

# Australians at War Film Archive

## Alexander Barnett (Sudden) - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/781>

### Tape 1

00:42 **Good morning Alex, could you begin by telling us about your childhood and where you grew up.**

I was born in Glenferrie, Melbourne 19th of the 9th 1920.

01:00 That's a while ago, and we probably moved around the Melbourne area living in places like Kew, Deepdene, Burwood, Monmeith Avenue in East Camberwell which is a well known little place and it was all right until we had the politicians arriving

01:30 and then the tone deteriorated a bit. I was a fairly bright sort of a boy but bright boys need disciplining and I was sent to one of the church

02:00 schools and was asked to leave that and I went to another one and was asked to leave that but the problem was that they hadn't given me enough to do and I was admitted to Mont Albert Central School under the headmastership of Boss Harley who

02:30 gets a real good mention in Manning Clark's history of Australia because Manning Clark was a pupil. There were some very famous people went to Central. But Harley said that he would give me work. And he brought me up to a stage where

03:00 it was a central school that only had two tiers of the high school, I don't know whether they exist any more, central schools, I'm not sure. And I then sat for a scholarship for the University High School. . (The scholarship only admitted you; there was no monetary value whatsoever) under the headmastership of a chap called Sharman

03:30 and the school had some very famous teachers like Potty Knowles who taught art and Brigadier Ramsey who was OC [Officer Commanding] artillery in the Middle East and he was in charge of mathematics. And being in close proximity to the university we sort of interacted with the university

04:00 electorate school, joined in the clubs, like the mathematics' club and engineers' club and we had the use of the conservatorium assembly and that's where we had our assemblies. It was a very well run school and it's produced

04:30 quite a lot of famous people.

**What sort of trouble were you getting into when you were younger?**

One that comes to mind was the butterfly season. There were thousands of butterflies emerged and the classroom had lockers at the back and

05:00 another chap and myself decided it would be quite a diversion to fill up the lockers with butterflies so that when the class was told to change their books, we'd have a classroom full of butterflies. They took a dim view of that. So that's what happened.

**Can you tell me Alex,**

05:30 **about what you saw of the Depression around you?**

Yes, our family was reasonably well off at that stage and I can remember my father taking us to the Victoria Markets to buy

06:00 vegetables and fruit which we distributed around Glenferrie and other places where people had very, very little. It was always at the back of our minds that it would be extremely difficult to get a job and consequently the better qualified you became the better the chance of

06:30 obtaining a job. Ah, the fortunes of the family changed and I was able to go to study for Leaving

- Honours. In those days the system was the Leaving Certificate. What we call matriculation now
- 07:00 and the bright boys usually if they could afford it stayed on an extra year. I sort of specialised in zoology and had a very famous lass teaching me, her name was Amy Croft. She had the Chair of Botany at Christchurch University and used to set the zoology
- 07:30 papers for Victoria. Now then came the position that the family did not have enough money to keep me so I had to find a job which would allow me to go to university
- 08:00 and one that would fit in because I was doing science and I majored in maths, physics, natural philosophy and I decided to become a student teacher which wasn't my real alley but it gave me
- 08:30 a big discount at university. I knocked off school at say four o'clock which enabled me to go to evening lectures and one of the lasses doing mathematics (but she was from arts and I was from science) was Nola Nicholas of the Nicholas Aspro family. I used to have
- 09:00 a ride in her limousine which was a Rolls-Royce. I didn't take kindly to teaching but I didn't take badly to it, it was a means to the end and I would have dumped it with my degree. So when war broke out
- 09:30 we sat it out until France fell and then me and the boys that I played hockey with all decided we'd go to the Melbourne Town Hall and join up. It was a bit difficult being a teacher, which was a restricted occupation, so we had to pull a few strings to get passed the Manpower Officer. I had to do it twice so
- 10:00 maybe he should have knocked me back.

**Why was France falling the decider for you?**

Things looked really bad for England, you may not remember but England was always home, you'd go to England you'd go home, that's strange but we had an English background.

- 10:30 England was always considered to be home and we probably misplaced our faith in the English because I think they dumped us in the end. They used us but amongst my colleagues, my friends, we were pretty astute,
- 11:00 watching what was going on and the thought was it was better to fight away from Australia than to have it come here and that was the motivation for joining up, I'd say.

**Can you tell me when you heard that the war had been declared?**

[Prime Minister] Menzies, yeah I heard Menzies on the radio.

- 11:30 I knew Menzies' son but I won't tell you what happened to him. It would probably be censored if I did. Ah, yes we heard it and it wasn't good. But we had heard from people giving lectures at university of things that were going on in Europe and particularly in
- 12:00 Germany. We'd learned about the Hitler Youth and the way that they were pushing for extra land and things were very confused.

**I wonder what you knew at the time about World War I and people who had served?**

A lot of our teachers were World War I veterans. My mate's father was a veteran also, he was a TPI [Totally and Permanently Incapacitated pensioner] and he'd been gassed.

- 13:00 We also had another teacher. I can't recall his name but he periodically lost his voice and we were aware of the people who'd been wounded and we knew it wasn't real good. We were also aware of the fact of chemical warfare because there were a lot of people gassed.
- 13:30 A lot of our Australian soldiers were gassed and that's a cruel thing. They have it for the rest of their lives.

**I can imagine the idea of chemical warfare would have been a frightening one?**

Yep, and even though when we were training we had to use the gas mask and wear it. We devised ways of slipping

- 14:00 the chin-[strap] because it is uncomfortable running around in a gas mask and you had to go up to the You Yangs in full kit.

**Why did you decide to join the army out of all the services?**

- 14:30 Because I had to wait for the RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force]. I nominated for the RAAF and it was the most popular thing. They were known as Menzies' Mannequins or Blue Orchids and the strange thing was when I got to Tobruk I got the call up and I said, "No, I'm in action I'm not going back."
- 15:00 The army was good enough. So instead of flying planes I went to sort of shoot them down which is a reverse.

**Well I wonder what you knew about soldiering before you joined?**

- 15:30 Very little except that they marched and I was a pianist and for a second instrument I joined a band, a brass band at Mont Albert Central School. It was affiliated with the 24th Infantry Battalion which had headquarters in Glenferrie or Hawthorn or
- 16:00 thereabouts and consequently we worked with their band and learned to march. That's about all I knew about soldiering. Not much, it was really (UNCLEAR) when we joined up.

**What were other rude awakenings about army life?**

- 16:30 I suppose you could say that I had lived a very sheltered life, the only time you'd be with men was when you were playing hockey or tennis, and then when we joined up we went to the Melbourne
- 17:00 Town Hall and had to fiddle around there signing papers and having trouble with the Manpower Officer and the next order was to take our clothes off and stand in your birthday suit amongst a whole mob of blokes. That was a rude shock. Then an MO [Medical Officer] doing all sorts of funny things to you. It's quite, it's different
- 17:30 and then we were moved from Melbourne Town Hall to the Caulfield Racecourse. That's where a lot of the recruits were taken. We were given a uniform there and we slept in the grandstand. In the early stages there was a bit of
- 18:00 thieving but the army was a pretty tough place, it's ruthless. When three men got thrown over a balcony the thieving stopped. That was one of the first lessons I learnt, was that life could be very cruel if you don't behave yourself.

**18:30 The three men being thrown over the balcony for?**

Theft. You had to leave all of your gear just on the steps at the grandstand and consequently you had no safe place to put anything. Some of the people who joined up evidently didn't have the same sort of morals that we had

- 19:00 and consequently they stole things. When they got caught, justice was very swift and the example was sufficient to stop it. But it didn't stop people pinching your socks or your (UNCLEAR). Someone was missing a sock for the inspection.

**19:30 We were just talking about the thieving in the army camp I can imagine that seeing men thrown over a balcony for theft was a pretty rude awakening?**

To the reality of life, sure. But you accept it. I don't know whether the

- 20:00 authorities did but it was a rude awakening. See, men came from all walks of life and joined up together. Some joined up because they didn't have a job, some joined up because they wanted to fight, others joined up for adventure. There's all sorts of reasons and they came from every walk of life, and every sort of moral background
- 20:30 but the first thing they learnt was you don't thieve from your mate.

**I wonder if there was any other example of men disciplining themselves and building that kind of moral code?**

Yes, when they called for volunteers for the ack-ack

- 21:00 regiment [Anti-Aircraft Regiment] and you're told when you join the army that you don't volunteer for anything, That's the truth, you shouldn't, but you do. That sort of thing sticks in your mind. They said, "Those who wish to volunteer for the Anti-Aircraft
- 21:30 Regiment take one pace forward." which I did and those of us who did come forward were taken to Geelong. And we were put into the Geelong Racecourse and they didn't even bother to clean out the stalls and the gaps in the stalls. This was in the middle of winter
- 22:00 and a lot of people went down with what they call Puckapunyal throat, a horrible cough and those that went to hospital they just discharged from the army .The only way we were treated was that on parade with your pannikin, they gave us two tablespoons full of salt and a bit of water and you'd gargle the numbness and that was the
- 22:30 treatment for it. But , entrenched in that Geelong camp was a series of old army cooks and that was the first time we realised there were things called rackets. We had sixty-four consecutive Irish stews.
- 23:00 Sixty four, that's breakfast, dinner and tea. how they improved the stew was to put more water in it, until there was a terrific outcry from all the boys and then it was looked into by the military police and they found that the pub just across the track from the Geelong Racecourse
- 23:30 had rooms full of butter and bread and cheese and meat. I can't vouch for that but that's what we believed happened. Ah, so that was one of the next lessons that you learnt was that there were rackets.

We also learnt that you got food and

- 24:00 you ate it, whether you liked it or not because you didn't get any from anywhere else. Then the regiment was being formed and we were waiting for our grounds and they turned out to be the Werrabee Racecourse. And we still slept in the grandstands, some slept underneath the grandstands
- 24:30 and that was pretty raw, you know, you're just out in the open in a grandstand. One of my impressions that I've held for years was we were seated in, if you can imagine, the tiers of the racecourse and on each tier men were sleeping, every six feet
- 25:00 and about three or four stairs down from me I remember seeing a bloke just before lights out, before he got to bed, kneel down and say his prayers, . And being an observant sort of person I noted
- 25:30 that it happened each day, until I thought, "Now I better go and talk to this bloke." and I went to see him and I said to him, "You're game." He said, "What?" I said, "Saying your prayers. I wouldn't be game to say my prayers in front of a mob of men." And he said, "Well, you look at it this way. I've always
- 26:00 said my prayers before I go to bed and I can't see any reason why I wouldn't after joining the army." So I got talking to him and got to know him and he was a chap who was in Freddy troop of 8 Battery. My battery was 8 and he was Gunner Ince. He said to me,
- 26:30 "I'm a conscientious objector.." and I said, "What the hell are you doing in the army?" He said, "Well, when France fell I thought it was time to stop being an objector and I joined up. When I come home I'll be an objector." And I thought, "Golly! Well you're a bloke worth knowing." Now, for a conscientious objector
- 27:00 he received an MM [Military Medal], its amazing isn't it? He's no longer with us unfortunately. But his wife, he lived in Ballarat, and his wife was the chief commissioner for guides in Ballarat. We used to visit after the war. Dick wasn't taken prisoner at home.
- 27:30 **I wonder at the time what the opinion of conscientious objectors was?**
- Varied I'd say. Those who really were conscientious objectors and a lot of those were they joined up and joined the non-combatants, the ambulances and stretcher bearers and that sort
- 28:00 of thing, and their conscience allowed them to do that and most of the people I met as conscientious objectors, were prepared to stand up for what they thought, but they were prepared to do something. The ambulance drivers or something after the non-combatant
- 28:30 sort of life.
- You mentioned you were told not to volunteer for anything. Why did you volunteer for the ack-ack?**
- I hadn't been told. But
- 29:00 one of the lessons you learn, if you've been brought up with the moral background that I had you did your very best at everything. That was considered to be the way of life, so when you do army drill and rifle drill you have to move very quickly and slap
- 29:30 the rifle and what not, and I found that I was picked for guard, and that's a bit of a blow because you couldn't go out and have leave in the evening because you're on guard, and I copped it day after day and I couldn't understand it, and I talked to one of my mates and he said, "Oh ,you want to drop your rifle ,
- 30:00 just do it. Oh that's alright." So I'm slapping up the rifle and I dropped it. I copped 10 days CB [Confined to Barracks] for dropping me rifle and so there are a lot of lessons to be learnt.
- I wonder what it was about the ack-ack that you, what did you know about it?**
- 30:30 What we were told , that we were still in the stages of archaic thinking because the moment we became ack-ack we were told that we would be mechanised but that the army couldn't think of any other way
- 31:00 of mechanising us but sending us as cavalry so we had leggings, we had the cavalry dixies and bandoliers, all to run the tractors that would pull the gun!
- 31:30 But it was a new concept, light anti-aircraft The Swedes had produced a gun, a 40 mm Bofors, and the idea was that this gun was on wheels and could be towed and could be set up and the art of
- 32:00 light anti-aircraft warfare was to set up, attack the planes that were attacking you and then move so that they couldn't find you and come back and bomb you. That was proved and proved to the detriment when the wheels were taken off in Crete. When our 7 Battery got to Crete
- 32:30 the Poms had taken the wheels off and set the guns in concrete. So when you went into action you copped some bombs back because you couldn't move. But the concept of quick-moving warfare was

coming in but we were still cavalry and the unfortunate thing

- 33:00 was that we didn't ever see a Bofors in Australia, we had pictures. We didn't even have trucks. We drew trucks on the ground and we practiced boarding the trucks and getting out of the truck and you could be put on crime sheet if you got out the truck through the windscreen, and
- 33:30 half the time we didn't have rifles. Every now and again we would be taken to a firing range and fire about 10 rounds out of a 303 rifle, and that followed us everywhere, our equipment, the lack of equipment followed us everywhere. And that's really criminal to think that the powers that be would allow
- 34:00 that sort of thing. Even I would say that is was encouraged from the attitude of our politicians. I think it was Menzies and Menzies was known as Ming Menzies and or Pig Iron Bob. He sent all the scrap iron to Japan which came back as Kamikaze planes but
- 34:30 Menzies was a bit of a kowtow to the royalty mob and I think they made him an Admiral of [the Cinque] Ports, but whatever Ma'am asked for it touched a fall out and regardless of what it was you got it. It was the ingenuity of the Australian that got us out
- 35:00 of the trouble that the politicians and the bosses got us into, but we never forgot.

**I can imagine it's quite a shock being in army training and pretending to get in and out of a truck that's drawn on the ground?**

And using broomsticks for rifles and you're told, "Yes. Your equipment

- 35:30 will come." but I think eventually we did get the rifles. Because I can remember taking one home, we didn't, a rifle and bayonet drill and I remember my brother joined the cadets, he was younger than I was. I went home on leave and I had my rifle over my shoulder and he jumped out from the corner and I swung the rifle and knocked him out
- 36:00 so the training worked and he didn't try it again. But somewhere along the line from having rifles in Australia to having rifles overseas the rifles disappeared. We went, we worked in conjunction with the
- 36:30 RAAF from Point Cook and we used the ground of Werribee House (where they now have a rhino park and whatnot) but Werribee House was headquarters for RAAF and
- 37:00 the Italians had settled in Werribee and Werribee was the source of vegetables for Melbourne and it was also the finishing part of Melbourne's sewerage, the effluent, and beautiful tomatoes were grown in Werribee by the Italians. You can imagine our boys raiding the Italian farms,
- 37:30 so much so that the adjutant found a sheep trussed up in his bed and one of the sergeant-majors sleeping on a palliasse and they tied each corner of the palliasse to a horse, and he disappeared out through the hut but those hijinks were put down very quickly.
- 38:00 But we got on all right with the Italians but a mob of blokes will help themselves to any farm produce they can put their fingers on but we used to march up to the You Yangs and back in full marching gear. And I think it was that very solid physical training that stood us in good stead
- 38:30 particularly when we became POWs [prisoners of war] because if you couldn't take it in the army you were just got rid of, you didn't make it, they just got rid of you. And I think that that's what did it.

**Well I wonder what was your**

- 39:00 **parents' reaction to you joining up?**

My mother wasn't happy and I had to talk my father into signing, I was underage and I had to talk my father into signing, but they took it philosophically.

- 39:30 They said, 'Why would you go when you haven't finished your course?' I said. "Well maybe if we don't, there won't be any courses anyway." And the general consensus amongst us young blokes was that we didn't want any action on our country. Let the other countries have it and
- 40:00 let's stop them over there, but you're really brave and have some misconceptions don't you?

**Well I wonder how much contact did you maintain with your hockey team when you joined up?**

Not much.

- 40:30 There was only one bloke, two blokes, my mate and he became our first casualty and another chap, Roberts was his name, he was in 8 Battery but Freddy Troop and he became a bombardier and later on he was not taken prisoner. My mate was killed, he was our first casualty, but he was fascinated with motor bikes and he became a Don R which was a dispatch rider and his demise came about when we were encircled at our capture and he decided to ride to see if he could get somebody to come back and rescue us but he didn't reckon with the Hun marksmen . This other chap Roberts was a quiet type of chap, Phil Roberts was his name.

## Tape 2

00:33 **You were talking about Phil Roberts before we stopped?**

He was in charge of a gun crew at Derna and consequently got back into Tobruk and he went right back through the siege of Tobruk as a bombardier. I'm uncertain as to what really happened when he went to Egypt but I believe

01:00 he was attracted to the English artillery section. And there was a transfer of some sort to the English regiments and then I heard about him, he was in Aldershot and I think God called him and he

01:30 became an Anglican and I think he rose in the ranks of Anglicans in England and as far as I know he's still there, it's quite strange.

**Can you tell me about when you got word that you were heading overseas?**

Yes,

02:00 it would be in November, there were rumours going on and we'd been doing route marches and physical drill and pretend getting into trucks and putting your gun up and firing your gun and all the rest of it, which was a bit ratty really. And a couple of tries on the firing range.

02:30 The RAAF used to visit us in the Tiger Moths and misbehave themselves by showing off and coming in too close to the grandstand. One actually put his wheels on the roof of the grandstand, he was grounded and I don't know what happened to him but he probably turned out

03:00 to be a terrific pilot. But our officers used to visit their mess and vice versa and then word came around, I suppose that, first, we had a post office in the middle of the

03:30 racecourse. And it had nothing in it but we used to slap a guard on it and we had a chap by the name of Power. He's no longer with us, Bill Power, he was quite a character. When you talked to Bill and you said, "Well why did you join up?" And he said, "Oh, I was a tram driver." and he stuttered and said

04:00 "When I was driving along C-Collins Street, the t-tram lines s-s-started to come up and hit me in t-the face .So I said to myself, 'B-bill, you stupid (UNCLEAR), you shouldn't be driving trams, you should j-join up', so I did." Bill was about six foot or something in his socks and he

04:30 had joined up dutifully and he was slapped with guard duty and he was really browned off at this and decided to be paraded to the CO [Commanding Officer] and complained about being on guard duty, and he used the f-word and I'll just indicate the CO asked. "Well Power, what's your trouble?"

05:00 And he said, "W-well sir, here I am on guard with a bloody rifle with n-no ammunition and no bayonet and g-guarding f-all, I don't think I should be on guard duty." And the CO said, "You're excused."

05:30 And he got off guard duty. And to compensate that he became a cook. But we digressed from when word got round that we were going overseas. We received pre-embarkation leave, we went home. One of the boys, Plonk Stevens, took some of the boys from up the country home. He lived up somewhere

06:00 near Ferntree Gully way and they decided to go hunting deer and in those days there were a few deer up in the Dandenongs and they went out all day climbing all over the mountain, and coming home, they hadn't seen a deer all day, and in the dusk they saw one, and five rifles shot out, and they took off, and

06:30 when they got there they'd shot the boarding-house cow. A big row developed over that, but that was on pre-embarkation leave. Then we got back to camp and it was Christmas Day or Christmas Eve, around about the 20th of December 1940,

07:00 when we were taken by train to Port Melbourne. And of course everything was secret; nobody knew anything but there were thousands lining up around the pier. But I didn't see any of my relatives. But we were taken to Port Melbourne and there was the

07:30 most magnificent ship I'd ever seen. I'd never seen it before was the Mauritania. And when we got aboard, it hadn't been stripped. It was as it was on its normal run, we slept in a cabin for four people and had a steward to make our bath, a sea water bath. Some of the boys had to sleep in some of the common rooms but

08:00 they had beds and, there's a lot of coincidences in my life, particularly in the army. We went overseas on the Mauritania and I came home on the Mauritania, only it was stripped this time. Life on board was great, just lying around, but you weren't allowed to talk to the nurses, they were

08:30 for the officers, but you did. They were very nice. I can't remember the AGH [Australian General Hospital] on board, we had nurses, quite a lot of people on the Mauri. We went to Ceylon and that was

our first rude awakening. We transferred onto a Pommy [English]

- 09:00 troop ship which was shocking. The Poms treat, regardless of how you think about Australians we don't have class, Poms do and they're very conscious of it, and the officer class, they're damn lucky that they ever win a battle.
- 09:30 The officers, they become officers because of their class, and the ship was divided into about 20/80 and there was a white line across the ship on all decks with officers on that side of the line, ORs [Other Ranks] on this side of the line. Of course when the
- 10:00 Pommy in charge of the troop ship said no troops will cross the line everybody crossed it. You can't say that to Australians, and the next rude awakening was the mess. We slept over the mess tables where the hammock was slung and there were no port-holes and there was
- 10:30 a light, I can remember it, which sort of illuminated the whole of the mess tables, and they were in rows and we got a piece of bread, and when we looked at it, it was moving. When you looked at it through the light it had weevils, and they brought in a stew
- 11:00 which you could smell right throughout the ship. It was revolting, it had blue and green stuff in it and so the boys just jacked up about that. And the ship didn't leave until victuals went off and replenished them. But the officers still had the majority of the boat to walk around
- 11:30 and there were far less officers than there were troops. It comes up all the time, my mates, the Kiwi [New Zealander] mates told me they had arrived at Bombay and the Kiwis took all the food and threw it overboard themselves and took over the gun until the British did what they were supposed
- 12:00 to do and its even reflected in the notes of the diary I wrote for The Diary of a Desert Rat. When the Australian troops came from England that was the first time they'd been on a Pommy troop ship and their officers tried to placate them by saying, "The English have carried troops like this for years."
- 12:30 It's no good telling an Australian that.

**Could you tell us more about the trip on the Mauritania?**

We did PT [physical training] and had lectures and mainly just sat around the place. The boys played two-up,

- 13:00 cards, and the canteen opened occasionally, but the Poms have hot beer. But going over we discovered that the officers' mess was up top and that most of the ship is serviced by a centre section
- 13:30 which comes from the bowels of the ship and goes up, and we discovered that food going to the officers' mess went up the stairway through a little door near our cabin, and with a few bribes and what not, we ate like officers and didn't even go to our mess. And we also didn't have to go to the canteen because
- 14:00 we drank with the engineers of the ship. We drank Bass [beer] on the way over. On Galleface Green we upset the Poms, the Gallface, being a hotel, we conducted
- 14:30 tactical exercises with rickshaws on their lawn and we upset the Poms with that. They didn't really know what these colonial boys were doing, these rickshaw boys doing exercises. Which made quite a good voyage. There were similar things that happened on the boat going over on the
- 15:00 Pommy troop ship, but on both ships we had ack-ack lookout and submarine lookout. We had to do our stint, two hours on and four off, but how on earth you'd ever spot a periscope without glasses? We didn't even have binoculars and we were on watch looking for
- 15:30 that little snorkel sitting up but the Mauri was a fast ship, she could travel at 30 knots and they depended on the speed of the boat to get us out of it. But the troop ship couldn't, it was pretty hot down below and they don't ventilate them. But they'd used these troop ships to
- 16:00 and from England to India since the year dot. The Pommy soldier puts up with a lot more than we were prepared to do, and I think the first time we saw an enemy plane was when we were going up the Gulf of Aden. An Italian plane was up so high you could only see a little speck.
- 16:30 It was looking at us, and the next recollection I have is being in the lake [the Mediterranean Sea] and waiting to go through the canal and we went right through the canal, right through to Alexandria then through the Mediterranean through to Haifa. And that's the first time that we
- 17:00 found out that there was some sort of Jewish problem, because in Haifa there was a ship lying on its side and they were still pulling bodies out, someone had blown it up or it had sunk and it was the Jewish refugees that had come from Europe. The boat had got to Haifa and it had been blown up, that's how
- 17:30 we found out. It also was our first introduction to the Palestine police which was an English set-up and my reading since has proved to me that the problem that's going on in the Middle East now was going on then

- 18:00 because England had to put forces into Syria and Palestine and all the rest of it. And there were no Jews there then. So things haven't changed very much have they? But the Palestine police were pretty ruthless and they behaved just the same way as I saw the Huns behaving.
- 18:30 We haven't got a clean nose, we haven't really. So they took us from Haifa into Palestine and into a camp at, I think, one of the English camps and its tents. And
- 19:00 the Arabs, the first warning was you tie everything down, because if you don't you lose it and you were put on crime sheet if you lost your rifle or any of your equipment. But the Arabs were so clever they could sneak in underneath your tent and take it while you are still sitting on the bed. So you had to keep your eye on an Arab.
- 19:30 But our battery, the regiment comprises 7, 8 and 9 Batteries. Three batteries and each battery has four troops and they used letters and I was in Eddy Troop, E Troop. 8 Battery was put on alert ready to move and after five days at Palestine we went out
- 20:00 though the desert to the Canal and crossed at El Kantara and that's where we saw the first behaviour of Arabs en masse and the way they were treated by their own police. Most of the police we saw at El Kantara were big Nubians and they were armed with baseball bats and they got up like
- 20:30 sheep dogs on top of the people and just belted their heads down and the Arab doesn't even blink if he gets a hit on the head. They were, I don't know what the disturbance was but there was a disturbance and the police had moved in. I think they were trying to keep them away from the troops because
- 21:00 they've got very little, very clever blokes called Gully-Gullies and they've got chickens in their hands and they pull at your pocket but your wallet goes at the same time and it was the first time we heard "Sayeeda George." Every one of us was called George. Little Arab kids called you George and "Sayeeda" was "G'day.
- 21:30 "Sayeeda George" and we were put on the train and must have gone through Cairo and we landed at Alexandria, and there was a merchant vessel called Vosava and very small, one funnel, and we boarded
- 22:00 and went down into the hatches, and sitting on top of the hatches was a troop of Senusi which, they're Arabs, Arab soldiers and they were being taken up, and because they were Arabs they had to sit outside and they sat up on the hatches and we took off and we copped a Mediterranean storm, and boy oh boy, the waves!
- 22:30 I can remember looking over the top of the boat and it was down and the Senusi were sitting there with their blankets over them, and whenever they got sick, they'd just pull the blanket back and everybody else copped it. It wasn't conducive to hygiene at all and our blokes had no way of getting over the side of the boat but the first
- 23:00 stop was Tobruk and we went straight from Alexandria to Tobruk and this would be, have to be January '41.

### **How prepared did you feel**

#### **23:30 to be possibly now seeing action?**

I think we were a bit naive because they said, "When you get there you'll get your guns." So we just took it as, oh we're going for another ride, this one was a train ride then a ship ride and then we landed

- 24:00 on the platform at Tobruk and Tobruk hadn't fallen, hadn't been long, the 6th Div [Division] had gone through and there were ships lying over on their side and bombed and all the rest of it. That was the first that we had seen of the result of action and I can
- 24:30 remember coming into Tobruk. You come up a big ramp and there were all sorts of rumours going around that there had been a terrific fight at Tobruk and the 6th Div had done this and done that. And it was dusk and we could see stuff flowing down the gutter and it was red and we all thought it was blood.
- 25:00 We thought we'd come through into a massacre, we climbed up the ramp and there (lying up the top with a keg up on an easel sort of thing with a bayonet stuck in the keg) was an Aussie. It was a keg of wine. But that was stopped very quickly. The Italians had a lot of wine; in fact we were amazed when we got into their fortifications,
- 25:30 they had artillery fortifications that were dug and very prepared, they were concrete, and they had ammo pigeon holes all round the place and most of the pigeon holes were full of plonk [wine], not ammo.
- 26:00 There was quite a few fatigue- parties taken out to break the plonk because it's not good discipline to have your troops full. But they moved us out into one of the wadis, a wadi is a big valley, and in north Africa the wadis, they're actually
- 26:30 the valleys that the rivers flow down when it rains, and it does rain at odd times. They carve deep and they head to the Mediterranean, they'd be heading north. But Tobruk is built on sort of a plateau which

risers towards the south and to the west

27:00 and a very little known fact is that Tobruk, the defence of Tobruk, took place within an eight-mile radius of the harbour and very few people seem to pick that point up. If you put a compass point on the harbour and

27:30 described an eight mile circle, all our defences were inside that eight miles. And that's where the Italians had set up their barbed wire and we had taken that, but into the wadi and we were waiting for equipment, and nothing happened, so the boys they went scouting around the place and found thousands of trucks the Italians had abandoned.

28:00 Evidently they panicked and they didn't even bother to turn the key off and they'd just left the truck, so it wasn't very long before each one of us, just about everyone of us, had a truck that went. And we found a petrol dump so we had plenty of juice and everybody

28:30 was riding around like lords in their own truck. A mate and I had one with a fan stuck out the front so if you got caught in the sand you just went up to the sand and blew it out so you could go through.

**At that point what did you know about the Italians or the Germans**

29:00 **as an enemy?**

Knew nothing about Germany, Germany was not in it, we knew about the Italians we saw quite a lot as we came in that had been taken prisoner. Their heart wasn't really in it and they'd been stuck there and they were alright up to a point but the moment the 6th Div boys got in there

29:30 they gave up. I don't blame them. But the Poms were there and we were to collect our Bofors from the Poms and we were taken into the actual township of Tobruk and there gleaming were the Bofors.

30:00 I think we saw them for about half an hour, now we had a fiddle with them, and then there was an announcement made that it wasn't our guns. I quite facetiously say, and it's a bit more than being facetious, just the Poms were ordered by Churchill to take the guns to Greece and give them to

30:30 the Huns and they were needed in Tobruk and Churchill overrode a whole heap of stuff. So when we were told that we weren't going to get Bofors and then they told us that there were plenty of Italian Bredas ack-ack guns, 20 mm guns

31:00 shot off , and all of a sudden they came out of the air and we are made familiar with those and that's our guns. And we were moved see because we were corps troops they could split you right down to a single man and they sort off set up a gun crew here for ack-ack and we set up for...

31:30 My gun crew was sent to Benghazi, Robert's crew as at Derna they set the guns up at Customs House in Derna and our guns were set up on the little moles in the harbour and the idea was to catch the planes as they came, they used to drop mines and as they came in you got a pot shot at them

32:00 and at the same time we found three or four 75 mm heavy guns which we set up outside Benghazi.

**I can imagine it was quite a relief to actually now have a gun to be using?**

Oh yeah, and you could actually fire them

32:30 when you ran out of ammo you'd tell somebody and they'd get a few Ghurkhas around for the British and they were excellent. They could go and get you ammunition. During the night, you wouldn't see them, they're dark, and they're very clever with their kukri [knives], the Italians were scared stiff of them.

**Can you tell me about**

33:00 **the types of Italian guns you were using and how you learnt to use them?**

Well we'd been in theory but the theory of the Bofors, they were similar, they were fed by clips, the Bofors was fed by a clip and so it was just a matter of putting a clip in and working out which pedal you pushed to fire it and which pedal you pushed to wind around it.

33:30 It didn't take the boys very long, but every bloke had got hold of Italian rifles, there were guns lying everywhere and the worse thing that was lying around was their hand grenades which looked like an orange with a very weak sort of metal.

34:00 They were very unreliable, a lot of blokes lost their fingers and hands playing with them. I was sent to the 75 mm ack-ack gun, they were a much heavier gun, because they'd found a

34:30 a predictor. A predictor was a thing that I was supposed to be working and a predictor gave you an angle of approach and speed which you fed to your gun. The Italians had something after that style and we had captured one of those with a big Barr and Stroud rangefinder and we set that up

35:00 to operate and, we had two or three attacks and we were in action with the gun and, we were attacked

by a mob of Bristols but we didn't know that they weren't ours, but they'd been captured in France (but that was only just in passing).

- 35:30 That attack, then, when we had to retreat we blew the guns up. The Breda, which was the Italian anti-aircraft gun. was a 20 mm gun and it had ack-ack ammunition and it had anti-tank ammunition
- 36:00 and if you could get the depression the depressed far enough you could use it as an anti-tank gun. It was reasonably effective, it was very good when we were in Benghazi. Benghazi was an open city, in other words it wasn't fought for and
- 36:30 it still had three brothels there, the Italians were very clever with their comforts. They had three brothels, one for the officers, one for the NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers] and one for the ordinary ranks. Now that's really class and we had to keep an eye on the
- 37:00 girls in the brothel because we thought that they were sort of fifth column, spies and what not. And you had to keep a track on who was in there and you would sort of conduct a roll call. I suppose I could tell you, Plonk Stevens found a camera, no film, and he went along when
- 37:30 we were taking the roll and said, "Do you think I could take their photos?" and I said, "Oh yeah but you haven't got any film, that's alright I'll pose." And Plonk, I wonder what the girls would have thought if they would have known, Plonk taking photos with a camera with no film? The other people who were there were the Greek divers
- 38:00 who had been interned by the Italians and we'd released them and they were sponge divers and they were wandering around the place and very handy to use as servants because we had them cooking for us, we really had class, Australians really went classy. And they were the best
- 38:30 anti-aircraft warning that you could ever have, you could be talking to one of your Greek divers and he's there one minute and he's gone, and about 10 minutes later you'll get an ack-ack alert, and he's already gone for the shelter. But those boys, they used to go out and get fish for us. So we lived quite well
- 39:00 and it was a sort of a home away from home I suppose. You just make it that way, but the really crook thing was we had nothing to protect ourselves with. We had one rifle and 5 rounds for 10 men and no bayonet.
- 39:30 So how do you stop someone from pinching your gun? There was an incident there, I don't know if it would be recorded in the annals of history, but [General Sir Archibald] Wavell was a Pom and he was one of these pukka Poms, they really think they're good and he was a general,
- 40:00 and our troops had gone up from Benghazi up to El Agheila and there was railway line on which our engineers got the rail moving and Wavell went up to have a look and one of our gun crews went up to protect the train. We stuck one of the Italian anti-aircraft guns on the train and the apocryphal story goes
- 40:30 that when they halted the General put his shirt out to dry with the crossed sword and baton on it and every soldier knows that in his knapsack he carries a crossed sword and baton. So the boys thought, "Oh it's easy to get one." and they flogged it
- 41:00 and when it was discovered he wanted to put a whole lot on court-martial, little knowing that they were embroidered epaulettes. They weren't even metal. So that's a little story about Wavell.

## Tape 3

00:34 **Can tell me about the role of the corps troop that you were in?**

All corps troops are designed to be an adjunct to either

01:00 a battalion or a portion of a battalion or a regiment or signals or anything. A good example is a corps of engineers you can drop off one man, two men, a gun crew or a, a troop, they can be split, a whole battery can go or two batteries.

01:30 That's the idea of the corps.

**You mentioned that you were an artificer, can you describe that job?**

I can't describe what I did because I didn't. It was like everything else, we had a rifle but we didn't, an artificer who was a person

02:00 who was able to look after instruments and work instruments and the Bofors was designed to work with a predictor, a Sperry predictor which gave you angle of sight and also speed and you fed that into a gun, it was a precursor of the computer which did the mathematics and then gave it

- 02:30 to the gun, but I think as things turned out most work with ack-ack was done by line of sight. There wasn't time for predictors as the war progressed. You were either attacked or you were attacking. In theory I was supposed to be able to mend the instrument
- 03:00 or get it working or operate it and I had to have a bit of mathematical skill to do that. In fact we used my mathematical skill in Benghazi because we captured those heavy guns and their predictor was based on a 100 degree circle, why I don't know, and we had no log [logarithmic] tables
- 03:30 so I had to do a set of log tables and then work out a sine, cos and tan for 100 degrees and that's not easy, doing it straight from your mind with nothing to work on so, you had to be fairly versatile.
- Let's pick up your story and**
- 04:00 **if you can tell me what was happening, I believe you went to Tobruk?**
- Yep, I went to Tobruk, gun crews being corps troops they dropped off gun crews to give ack-ack protection to Derna and the other places
- 04:30 and we got to Benghazi and that was the furthest west that we got. The rest of the Australian troops were at El Agheila which was on the Gulf of Sirte round there. That's as far as we were able to. And of course we looked after Wavell.
- 05:00 They didn't send us many Poms after that.
- You mentioned you were very lacking in equipment, did you know why that was at the time?**
- We didn't have it, well we didn't, we sort of sensed we didn't have it and it sort of gets through to you that
- 05:30 Britain was in a real mess and the Germans had caught them off balance but we weren't dealing with Germans we were dealing with Italians in the desert and the Germans hadn't even got into our, sort of thinking. The moment we left home we didn't hear anything about Germans. In fact you don't hear much news at all.
- 06:00 **You received movement orders to go to Derna; can you tell me what happened?**
- We didn't have any trucks, we relied on the Poms to drive us everywhere, we were supposed to be mobile and we had no mobility.
- 06:30 We were taken up by Pommy drivers, some were Pommy drivers and some were the Australian Army Service Corps drivers and most of the trucks weren't British trucks, they were Italian trucks that'd been picked up in the desert and it was fortunate that when we came to leave Benghazi, and I don't know who would be responsible for the brainwave, but
- 07:00 to bring the guns back we had flat-trayed Fiat trucks which had been captured and I'm not sure who was driving, whether they were Poms or not, but they were able to take the wheels off [the guns] and they put the frame
- 07:30 down and wired it to the flat tray and that acted as a gun platform. So that really we had a mobile, where we didn't have mobile guns before, we suddenly acquired them for the retreat and they were quite, we were able to use them as an anti-tank gun and as an anti-aircraft and we loaded
- 08:00 I think was one to two, one anti-aircraft shell to two armour piercing shells went into the gun. But the very fact that we had them up on the trays made it quite manoeuvrable, that's the theory, but in practice it didn't quite work that way.
- 08:30 As you'll hear when I tell you the story of how we got caught. Ah, Benghazi was ordered to be evacuated and I think from memory it would be the 4th of April around about that, I'd have to look at my notes. But it was around about then
- 09:00 and we spiked two big guns, the 75 mm, we couldn't move those at all, so we spiked those and blew up the predictors and the beautiful Barr-Stroud rangefinder that took six men to move, it was huge, it must have been a portal from one of the lighthouses or something
- 09:30 but it was sacrilege to have to blow up one of those. The engineers came in and as it turns out it would have been my mate who I picked up with in the prison camp, he was one of the sergeants, he's the chap that I've written about in The Diary of a Desert Rat.
- 10:00 They blew the water and the sewerage and some very bright boy decided to blow them in such a way that the sewerage and water mixed and as a consequence when we got back to Benghazi after being taken prisoner we had to suffer because you got water and sewerage. They blew up all the installations
- 10:30 that they could, but they didn't destroy the city because we had taken it as an open city. Any installations on the wharf or anything that could be used militarily was blown up and I can recall seeing huge plumes of black acrid smoke behind us as we left Benghazi and our orders were to head for Derna

11:00 but we halted in various places and set up the gun for ack-ack defence and the actual "Benghazi Handicap" as it became known hadn't really started in earnest. In my opinion it didn't start in earnest until the night when the troops

11:30 were sent into the desert south of Derna. The idea was to go through Derna because of the macadam road that went right through. Mussolini built a road from Tripoli through to the Egyptian border and that was some feat. But the escarpments,

12:00 Derna was down below the escarpment and then big wadis came in and you wound through the wadis into Derna and that you had to wind your way up to the top of the escarpment, which was very hairpinny, and there was the aerodrome.

12:30 The Derna aerodrome and that features quite a bit, we sat at the top of the aerodrome, I can't recall exactly, but there were troops, infantry and whatnot and we set up to give them cover and the orders were to go south of Derna and hit the road through to Tobruk because if you know Africa

13:00 there's a rise from Tobruk to Derna and you can cut through the desert on the old Tobruk road. That's where we were supposed to go. But in the middle of the night one of the big sandstorms that the Americans told us about arrived: he had said, "You can't see anything, you can't do anything." We already knew that

13:30 but in the middle of the night its not funny. You haven't got lights and there's trucks going everywhere and you didn't know who was who and who wasn't and that was the night that the Germans set up one of their blokes as a British MP [Military Policeman] with his red cap and they

14:00 directed the convoy into a wadi and they caught two British generals who were sitting in their staff car with their maps open and all the rest of it and they were just caught and the Germans caught quite a lot of other blokes there until somebody woke up that there shouldn't have been an MP there and

14:30 each battalion claims to have shot the bloke. I first heard it was the major from the 24th Battalion who shot the MP. I think one, the engineer, was the seventh one of those claims and I think one of the other battalions claim

15:00 that they detected the bogus MP and shot him. But fortunately we didn't, we weren't caught in that. We were further south and when dawn broke that morning we came across the 2/15th Battalion headquarters having breakfast. During the night we'd sort of stopped

15:30 near a wireless truck, an English truck, and the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] news was on and I heard them say that there were Germans in Africa and I got my hand slapped for telling somebody that by my officers. They told me I was spreading propaganda

16:00 and I said. "Well its not. I heard it on the BBC so how can it be propaganda?" But that was the first inkling that there were Germans there. And even then it didn't dawn. We were expecting that if we found anything it would be Italians, and nobody had told us that the Germans were pushing, they hadn't told me, hadn't told my gun crew. So there it was in all its glory was the 2/15th

16:30 Headquarters Battalion, at least the 15th Battalion headquarters having breakfast and the officer in charge was Spike Marlin and Charlie Barton [Maj. Charles Newton Barton, QX6148] was there, they were all just sitting down to breakfast and we arrived of course Spike just

17:00 who was Lieutenant Chester Guest, and Chester's got his own claim to fame he was the head of the CBA Corporation [Commonwealth Bank of Australia] when the merger was on, the Bank of NSW was mooted to make Westpac [Bank] and you can quote me as saying that Chester voted against it, he didn't like it.

17:30 Neither did I and I never did. And the problem was that most people didn't like the Bank of NSW and particularly Queenslanders, the CBA was a magnificent bank that looked after farmers and country people. And you even got taken out to dinner or they had them to dinner or they introduced their staff to you

18:00 when they got new staff. Boy haven't we deteriorated since those days. Anyway I digressed. Chester was grabbed and Spike I believe asked him for us to give cover. The order was given, we were mobile with those trucks that I described, and we started to set up and the first shell came over and we were on top of a rise and that's the worst place in the world to ever get caught.

18:30 I can recall seeing these armoured vehicles sort of running around like in the bad old days when we used to go to the matinees where the Indians used to circle the cowboys. And there we were being encircled, and they came in closer until we could see they had a long-barrel,

19:00 two pound anti-tank gun which was very effective and it had three operators and they lay with their legs spread out towards you with their heads away and it wasn't long before our first gun was blown off the truck. We'd opened up

19:30 and we had two, three of the trucks were on fire and it could only be operated by two people, with the

flames, the rest of the mob were down below and the final gun, it finally got blown off too, but we got a few things away

- 20:00 and after we got caught and were taken to see what we did because we were bouncing the shells and we were splitting them as they went up and the Germans took a dim view of that. But they were using explosive bullets. It's whatever you need to save you, so
- 20:30 its an amazing thing, while the action was on and I couldn't tell you how long it lasted. It seems an age and yet it doesn't. They were shelling and I don't know where their guns were but we knew where the shells were landing and we'd
- 21:00 always been taught, being artillery, that your ranging fire is one over, one under, one in. So the theory was that, all the boys that had brains up on top, if a shell landed it was most unlikely that one would land in the same place so, in the desert where they was no protection, we dived in another shell hole
- 21:30 but no one ever told us that inside once the shells gone off that the shrapnel inside is white hot and you land on a fragment of shell you soon jump out of the thing again, but one of the gunners who was still operating, this Charlie Little, and Charlie had a doctorate of Electrical Engineering, he was
- 22:00 a gunner. That's how we wasted manpower, it didn't worry Charlie, he'd never ever operated as an engineer. He came out in the depression and he never ever used his degree. He got a job as an electrician's mate, and he had a doctorate in Electrical Engineering.
- 22:30 That's great, anyway, Charlie was 6 foot 4 in his socks with about four inches of blonde hair on the top and we'd found two cases of dynamite and we used them for fishing and Charlie used to, there was an old cow-cocky, he went back to cow-cocking and he used to
- 23:00 bite the detonators to fuse them and anyway he bought one case, he detonated them all up and they were on the truck and he immediately, the first shell that came over he, I could see Charlie walking, he was actually running, the truck with this gelignite all ready to go
- 23:30 and for some reason or another it was very cold that night and Charlie had his greatcoat on and he came back to the truck and I remember Charlie putting his hands in his pockets and he pulled out a stick in each hand and he went white and got back up on the gun and started firing. So those sort of things happened.
- 24:00 And when they knocked all the guns out and one rifle no bayonet and five rounds to protect each gun and you fired the five rounds and then you look around the desert to see if there's any stones and then after you run out of stones, what do you do, particularly when they're coming in closer.
- 24:30 So I think Chester and Spike Marlin got together and thought, "Well we've just got to stop the, these blokes will be slaughtered." Nobody's got any ammo left and that's a horrible feeling, so you just have to put your hands up, and the closest piece of protection
- 25:00 that was there, I can remember someone (must have been the Arabs or somebody) put a sort of a... it wasn't a parapet but a raised section of stone, and we tried to hide behind that but you try putting your body, and your chin sitting on the top, you can't get much, there's not much protection there.
- 25:30 It wasn't very long before we'd had a gutful, and hands up and walking in a line and then we had a terrific tirade, the Germans had a machine gun which they could tote and hang around their neck, it was the first time we had ever seen things
- 26:00 like that and they waved them round and shot them all over the place. Quite intimidating and they told us to line up in a line and to make sure the line was straight. They went like that and of course everybody thought, "This is it!" because we'd heard about what happened in France, so
- 26:30 I think everybody smoked, 'cause if you didn't smoke you got duty, so it paid to smoke, you got a smoko if you smoked and you got duties if you didn't smoke and the government doesn't like to admit that you started smoking when you got in the army or that the reason you started smoking was that they gave you the
- 27:00 cigarettes and they encouraged you to smoke because they gave you a smoko, so the first thing that you do, and it is addictive, when we were caught you went for your cigarette to light it up and the boys that didn't have any left you gave them one and when you saw them waving the machine guns we all shook hands because we thought, "This is it!." you know?
- 27:30 And particularly then they took us down and showed us the casualties, and we'd really split a few open, we lost quite a few too. Our battery only lost one and that was the Don R, that was my mate Les Wilkin. He was a school teachers' son and mad keen on motor bikes and his idea was when we were caught there was plenty of movement, the desert was pretty flat and you can see
- 28:00 the whirling of the dust, and he knew there were troops, he didn't know where they were, but his idea I take it was to go and get somebody to come back and rescue us, they were too good with their machine guns they had a fill of heavy machine guns. He died of wounds actually, and

28:30 I'll grant them, they were decent enough to allow me to go to the funeral when we buried him. But .

**When did the funeral take place?**

They took us to a square which was laid out and then we were

29:00 ordered to lie down, they laid out a stone square and we had to lie down in the desert, flat down, not allowed to move, they put guards all round and , then somebody came and told me that my mate had been killed and someone came with a Hun [German] because somebody told the Hun that I was his mate and

29:30 they, I think it was that day... but things are very, you know? And that taught me that the things that you are really fond of you lose. That's the first lesson I learnt.

30:00 **I can imagine it was a very traumatic and emotional day, having to surrendering and losing a mate.**

Yep, the thing that you're worried about was, I read about, you know here I am, I've joined up, I've done nothing. And what do I do?

30:30 It's a dreadful feeling, we weren't even , it was never even suggested that you'd be a prisoner. You understood that you could get killed or wounded and if things were tough a wound was probably welcome because it got you back to base but it was always the other bloke that'd get killed, that was the,

31:00 that why you can have soldiers, nobody better tell them, it can happen.

**During that day of action, how did you cope with fear?**

Ah, that's a goody.

31:30 The first, I'd always read that bullets going over your head sounded like wasps. I heard a psst, and I realised that it wasn't a wasp and you realise that you're being fired on and then a shell

32:00 comes over, it's a fear, its very hard to describe. You freeze, you tend to freeze, you have a horrible feeling of wanting to urinate, and you will

32:30 and then you think "Well I got to protect myself out of this. I can't get on my gun because only two can do it." But you hang around to give them the ammo and when the gun goes and you've got nothing. What do you do? But it's that first freezing,

33:00 its ... and, if anyone ever says they're not frightened they haven't been in action. Although we'd had bombs dropped on us but that's different. I don't know why it is, but it's different, it's your job, you're going to get a bomb dropped on you.

33:30 To be acting like infantry out in the open - something that you weren't prepared for - and a bullet flies over and then a shell, it's fear, and it grabs and your mouth gets dry. But it doesn't last fortunately because you've got to do something and once you do something that's it.

34:00 But the futility of being caught was horrible.

**What was the disadvantage of being up on the rise?**

They could see you. They were down below and you were up like a target, it's too easy to see, and they'd come round, they were below us and the difficulty to get

34:30 a traverse or a depression is to get the bullets at them, to get out the shells at them, but you should never be up on the hill. But guess what we were?

**It sounds**

35:00 **like it was intense action, when were you aware that the order came to surrender?**

Ah, we'd sort of, after the guns had been blown the most sensible thing was to

35:30 get out of the way of those because that was arranged for them. We sort of got down the hill and I think we tended to bunch. That's not clear, my mind's not clear but I can see Chester, Chester had his 45 in his hand on the lanyard and I can still it he's got the lanyard around his neck and I

36:00 think he was talking to Spike, I didn't know. Spike he was talking to somebody and it was just sort of unanimous, the order was to surrender, put your hands up but I don't know if they had a flag or what. I do remember putting my hands up. But it's a horrible feeling.

36:30 You think you've let everybody down and I think Chester never ever forgave himself. He never joined in after he came home. He was taken prisoner

37:00 and I think he got roughed up in the offlag [officers' prison camp] and I think he had something to do with, it was an intelligence section in his camp and he was up near Brunswick and he didn't talk much he didn't talk to his daughters. In fact I do now,

37:30 but he played golf with them, but he never told them anything, he sort of withdrew from talking to his fellow officers and they all said that Chester was (UNCLEAR) and then he died young from a heart attack.

**I'm wondering if what you are talking about is almost a shame?**

38:00 Yeah, you feel you've done something wrong, but if you look at it in hindsight you've been wronged, it's a very difficult question, very hard to comprehend. And you think. "What else could we have done?"

38:30 And then I had an experience after I came home, and I was pretty toey when I came home, and my wife had a cousin who had real tabs on him and he was a real shiny bum if ever I'd seen one and at a party I was at he happened to say that nobody should ever be a prisoner.

39:00 My wife intervened, I'd have cut his throat. Jeepers, that reminded you of Bible didn't it.

**Do those feelings come later rather than at the time?**

39:30 **I wondering on the day you surrendered?**

Oh, its dead. Everything's died. You don't, you feel so useless, it comes from, I've never discussed it with the other boys but I wouldn't be unique, and you can get an idea

40:00 of what its like to a degree. When we got, when we were taken to Prato in Italy we met up with the 7th Battery who'd been in Crete. Now by the time we'd got to Prato we'd got over a lot of the trauma

40:30 and it all comes because these boys had come straight off Crete and they were still yelling out in their sleep, its their mates you know. It does that, sort of, it takes a while but then it comes back, and when we got home the medical profession tended to sort of say it's all up in your head, and they put you down as suffering from war neurosis and I was a pharmacist and to me that's the worst thing to ever happen. They'd all say, "It wasn't going to happen to me." Because they filled them up with uppers and downers, and the blokes would say to me, "I feel crook." and I'd say, "How many of those tablets have you taken?" They'd tell me. And I'd say, "What are you taking them for?" "The the doctor told me."

## Tape 4

00:33 **On that day of being taken POW, how surprised were you and your unit that it was the Germans?**

We, it's, I don't know, you just can't describe it, the fact that it was Germans, although

01:00 it was a fact and it hit you, there they are. They are supposed to be Italians but they're not, their Huns, big difference the way they were waving their hands, the Italians would talk to you and wave their hands, the Huns talks to with a gun and a boot, you didn't and these boys were tough boys, probably as tough as our blokes,

01:30 'cause we are arrogant, they are too. I have to say it: an Australian is an arrogant person, he should be too.

**You mentioned that you were all forced to lie down; can you tell me why that was?**

They were, the Huns were as frightened as we were, because they didn't know where

02:00 their mob was, we didn't know where our mob was and the desert's a pretty lonely place. It's wide and they scratched out and marked out a place and they decided that that's where they were going to keep us and we were their prize, and the only way they were going to keep us was to lie flat, you stick your head up you got a bullet

02:30 but under the circumstances I would have done exactly the same, you just can't blame them and they had no water and no food so we got no water and no food and the desert sun can get pretty hot. And there was no going to the toilet it's a pretty,

03:00 it's a very grim situation. They were frightened, we were frightened, and anyone who says they weren't, they weren't there, I can tell you that.

**Roughly how many men were surrendering?**

Golly, I've got it written down in there.

03:30 They got, there were, all up there were 2000 Australian prisoners. But I think all up we would have

been about 200 in this issue.

04:00 The casualties, I make a comparison but I don't make it derogatively: at the Battle of Long Tan [Vietnam] the Australians had 64 casualties; we had that many on our day. So it was the post-traumatic stress. It's hard to follow, I can see where it is, but you know,

04:30 Europe, we don't understand Europe at all. The desert was a fight between divisions and the divisions three battalions, no three brigades, Europe they were armies. They were one army, two armies, three armies, four armies

05:00 against two other armies, that's a lot of people, and it's a matter of perspective. But we did think that while we were in the desert that it was a very good place if you're going to fight it's a good place to fight it because you're fighting between the troops and that's what you're supposed to do you're not knocking off civilians

05:30 or doing anything like that, but boy when they moved to Europe, they really made a mess.

**What was the buzz or the mood of the troops towards those in command?**

Of our mob,

06:00 Probably summed up, I don't know whether anyone has told you in the thing, but [General Sir Thomas] Blamey was always considered to be a brothel keeper from his behaviour in Melbourne, and by the behaviour of his wife because as soon as Blamey got to the Middle East she turned up too and I don't know whether you should edit that but

06:30 when we were in Palestine, Blamey decided to visit and the boys were lining the road and as he went past they turned their backs, and it's, nobody said anything but that's the feeling that I would take

07:00 but I don't know whether that's to the bone or whether I have exaggerated it or not but he should have been looking after us and so should our politicians, because when you look at

07:30 who took, who broke out, who got into Tobruk, who got into Benghazi, the drunken 6th Division, but boy when they fought they fought and when they drank they drank. But they were tough boys they really were.

**How long did you have to stay laying on the ground?**

About three days, and then they marched us to Derna and the, I can remember the in the books that you read in your childhood

08:30 when you get thirsty you suck on a stone. It doesn't work, its dreadful, but we, it was probably two days and it was at night that we did the marching because it was too hot. And we got to Derna and they put us in the hospital there and there was no water,

09:00 even in Derna, except one of our blokes, Darcy Edwards, the Edwards twins, one was short and one was tall, and Darcy found some water in a trough

09:30 and everybody drank the water and in the morning the trough had, it was a hospital, and it had all the refuse from the hospital so it wasn't long before we had dysentery, and boy that's shocking. Don't know how long they kept us there, they took us by truck, we had to stand up

10:00 in one of the Italian trucks from Derna to Benghazi. Then they slapped us into the compound where the big water tank was for the reticulation of water, it had been blown up over on its side and it was mixed with the

10:30 sewerage and that was our source of water. And everybody was, I don't think anybody escaped the attack of dysentery, and my research has shown that it was amoebic dysentery we had and that's pretty horrific. Mix it up with a bit of malaria and you got a good dose of stuff.

**I can image after a few days of rough treatment, hot sun and not much food or water you must have started to feel fairly weak?**

Yeah, we were pretty fit, but the dysentery sucks you and we were caught in our desert gear. We just had shorts and shirt, long strides, long

11:30 socks and some of us had greatcoats. I didn't but Charlie had one, the desert night is very cold, it can be, in fact you can freeze, you can freeze water. But you started to get a bit wobbly

12:00 and the Italians wouldn't stop if you had an attack of dysentery. The boys that could just had to hold another boy out over the back of the truck and that's morally degrading that sort of thing and it doesn't build your morale up I can tell you. But in Benghazi we, see

12:30 at Derna the Huns disappeared. They took us into the hospital grounds and then we suddenly had Italians and then the Italians were frightened of us cause they are small. And the boys, an Australian is

arrogant and if you are yelling in a foreign language he'll tell you what to do

13:00 and it doesn't matter if you got a gun or not, but the Hun knows how to shut you up but the Italian was frightened and you had to be careful because he'd use a bullet when he didn't need to.

**What do you mean by that?**

Oh, an Italian would shoot when he didn't have to, he's so frightened, you have to be careful of frightened people.

13:30 A Hun, you know is tough and you treat him that way and you can goad him to a point, you become psychiatrists and psychologists, you learn how to do things but you had to be very careful with an Italian because we towered over them, generally speaking, and they were frightened of us, and you know, because the boys were raucous,

14:00 they told them that you know, to get the hell out, and half the time they did. It's absolutely stupid when you think about it in hindsight. Telling your captor what to do.

**In that hand over from the Germans**

14:30 **to the Italians whether their was any first thoughts of making a run for it because they were Italian ?**

The thought was always there but how was the question. And one of my, one of the blokes that I met up with later

15:00 he was in the hospital and he got out, that was Bill Kelly. He and another bloke, Snow Campbell I think it was, they go out over the hospital wall got into they pinched

15:30 the sticks that you use to carry a stretcher, and they made oars out of them, got down into the harbour and stole a rowboat and they got the boat and Bill Kelly, he lives at Kangaroo Island now,

16:00 he said that we'd better tow the boat out of the harbour by swimming it because it's too dangerous to get in the boat. They'd made rowlocks and oars from the stretcher and his mate said, "I can't swim." So they put him in the boat

16:30 and they rowed for five days and they rowed almost to Tobruk, that's a feat, and they saw a mob they reckoned must have been at Tobruk, and they were all starkers, frolicking in the water, and they thought, "Well its only Australians that'll do that!"

17:00 So in they go and it's a mob of Huns having a swim. But Kelly, he never gave up, he was one of the boys, he was an ambulance driver. When he got caught he had heaps of Italian rifles and pea-shooters and the Huns on that side of the ambulance and he shovelled them out the back, ambulance

17:30 drivers don't have weapons but he's a farmer, there were lots of farmers, but...

**And when did you hear that story about their escapade?**

Bill? When Bill came, up to 57 [Camp No 57 Italy] when we were in Italy. But also we had a very horrible experience in Benghazi when the Huns turned up and decided we were prisoners and

18:00 we'd work for them and they took us to the wharf and we suddenly found that to unload munitions from the boat - and we were still arrogant enough to get away with what we did - we cut the ropes they used to unload the ammo in nets and, of course, we cut the

18:30 rope so that it spilt into the harbour or was busted. They were the bombs they used on Stukas had whistles or and we could rip them off. You did everything you possibly could and the Hun always - for a reason that I've never ever discovered -

19:00 blamed somebody else rather than the Australian, which I thought was terrific. If you think of it, it's a black irony that when the net broke they shot a couple of Arabs; it wasn't the Arab's fault it was ours. We kicked

19:30 up a stink, we were too much trouble for them and I think we got away with it because they needed the work done, because they were pushing on, they were doing the siege of Tobruk at that stage and they couldn't afford the time to bust us, so they took us back and got another batch, the same thing happened, but then they got cunning. The time came and Kelly was one of the blokes who was kept

20:00 at Benghazi and they really stood over them. That actually, in my book, was a concentration camp; it wasn't a prison camp and our government has never ever acknowledged that. Bill has tried all sorts of things but they won't accept it and the same thing happened at Tripoli, It was horrific there, they tried it on us, they realised they got the wrong ones and we got away with it.

20:30 But there were lots of blokes who didn't get away with it. From Benghazi they took us by truck again all the way up, it must be a couple of thousand miles, and we slept on the road and the guards slept in the

- 21:00 truck, they're not silly. And sometimes we were in the barracks but sometimes it was better to sleep on the road because the Italians were lousy and they were full of fleas and there's fleas everywhere in the desert. Don't know what they live on, but boy you can go out in the desert and get a boot full of fleas, and then
- 21:30 we were taken up to Tripoli and it was a long journey. You get very little tucker on the way and we were taken to Sabratha about 60 km west of Tripoli, a very famous place I found out, very big excavations, I didn't see any excavations, I only saw a cage.
- 22:00 We were held in the cage and we'd already upset the Italians and I think they decided we should be separated from the British and anybody else and but...

**I was going to ask you if you were with the British and how you got along with each other?**

It took us

- 22:30 a while to understand them., If you're familiar with the Tommy he's only got one swear word and it starts with F and rhymes with crook, he can use it as an adjective, an adverb, a noun and a verb all in the one sentence.
- 23:00 It's very difficult to understand him, but generally speaking we found them, their attention to hygiene is nowhere near ours. The Australian is a rough and tough bloke but he'll always have a wash whenever he can get there
- 23:30 and even try and clean his teeth, not so much the British, although you have to consider the British as those who were conscripted and those who were permanent and they are two entirely different section of people. But the officers, the
- 24:00 Poms were rushing around saluting the officers. They hadn't separated the officers from us and in that particular push they got Neems, Parry and O'Connor there and they got the one-eyed one, who ended at Derna in a plane, he got taken prisoner. The plane at Derna they thought belonged to us, it didn't belong to the Huns and the Italians
- 24:30 but they were in the up in the pen. They hadn't separated them out. The thing that really rocked us was that we were in a shirt, shorts and the Huns had taken our tin hats because they considered them a weapon, some blokes had their slouch hat but most of us were caught
- 25:00 with a tin hat on. Anyway we got to this camp at Sabratha and there was heaps and heaps of Poms, and officers. Look, you've never seen so many officers in your life and the rotten sods are walking around all dressed up like chocolate soldiers. They had their mess kits with them some even had tartan trews on. They're swaggering around the joint and the stupid Poms are saluting them.
- 25:30 Well Australians don't salute very much, if the Australian salutes you he respects you and it's not this, "I'm not saluting you, Sir, I'm saluting the uniform." but these officers, Neems, Parry and O'Connor, they're all dressed up as though they were on parade and we heard, walking
- 26:00 in the compound, one of the sycophants called out, "Stand fast, soldier!" Of course, you sort of look around. "Don't you salute?" and we look around. "Don't you know who we are?" And the bloke near me said, "Yes. You're the stupid bastards who got us into this."
- 26:30 It didn't go over very well but they never asked for a salute again. But they must have been caught with their mess kits and everything, how or why I don't know. They were all dressed up like dolls, we'd never seen anything like it, they were all tearing around saluting, jeepers. Our blokes,
- 27:00 we saw our lieutenant and every bloke saluted him, big difference.

**Going back to before you got to Sebratah how were you travelling and where did you go?**

In trucks, Italian trucks, they were covered and you

- 27:30 had to urinate or defecate out the back. If you couldn't make it, it was horrible and they used to stop. I think we went. it would have been Benghazi, Homs, Sirte, Tripoli and from Tripoli they took us by rail
- 28:00 truck to Sabratha. We were going to the wharves again, and then they separated the Australians from the rest and they slapped a guard on and we couldn't even talk to them.

**I am wondering how much you knew about where you were going and why you were being held?**

- 28:30 Nothing, we thought they would take us to Italy but we got that from, see the Italians are fairly garrulous and thought they could and they liked to show off and so you could find out a fair bit so the
- 29:00 rumour - it was all by rumour - was that they would try to get us to Italy and we weren't too happy with that because we knew that you had to go past Malta and it wasn't real good. So they decided to take us up into the Tripoli port

29:30 and we were loaded aboard an Italian boat the Vittoria. And we were stuck down in the holds down below, and I was right up in the nose and during the night we heard the torpedo boats and fortunately we didn't get one. But there

30:00 were lots of POWs who were killed, and there were lots of boats that were carrying POWs that were torpedoed by them but fortunately we dodged past Malta and we saw Sicily in the morning when they opened the hatch. I didn't

30:30 see it, but the guards up on top told us we were off Sicily. And that afternoon or evening we arrived in Naples, I could smell it. It does smell, I'd read about it, its got a smell all of its own, thinking back in hindsight its probably all mixed up with Mount Vesuvius, the smell,

31:00 and you put it down to the Italians.

**Before we talk about Naples, can you tell me how your unit was keeping itself together,**

31:30 **how did you manage to maintain discipline within your unit?**

No, we're just mates. If the sergeant didn't have a cigarette you gave him one. Good old Tom, was Hawkes Brothers, poor old Tom he was an inveterate smoker and a bottle of whiskey a day

32:00 bloke. The grog didn't worry him when he was taken prisoner but without cigarettes he nearly died. But when he came home he got back to the bottle and didn't last long.

**Were you able to talk directly to your Italian captors?**

32:30 No, we didn't want to talk to them, they were little Dago b-s [slang for Italian bastards]. Why would we talk to them? "Go home, go on!" We should have really been slapped down, we were too arrogant, in hindsight

33:00 that we got away, we would do what we were told but only with protest.

**Did you still kept your own chain of command?**

No, it wasn't necessary, see the Australian, you don't need it, he doesn't really need

33:30 a corporal or sergeant. He knows what to do and he does it, generally speaking, you do need it for certain parts of discipline, but no, my experience is that the bloke next to you knows what he's doing and he's prepared to help you.

34:00 He's prepared to do anything, it's a mate, it's a mate. It's different to a friend, and inadvertently he'll give you a cigarette if he's got one and he'll help with tucker but as the life

34:30 progressed in the prison camp, towards the finish, it didn't quite work out that way, you had three mates, it was three mates for preservation, you realised you couldn't do anything for anyone else and your chances of survival were so slim that you had three blokes.

35:00 If something happened in front or something happened behind, you tried, you didn't overextend. If something happened to your mate you picked him up, you carried him, you got water for him, you found fire if you could find it, its how the circumstances change, you are with your mob and you're all mates and then,

35:30 when it gets down closer and closer to being ,well, the end, as many a time I didn't think I was going to make it, and then it's up to three blokes. And as you'll see in the story, I got separated and that was the most tragic thing, you've got no idea:

36:00 you've got em, and then you haven't, and they've got you and then they haven't. It's a dreadful thing.

**In the beginning of being captured, it was a leveller and you're all in together**

36:30 **as a mob, I'm wondering how do you settle into a routine where you know what to do?**

It takes a while you see, Sabratha was a staging camp. We went from Naples to Capua and those of you who read the classics you knew where you were, "Capua and the sea"

37:00 and all the rest of it. The reality was you were put into a camp which was a barbed wire fence with guards, tents, and it rained, and it rained, and it rained. The toilet was a ditch from World War I with a pole you hung onto it and if you slipped that was bad luck and there

37:30 was one tap or very few taps to have a wash and it didn't take very long for the rain and the what not to stir it up into a quagmire and our glorious people, public servants, who say

38:00 there was no malaria in Italy but there had been malaria in the Pontine Marshes, malaria in Yugoslavia, anywhere you go, DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] they still don't believe it I don't think. And yet Captain Levings [Edward Winchester Levings, OBE] wrote a report saying the people who came in from southern Italy had malaria

- 38:30 and he was the MO [Medical Officer]for the 2/4th Anti-Tank Regiment I think. I found that in the archives in Canberra, I've got a copy of it you want it. But in the camp we were still
- 39:00 arrogant, we weren't getting fed properly, we were dirty and it doesn't take long, we were on the plains of the Volturno River and the Italians were training their troops in front of us they were trying to show off too. And they march along in their little pantaloons and it really is, to us.
- 39:30 humorous seeing these little blokes trying to do drill and they're skipping along like that and it wasn't long before someone remembered Laurel and Hardy, you know "dah dah dah dum dah dah dam." you know then they changed step, well we made them change step by whistling so they stopped manoeuvring in front of us
- 40:00 and then when seeing the bursaglieri in the desert they wear a cocked hat with a big black Orpington feathers and they do everything at the double, their drills are all at the double. The first introduction we had,
- 40:30 they have a band which plays on the double too, and the bands plays faster, and they get that fast than the mob that's marching and then they stop for them to march past again and then they're running. God, that was the greatest amusement since Fanny had the accident. As far as our blokes were concerned, they were crook,
- 41:00 they'd got dysentery, no tucker so they decided they better get rid of us out of that camp and they took us by train...

## Tape 5

### 00:33 **Can you tell me about arriving in Naples?**

We arrived in Naples and I might have mentioned that it smelt and possibly that we attributed to it Mount Vesuvius. They had us down in the holds

- 01:00 and that was the first time we came up when we got into Naples, and we were very scruffy and scraggy. We had beards and, well, some of us had beards, I've got a Chinese beard, there's one curl that's it, and one of the boys had wheedled a pair of nail scissors from the guard.
- 01:30 During the night he had trimmed his beard and moustache, and his name was Hammon, Noel Hammon, and he was a gunner, he'd been a gold expert in every goldfield in Australia and New Guinea and had joined our unit and was a very likable chap but a bit more mature. We were the 19, 20, cheeky kids
- 02:00 compared with some of those blokes and Noel was quite a fastidious sort of chap and overnight he had trimmed his beard and his twiddly little moustache and even his hair and he had, not red hair, but a tinge of red, very titian I think.
- 02:30 So we were lined up on the top deck and they had a big gang-plank for us to go down, we didn't go down stairs as it was sort of a gang plank with steps on it. And down below waiting for us like a Roman holiday were all the inhabitants of Naples, the military, the brass, you name it.
- 03:00 Generals with medals that rattled all over the place, and we were going down in two, threes or fours, and the mob was booing and hissing and what not and my first thoughts when I saw them was, "Here we go for another Roman exhibition."
- 03:30 You know how the Romans used to take the slaves into Rome and walk them around, as we went down and I was ahead and I saw one of the waiting generals sort of genuflect and kneel. And the whole mob did, and then I looked behind and here comes Noel Hammon with his
- 04:00 goatee and twisted beard and for all the world he looked like a Titian Jesu Christi and they said, "Jesu Christi!" and ever after that they called him JC.
- 04:30 So we got to the wharf and they took us down through the narrow laneway and the crowd was calling out the rude words that Italians call out and making the rude signs that they make, they are quite explicit in their action and there's no doubt about what they mean. The big blousy women as well as the men and somebody threw some slops over us from up the slums
- 05:00 and it was quite a disturbance and the carabinieri, they were sort of military and civilian police, and they wore the Napoleon hat, you know the one that they don't wear anymore, but they were quite worried and we got shoved into a barracks and the crowd was quite ugly, and that
- 05:30 wasn't very pleasant and then the trucks arrived and they took us to Capua and Capua was on the plain, it was a river flat of Volturno River, from memory under the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, we could see Vesuvius at night, you could

- 06:00 see the glow. It was under a tent that the latrine was dug and it was just a pole and there was very little water and it rained, and rained, and rained. I think I told you about the way the boys took off the Italians marching on the bursaglieri,
- 06:30 well they must have got sick of us and decided to take us by train this time and to our amazement we went down to the railway station and saw a train waiting, a passenger train. Those of us who knew, knew it was the Blue Train, the famous Blue Train, that intercontinental one,
- 07:00 I think it was Paris to Rome or Paris to somewhere and we didn't dare think that that was going to be our mode of transport, but sure enough it was. And I'll say you this for the boys, they didn't wreck it. The curtains, the only thing is, they made them into laplaps but they had the glassware
- 07:30 and it was still there and the trains where you had a water source and a glass, where you could have a drink, and we were still on the train and the next stop was Rome, no we went through Cassino. Now we stopped in Cassino and being in a passenger carriage we had guards that were close to us
- 08:00 but we were pretty voluble and they made it known that we were in Italy and that we were going to Rome to do this and do that and we pulled up and way up in the top was this Benedictine monastery which was at Monte Cassino and it was built by the Benedictines and
- 08:30 it housed the greatest Roman Catholic library in Christendom, but it housed and it was perched way up at the top and it was magnificent to look up and see this thing and even though we were prisoners you derived a benefit from just looking at it.
- 09:00 So when the Yanks in their ruddy wisdom bombed it we considered they were vandals and as history proved all they did was when they bombed that monastery to rubble and they made it a beautiful hiding place for Germans. But fortunately I found out that the library had been shifted, and the
- 09:30 treasures had gone to Rome, before it was bombed. But that was the greatest act of vandalism I had ever seen by a mob and you have to say it, you have to admit it. So we have had the privilege of seeing it and I have seen a photo of the restored one but it's not quite the same. So next stop was outside Rome
- 10:00 in the Pontine Marshes and then into the marshalling yards of Rome. Its huge, you go through rail after rail after rail and eventually we pulled up at a station and something I had never seen before, something I had never imagined, was a gleaming train made of metal and it really gleamed.
- 10:30 It was polished and of all things it had an electric motor, electric locomotive and sure enough we moved into that but it wasn't as luxurious as the Blue Train. And after a while we took off and we went through a tunnel, and then another tunnel, and we hadn't imagined, I hadn't read enough to imagine,
- 11:00 the mountains we were going through had been tunnelled and they had this system of electric locomotion which just glided along, it was a magnificent trip. We were being paid 5 bob a day for that. And eventually we pulled up at a station which was called Sulmona
- 11:30 and it was almost on the east coast about level with Pescara, a fishing village, but Sulmona's claim to fame is the poet Ovid, he was born there and there's a statue to him somewhere in Sulmona and
- 12:00 they took us up from the railway station, climbing up the mountain to brick walls, and it turned out to be a prison camp. It was an officers' prison camp in World War I but the roles were reversed and it became an officers' camp only in the reverse in that it housed our officers this time.
- 12:30 Now going up the mountain it was fairly steep and we could hear a lot of noise and a lot of abuse by a male and eventually we'd halted and, coming up the steep part of the track was a woman, and on her head was a telegraph pole
- 13:00 and the noise was coming from a bloke abusing her for doing nothing. She was carrying it and of course the boys booed, you don't do that to women, but you do in Italy, and I always threatened the wife if she played up that I'd take her to Italy to see what they did to the women. That was an incident on the way up.
- 13:30 When we got to the camp we found Chester Guest and Spike Marlin from the 2/15th Battalion and they were allowed to talk to us and they told us what the score was and then the Italians put the hard word on us
- 14:00 and the hard word was that we were brought there to work. It was a farming district and they wanted us to work on the farm, and Sulmona was famous for its almonds, you never had a wedding unless you had Sulmona almonds. The place was called Sulmona what I remembered as being Fonte del Amere and
- 14:30 for the life of me I could not find any reference to Fonte del Amere until I was reading Morton one day, H.V. Morton, and he mentions that it was the "fountain of love" and it alluded to the fact that in the temple of Ovid was a huge phallus which the women touched for fertility
- 15:00 and that's where they got the name. I also found by looking out of the brick walls, perched way up in

the mountains, it was a most spectacular country, was a huge cross which overshadowed the valley and in the evening and the morning you could see little figures going around the cross and my

- 15:30 research tells me that, I think it was Celestine, he was a hermit monk whom they made a Pope and he didn't like it whatsoever and he came back to his hermit business. Some of the officers, and I think Chester, went up, they were allowed to go up but to see a cross
- 16:00 overshadow a valley is quite a moving experience particularly when you are a prisoner and you are sitting on your backside with your back up against the wall and you can only see clouds and the cross or the people moving and that's my impression of Sulmona. So when they put the hard word on us the boys told them what they could do with their job, they weren't going to work for any Dagos,
- 16:30 and the Italians took that as being a riot so they decided to take us out and the next trip we went up to Prato al Isarco which is up on the Brenner Pass. You go through Bolzano which is near Trento and there's a lake in there very similar to Lake Como and the boys
- 17:00 got ideas of escape because you're not really far from Switzerland when you are in that area and it's difficult, because England's not very big Italy is not very big, Australia is big and we are used to big distances and we're not used to small distances. So when we arrived at
- 17:30 Prato al Isarco it narrows so you have a cliff, a highway, a railway and the Prato River and a cliff and it's that narrow. We detrained at Prato crossed the railway towards the big cliff on the right hand side, marched up the road, turned
- 18:00 the corner to a cross road, a T-junction and of all things, we looked up at the word braury, which is brewery in anybody's language and can you imagine the irony of Australians being put into a brewery, a pub with no beer?
- 18:30 We look at this and we think, "Oh golly, it's the essence." I mean Australians in a brewery, so there were huge cast-iron gates, a very impressive little place, very picturesque it was. On the corner was the road that led to the Dolomites and along that road there is a little village where the people speak Latinum,
- 19:00 its an offshoot of Latin and it's not Italian, they speak Latinum. Of course we got a different type of people, red-head Italians, blondes and all in alpine dress, you know, the nice little shorts and smock and what have you, so it was quite a change
- 19:30 and we were housed in what must have been the offices of this disused brewery and we were told if we misbehaved we would be put in the dungeons, we laughed. There came a time when they decided they'd give us a shower and we went out
- 20:00 through the gate again and just round the corner into the cellars which were the dungeons and they were beautifully made and shaped with hammer hung type of domes and they had these little showers in there. They must have used part of the brewery,
- 20:30 but they could have stuck the whole lot of us in there and no-one would ever have found us. Ah, the catch of Prato was that the sun rose and shone, disappeared and then you saw it again hidden by the big cliffs, there was nothing to do, the boys would move from the sun to the sun as the sun moved
- 21:00 and on the southern part of the camp you could see the rail and the rail carried troops, German troops, which we could see and every now and again rail cars going back would have damaged planes or vehicles or tanks on them
- 21:30 and it was quite amusing for the blokes. It also allowed them to wolf whistle any of the girls going up the track which was frowned on by the authorities. It was there that they decided that we would settle down and we got the boys interested in something and we had a meeting and we thought
- 22:00 "There's a lot of talent here and we should be offering some sort of education to the blokes." And that's that little poster I discovered. Someone rang me up and said "Have you got a copy of the poster?" And I said I didn't know about it, but I didn't remember. Anyway he showed it to me in the drawer and I have it now and we started on that but it didn't start for very long because the Italians are
- 22:30 ankle biters, they chased us round and whacked at your ankles because they feel so insecure, they thought that we were getting on too well and they decided we should go to bed at 4 o'clock each afternoon. You lost the sun about 6 o'clock anyway, of course you can't put Australians to bed at 4 o'clock
- 23:00 so the boys told them what to do. That constituted a riot so they put us on parade in front of the gates and they made the greatest mistake of their life, instead of leaving their machine guns and troops outside they bought their machine guns and their troops inside. This was duly noted by the boys who had just virtually come out of action and were still
- 23:30 pretty toey and then they had a Judas Gate in the big gates and with all the pomp and ceremony a little Italian general turned up with more medals than you could carry anywhere, and he clinked and clanked and he put on a big pompous show. And, as he come through the gate,

- 24:00 he threw a big Fascist salute but as did so he fell flat on his face because he forgot there was a Judas bar on the gate and, of course, the boys thought that was a huge joke and they laughed. Now to laugh at an Italian general, it's duelling, it's swords at the ready. Anyway when he recovered
- 24:30 he came in screaming and simultaneously the boys just moved around the machine guns, the NCOs moved around the general and then Cotman who was of English origin but was WO [Warrant Officer] from the 2/15th Battalion, a very brave man, said, "Well we got your general. We don't go to bed
- 25:00 and if you want your general, if you want your guns back, you just go out." And that's how the riot finished. But it didn't really finish because they never forgave us. We had rioted and they brought troops from everywhere, we had more troops than you could poke a stick at around the place, but
- 25:30 the curfew was taken off but it wasn't very long before they shifted us and in hindsight you would say that they found a place for the unruly rebellious Australians. There were 200 of us, and it was at Prato that we found the boys from Crete and they'd been on the [HMS] Hereward and
- 26:00 they were being evacuated. They were the first people be German parachute divisions and the Poms put the guns into fixed positions, this made it practically impossible for them to operate. Eventually they were overwhelmed and they were evacuated
- 26:30 but they sent to Hereward the British destroyer to pick them up and when they were going through the straight and a Stuka came over and dropped a bomb right down the funnel and blew the engine right out and the ship foundered and some of the blokes were in the water for 16 hours or more and lots of them didn't make it.
- 27:00 Lieutenant Mann was reported swimming around the water offering blokes something and in the morning he wasn't there, well those blokes were still reliving that when we'd met them and we knew what we'd been through but we didn't know
- 27:30 that they'd been in action, and they didn't and we didn't know that our 9th Battery had been in action in Syria and along the canal. Things had gone on while we had been taken prisoner so it was quite rapturous in a way that to meet the blokes but to find out their casualties were very high. So in their wisdom the Italians had worked out that we were to go to
- 28:00 Gruppignano which is outside Udine and Udine is north of Venice or Trieste in that area and its about 10 mile from the Yugoslavian border and 15 from the Austrian border up on a plain and the coldest and windiest place that you can imagine on earth.
- 28:30 It had been used as a camp for the Italians because of its proximity to the Yugoslav border. In the meantime the Italians had attacked Yugoslavia and it wasn't necessary and here was a perfect place to put the prisoners.
- 29:00 In the winter the winds blew from the Alps and in the summer it blew from the Adriatic and all the huts were braced with huge buttresses and they were wooden huts, about 100 men to a hut, the camp was about
- 29:30 a mile around the camp, we used to walk around and figured you did a mile, but I can't recall the size but it was divided into four compounds and they had it arranged so that in the centre of the four compounds they had a communal cookhouse where you could serve each compound,
- 30:00 that caught on fire in a big storm but we were put into number one compound and, trying to think of the time, it's starting to get cold, and we've got shirts and shorts and no clothes.
- 30:30 And they had one little stove in the hut but didn't give you any fuel, if you got some you were lucky, so because the huts were made of wood the boys whittled it so when the wind blew it was damn lucky they didn't fall down. It was so cold in the winter, a litre of water stuck in an aluminium dixie on the wall
- 31:00 was frozen in one minute, that's cold. And it snowed; the camp was in charge of a carabinieri so I've explained the carabinieri are military and civilian police. And this little pompous, I called him a clone of Mussolini was in charge of, he was a Fascist
- 31:30 and he had helped put Mussolini into power and all those dirty tricks that those Fascists got up to, he hated the British. Over his office was a sign that read, in essence, "Cursed be the British and thrice cursed be any Italian who lifts a hand to help him."
- 32:00 He said when he first saw us that no one would ever escape from the camp, he offered 1000 lira and a fortnight's leave to anybody who shot a prisoner, he showed us the bullets they were using and they were an explosive bullet which broke into 15 parts, definitely against the Geneva Conventions.
- 32:30 He systematically starved us of Italian rations. Originally America was not in the war when we first got there and the American Red Cross visited, but they only visited once because Pearl Harbor happened and then the Swiss Red Cross came.
- 33:00 The Vatican in their wisdom decided that there would be some Catholics amongst the prisoners and of course there were Catholics in the guards, and we were guarded by the carabinieri, the Alpine, a

regiment of infantry plus another regiment. And they worked in threes, a carabinieri, a Alpine another guard, and a dog.

- 33:30 They just roamed around in the compound all the time. During the winter one of the guards froze to death, and of course that received cheers and not condolences, we were subjected to a lot of electrical storms because it was ironstone country, iron and limestone
- 34:00 country and the electrical storms that are created are fantastic when they hit, I've never seen anything like it, they moved along the road and they hit the cookhouse one day and the Italians, for their meat rations, they used to keep rabbits and the rabbits got out when the cookhouse caught on fire and the boys tried to snare them to eat them, I think they got two,
- 34:30 and that went into the pot-bellied stove with the fur and all. There was pin-pricking all the way through. Anything that this colonel could do, if he even looked like getting near the side of the camp, you were supposed to stand up and of course the boys wouldn't salute him.
- 35:00 Our excuse was we didn't have hats and you can't salute without your uniform, but we had to stand to attention, now if you didn't, you went straight into the boob, the calaboose, [solitary confinement] and you'd do 14 days with bread and water, and that wasn't much different to the tucker he was giving us. Originally we used to get a little macaroni in the soup,
- 35:30 then they withdrew the macaroni we got about 4 little pieces of polished rice and any pieces of grass or weed would be stuck in it. Occasionally there was a piece of pig fat. I can remember one occasion when they made a mistake and we got pasta sciutta which is like,
- 36:00 it's like macaroni and pig fat and tomatoes and cheese and all the rest of it, but that's the only time. Red Cross parcels turned up and they were divided one between two, I can't remember ever getting a parcel to myself and he the colonel deliberately withheld them
- 36:30 so much so that when, it was a West Australian unit of infantry that got caught at Ruweisat Ridge in the Battle of El Alamein, a whole regiment was caught, the whole battalion and these blokes were very badly knocked about
- 37:00 There were things called Red Cross invalid parcels which the MO Captain Levings asked the colonel to release to save these blokes, and he refused and he wouldn't even give them any Red Cross parcels and quite a few of them died, that's reported in Levings's report. That's the type of bloke that he was, then,
- 37:30 to really muck us up he decided that he would insult us and we kept ourselves fairly clean and we had access to the Italian barbers to do our hair, and by this time we got some razor blades I think and we were shaving and the boys, it's not funny having cold water for a shower in the middle of winter but particularly when
- 38:00 it freezes. Another way of describing the freezing is that at the urinal it was an open pit and stalagmites came up, one bloke had a job with a pole to knock the stalagmites over and that was frozen urine and it didn't take long
- 38:30 to freeze, so it was cold. The colonel decided that every prisoner, because they were dirty, this was an insult, would have every hair taken off the body, of course the blokes said no, so he said, "Yes they would." Now it's comical because they are
- 39:00 comical people, well they seemed to be comical, we were all on parade and he told us he was going to force us to have a haircut. We were kept on parade nearly all day and there were little Italians running off on bicycles coming around all day with newspaper parcels and bringing them
- 39:30 up to the administration building and dumping them. We found out they were collecting handcuffs, all around the district collecting handcuffs so they could handcuff everybody and then hold a pistol to your head so they could shave your head and shave your body. In the camp were four Sikhs who were loyal to the
- 40:00 British and they were subjected to torture and whatnot in Rome because there was a bloke called Chandra Boses who was operating propaganda aimed at India, trying to cause unrest in India, and some of the Indians were defecting but these Sikhs, they were only young blokes, 18, 19. No,
- 40:30 Harban Singh would have been about 22. I was 19, he was 22, he towered over me but these blokes had resisted that and to punish them the Italians had figured that Australians wouldn't have anything to do with coloured people. They put four Sikhs in with the Australians and as soon as their story was known
- 41:00 they were looked after, when they went to cut the Sikhs' hair decided that he went straight up to the colonel, picked him up in bear hug and said, "Italian, you die if you cut one hair of a Sikh." He didn't get his haircut
- 41:30 but he got shifted out of the camp and to punish him they took him from our camp and put him into a British officers' camp. And guess what? They took them under their wing so they almost didn't have a win there.

## Tape 6

00:32 **Telling us about Camp 57 and how the Italians nearly broke you, why do think they wanted to?**

01:00 I think you've got to understand that we were dealing with the Fascista, the Fascist section, who were a different mob to the ordinary Italian. They were the red raggars like the Nazis but this bloke, you see when they came to power they killed people and did all sort of things as did the Nazi Party

01:30 and it was in them, and you know the Mafia and whatnot and how they can behave, very similar I would say. But this colonel, he was really sadistic and the pressure that he put on the prisoners according to Levings, Levings said that if had've lasted

02:00 another six months 50 percent of them would have been bipolar. He would have broken them and that frightens you when you thought you were handling it all. You hated it but you thought you were handling it, but I find that I read this medical report, and in hindsight it frightens you.

02:30 But this colonel, he decided that with the Red Cross, it wasn't good enough to get Red Cross food, if it wasn't for Red Cross food we wouldn't be alive, I can guarantee that. Fortunately it came at the right times. And when the periods of starvation were deliberately on, we used to suffer from a thing we called blackouts, I've never had it explained and

03:00 nobody's really been interested to find out. There's a fund of pathological knowledge that could be got from POWs but nobody's ever bothered to do a study. It's perfect, you have people who been treated to malnutrition periods over long periods and they'd been subjected many times to periods of

03:30 malnutrition but nobody seems to have bothered to find out. Anyway, this bloke decided that to pin-prick more, every piece of food, every tin would be opened, now when you open a tin you have to eat it, if you have no refrigeration, and this was tantamount to murder really.

04:00 He continually boasted that no-one would escape, so the boys decided to prove to him that they could escape. Unfortunately we had a couple of blokes who really got into the depression stage, one bloke walked straight through the wire and they shot him. It was obvious that he was off his rocker but

04:30 they still shot him. One bloke decided to withdraw from life and he refused to eat and his mates couldn't save him, and he died.

**You mentioned you got razor blades for shaving, I'm wondering if any of those blades were used for self harm?**

05:00 To my knowledge no, there was very little thought of that. Another important observation with all the men congregated together there was no homosexuality tolerated whatsoever.

05:30 It occurred amongst the Greeks and they got bashed up. And the Australian has a very strong sense of right and wrong, whether you think it's right or wrong is another thing but the Australian did. That's another observation, but the boys decided that the only way to escape was to tunnel

06:00 and because they worked out ways of blacking-out the electricity supply but it didn't work. And you couldn't cut the wire and go out because they were very high, three layered fences and they didn't have razor wire in those days, they had barbed wire and had aprons and they decided they'd tunnel

06:30 and they found, in an unused compound, a hut that had been built closer to the wire which gave them a good start and a 60 foot to 100 foot tunnel would get them out. Noel Ross, the sergeant of the engineers was in charge of the tunnelling and they had an escape committee

07:00 and they worked it out that they could only have 19 blokes into the tunnel and escape, because to escape they'd all have to be in the tunnel when it was sealed off, and 19 was all that would fit but the rest helped them do it. And there were some very famous blokes who were involved in that,

07:30 who did well for themselves after they came back. There was Tom Cummins who was a pharmacist when he joined up and how on earth he was accepted as a ruddy pilot I don't know, but he was a pilot and came home under rehab [rehabilitation] He did medicine, he got himself a degree by going over

08:00 to Edinburgh, came back got a degree of surgery and practiced in Sydney He died of bowel cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Eric Canning distinguished himself in dentistry; he was a consultant at Hobart Royal Hospital

08:30 **And what did the blokes use for digging?**

They purloined a pick, and they got that under subterfuge or whatever, they decided that they would flatter the Italian officers, who didn't

- 09:00 bathe, they used perfume, you could smell them a mile off, they must have used gallons of perfume, you know don't have a shower, just put the Old Spice down the shirt and they were always dressed up to the nines and so the boys decided they would talk them into letting us build footpaths so they didn't get their shoes dirty, it was all so we could use the spoil from the
- 09:30 tunnel. Also had to get equipment but the Italians would bring in a barrow load of tools which would be counted and they'd count it out and what not, but they made a mistake of leaving it outside the gate, one weekend I think it was, and it was observed when they came in next morning. On the Monday Noel Ross kicked up a terrific stink saying there was a pick missing
- 10:00 and because there was a pick missing he wouldn't accept the tools until they got another pick. In the meantime the pick had been pinched and hidden and gone and that was the pick they used, and they had an old tin hat and pieces of wood which they made a sledge to carry the spoil and they had volleyballs from the Red Cross and they used the bladder to take air to
- 10:30 the digging place. That's about the most I can tell you about what it was like. They chose this hut and the second, I think I'm right, the 2/28th was a West Australian unit that was badly mauled but was kept together as a cohesive unit and their spirit
- 11:00 it was good even though they had been belted around and they were, by subterfuge, to go into the hut while the tunnel was digging and they kept everybody silent and it didn't get out at all. So we had Greeks and Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, we had Arabs, we had Palestinians and those people haven't got the morals we have and,
- 11:30 in fact, thing if anything isn't tied down it goes, and they don't hesitate to inform or do anything like that. They are very treacherous people. You have to discipline them regardless of your morals. If you belt them up and it's made known why and they walk around
- 12:00 they are a living advertisement as what not to do. It's a hard fact of life that but it works under certain circumstances.
- Digging a tunnel would have been incredibly dangerous,**
- 12:30 **what did you think of that word of that was kept quite?**
- There was an escape committee who were in the know and they'd worked themselves into the administration section which liaised between the captors and the camp,
- 13:00 they kept that hut absolutely quiet, there were odd rumours but they all got squashed and you had to squash the thing, I knew because I gave advice to Noel. He made an theodolite I drew more out of a dumpy level I used a half circle they could get some levels, but even then it didn't work .
- 13:30 They found two or three dirty big rocks that they had to circumvent. Anyway the tunnel was about 50 yards long and it was aimed to run to a maize patch because they thought that would give them cover, but it started to slope up and they couldn't do anything about that so when they had to decide to go
- 14:00 and when they decided to go they went. The last one got, they were all recaptured because we got an alpine storm on the day they went. All the rivers and creeks ran and all the Italians had to do was put a guard on either bridge and you can't cross the rivers anyway and if you're up in the mountains you can't do anything. The last one was brought back in five days.
- 14:30 They were bashed up, they were starved and segregated, as were the haircut people and we never ever saw them again. Ah, there was only one pair that they didn't belt up and
- 15:00 they used to taunt them and they were subjected to Italian military justice and it's a really peculiar thing, if you're a high rank you don't get much punishment but if you're a low rank you get terrible punishment. You belt the peasants and not the lords. Yeah I think that's all you need to know about
- 15:30 that tunnel. Except that you can go and visit Bob Hooper who's up in Queensland. I found him through the book he got out five times when he got to Germany, he's an escape artist and he ran the Colts cricket team when cricketers were gentlemen, we had a cricket team and a Colts team he ran the Colts.
- 16:00 He's a typical Australian with the Aussie hat, corks around the thing, chest shirt wide open and a XXXX [beer] in his hand, he'd be a character for you to interview, I've contacted him, I've talked to him, he's one of the boys that got out. One of the New Zealanders that got out got a Military Medal because he got into Hungary or one of
- 16:30 those places and developed an underground. So they really distinguished themselves. Ah, so when Italy capitulated we didn't know, we were kept quiet but we found out since, but when it was happening they kept telling us
- 17:00 the orders from Britain or the military: "Stay put because you're going to be rescued." And the conditions were this and that and I since found out that a loud-mouthed Yank by the name of [General Dwight] Eisenhower ...Italy signed on the 9th of September 1943 a proviso that all the prisoners were handed over by the 10th and all the prisoners would be handed over. Eisenhower,

- 17:30 when his fleet was sailing for Italy, told the world that Italy capitulated, and I did two and a half years because of that loud-mouthed Yank, and I take it very, very unkindly, and I think every prisoner has a reason to. We were held we didn't escape; the senior British officer was a padre of all things
- 18:00 and that rotten sod, excuse the French. We got out because we decided we had to go, and we'd been watching the Capronis [Italian bombers] that were on an airfield near us and I had a mate who had been practicing the conversion of a Caproni and we were going to pinch that and fly to Africa because the Italians filled them up at night went to sleep during the night and then took off in the
- 18:30 morning and we knew that but we got out through the wire and got into a wood and all of a sudden we were surrounded, somebody dobbed us in [informed on us], and I found out that it was that padre because he was doing God's business to protect us. So you know things happen
- 19:00 but we got up the tree and climbed the trees and Europe's different to the bush here, there's no undergrowth to hide in so if you want to hide you got to go up a tree, we got up these pine trees and we heard the, that's the first time we knew they were Huns, we heard them, they had a loud-hailer and told us they knew we were in there: "Now put your
- 19:30 hands up!" No we didn't do it. "You have 30 seconds!" Still we didn't. They brought up a flame thrower and were about to demonstrate it. "You then have two seconds to come down." And the flame thrower went "boom" like that and the tree went "boom" like that. We were down on the ground with our hands up and back in the camp. So they didn't muck about and the place was swarming with Huns. They then lined us up,
- 20:00 took us out down the to railway line, and it's only recently that I realised there were two trains and they whacked us into these trains. We'd been sitting in Italy watching the mountains, those alps are magnificent and it looked as though they had foothills and mountains, and we looked at this for two years so when we
- 20:30 found that we were in the train, we decided we'd cut the bottom out of the train and jump out when it got into the foothills. I got news for you, there's no foothills. And that was that, now one train, the train that I was on, I can tell you, in the middle of the night we pulled
- 21:00 up and we had a hole cut, there were 50, about 60, 70 men jammed into this carriage and it had been done before, human cargo had been in it before because it had never been cleaned out. They just push you in and belt you in and I now know what they did to the Jews, you couldn't sit down, there were no toilet provisions, no food, no water, no nothing.
- 21:30 We managed to squeeze a space and the floors were a bit rotten and we got a hole and we weren't the only ones that cut a hole, and one of our blokes got out when we pulled up and he came back and said the terrain just drops away like that and it goes up like that so where are you going and we went through Villach,
- 22:00 pulled up at Markt Pongau and some were taken off and stayed at Markt Pongau, and the rest of us went to Spittal and when we got to Spittal they decided , the Huns were in charge, and it didn't take them very long to learn the words verbatim and raus and nicht rauchen means "no smoking"
- 22:30 and nicht singen means you're not allowed to sing, because when with the Italians we weren't allowed to talk, so we talked them into letting us sing and we used to sing the news to each other when we were in prison. But the Huns all woke up to that nicht singin, nicht smoken. We didn't have anything to smoke anyway.
- 23:00 **And would you sing songs or was it just the news?**
- You just make it up and you'd say "There's a rotten bastard coming around here with some food." and you'd sing it and that's how you knew what was going on around the cell. It's quite clever when you think about it, you know, there were ways around it but it didn't bluff the Hun that way.
- 23:30 When we got to Spittal they took some of them out and they stayed in Austria but the rest of us were taken by train up through Bavaria, through Berchtesgaden , up through Dresden and up onto the Polish-German border,
- 24:00 to a place called Gorkitz which was Stalag 8A but prior to that it had been a Hitler Jugend [youth] camp were they grew vegetables for the fatherland and threw brooms around did their drill getting ready to join the SS [Security Squad]. When they invaded Poland they took
- 24:30 the Polish prisoners and put them in work in the Gorkitz and then the Poles disappeared and the French arrived, French and Belgians because they'd invaded their countries and the place had been a camp for French and the Belgians and in my book the French are treacherous . The French women aren't. The French blokes are very treacherous and
- 25:00 they still today, you look at the, they're telling us what we're supposed to be doing and what did they do to us, they just dobbed us in. They were allowed to walk around Gorkitz without guards and back into the camp at night. They were then displaced by British prisoners, there were a

- 25:30 few Belgians and a few French and British and then when the mob came from Italy they whacked a few in there but there were only 70 Australians who ever got to Gornitz. The Hun had a divide-and- rule policy, whether it was done on purpose but it happened, you got separated from your mate, I got separated from Charlie,
- 26:00 then I got separated from my mob. I think there were about two from my mob who got to Gornitz, Charlie Little got to Gornitz before I did and they sent him out to a sugar factory, when they got to the sugar factory there was no accommodation, so they took them from the sugar factory and took them to Stalag 8B which was in those days Lampersdorf, I never saw Charlie again.
- 26:30 Yes I did. I picked him up in the mine when I got sent to the mine. But the Hun had no qualms about saying if you had stripes you didn't have to work, they adhered to that, but if you were just an ordinary peasant
- 27:00 you had to work and you could dodge up to a point. I got sent out to work a place, we arrived at a place called Badwarmbrunn which is in Poland and to my horror and the horror of the other boys that were with me it was an armaments factory that was run under the control of IG Farben which is a cartel
- 27:30 and that takes ages to go into. I don't know whether you understand them, the German cartels were broken up by the American, America was in it, it's dreadful. Parke Davis, Johnson & Johnson, all the pharmaceutical firms belong to it. Exxon Oil which became ...
- 28:00 had it all off at one stage. But Henry Ford, do you know that Ford sued the American government for the damage done to his factory in Dusseldorf and won. So why do you fight a war, because somebody gets you into it and you're not going to let anybody upset
- 28:30 your mob and they've got you by the short and curlies haven't they? Anyway I've digressed from that part.
- Well I am interested to hear because you mentioned earlier that your three mates was what got you through to a certain point, after you were separated**
- 29:00 I had to get new mates, we hadn't got to a stage where it was absolutely essential, we had mates whom we shared our parcels with in Italy and anything that you got you shared but we hadn't got to the stage where you could help each other to survive, but to Bad Warmbrunn and I found it was an armaments factory
- 29:30 the Huns are very astute, they have, you know how we have apprentices and they go to the TAFE [Technical and Further Education College] and what not, the Huns had schoolrooms in the factories and they had teachers at the factories so that the apprentices were taught on the job like that. So the Hun, in his logical
- 30:00 thinking, said "Ah ha, we've got prisoners. Australian prisoners and they are strong. We will teach them how to work these lathes and whatnot, we'll send them to school." So for the first weeks we were in this factory, we hadn't even found out what it was all about but we were being taught metal work and how to work them, go to school, and you can imagine what the boys thought. They'd sort of say.
- 30:30 "Please sir, Herr Doctor, may I leave the room?" "No." "I want to go to the toilet." "No." So the boys would just use the floor and it would trickle down so we went to the toilet, and when we had to do the metal work things you ought to see
- 31:00 the things that came out of that place, they made all sorts of things. Very ingenious this mob of ours, they could make all sorts of things out of nothing, but anyway they finally gave up and decided it was useless putting us to school, they would then tell us how to work, and the day came and they took us down into the factory itself and it was
- 31:30 as I imagine the Ford type of factory was, you know, on chains and this whole series of lathes all the way down and each lathe is doing something different and as we went down I was assigned to a civilian Hun and the other blokes at the same time where there.
- 32:00 But coming back and thinking about it, there weren't many Australians, there was Dud Jarvis, there was myself and, as I found out later, there was only one more Australian. The rest were Kiwis and South Africans but they all had the same hatred of the Hun and they weren't going to work for them. Anyway I was taken
- 32:30 to the lathe we'd been given a lecture by the gauleiter [Nazi political governor] who said that we would stay at the lathe for six weeks and we would learn the lathe and after 6 weeks we would work with that lathe on our own and of course you can imagine what the language was like when we were told what to do, so we just stood there. And it was the most elaborate thing I've ever saw, it was a
- 33:00 three dimensional-type tool and the lathe bed could work in three dimensions too, it could be adjusted and we didn't know what they were doing, we only just saw a part come down there like that, the bloke had a spanner and you'd take the nut off and put the thing on and you just stood there watching and then he'd push a button and

33:30 a green light and a blue light and whatnot and the lathe did the rest and that's what we were supposed to learn.

**It must have seemed strange to go from Camp 57 and now operating a lathe?**

It was more than that, you just didn't believe it,

34:00 when the test came after 6 weeks they decided it was time for us to do something. The Hun that was in charge of me said, "Arbeit!" And I said, "Nichtwursteln." And he said, "Arbite!" So he then picked up the spanner then see, and I knew what to do with it so I took the spanner

34:30 I went bang and I was flat on my back and the word was sabotage. I'd been hit with a rifle and there were guards all round. I got belted up. Broke my ribs, they had the whole factory going. Sabotage, that was the worst thing you can do in Germany. Well I hit the lathe instead of using the spanner

35:00 and it was a sensitive lathe. But prior to that I had seen what they were making. It was a long-barrel, two pound anti-tank gun and the boys were really upset, they didn't know how to get out of this lot, but we decided that you know, something would happen. Anyway I got belted and was told that I was going to have to work with the Jews so I went out with the Jews

35:30 out into the yard where it was snowing and they were shifting train lines

**That would have been an act of resistance on your behalf, but you would have known what the consequences were?**

Oh yeah, I didn't care, because you can't. Who's going to help you? You're illegally

36:00 working in a factory and there's only one way to try to get out of it and that's what I tried, and then my mate that turned out to be my mate Bill Cowper he joined me and there was Bill, Dud and myself out in the yard with the Jews shifting lines and even then I'd broken ribs and Bill got a shirt and

36:30 tied it up in a sling for me. He'd been belted but he didn't break anything. And then they wanted us to lift the rails and we said no we just couldn't do it, the Jews were going, one, two, three but we don't understand that language, we couldn't interpret: "If you want us to lift, we are going to do it our way." And they got an interpreter

37:00 and we explained to the interpreter that in Australia whenever we wanted to lift things we said and used the word "get" and the 'f' word and they thought that was strange but we demonstrated. Bill and I, 'Get... with the f word...' and we lifted, so then they put us with the Jews, we said we can't do it with theirs and we got them saying the word

37:30 and in hindsight that was a horrible thing to do the poor Jews but to our ears that was the funniest thing these poor persecuted Jews telling the Germans what they could do. It's black humour, its not nice.

**You mentioned you got your ribs broken what kind of medical treatment?**

38:00 None. None, just no medical treatment. If they send you back to Stalag there would be treatment but they weren't, I've transgressed, I've sabotaged and I found out later what happens to saboteurs,

38:30 they shoot them or hang them, they don't for some reason and I don't know whether we had a little bloke sitting on our shoulder but we could do the most horrible things to them and the person that would get the blame would be the poor Pole or a Yugoslav or something, and he'd pay the price, be hung up. I think we had, there was a little bloke sitting on our shoulders there, had to be,

39:00 you just don't make it otherwise. Anyway they decided that because we were saboteurs they would send us to straf camp and that turned out to be a place at Glatz down in the Sudetenland, almost on the Czech border and

39:30 it's coal mining country and the place we were sent to was a quarry, unfortunately while we were there both Bill and I got an attack of malaria and they were scared of malaria, they called it mosquito fever or mosquito fieber

40:00 you could catch it because they had no Atebrin, they had an Atebrin substitute and they had no Quinine, the Italians had very little Quinine and it was a magic word so they decided after a fortnight in the quarry and after we had nearly killed a couple of our blokes down below letting rocks fall they decided we'd go back to the camp,

40:30 we went back to the stalag. By this time my ribs had sort of eased up and, I might have it chronologically out of order, but we were then taken to a coal mine and that's where I met Charlie and Charlie said, "Do you want to go down the mine?" I said,

41:00 "I don't want to go down the mine." He said, "Well you just do what I do." So we went down the mine and they used their shafts, their drives are shallower than ours because they're much shorter people and Charlie is 6 foot 4 in his socks, and they used an overhead sort of line for electricity and Charlie straddled the line and wobbled his head and it wasn't long before we were on the floor again because it

was sabotage and we went up the mine and the bloke in charge of the mine said we were never to go down the mine again cause we had scared the hell out of the Germans. That's when we got the fever, that's right.

## Tape 7

- 00:36 **You mentioned being sent out to work with the Jews; can you tell us how the Germans treated you differently to the Jews?**
- The Jews were treated as
- 01:00 sub-human beings and whatever you've read or heard about the treatment of them is absolutely correct, I didn't see the treatment of them in the gas chambers, we had a clue but because they used to see
- 01:30 smoke going up the chimney. Their attitude to a Jew was that he was sub-human and he was the cause of all their trouble, and he was going to use them, and when you read how they did, they used his body fat and gave him nothing and when he was expended they got rid of him. He was used on the streets to clean up,
- 02:00 used in the factory to move lines and shift snow and that sort of thing. And they had what they called steigers or bosses, with baseball bats just like the Americans do with their Military Police. And they'd belt them, and they'd belt them down, and they'd belt them until they got up, then they'd belt them again.
- 02:30 And it is extremely difficult to watch that, you have an instinct when you see that to intervene. It's there, I don't care what anybody says, you can't be a human being, I can't and my mates couldn't either, but to have to hold back while this was going on, to be absolutely helpless to do it. If they didn't get up they got thrown on the meat cart to be counted as a body when they went back to the camp.
- 03:00 So you know and if we could find some food we'd leave it for them, but sometimes that was tantamount to a death sentence if they got caught. It was
- 03:30 one of the greatest shocks to see a human being treat another human being like that and didn't know why and when you asked them, the German peasant, I picked the language up, it wouldn't pass for any examination test but it would get me through the peasants, but that's like learning Australian, a lot of rude words in it
- 04:00 but when I'd speak to them and I'd say, "Look at that." And they'd say, "What, that, oh they're Jews." I'd say, "But they're human beings." "Oh no, they're Jews." You just can't understand it and they kept them very well secluded, at one stage
- 04:30 we were separated from them by an electric fence and to prove it was a electric fence a guard got a cat and threw it against the fence and the cat just went psst. We didn't try the fence. But we saw a lot of that, they had them in the streets, you see as their fat wore down and they
- 05:00 couldn't get anything from them, they were taken to the concentration camps and ovens to get rid of them. Its very hard to comprehend and my mate Charlie Little, I wasn't allowed to publish what I knew about him, his wife asked me not to.
- 05:30 I felt, I still kick myself that I didn't, but I succumbed and I didn't put it in, I wrote about it, I'd buttered it up. But he at one stage was moving bodies out of the oven, because
- 06:00 there was a bloke called Stoker who wrote a book called ... I think he was a Bundaberg bloke and it was in that Auschwitz area and there was a stalag attached there, where there were British prisoners. Charlie was in amongst those and that actually marked Charlie and, oh Charlie
- 06:30 died a lot of years ago, but his wife had a nervous breakdown and his daughter did too and that was the reason why I withheld because it seemed to be turning, but I felt it should have been told, but Charlie did actually move bodies, and there's no stories told about it.
- 07:00 **That's a pretty horrendous thing to have to do just to survive yourself.**
- Yep, it's, survival is a funny thing, when you are first taken prisoner you don't care, they can do anything they like and you will misbehave because
- 07:30 you know the war is not going to be very long, you're gonna beat them. And then the war drags on and you get a little cautious you think before you do something stupid but it doesn't stop you all the way but then when things get worse you tend to be a bit more careful because you think I've done all this,
- 08:00 how long am I going to have to do this and you're prepared to put up with that and then you come to the other end where you don't think you're going to survive and you hope you're going to survive and that's

all you've got, just the hope and if you don't well that's it.

- 08:30 You go through a whole gamut of psychological change, at least I did and I've always been a thinker and I've tried to work things out and I've tried put them into perspective that is the perspective: you don't care at first, but then you get a bit cautious, you become very careful and
- 09:00 then you get into the other section, well if it happens, it happens. Not going to take risks to make it happen I think that's a philosophy. So where did we get to with Charlie, Charlie was down the mine,
- 09:30 then we got sent back to stalag and our next foray was out to the sugar factory and still working for I.G. Farben and I'd been expecting a visit from one of the boys from I.G. Farben because really, I really dobbed them
- 10:00 and if you read das national sozialistische lager system you'll find that I.G. Farben and Krupps and Fuellner and all these people profited from the fat of Jews and from people like myself doing the work for them. See we had a lot of blokes working in petrochemical factories. No way, you shouldn't have to do that,
- 10:30 when we got to sugar it was two shifts, 12 hours a day, and 18 hours on the changeover, every fortnight you did 18 hours straight. And it was cold, it was winter but we were still at the stage where we wanted to get back at them.
- 11:00 We found that when they took the sugar out from the fugals it was placed in sort of a holding bin on the floor and big flat bin where they packed from. And we thought the best way we could help the war effort was to save our toilet problems until we got to work and use the sugar which made it very awkward if you wanted
- 11:30 pinch some sugar because you had to get it straight out of the fugal you couldn't use it from the floor, but the Huns did. Some of it went into the axle boxes of the trains. We tried, they used, they didn't have jute, they had an ersatz [artificial] type of material which
- 12:00 they made their sugar sacks out of and it was deadly on your hands, it takes the skin off because it was so rough and we found that if we fiddled with the nails on your shoes on your heel you could put little spikes on so that when you walked on the bag you frayed the bag and
- 12:30 they stacked the sugar in the bag and our theory was walk on it, stack, walk, stack, walk. And when the stack gets high enough and sugar down the bottom starts coming out of the sack then something has to happen, well it did, it knocked the wall over, and that was sabotage again, only they strung two Poles up for that.
- 13:00 But what do you do, you're responsible for them yet you just got to watch your conscience, its better them than you. Even though you don't like it. The other thing that was happening at the factory was we had contact with the underground,
- 13:30 they used to slip notes to us or someone would talk to us and they were running from, there was an escape route that was running to Stettin [Poland] for pilots and if we could possibly do it they'd send us a pilot and we'd whack him in the molasses truck.
- 14:00 Do you know that a molasses truck is like a petrol truck only it's got a dome on the top and an inside section? You can hide a pilot in there and I believe that the scheme fell down because they picked up the contact at Stettin and the lady was executed,
- 14:30 and there was no more of that but I'd worked myself into, I could speak German, and they used to seal everything with a swastika on lead and once that was on that sack it was sent, nobody would touch it if it had a swastika on it and you threaded it through and it made a lead seal with
- 15:00 a special tool to seal it, and I reckon the Hun that was in charge of it was lazy because it was cold and I talked him into giving me the seal, but they put tarps over the bags and then wired them and I figured if you could put the wire through the seal like that and I'd noticed that the
- 15:30 Hun, when the trains were at the points, lifted the point change and he was level with where I put the wire and I thought I might get a couple of fish and I think I got a couple, it took a while to adjust it to the right height and I put the seal in and that was my object of doing that.
- 16:00 One cold night I forgot and I walked into the seal and I hit my eye, and at the same time I put my hand on the side of the molasses truck and I stuck 'cause it was so cold and fortunately I was in very well with
- 16:30 the bloke who should have been working the seal, and he was kind enough, he got a blowtorch and got me off, if you pull your hand off you lose all your flesh. And he was concerned about me eye and I said something stupid like, "The wire, I walked into my own trap." This is when Bill Cowper, Bill and I joined, and it was around about when we were at Strzelin, which is south from
- 17:00 Wroclaw or Breslau on the Oder River, this is when we met Dud was who was a Western Australian

infantry bloke and Bill was a Kiwi. Bill

- 17:30 saw the damage that I'd gone through, the lid and everything, and strange to say the Hun that I been sort of buttered up to insisted that I went to see an eye doctor. How on earth I don't know but sure enough I got a guard, the guard took me to Breslau which is called Wroclaw and I was
- 18:00 taken to the university there which was a medical school and that's where I first saw experimentation on bodies, they were doing dyes on women, a red breast and a blue breast. What have you; I don't know what they were doing
- 18:30 but they were doing some pretty horrible things there. And I went to the eye clinic and had my eye treated and it's alright. Used to get sore but it worked alright and that was when, having been treated and I was returned to the sugar factory, the guard was a young bloke and
- 19:00 was standing on Breslau station, you know, they've got three or four platforms with trains coming in and out, and they were steam locomotives and the guard started chatting up a couple of sheilas and he was (UNCLEAR) and the train pulled in and I thought that bludger's not looking and I just on impulse jumped into the train and took off, so I escaped.
- 19:30 And I thought, "Oh God, what am I going to do, I got no tucker no nothing." This was real good so I thought, 'Now I know these Huns, the moment the guard looks around and finds me I'm gone. They'll know what train went out and they'll have them waiting.'" So
- 20:00 I decided to get out at the next station and I'd catch another coming back, that's what I thought I'd do, by this time we were in British clothing which we got from the Red Cross and it's the same sort of clothing that the French the Belgians and all the rest of them were wearing so I wasn't too conspicuous, so I picked a train that
- 20:30 went through about four or five ruddy stations, more than that, and by the time it stopped there was the Gestapo and oh you had no chance, they just came in both ends of the carriage and you just have to give up again. So they made me crawl on my
- 21:00 hands and knees down the carriage, getting booted all the way down. Pigs! And so they could muster and they were telling the people I was a "pig dog English" not an Australian, always English and they took me in their car and it makes that horrible noise not like our sirens
- 21:30 and I got taken to the police station where I was interrogated. They stripped me off and then they mocked me, they reckoned I was a Jew, an American Jew, then I was a British Jew, even though I had my tags on. And they
- 22:00 put some electrodes on my genitals and gave me a couple of charges and that's not ruddy funny and up on the table with lights like that and you can't see them and they're yelling at you and belting you all sort of things and you become confused, and they want to know what plane you're from, where did I escape from or you jump off and all the rest of it, then they said
- 22:30 I was a Jew and I was going to the concentration camps with the Jews, they were going to do this and do that. They kept, I think it was about 24 or 48 hours. It's very hard to judge time and then the lights go out and you don't know where you are and you are on the table and still starkers and it's cold
- 23:00 and then finally they decided that I was what I said I was so to punish me they put me down on the floor and they got a very fine punch and they punched the roots of my teeth which I haven't got anymore. They were quite adept at it, they had done it before, it's quite excruciating I can tell you that.
- 23:30 I was picked up by some guards from the sugar factory, taken back to the sugar factory and I got my job back of putting the seals on and then the sugar cut out and, ,
- 24:00 there's a gap in my memory, I've solved part of the gap, it's a chronological, a geographical and a psychological gap. I know I've got it, I've solved some of it and I solved it through the book I had to write
- 24:30 a stop press and when I was taken to the next place with Bill we went to, we were always on punishment working for I.G. Farben and we got to a factory which, I'm not sure what it was,
- 25:00 I couldn't remember the name when I wrote the book but I got a stop press and I got the name, got the name, I should never have forgotten the name because being an Australian the place I was at was spelt M I L K O (grave) W, "milk cow." Now fancy being at a place called Milkow and you'd never forget it.
- 25:30 But there we were put out in the snow cutting pine logs, they were using the logs making some sort of synthetic, they could have been making synthetic shirts. And I had a feeling that because of the secrecy they were making gun cotton but it was all done in secrecy and we
- 26:00 practiced our art of sabotage where, by jamming their saws, they had benches and if you got a log and you jammed the log you could hear the scream and it would sort of cut out and you blew the fuse so you couldn't work . And then if three or four of the saws went together you blew all the fuses in the factory,

- 26:30 the factory had two chimneys and I can see them like that, and there was a backdrop of mountain behind it, that's what stayed . I had witnessed a bloke being shot who was in a malarial coma; obviously the guards came in and told him to get out of
- 27:00 bed and we told them he was in a malarial coma, they went upstairs and shot him, now I don't know who he was, I don't know his nationality because by this time Bill and I are together with Dud and we have now become the three people looking after one another and we don't
- 27:30 know who these other people are, Kiwis and South Africans and Yugoslavs, they're people that we don't know and we don't trust because we are now on this survival business and this was where we saw the Jews being belted up in the street. It was
- 28:00 one place where we saw it and this place stuck in my mind and I don't know what other thing happened, we also were responsible for the death of one of the guards because we rigged the load in such a way that when he opened the door and pulled a piece of timber the load fell on him
- 28:30 and we didn't help either. So there was a few things in there that's got me tangled up, and I forgot where the place was and through a Polish friend in Melbourne I felt that it was in the Karpak area of Czechoslovakia.
- 29:00 I knew that it snowed there and that they lost a train under 40 feet of snow in a ravine because we were suppose to dig it out and didn't succeed, somebody else was sent there to do it, and all these things got tangled up and in my mind I forgot Milkow and
- 29:30 I said that I thought it was in the Karpak area and my logic told me that it was, so this lass who is an assistant chair of forestry in Melbourne, a Polish lass and she comes from the Hirschberg area and I was talking to her and I said, "How can we find out?" And
- 30:00 she said. "We write to the bergermeister in Capatz." So she wrote a letter and we wrote to him and the next thing I got was an e-mail with five photos and the letter (in Polish which I had to get translated
- 30:30 in Melbourne) said, "I've been around the area and its Milkow, the people remember British people working in the factory yard and sawing stuff and jamming the saws, the people here remember." There's only one chimney in the photo but it did have two chimneys and after World War II one chimney fell down.
- 31:00 **Is there something that stands out as to why that part was forgotten or might have wanted to forget it?**
- I thought I wanted to know, now I know where it was, and I've found out these other things and I've survived this long without knowing so I think maybe I shouldn't know.
- 31:30 I have a, I won't put it on record. My daughter has a rough idea because in my cups at one stage she heard me and I've got a suspicious business when we are off camera I'll tell you.
- 32:00 But I don't think I should put it on, I'll withhold some things, it's pretty horrific. I've got a fair clue but there are certain things that I think, if you survive mentally, I did think at one stage that I'll maybe go through hypnosis and find out and then when I found out where
- 32:30 the place was I thought, "Well, why not be content? And I don't have to know. Why do I need to know?" They're mysteries aren't they?
- You mentioned the treatment you got after your escape, and this continuation on, what keeps you going,**
- 33:00 **what stops you from being broken?**
- What stopped me with them? I hated them, it's hate. I don't hate anymore but hate is a very strong thing, it's,
- 33:30 I don't think it's the reverse of love but it's strong, and if you hate somebody well like we hated them, you would do just about anything to upset them. Oh, they took my toenails off too with a pair of pliers,
- 34:00 they're still crook that's why I walk around, but they didn't believe me in DVA. I only got, I collapsed in Melbourne I got TPI in 1994 and I had to take them to the tribunal anyway, and they withdrew.
- 34:30 But Senator Gietzell told me I was a liar and told in parliament, unfortunately before I could prove it, I could prove it with that book. I'd have rolled it up and stuck it right up his nostrils but he had the hide to, if you read Hansard, he named me member up in Mackay, that Mr Barnett, had virtually had aberrations that
- 35:00 he was only at Gorlitz in Germany, he wasn't in Poland, there's no record, there has to be a record somewhere in Germany because they've got my fingerprints. When I asked for them to be given back they're not even interested. I don't think my fingerprints should be wandering around Germany.

- 35:30 **You mentioned a couple of men who cracked up, as the war dragged on tell me about people who did break?**
- We had one when I was in Gorlitz, he was a little bloke,
- 36:00 it would be what we call bipolar now, it started off, the people that sort of withdraw to themselves are the ones you've got to watch. This bloke suddenly became silent, he didn't communicate with other people, even his mates, and one night
- 36:30 he started counting very slowly one, two, three up to ten and then he'd start again. And someone would say, 'Shut up!' 'One, two,' after a while that starts to get to you, you've got one bloke counting and then he
- 37:00 starts counting quicker and then he moves and counts, and then he counts backwards and moves backwards. Once they drop you in the stalag for the night there was nothing you could do, that was it and in the morning we got the guard and they got the medico
- 37:30 and if you've read anything about Germany people who went off their rocker they did exactly the same to them as what they did to Jews. They are pretty ruthless people, they just exterminated them. But they decided that they'd put this bloke in an asylum and he went down with two burly orderlies, they took him down to the railway, this is CSA [?] but he wrecked the carriage,
- 38:00 he just went berserk, he's only a little bloke, but they tell me that he was unstoppable he went, there was wood and metal and he wrecked the lot. I don't know what happened to him, I don't know what nationality he was. That's one example and it shows you the power of what can happen in the body. You
- 38:30 learn a lot, don't you?

**What was the closest you came to breaking?**

It was on the march I would say, when we got on the march after we left this Milkow we were taken to Hirschberg and I found out that

- 39:00 Hirschberg, I couldn't understand why I couldn't remember anybody but Bill and Dud and myself, but I found out from Kiwiland there were Kiwis there and South Africans, there was every nationality, everyone of us had blotted our (UNCLEAR) the Germans. For one reason or another, we had either escaped or sabotaged or something like that and we were a collection of no-hopers and they
- 39:30 put us in a camp in an old paper factory which was in the middle of the River Bobr which is at Hirschberg, or Jelenia Gora, or it's the Polish name and the place was called Weltende which translated means "world's end" and
- 40:00 that was a great finish, to be in Germany to Weltende we were put in charge of another officer who we christened The Frog. He was a maniac he was a member of the SS but
- 40:30 an under-officer has two stripes in the German Army and I could never understand why he wielded so much power, he carried a side-arm and he uses it without question. And I think it was Hermann Wouk, a long time ago when I was reading. Have you read Hermann Wouk's The Winds of War, and a whole heap that he wrote and he discusses
- 41:00 how the Germans built up their army after the Treaty of Versailles and the under-officer, which is the equivalent of corporal in our army but only one stripe, was really a trained company commander and that's why he wielded so much power. Anyway this bloke was in charge of us and he ranted and raved.
- 41:30 We were first introduced to him, he had a sycophant who used to follow him around, he was only a little bloke, that used to follow him round a three legged stool and he was that small to talk to us he had to get up on the stool and this bloke used to place the stool for him and he'd rant and rave in German, and you'd let him go and then you...

## **Tape 8**

- 00:31 **Would you like to keep your story going?**

I think I was talking to you about The Frog who was an under officer there and I think I was explaining to you that it always puzzled me at the power that the under officer had and this bloke had a sycophant that used to walk around with his stool.

- 01:00 The Frog had a vein up over the top of his temple which used to stand up and stand out and Germans have a habit of shouting and the more they shout the more they try to bully you and the louder they shout the madder they get so we used to be harangued about the work we didn't do and for the

- 01:30 Fatherland and it was his job to make sure we did do it. They were bombing out at Berlin and we were supposed to be fixing up the factories and then it'd be a little quiet pause and someone at the back would say sheizen and that's like merde in French or
- 02:00 faeces in Australian. And he'd start again and we'd just wait until the vein would start again, we were hoping to get him into an epileptic fit, hoping that he'd drop dead and this would go on and you'd be goaded, but he was a very dangerous sort of a person and he boasted that nobody would get away and we were a polyglot,
- 02:30 polyglot might not be the right word but we were a mixed-up multicultural people in the camp and this was on the River Bobr at Weltende and a Serb got away and of course there was hell to pay and The Frog swore that he would get him.
- 03:00 Now it's about, in normal weather it was about 20 minutes to half an hour's brisk march or reasonable march to the work plants, to the paper factory that we used as our barracks and one night we heard that the Serb had been caught and The Frog brought him
- 03:30 crawling all the way down, and there was snow at this time, he'd picked him up from the railway station and he'd crawled all the way to the barracks and when he got him there he shot him. And left him there for a week as an example to us. That's the type of bloke that we had in charge of us and
- 04:00 they weren't adverse to belting you, , our job was primarily to dig sand, of which there always seemed to be a deposit. I've looked at a map of Hirschberg and I think I could almost place it, it was on the outskirts and Weltende would probably put the situation of the place in the river, the Bobr.
- 04:30 In the winter you had ice, in summer you had running water and the Bobr was, it actually flowed up through just about Berlin. Our job was to dig sand to make concrete for the work, that was
- 05:00 part of our job and we did the least amount possible, we dug down until we got past the guards' level and dug a cave underneath and shored it up so we could hide from them, so much so they used to have a little sort of like a caravan or something like a gypsies'
- 05:30 trailer which they called a budi and the Germans were segregated from the Poles so even though they were working together the Germans didn't drink with Poles and the Poles didn't drink with the Germans and they had two budis and they used to carry little coffee pots that looked like oil cans just about and
- 06:00 when they came to work they put their coffee on the stove so that they had their tea break or coffee break, so one day Bill decided it would be a good idea if we pinched the stove cause we could do with one down in the sand pit. So when there was a diversion, Bill and Dud and somebody else
- 06:30 just went into the budi when they weren't looking and picked up the stove with all the coffee pots on it and brought it down in the sand pit and the Germans couldn't find it. But they had a solution to that problem they just went into the Poles' boody and picked up their stove and moved their stove into theirs. So once again the poor Poles paid for our
- 07:00 problem, but it was so touch and go that we decided that we'd bury it, so we buried it in the sand, and it's still, I think still find it. Sabotage was always on our mind and the snow gave us an opportunity to do it.
- 07:30 By this time they brought in big concrete mixers and some of us had graduated to working on them, it was like you shovel one piece of sand and one piece of cement into the thing and that was your job and one person would get it into a barrow, his job would be to wheel it to the brickies or whatever
- 08:00 but going around the corner one bloke tipped the load of cement over and of course it went into the snow so he thought, "Why should I pick that up?" So he filled the barrel up with snow and put a bit of cement on the top, and the idea came. We'd put one shovel full of sand, two shovels full of snow and a
- 08:30 shovel full of cement, more snow and foundations out of that. And any snow that you could put into the barrow as you went through you did that. The thaw came and the machine beds cracked and the roof was about that far off the wall and when we got to work
- 09:00 there was a Pole strung up on each corner of the workplace because it was sabotage and Australians wouldn't do that, only Poles would do that. But it's, it happened, it had to happen but I still have a conscience about those poor Poles.
- 09:30 **Were the Poles engaging in acts of sabotage as well?**
- No, they were under the thumb. See the Germans wanted living space and they thought Poland was a beautiful place, you noticed they changed all the names to German names and now when you want to find out where you were you had to come back and find a dictionary that will tell the German Polish name and it took me a long time
- 10:00 to find some of the places, took me a long time to identify them. But that book helped that 'das national sozialistische lagersystem' helped me a lot because of that good map and it put me onto the area and I got the Polish name because Poland and German name but the Poles, the old Poles were

- 10:30 the Communists, they had little badges on the, but they knew the German, they couldn't stand the reprisals. But they did because we caused it and Germans weren't fussy, they wanted four people to string up they'd just take four but fortunately they didn't do it while we were there, we were coming to work.
- 11:00 **Did that cause any tension in the camp between the Poles and the Aussies?**
- No, we didn't have any Poles with us. See the Poles really were civilians and those there were other Poles, there were German Poles, Poles who defected to the Germans and one of the stories I was about to tell you is about a Polish
- 11:30 steiger or boss, he was more German than the Germans, they had to prove themselves, I think its got a similarity to the Japanese and the, oh who was the mob, they were worse than the Japanese. But the Poles were
- 12:00 in a similar situation. The building, we were building an administration building, it was to be three stories high, they don't have scaffolding regulations like we have, any piece of old timber makes a good scaffold for the German and it was very dangerous but we made it more because we used to leave nails out and bolts and all the rest of it and warn everybody not to use it
- 12:30 and when we got up, the way to carry the bricks up, if we had enough prisoners we sat on a ladder and you put your bottom on the rung and you lifted the brick up to the next bloke and that's how you got it up. And we reverted to the good old F word to get the rhythm going
- 13:00 and we moved as slowly as we possibly could. Now it is very difficult to work slowly, it's worse than if you work properly, we were determined and you'd say "Get" and the F word and hand it on and this was too slow for the Pole so he called the guards and we argued
- 13:30 with the guards and told them it was the only way we could go, we couldn't go any faster because they were not feeding us enough food and so there was no love lost between the guard and the Pole because he was a German and he was a Pole so I told the Pole to put up with it. Anyway he's up on the next floor on the scaffolding that we'd put up and every time we'd start he'd say,
- 14:00 "F, F, F, what is this F marken?" And as he was jumping up and down the scaffolding broke, and he tipped over and as he hit the floor and went to meet his maker the boys on the ladder said, "F." So it was ringing in his ears and that was another
- 14:30 form of sabotage of slow play, the boys were very adept at pinching things and having a workplace was really good. I walked home in the snow next to a bloke and when he got home he pulled a crowbar out from his legs. I didn't see him do it; I saw how he did it,
- 15:00 when he got back to the lager we paused to be counted and searched and he slipped it out into the snow, then its just a matter of slipping it up again. But fancy walking around with a crowbar, it's really unreal to think that that could happen and then we
- 15:30 got plaster when they started plastering we were using mortar, that was the greatest thing because the building we were in was brick we could hide things, pull the brick out and we could plaster over it, we had all sorts of things hidden.
- Like what things?**
- Like a file or a chisel or a hammer or anything useful.
- 16:00 If you ever got back to camp you never knew when you wanted to escape or cut something. And we even had a radio which we'd hidden in there and it was made by a Yugoslav who was an amateur skating champion and we got the parts through Askania Werke
- 16:30 which was a fabric type factory which was working just below us and they had a cell in there from the underground and I've got a letter which I published from this bloke, Arthur Hyatt, he wrote to me from Luxembourg, he was a Luxembourger and he passed on messages and things for us and he
- 17:00 wrote to me after I got home but I couldn't make contact so I don't know what happened to him. The boys tried to demolish the factory, the works part was on a side of a steep hill and the railway line went over on top of the road and it
- 17:30 got very slippery. And when they decided to build the new headquarters for the building they put a branch line so that they could bring the brick off and it was on top of the hill, well we let a wagon full of bricks go down the hill, it nearly demolished their factory down the bottom. Only this time we got the blame for it, only we got out of it
- 18:00 because we told them they didn't have the stop set up properly, they bought it but they didn't. They accepted it but they didn't quite know what to do.

**Did it help for you personally to be able to speak German at this stage?**

Oh yeah, because

- 18:30 we one day Bill and Dud and I , we always worked together, one day I was going, giving mortar to one of the brickies and I looked and I said, "That looks like a woman." So I went back to see
- 19:00 Bill and I said to Bill, "I think we got a woman on the site." "Don't be silly." he said. So he went and had a look and he came back and said, "Oh I think so." He said, "I tried to speak to her but she wouldn't speak." So Dud, who was a bit of a doer, said, "I'll find out." Up on this scaffolding which got pretty loose so Dud takes a load of mortar up to this person
- 19:30 and as he goes up he knocks her leg and she squeals, and we found out she was a woman. So then we thought, "Yep, what can we do? How can we do this to our advantage?" So we eventually, I was supposed to be the white haired boy, and
- 20:00 we made some flowers when we found out she was a frau, out of the cement bags we made little flowers, and I'd take them up and give them to her to get a smile and eventually we got her talking and found out she was a grafın which is a countess and she came from Bavaria and her
- 20:30 husband was one of the leading Nazis but she wasn't, she didn't like the Nazis and she was being punished by being a brickie on the site. Of course we worked on her this is why my German was so good, so handy, and we worked and worked and worked on her until eventually we bit the bullet, and
- 21:00 she had a castle, a schloss, somewhere down in Bavaria we said, "How would you like to go to Bavaria?." You know what we were like and you'd nigger at her and say, "Oh, wouldn't it be nice? We'll just take you down there. How would like us to take you down? And then we talked her into it and we discussed it
- 21:30 and said it was feasible: "Oh we can get the passports, we can get them forged and we'll get the papers. Will you be in it?" And we were all set to go, Christmas Eve 1944 was the date, she was to leave work the day before and we were to ping off that night,
- 22:00 stationed down the track, she'd get the tickets and we'd have all the paperwork and the clothing was all hidden, we got workman's clothes, bandages to bandage ourselves up, if you'd been bombed you had an excuse to walk around the place, that was our idea. And it was all set and would you know,
- 22:30 Christmas Eve the Russians come over and dropped a bomb on Hirschberg. The ruddy Russians were coming and at 2 o'clock that morning 220 of us had been bundled out of the lager, the place we were living, they called it
- 23:00 and we were on the road marching and the rest followed. Bill, Dud and I are there and we thought they'd tumbled to us you know that the plots rumbled and they started us moving north, we got toward Sagan and
- 23:30 then we headed east, nobody knew where we were going or why we were going, and we'd run into refugees and soldiers going each and every way and that somewhere. At the beginning of February we had gone in a complete circle behind Hirschberg and we were back at Gorlitz. We'd been on the march
- 24:00 don't know what happened to the frau or the grafın frau. More than anything else, we just called her frau and she was a grafın and I don't know what happened. I put out a few feelers. I tried not to stir up too much to see if I could track her but I haven't been
- 24:30 successful. The only thing I've ever been successful in, I've got the death certificate of colonel of the carabinieri, Calcanterra, I got a copy and that was to squash a rumour that Calcanterra had been strung up like Mussolini and I still don't know, the death certificate, they are so cunning, they have left off the cause of death and they had him as a
- 25:00 pensioner. But it's his name and he's a colonel, carabinieri but that's digressed. So we lost the frau and we were back at Gorlitz, and when we were back at Gorlitz the Yanks, the first Yanks we've ever seen and they were the scruffiest mob you've ever seen. They'd been caught for three months at the Battle of the Bulge and you'd swear that they'd been longer
- 25:30 in camp than we've ever been and they were crying, "I want my mummy, and I'd like some ice cream." And you'd say, "Shut up Yank or I'll kick your bloody head in." So we weren't very impressed with them and you couldn't get a space in the camp, and I think we were there for about a fortnight back at Gorlitz
- 26:00 and then it was decided to evacuate Gorlitz and 200 were grabbed and they put 200 out, followed by another 200, there were 200 Yanks and also 200 British or so-called British whatever. And we were put on the road and went down and we took off before the rest of the mob and went down through
- 26:30 Dresden and we were sitting way on the outskirts of Dresden on the last day of the fire bombing and we saw some of that, it was shocking. And then we came back, going north, that was the beginning so virtually from Christmas Eve 1944 we were on the road
- 27:00 and we'd already experienced what happened on the road. You were expected to keep going, if you fell

you got a bayonet stuck in you or if you moved off the line you got a bullet, if you stole anything you got bashed up, they were pretty adept at using the bayonet; they wouldn't put it in about that

- 27:30 far and it doesn't stop you doing too much, but by golly it hurts. And we knew what the Hun was like on the road, because he was scared, he was frightened of the Russians and he was coming away from the Russians and we were slowing him up and he wasn't going to be caught in that lot. But the moment we got on the road again
- 28:00 it was the same thing and from then we marched every day except for an odd lay-off day, getting rations every second day or maybe not. Only what Red Cross stuff we could carry and there was very little of it left because the Yanks had taken most of it, with the influx into Gorlitz.
- 28:30 **And how were your shoes going?**
- Fortunately I got a pair, second hand ones which I pinched when I got into stalag, British issue and if I hadn't got those I'd have been in clogs or in bare feet and they weren't worth very much when we were finished I can tell you. And some of the blokes finished up
- 29:00 wearing clogs with they didn't have socks, they had what you call foot rags, they wrapped rags around their feet, those who wore clogs, but oh boy trying to walk through snow in clogs. That's not funny, and we took off in a snow storm and it tipped down. Then we got a little thaw and then it froze again and then we got
- 29:30 alternate snow and sleet. The first night I think we spent in a barn, it wasn't too bad we were first on the road and you get into the barn you'd find an egg or something. On the whole of the march there was no provision of issuing water for the whole march, it was up the farmer or the place we
- 30:00 were or the village if we could get water. And sometimes you just had to get it out of a stream, cause it didn't take long for dysentery to take over, and with very little food and marching everyday; you do about 30 kilometres a day. Well eventually we got back to where they evacuated the stalag and they were following
- 30:30 us and there were batches of 200 spread all the way across Germany, the general route would have been through Erfurt, then Gotha. Until we got to, I think, Erfurt I lost Bill and Dud.
- 31:00 I got caught with dysentery and malaria and we were just about to take off and I got to the toilet and the column moved off in the dark and you had to pick the column up or you were gone, so I picked the column up and by the time I sort of got my senses back
- 31:30 I was in another column; there was no Dud and no Bill. As it turned out they went north and I'd picked up a column which had come from Stalag 8B they were heading for Zeigenhain, they were mainly RAAF blokes. And then I got taken out
- 32:00 of that column and in a malarial daze I just wafted along one foot after the other and found myself going north again with a column and finished up at Duderstadt and Duderstadt, it had room for about
- 32:30 3000, three floors, it was a big factory old abandoned factory, holes in the roof, gratings for the floors, one staircase lead up for the whole so if you were on the top floor and you had to go to the toilet it was practically impossible to get there before dysentery hit you. And with heaps and heaps and heaps of men doing that
- 33:00 it wasn't funny. They tried to feed you out of a kerosene can with a bit of soup, bit of watery soup. If there was an air raid they stopped. Now the bombing started, like we had bombers over when we left Hirschberg there were bombers up you could count a thousand any time you wanted.
- 33:30 They were up overhead and the noise was just there and as you moved and marched the anti-radar metal twisted down on you and the worst thing that could happen was to be hit with one of their auxiliary tanks you could hear them coming down, they made a horrible noise, but you couldn't figure out where they'd land.
- 34:00 You're deaf and the bombing stopped somewhere in April, the bombers weren't there somewhere around the 10th of April, and I can remember, I couldn't hear, I was deaf, deaf was silence. It's hard to understand you've had all this noise and it was continuous and then it stops
- 34:30 you didn't know whether you were talking or, it took a long time to get used to. Ah, Duderstadt by the time I got to Duderstadt we had got to the end and when we marched Bill, Dud and
- 35:00 myself marched together in columns of three if someone fell in front you tried to pick them up but if you missed you hoped that the mob behind would pick them. If your mob fell you picked them up and you carried them, because three of you could look after each other, but you couldn't look after anyone else and that was the rule, and you needed three, you needed a bloke to get water,
- 35:30 a bloke to get food, and a bloke to get fire if you could, that's why you needed three. And you could put a bloke in between you on the march and you could help him with both shoulders and you could take it

in turns and that's the survival technique that we had. There was a miracle of Azmannsdorf, out of the blue the Red Cross found us

- 36:00 and we had a parcel between two or three blokes. Now how did they find us with a trail to Azmannsdorf. And that probably saved our life. The food that we had there gave us sufficient business to get on, but you see we had beri beri, the knees were swollen,
- 36:30 we were walking along cobbles, our knees were swollen every time you walked on a cobble it jars and with beri beri you get fluid and it swells out you can get little sort of pieces of deposit which you could break up, I don't know whether that but did any damage, that's what we used to do.
- 37:00 Your belly was swollen, we had scurvy either red inflamed mouth and swollen gums. And on top on that malaria and dysentery it wasn't real good. At one stage we decided to take our trousers off and we just put the blanket around us
- 37:30 march like that because you didn't have time to get your strides down. I think I got as far, not quite to the River Rhine because I was moved up and when I got to Duderstadt I found Bill and Dud
- 38:00 Bill was crook and Dud was crook. And Dud had got to the stage were he started to believe things, you resist things that you're told when your brain works properly, but when the Hun says to you, "Oh we've got a hospital train."
- 38:30 you believe it because you want to, and Dud did. But we had a council of war, Dud, Bill and I said we mightn't make it, one of us mightn't get home, one might so
- 39:00 we think it's time to spread, this is our thinking. One has to get home to tell what's happened and we took a chance at one in three. Bill was a rogue, he was much older than us, he had a beautiful head on him he was quite good looking and quite a talker and he used to say to us, "I'll chat the sheilas up." You
- 39:30 know what to do, you know the type but he had his head on him, and it was that old head though because he was a World War I veteran too. And if it wasn't for his sagacity I don't think we would have made it. But when we had this counsel we decided that
- 40:00 this was it and we better choose one of three things. Dud chose to go with the RAP [Regimental Aid Post], He believed, we didn't, neither Bill nor I believed that, Bill reckoned that Duderstadt would be evacuated and he was going to hide in the rubble
- 40:30 and take his chance that they didn't get him with a bayonet. And I said I'm going to do the most stupid thing, I'm going to volunteer, for a work party, and if you look at it logically it wasn't such a stupid idea because I was crook. How could I work? But I might get somewhere out of, if I stayed in Dudrestadt I would have died.
- 41:00 There was no food, there was dysentery, there was at least 5 or 6 funerals per day from people being shot or dying. I don't know who they were, nobody knew who they were, nobody knows who was killed on the march and when I've asked what nationalities were picked up, who died, how many, what were the casualties, all I could find out was that the casualties were high but you don't know who they were, My choice was to go working.

## Tape 9

- 00:34 **Alex you were about to finish the story going out in the working party.**
- I'd heard that the Germans were had working party to clear the railway line. And I thought they can't make me work cause I can't work anyway I'll get out of Duderstadt and that was the object
- 01:00 and I took off on the march again, still in a sort of malarial coma and I remember going through Hamlyn I wonder if he's still got the rats, this is crazy, you're silly and you see Hamlyn and it comes back
- 01:30 from your childhood and when we arrived in Hanover, we arrived at the railway station and the rumour was true, we were to clear the railway line at Hanover, but there was nothing there really, it had been bombed, it was shocking, it was the worst bombing I had ever seen
- 02:00 and I was crook. I was really crook and I was at the end, I was desperate but I still had my brain working and it's your brain that you need not your brawn. And I heard from a Hun, that was marching, one of the guards, a whisper that there
- 02:30 was a hospital train going to leave Hanover and I thought, "Yep, I've got to get on that train if its true." So I asked the guard to parade me to the higher-ups, the colonel in charge, he just laughed and told me to go chase myself
- 03:00 and so I thought, "Oh well, I'll do a trick." You know the old trick? You're working and you pick up

something, walk around with it and look as though you were working? I did that. And I went along the station and I saw an office open and a whole heap of reasonably ranking officers arguing and chatting and what not

03:30 and I recognised the colonel and I said, "Herr Obst, do you speak English?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "I heard that there's a hospital train, I'm really sick. I've got malaria with dysentery and if I don't get on the train I won't last." And he said, "You're not British." And I said, "No." And he said, "What are you?" And I said, "Australian. He said, "What the hell are you doing over

04:00 here fighting in my country?" I thought, "Oh God, I've really picked one here." And I said, "All our relatives live in England and we call England home and what happens to England happens to us, that's why I'm here." He said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want to get on the train." "You? Who came over to wreck my country?" I

04:30 said, "Yep." He said, "No you can go to hell and back." And I looked over and they are all working away like steam at a mathematical problem, and there's paper everywhere and they were in a frantic mood and the little bloke that sits there said to me ask them if that's important and I said,

05:00 "You seem to be having trouble with your mathematics." And he said, "What would you know? I said, "I might. I notice that you've got an integral stuck there." He said, "We've been working on this for two days and we haven't got it." And I looked at it, and in the bad old days of calculus, to solve some integrals, they weren't solvable.

05:30 You had to know the answer and you had access to the answer and you kept it in your brain. It was one of those, so I said, "How important is it?" He said, "It's very important." I said, "I don't want to know what it's all about, but it looks as though you're not doing any good at it. If I solve it, can I get on the train?" And he laughed, "You can have a go but not that you'll ever get near it. We've the best brains

06:00 in Hanover working on this." And I said, "Give me a piece of paper and a pencil." And it was one of those things that came out in five lines and he looked at it and he said, "But

06:30 you come from Australia. What do you know about that?" And I said, "Well I solved it didn't I, can I get on the train?" Then he barked an order and I was escorted to the train and lifted onto it. And we sat on the train, and it wasn't a hospital train, it was a train carrying wounded and they were on flat trays and carriages and

07:00 I was sitting in the yards there, it was in the days when they had Mitchells [fighter planes] up over the top and a locomotive came along and the moment it came it was hooked and down came the Mitchell and blew it off, that happened twice. And just as nightfall came they got another one and it took off.

07:30 From there somewhere between Hanover and Hamburg I lost consciousness and I woke up in a holding camp like a lager which I have deduced as being part of the Fallingbostal

08:00 complex and there I laid on the stretcher until the British 7th Armoured Division burst through with a tank, picked me up, I lay on the tank side and was taken out. That's how I was rescued. From there

08:30 we went through pockets of resistance until we eventually got to Brussels, and from Brussels to England.

#### **What had happened to Dud on his hospital train?**

Dud was, went out and was digging anti-tank

09:00 traps and was picked up by either the Americans or the British. He got to England before I did. Bill was picked up first, he was hiding in the rubble and then I got to England

#### **Having been with the Germans towards the end of the war**

09:30 **what could you see of their attitude or behaviour changing toward you?**

No, it got worse we thought that they'd be kowtowing to us they just got worse, although see we had a mixture of Dad's Army and mothers' boys

10:00 that were dragged in but we still had the eastern front. The Russian front blokes who were pretty tough, but they weren't going to give in. It was almost as though it was fanatical, I think they had reached the stage of no return, it's the only conclusion I could come to. See they had broken up into pockets of resistance

10:30 you'd come to an airfield and you'd have to fan out landing planes and there's Germans around the outside, I actually fired a shot but I couldn't get a medal my unit wasn't there

#### **How could you play on their fears about the Russians or the Americans coming?**

11:00 It was rude they used to put in their paper that the American Negroes were the pilots who were bombing them and then they became American Jewish pilots, and we used to play on them by saying up to an old bloke and you'd say 'boo', and you'd say, "Look there's an American Negro just there!"

- 11:30 And we used to tell them tales that they were so sexually endowed that you'd have to lock up all the women in Hanover because of one pilot. Those are the sort of things that we'd try to scare them with and turn it back on them, and they were always Jewish, everything that happened was Jewish.
- 12:00 **And did they believe you?**
- To a point, it was but it stuck there and when you'd scare the hell out of them.
- I can imagine that when the English arrived to rescue you it**
- 12:30 **must have been an amazing moment?**
- Yep, they asked us that was the first time we'd ever met DDT [insecticide] and they puffed it all over us and we had a bath and I remember stripping off and I looked at one of the blokes I was with and I said, "God you ought to see yourself. You haven't got any buttocks." And he said, You want to have a look at yours."
- 13:00 I can remember that we were only skin and bone, big pot belly, swollen knees, no buttocks and plenty of ribs, I think I was 7 stone 8 pounds. I went in at 12 stone 12 pounds, that's in the old scale, and they decided to fatten us up.
- 13:30 We were given leave and we were taught how to become civilised again by the Red Cross ladies who told us to wipe our boots and take our hat off and sit down in a chair and use a knife and fork and not swear at the table. It was good, it got you civilised again and then they gave us leave. I went to London and I didn't like it.
- 14:00 So I decided to go up north up to Stockton, and then from Stockton to Scotland and I was going to the Orkneys, and I got to Dundee and all I can tell you about Dundee is that it had a yellow gravel section of the railway station because that's what I saw and the next time I woke up I was back in Eastbourne
- 14:30 that was five days later. There was a mob sitting around the bed in the hospital and I can remember saying, "Who are you?" And they said, "Oh, we're your English relatives." And I said, "How did they find you? I don't even know you. What are you doing here?" And they said, "Oh you were going to die and called." And I said, "Look, I've got news for you. I'm not bloody dying.
- 15:00 No Hun's going to knock me off." They put me on the Mauritania in a stretcher, and the Pom in charge, a major said, "Are you an Australian?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "I don't like Australians." And he said, "What are you in for?" And I said, "I've collapsed with my liver." He said, "Are you a POW?" I said, "Yes."
- 15:30 He said, "I don't like POWs. You're discharged, go onto the deck." I was discharged out of hospital and did duty all the way home on the Mauritania, when we got to Panama, no Honolulu, I was going off the ship and I got yelled at and they said I had to report to the sick bay, and I got to the sick bay and the bloke said, "You're in
- 16:00 hospital. You can't go on leave." And I said, "Like bloody hell." And I just went off and then when I got to Sydney they said, "Ah, you've got to go off in an ambulance." And I said, "Not me. I've been doing duty all the way home, I'm going home." Besides I saw a little girl I know, who must have known I was coming home and she's got a staff car down there and she's in the air force.
- 16:30 She's already waved to me: "You can go to hell." I went off and she took me to the showgrounds. I haven't seen her since. I lost track of her but we were just friends from old days. So they took us to the showgrounds in the dark and we left the showgrounds in the dark
- 17:00 and we took a train to Melbourne and got off the train in the dark at Royal Park in the dark. There waiting for us were our rellies [relatives] and no one else, no one to clap, no one. So I think there was a conspiracy, there was no photographers, absolutely no one
- 17:30 and I got called up for a Japanese inspection. I thought it was a genuine one for me. They said, "We can't look at you. You're not a Jap prisoner. You're European. Our brief's for the Jap prisoners." And I'm crook. "You better have a look." So they had a huddle
- 18:00 and they decided to give me a look and then they did a few tests which I wish they hadn't have done, they poked things into me and whatnot. They stopped me urinating properly for the next 6 weeks, I had to go to the toilet or shower. I got a mixture from one of my mates,
- 18:30 they used a catheter and don't know what they did. And then I got that "no degree of assessability" thing but I would be entitled to attend a doctor, and they gave me a list of them and I had to nominate a bloke and if I wished to change that one I could do another one.
- 19:00 **What did your family know about where you'd been and what you'd been through?**
- They didn't, I think I was missing believed killed for six months, then missing believed killed for 12 or 18 months and then they, by the time they were told, my father had died,

19:30 so that's when I found out, but we didn't get very many letters.

**Can you tell me about getting out the army and trying to settle into civilian life?**

I couldn't get

20:00 out fast enough, and they offered me the rehab course and I made inquiries and if you had a degree in science there were no jobs, it's a bit like that now. If you got a degree, you're better off going and working in a factory you get more money. Um, so I thought, "Golly, I've got to find something connected with medicine

20:30 and where I can use what I've already done on the way?" So I thought, "Well, pharmacy, I can't do medicine. It's too long. I'm crook. If I can do pharmacy in three years then I'll do pharmacy." So they allowed me to do pharmacy which was a four year course

21:00 but I sat for the three year examinations in the three years, which I did but towards the finish in September I had to stop. I said to the wife, I'd married, I came home all my mates, I didn't have many mates left,

21:30 I didn't really have girlfriends, I think I got a Dear John letter [letter signifying a relationship is over] from one in the Middle East but that was par for the course, but I had always admired my wife, she was older than I was, but there was no way in the world I was going to do anything before I went overseas but when I came home the first

22:00 thing I did was find my little black book and there was her telephone number, the first which I rang and she said, "Oh, I thought you were dead. I couldn't find you." I said, "What are you doing?" She was a school teacher, correcting exam papers. "Good" I said, "Sammy and I are coming around. We've got a dozen bottles. We'll help you correct the exam papers." And Sammy was Sammy Fry, Sergeant 2/24th Battalion.

22:30 He was the head of the Teachers College of Victoria, so Sammy and I did the examination papers and we passed all the kids and we got Lois tiddy and ourselves, that night I didn't miss a night, except when I had to go to Ballarat for discharge. We went out and then she said to me, I said to her

23:00 "I'm crook. I'm no bargain but I'd like to marry you." and she said, "I'd like to marry you but I can't because I'm engaged." And I said "Go and break it off." She said "What?" She said "I'm not keen on him." I said, "Well go and tell him or I'll break his bloody neck." Next day she rang and said she had broken it off and I said, "Good enough. We're engaged. When are we getting married, tomorrow?"

23:30 And she said "No I can't, I'm teaching." She was teaching at Upwey, she was teaching English and she was teaching with Bill Woodfull the test cricketer and he is a very nice bloke, and his son's a very nice bloke, he's a dentist now. And she said "I couldn't let Bill down."

24:00 "Oh well, when do you finish, the 20th of December?" I said "Right, that's the day we get married. I'll meet you on the train." and I picked her up with a train full of flowers and I took her home, you're not supposed to see your bride on the day but I did gave her a big cuddle, then went home and got dressed

24:30 and we got married at St Marks. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't be here. Because a POW has got a lot of things tucked away that you don't know you've got and the first inkling was we lived in Monomeith Avenue in East Camberwell and

25:00 I was walking with her down Monomeith Avenue and they had white picket fences and I could still see the movement on the picket fence as a car came around and the noise it made it sounded like a tank and it looked like a tank and I kicked her feet, fell on top of her to protect her, she still married me

25:30 and then I had malarial comas, when I couldn't do any good with DVA. I said, "Right we are going to get our own business. If you stick with me we will and they can stick what they've got. We'll make it on our own." But not before she'd been kicked out of bed and

26:00 it's, I didn't know what post traumatic stress was, I didn't want to know, it was 'war neurosis', that's what they called it. And I'd seen what happened to the blokes they were given uppers and downers and that was wrong and

26:30 I said I wasn't going to tell the doctors, I picked one up by his collar, he reported me, he told me that everything, I'd been vomiting I had a lot of pain, and I thought it was my liver that was playing up again. And he said to me "With you POWs it's all in your head." I just leant over and picked him up by the collar and he was only a little squirt

27:00 and shook him, put him down, and didn't go back. But that's the only medical report that DVA ever got. I lost my records. I found them in 1944, they were at Concord and I enlisted in Melbourne. They got to Concord I assume because I didn't get on the ambulance and the doctor who was supposed to

27:30 be looking after me on the boat got that mad he threw it in the ambulance, the ambulance didn't know what to do so they gave it to Concord. And I couldn't do anything with DVA because there was no records. But they found them and then when they found them it still didn't do any good until 1994.

## **How much**

28:00 **did people understand of your story?**

We didn't tell them, they didn't believe it, it didn't happen: "European!, He's telling lies. We know what happened, they were all out on farms while the Germans were away and getting nookie and all sorts of things and

28:30 it was the Japanese prisoners, they suffered. You couldn't have suffered like that!." You didn't go to the POW meetings after a while because one of them would taunt you and of course a fight would start, and you learnt to shut up and the wife suffered because she was told that nothing happened to me

29:00 and then when Senator Geitzel said, I think they offered \$2000 for somebody who was in a concentration camp way back, there was a little RAAF bloke who was picked up in France and ended up in a concentration camp and they gave him \$10,000. And the golf

29:30 ladies taunted my wife by saying Alex didn't get one, he wasn't in a concentration camp, that was a bit hard.

### **How much extra suffering did that cause not being understood and recognised?**

To me, I'm a bit philosophical, if you don't like it you can lump it. And I learnt that, that's the hard way

30:00 but the wife, it's difficult, when you playing golf with someone and they say, "Oh your husband's putting it on." and here she is trying to get me out of malarial comas which they won't recognise and can't do anything about. I had one doctor in Mackay who did know. And he put in a report and they just knocked him back and said no, it couldn't be,

30:30 couldn't have malaria but that was only part of the story. To play golf I used to wear a wrist strap and ankle brace and two knee and ankle braces because of the broken ribs. I'd changed from left hand to right

31:00 hand cause you know in the swing. And I could hit a ball quite well, got a handicap of 9 and my mad mate and I could play to 9 and we won a lot of money, playing 4 ball, 2 bob on the blue, if you play to your handicap you can win a lot of money.

### **You told me earlier that the thing that kept you going was hate**

31:30 **how do you let go of that hatred after the war?**

I think it wears off. I hope, I'm more tolerant now, I don't hate the Germans, I don't hate the Italians, I

32:00 I'm more intolerant to Australians who don't behave, that's strange isn't it? I can't see that if they don't play by the book that they should be treated anyway. I nearly committed a crime in the early days. I was in Wangaratta Station

32:30 and the Albury Express was going through and there was an Italian POW on this station running wild, doing what he wanted, and we hadn't been able to do a thing, and I was that far off pushing him in front of the train , but the wife knew and sensed and stopped me.

33:00 I can't forgive the cartels and the Americans were tied up in those too. Even George Bush's father belonged to the I.G. Farben cartel and that's the thing that gets you into wars and once you're in

33:30 are you going to let somebody rape your wife or your daughter? You're going to have to take the gunner. It's sad isn't it? But I don't think I hate anymore. I don't like hating, but I do get mad with the behaviour of some of our youth and yet

34:00 I go along and I find young girls doing drill on a Bofors and I think "Well they're not too bad after all."

### **You talked about the cartel and its angering to think that people profited.**

Well the British

34:30 paid royalties on the Lewis gun, I think to Krupps, to Dorries - Fuellner and ICI and CSL, its something we really need to delve into but I don't think you'd ever get there. It's,

35:00 when Henry Ford can get paid by the courts for the damage the Americans did in Cologne or Dusseldorf or whatnot, there's something wrong isn't there?

### **Today you've hinted at a bit of anger at the British for getting you into that mess, I was wondering**

35:30 **if there was any lingering anger there?**

No, I don't think so. But the thing that you really have to if you listen to the news and you listen to

what's going on now, we still have troops that are not equipped properly and they risk them. They don't deserve that.

36:00 They are working for us, I can't fight anymore but these blokes are doing their duty as far as the governments concerned but are they supported? Will they be looked after? When we joined up we got slapped on the back and they were saying, "We'll look after you mate, your job will be here when you get back. you

36:30 won't lose by it." But they don't tell you, you can't make up six and a half years, you never do. And I can't tell my grandchildren that, they think that you can take a year off, you can't take a year off in life. Not really, I know I lost six and a half years and I've never made it back. I've tried, but I've had a good life, and I've had a good life because of my wife and a daughter

37:00 but the daughter paid for me, it leaves a stamp, they don't get the same treatment because it takes you a long while to wake up to what you are doing, and you don't even know what you are doing. And when you get,

37:30 they used to be levelled at, you'd hit the grog, you do to a degree but you drink with your mates and your not talking about anything, you're just talking to your mates, its very hard to understand that, some boys the grog got them. And you do use it as a

38:00 safety valve I think, and it gets you into trouble.

**You mentioned earlier the difference between what a friend and a mate was.**

Yep, I think the best example did you look at Slim's funeral, there were a lot of mates there

38:30 and it's different to friends. A mate will do anything for you, a friend will have a reservation or something, a mate will give his life for you, he would.

39:00 And I had a wife who was a mate, go and ask for better.

**Are there any final words that you would like to say?**

I think I have probably said too much,

39:30 there is quite a lot we didn't cover but it's a lifetime and you can't cover a lifetime, I've learnt a lot of lessons. I'm happy, I've got a dog now, I've got friends, and I've got mates, lots of the mates are not with us anymore

40:00 and I've told you people about some of my mates and went through and they should get their story before they go

**Why is it important to remember what you have told us today?**

To see that it doesn't happen again, if you got to go to war you've got to be equipped you got to be looked after

40:30 otherwise it puts you in an awful mess. I think that the people who get us into war should be made to fight them, maybe we wouldn't get into it. I don't know if you agree with that, but it's not bad if you think about it. They might think twice, but who gets you into it and that's the big question and I think it's the people behind the cartels and it doesn't matter what you do, its money, it must be awful and its power and through all of my life I have never wanted power, never, but there are people who do. I think it's power, a hunger for power that gets you into trouble.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**