

# Australians at War Film Archive

## John Campbell - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/850>

### Tape 1

00:41 **It would be good to start with your childhood.**

I don't mind. Wherever you want.

**Well we'll start there. Where you grew up and if you could tell us some of the stories from your childhood I guess. Where did you grow up?**

My mother and father moved up to Mildura about the time they were

01:00 married. Dad bought...and although he was a tailor, a qualified tailor, he bought a fruit block, grapes, in Mildura. He and Mum lived there and I was born about nine months after they were married which was rather a strange thing to happen. The life there was a very good life. Mildura was a lovely climate and there was plenty of fresh air and fruit and that sort of stuff. And so I had a very, very

01:30 good home life I guess because we lived out of town a bit. My nearest two play mates, boys about my own age, they were about a kilometre away and the other one a little bit more than a kilometre. But we got together most weekends and played. Did the usual things that kids do, climbed trees, rob bird's nests and blow eggs, and climb up the mulberry tree when the mulberries were ripe and get mulberry juice all over your shirt and get into

02:00 trouble. But these were things that kids do and they were simple pleasures. There wasn't much money in the 1920s. My mother and father lived on a very tight budget. They had a debt of course to the cooperative society, which is where the fruit went to, and they got an allowance of two pounds a month for living and that wasn't many dollars. But in those days they got by

02:30 with what they could grow and the fruit that they could preserve and that sort of thing through the year. But schooling? I went to school at the age of five. I started at state school and that was a mile walk to school each day. Mum couldn't take me because she had a baby, my sister then. So she would walk me as far as the next door neighbour and they had a daughter who was two years older than me. She was seven. So she took me to

03:00 school along the sandy road of (UNCLEAR) avenue in Mildura. That's how I started school, and I went to the state school then until I was about 11 or 12 thereabouts, then I went to the high school which was a bit closer to where we lived. I completed three years at high school. And the Depression,

03:30 doing the usual things at school, like play football and get together with all your friends there. But the Depression caught up with Dad and he found he had to sell the property and move away. If he didn't do that he could see that he would be forced off. So we went through some pretty tough times. Mum and Dad...Dad was 48 I think at that stage and he had to sell up and he and Mum,

04:00 two suitcases of clothes and two children, moved to Melbourne to live in their parent's...that was their parents house. The parents had just died, and he had I think 60 pounds left after 14 years of work. We were never aware of this too much. Mum was a great sewer. Dad of course had been a tailor. Not that he did much in Mildura at all in that regard.

04:30 But Mum was a good sewer and we were always well dressed even though the clothes might have been made out of someone else's hand me downs. If the fabric was ok Mum could do something with it. So that's the way we went. We were regular church goers. Mum and Dad were great singers. They loved singing and Dad sang in all sorts of things around Mildura and the surrounding districts. And even today, I might be driving the car somewhere with the radio on

05:00 and there's a tenor singing and I hear Dad...regularly almost every week I hear things being sung that I heard him sing when we were little. And that's wonderful because it brings back memories of a terrific father and mother who cared for us and loved us and taught us all the things that children should know in growing up. So I feel I had a very wonderful childhood.

05:30 But we had to come to Melbourne for the reasons that I've stated.

**I'd like to go back to Mildura to the property and perhaps some more detail of what life was like for you growing up on a farm with the grapes. For example, did you have seasonal workers who came and worked the property?**

Yes. The seasonal workers were my aunt, Dad's sister who was single

06:00 and she would come up to Mildura and stay with Mum and Dad over the summer season, the picking season. And Mum herself would get out on the block. The picking season was the main season for extra labour. They couldn't afford for extra labour. So Mum would work late at night in the kitchen and cook for the following day, and Auntie Daisy would come up and stay with us. And Dad and the two ladies would be out picking grapes

06:30 all day and then at night they'd do the normal regular things that ladies do...washing, ironing. A tough life, but never any complaints. And we as kids really didn't know what was going on behind the scenes. We got our food, we went off to school and we played, as kids should do. It was only in later life, as you get older that you

07:00 really understand what our parents had to go through. My parents weren't the only ones. There were many parents of children in the country in those days who lived on nothing, but they survived, they hardened. They were good parents.

**So can you create a picture for me of what a young boy on a grape farm,**

07:30 **what life was like for you? What your chores would have been? Did you have chores that you had to do around the farm?**

I must confess I don't remember. We had no garden as such and no lawn as such around the house. But we had fruit trees and I do remember I had to pick fruit. We had apple trees and pear trees. An almond tree and plum, I think. I think there was a plum. And I would go out and pick fruit

08:00 for Mum to bottle fruit which a lot of ladies did in those days. Preserve fruit for the other parts of the year. So there was a lot of cooking. Big pots of fruit were cooked on the stove and put in these...what were they called? Fowler Vacola jars I think they were. With a lid and a spring clip on the top. That was a constant job when the fruit trees...and I know I collected the fruit. I

08:30 helped Dad down...when the fruit was on the drying racks, and that had to be handled...covered from time to time. It had to be covered or it had to be raked off the racks when it had dried. It was raked off and it would fall down onto big long hessian sheets. Then it would be processed and sent into the Cooperative Society where they would grade it as far as quality was concerned,

09:00 and that would be worth so much. So I had jobs such as that. We had a horse and occasionally I help Dad...it was too big for me...it was a draft horse and I couldn't reach him. I used to sit on him and go somewhere from time to time with Dad. But I would groom the horse where I could...on the lower legs and underneath the tummy with the big brushes that you groom horses with, and Dad would do the top part. Things like that, general things around.

09:30 But there was no pressure on me to have to do this or have to do that. I guess we did what we could in the house when Mum asked us. We used to lick out the basins when she was cooking and what was left in the basins, little Johnny was allowed to get a spoon and get the rest out of the basin. So that was always a very good thing when Mum was cooking. In the house there was no running water in the house, it was just tank water

10:00 outside so every bit of water had to be brought inside from the tank. In those early days I can remember quite clearly that when I was little, Mum had the usual thing, a big galvanised iron tub which would be out in the laundry and that's what she washed in. And that would come into the kitchen one day a week, or one night a week. It would be a Saturday night.

10:30 The copper outside would be lit and filled with water. The water would be heated up and then bucketed in and put in the oval galvanised iron...not a dish, but a container that you washed your clothes in. And there the youngest child would be bathed. My sister Jess, she'd be bathed first by sitting in it of course. She was small enough to sit in it. Johnny would be next. And then

11:00 we'd be put to bed and then I understand from later years that Mum would then have her full strip off and wash down with a washer, and poor old Dad who was probably the dirtiest of the lot, he would be last in line. Mum would top up the water with another bucket of hot water. So he was last in line to have his wash ready to be clean for Sunday and the start of the week. The rest of the week it was a matter of a washer and a basin

11:30 of hot water to give everybody a quick sponge over at night before you went to bed. But that was the way it was. There was no reticulated water and you did what you had to do and that was it, and everybody was happy. And of course, years before that, you go back another hundred years or maybe less and the ladies...there was really not the bathing then that we had in my day. They wore perfume to hide

12:00 all the smells. So it was a constant evolution of things.

**Talking of smells, what it conjures up for me is the description of your mother's baking and the fruit boiling...**

Beautiful.

**What was the kitchen...can you describe the kitchen...on a weekend what would happen?**

Well on the weekend...it was cooking time on Saturday and after the usual chores had been done in the morning, Mum would start

12:30 to cook for the week ahead. And particularly during the picking season...although they picked on Saturday, so that used to be done at night mostly. But quite often Mum would cook a fair bit on Saturday, all sorts of things for the following week and also the special meals that we might have on a Sunday which might be a roast...well she would cook the roast on Saturday, and it was usually a roast on Saturday. The cold meat would then be served up on

13:00 the Sunday when we came back from church. Then on Sunday there would always be a quick batch of scones made and a sponge for Sunday night's tea. So they were fresh. And that was a normal thing to have...fresh scones and jam and cream, and a sponge with some icing on top and cream in the middle and maybe jam and cream in the middle and that sort of thing. The other things that were made that were more lasting things like a cake

13:30 of some sort or biscuits or things of that nature. The meat and the vegetables they were done day by day. But the smells in the kitchen as a small boy were most attractive. And I must confess I think I must have hung around the kitchen a fair bit on a Saturday when Mum was cooking. That was good. And I always liked my food. I've got to watch what I eat.

**So the farm itself. You said before**

14:00 **there was drying of the fruit, what was your father producing on the farm? Fresh grapes and sultanas?**

Fresh grapes. There were black currents which they just get dried straight on a rack. They just dry in the sun on the rack. Then they get raked off and you just have a ...like a broom handle and wipe it along the rack itself which is only like wire netting and then the fruit then falls off the stalks and then falls down onto a piece of hessian.

14:30 Each piece of hessian was probably around about 20 metres long I suppose, a bit less than that. A bit more than half. Then they could be pulled out from underneath the rack and the fruit would be put into boxes which went to the co-op. Sultanas, they were usually not dried straight fresh, but

15:00 dipped first. So...don't ask me the reason. I've forgotten that now. But they were dipped in a solution of some sort and then put on the rack. Then there was another grape we called 'gordo' or muscatel, and they made the muscatel which we buy these days. They've got a little bit of a bloom on them when you buy them dried, and you buy them at Christmas time and they're nice.

15:30 They too were dipped in a mixture before they were dried. They were normally dried on wooden trays. They had to be spread after they were dipped, on wooden trays about five feet long and three or four feet wide or something like that. They could be stacked one on top of the other because they had edges around them. If you wanted to get them away from the weather you could quickly stack all these together and put canvas over them so they were protected.

16:00 A lot of work during the picking season and many a night as a little boy, I could hear rain pattering...our house was built...I'll just digress a bit. The house we had was fairly basic. Galvanised iron roof and galvanised iron walls outside. The inside, the kitchen was all tongue and groove board. The kitchen was tongue and groove board also.

16:30 The big lounge dining room had tongue and groove up to about dado height and then it was hessian. Hessian to the ceiling, and the ceiling and that was wall papered with wall paper. It looked quite ok but in windy weather those hessian walls would move of course, and the ceiling too, would fluctuate because there was nothing to hold it up but a few beams. The beams that were in it and the beams that were in the wall.

17:00 And our bedroom, the bedroom that I was in, Jess and I slept in the one room and it was called the sleep-out. It had galvanised iron around two sides about that high with wire netting. And in the winter time they could let hessian down to cover the wire netting and hopefully keep the cold out. So it was a very basic house. Very basic house.

17:30 I'm answering the question as you asked me, is that ok? The kitchen, you did ask me about the kitchen. The kitchen as I recall had no sink of course, and no running water. It had an iron stove standing in the kitchen itself with a flue going through the ceiling, and that was ok. It was a stove whereby...

18:00 it had to be cleaned regularly and there was stuff called blacking. And with a brush you would put blacking on the stove when it was cold and you could polish up the stove to make it look nice and clean and tidy. So that was the stove and that was a source of warmth during the winter months when it was

cold because we'd go in the kitchen to have our meals, and we were little of course, so after our meal we'd be shot off to bed.

- 18:30 And Mum and Dad would continue to do what they wanted to do in the kitchen because the stove had been going probably all day I guess, or when ever they needed it, but certainly at night. It was a deal table, a pine table around about the size of the dining room table we've got here. That was covered with what was called an oil baize. It wasn't contact adhesive but something like that.
- 19:00 But it wasn't a contact adhesive. It had a fabric back but a plastic sort of top and that was very commonly used back in the '20s and '30s for covering tables or shelves or things of this nature. And that would get wiped down of course after Mum had done the cooking or that sort of stuff. But there was no sink. There was a dresser, one of the old type dressers,
- 19:30 like you see in various colonial stores today. Cupboards at the bottom, a couple of drawers and then the open shelves going up. And there was a dresser there where the crockery and cutlery was put, and then there was another built in cupboard where the pots and pans and cooking needs and all that sort of stuff were put. A basic kitchen but it worked. There was no refrigerator of course. No ice chest of course
- 20:00 and you're in a hot place, or hot in summer certainly. So out in the back verandah...it wasn't really a verandah but a lean-to off another room that Dad used for storage for tools and all sorts of stuff, and it just had a dirt floor. The laundry was down the other end of it, such as it was, and that was a great big wooden box that Dad had got
- 20:30 from somewhere or other. A packing box of some sort, and on that stood this galvanised iron tub which Mum washed in, and she had one of these...I've forgotten what they called now, but a ripple board...you rub the clothes up and down the ripple board to try and get any dirt out of the clothes. Then there was the copper at the end of that as well for boiling up the things before you
- 21:00 lift them out with a stick and put them in this big tub and given a final wash and a rinse. And all that water had to be handled from the tank in buckets for the rinsing water. So to do the washing and hang it out and clean up, and with that washing water the floors were always washed after the washing had been done because you couldn't waste water and it all had to be carted. So a
- 21:30 mother in those situations had a very, very heavy day. Wash day was normally Monday, and I think she must have gone to bed pretty tired at night because the more I think about it and have thought about as I've got older, we never appreciated how much work our parents in those days had to do. But I was talking about in the kitchen,
- 22:00 no refrigerator, no ice chest, we had Coolgardie Safe. A Coolgardie is a metal safe about so high and on top it had a flat dish that you could put water into. The sides of that Coolgardie were just made out of perforated metal, and you'd put pieces of flannel from the water at the top over this
- 22:30 perforated panel on each of the four sides. As the breeze blew threw, the water came down through the flannel. You had to keep the top filled with water, and it would feed its way down and these panels of flannel would be wet. The breeze blowing through these wet panels would cool the inside of the safe. So you could safely put your milk and meat and butter sometimes, depending on the weather,
- 23:00 but things like that would be kept cool. But Mum also had a hidey hole underneath the house where she had an earthenware pot where on very hot days she kept the butter, and that kept the butter even better, with wind blowing underneath the house. So very basic. No electricity, all our lights were kerosene,
- 23:30 and that means you didn't have an electric iron either. You didn't have a polisher. You didn't have a vacuum cleaner, so again it was all muscles and work. Ironing, the irons...there were number of...Mum had I think, a kit of three iron shapes with a handle that interconnected with the three of them. So you would have the three of them on the stove
- 24:00 and when they were ready to use she would click the handle into this one. She'd use it until it cooled off, put it back on the stove and click the handle in the next one, use that until it cooled down and rotate the irons around, and she had a hot iron all the time. There was no other water to do it. You could get irons that had their own handle on. You might say these were the super model of an iron with
- 24:30 no electricity. I often wonder where they ended up. They probably got sold. I remember I've still got in there when Dad sold the property, all the bits and pieces. There was a tin of this and a tin of that and all the nuts and bolts and bits and pieces. I remember reading on this ...the auctioneer who sold everything, on this sheet, he had there a tin...a dip tin. A dip tin was used to dip the fruit in the various mixture.
- 25:00 A dip tin of odds and ends. One and sixpence and all this sort of thing. I think they got about 38 pounds or something for the sale of all their bits and pieces, if it was that much. So that was basically the house.

**So Mildura's a very hot place and farming is always to the whim of the weather. What were the**

25:30 **weather conditions like and were there any problems with drought and ...**

Well I think the major problem around Mildura and the Murray River in general was a salt problem and the salt rising, and that is because of the irrigation that started there many years ago. And even on Dad's block which was only small on any standards, it was only ten acres and only really big enough to support a small family, barely.

26:00 The salt was even showing its fangs there on sections of that ten acres and Dad didn't get the return on the grapevines as you would normally expect. Now that's been an ongoing problem for so long and governments really haven't done a great deal about it as yet and until something is positively done, more disaster can happen...I think.

26:30 But you don't know what's going on behind the scenes I suppose. I just hope that things are ok, or will be ok. But what happened with the floor irrigation on the land, the way it was irrigated, that tends to bring the salt to the surface. There's a lot of salt right through that country. Sea Lake, there's quite a lot of salt right around Sea Lake. There are actually salt lakes, so all that area

27:00 is a problem with salt. But anyway that was one of the biggest...well, not in Dad's day it wasn't, but it was an increasing problem. But one of the biggest problems is if you get rain at the wrong time of the year and although the weather was generally fairly stable, there were sudden storms that would come in. And if the fruit was getting near ripe

27:30 the rain hitting the fruit would split the fruit. Now different things could happen then. If the weather turned a little bit humid, the fruit would then grow a mould and that would bring down the quality of the fruit, and that meant the Cooperative Society, when the fruit went to them, it would be graded low grade and then low cost. And that was what the farmer

28:00 was depending on his living, to get a good quality fruit. And it's classed in crowns - the top fruit would be classed as five crowns, then there's four, three, two and one. So the different gradings, depending on the quality of fruit when it was delivered. That was the biggest problem and I can well remember as a child in the middle of the night hearing rain drops...you know in the country you get

28:30 this sudden thunder and lightning, and the next minute you get these heavy drops of rain hitting the roof. And I was conscious of Mum and Dad scurrying out of bed, lighting the hurricane lamps and racing down the drive to where the fruit was still exposed and ...this was when it was being dried of course, and covering up fruit which was out. You wouldn't necessarily cover it up every night, but you had to drop the sides on the covers, the hessian

29:00 covers on the sides of the racks if there was fruit on the racks. The fruit on the grounds, you might have to get the ends of the strips....which as I say might have been 30 feet long, and tumble the ends together and bring all the fruit in the middle and put the balance of the material, the hessian over the fruit to protect it. And that I can remember happening on many occasions. It was a worrying time for people who had

29:30 fruit out. And to hear rain drops in the middle of the night, it was all hands. I was too small and I don't recollect ever being asked to do that because it would be a two person job and Mum and Dad would do that together. They were probably the biggest things, the weather when the fruit was ripening, other than that, not a great problem at all.

30:00 **So were your parents good at monitoring the weather, detecting what sort of weather was coming?**

I think they would have been. I think you had to be to survive at all in those situations. You had to be aware of what was happening. They didn't have a radio either. See there were no radios in those days. You had to depend on the paper, and your own observation of the situation.

30:30 I'm quite sure if it looked like it was going to be rain they would cover up before they went to bed. But it would have been those sudden storms which would come over in summer time, like a summer storm that you wouldn't be aware of when you want to be, but it would come over in the middle of the night and give you a shock.

**So how long was that season. That season when the grapes become vulnerable to weather?**

Probably around about Christmas time on, for the next three months.

31:00 The flower sets after the spring and it's around about Christmas time when it...from then on it can become vulnerable. So it's a few months where you had to be careful.

**What about community. Did you have a lot to do...I know you said you had friends who lived a few kilometres away. But did you have much to do with the local community?**

Oh yes.

31:30 Within our own friends and friends that were mostly...well no, not altogether through the church. Dad played cricket so he made friends through that association. The Sunraysia Cricket Association I think it was. And once a month, there was usually something on once month. I don't know about during the

summer season when the fruit was being picked. I think they were all too busy at that stage of the game. But once a month at least

- 32:00 they had either a 500 party and they would go round to different houses. People would come to our place. There might be six or eight or ten. I can't remember now, but quite a few would come to our place and the adults would play 500 and then they'd go to someone else's place another month, and someone else's the next month. Both Dad and Mum being fine singers, they were very much involved in singing in the community
- 32:30 and Dad sang at all sorts of concerts and light opera and Gilbert and Sullivan and all sorts of things, right through Mildura and through the district...for various charity or churches or whatever, or just concerts. When they left Mildura in 1934, the Shire put on a...what was it?
- 33:00 A special night in the Town Hall for Mum and Dad, and gave them...oh goodness me, I can't think of the word now, but there's a particular piece of paper, nice paper, it's printed. It sort of says something about their efforts in the town. That for the life of me, I have no idea where it disappeared to. I've not seen it for many
- 33:30 years and it must have disappeared somehow, during Mum and Dad's time before they died, because I never ever saw it since. Other things, but not that. 'Illuminated Address' that's what it was, an 'Illuminated Address'. So they had a big night, a big send off and I've got outside, a ribbon which has been sewed to be a circle, and on that ribbon has been typed...it's a wide satin ribbon, the names of all their friends in Mildura.
- 34:00 And I don't know how many names are on that, I've never counted them. The ribbon would have been about that long I suppose, and so whatever number of names you could get on a ribbon about that length, was all the friends they had in Mildura. They were a very popular couple. They had no money but they had lots of fun and they made the most of it.
- 34:30 But yes...and as kids we went to Sunday School in church, we were involved in the activities there. I never played...well I was only 14, and there wasn't the sport activity in those days as there is today. They start at about this size. It was cricket and football and that was about it, and tennis. I didn't play tennis then. I started tennis
- 35:00 at 14 when I came down to Melbourne, and I played footy just around the school and that with the kids. But Mum and Dad, yes they were very much involved in community and appreciated by the community at that time too. There we are.

**Can you recall an early childhood memory of an event or something that happened to you. Maybe playing with your mates or maybe playing with Jess.**

- 35:30 Yes, a couple of things I suppose. You've jogged my memory about...we came down to Melbourne for the marriage of my mother's youngest sister. I was only a little fellow at that time, seven or something like that, six or seven. And you wouldn't believe it but I was dressed in a white satin suit because all Mum's sisters...she had six sisters and two brothers...
- 36:00 and most of them were pretty good sewers and they must have...probably Mum made it, a white satin suit. I was a page boy or something of that nature. And we were staying with my grand parents out at Northcote. They were my mother's parents. And my cousin who was a bit older than myself, Les, he decided he would give little Johnny sort of an aeroplane ride and I had to...he lay on his back and put his feet up and I had to sit on his feet and he was
- 36:30 going to throw me through the air, and I ended up with a green stick fracture of my left arm an hour or so before the wedding. So I don't think I was very popular. But that's just one little thing that comes to mind. My sister Jess - Jess was 18 months younger than I. A lovely, lovely lady my sister. And when she was a little girl
- 37:00 Dad and Mum used to get most frustrated at Jess because outside the house...where the horse and carts came up the drive, which was a long drive, around about I suppose 300, 400 yards, there was a turning circle, outside the house where the horse and carts came up and turned around and went back again. And in the wet weather, that used to look chocolaty, and when it dried
- 37:30 out a bit there would be all these brown...it would crack and look like brown bits of chocolate, or Jess thought they were, and she'd go out and eat them. She was only tiny and Mum and Dad used to get so frustrated, and I can even see his big fingers going to her mouth and ripping out what she had in her mouth. But finally it was determined by the doctor that she was lacking something in her system and obviously was finding it in the mud.
- 38:00 But I can still see Dad doing that on one occasion. Another occasion, I can remember I had a dog called Prince, a spaniel type dog, a lovely dog. A black coat with a nice white throat and a bit of white in other places, and we used to play a lot together. And one day I was probably being a nuisance to the dog as much as anything, and
- 38:30 Prince was yapping away at me and I was teasing him, and I must have teased him a bit more and put my face towards him and he yapped. And as they yap their heads come forward and his tooth caught my

lip and I think I still have a sign there where his big sharp eye tooth cut me through almost to the other side. So then,

39:00 there was no car, no, horse, we only had an old horse and cart. I don't know how they got me up to the hospital and the doctor, but I got stitched up. So what is there?

**What about your friends that you used to go and play with. Where did you go to and what sort of games did you play?**

Well, mostly we mucked around in each other's places I suppose. There was no formal places where you could go and play.

39:30 You had to make up your own games. As far as the boys are concerned, Eddie Thomas and Colin Smith were my nearest neighbours. And at Eddie Thomas' place, they had a huge lot of peppercorn trees right down the side of their property, beautiful trees to climb, lots of bird's nests and we'd go bird nesting looking for eggs and that sort of thing. I had a collection of birds eggs. That would be a no-no today.

40:00 You wouldn't do that today but that was quite an accepted thing to do when you were young. So I'd go bird nesting. The most we did...I can't say, but we probably played cricket with a ball and a bat. It might not have been a bat, it might have been a piece of timber for a bat. I don't remember a lot about that. But at Colin Smith's place

40:30 there, they had a dam and one of the popular things to do was to go to their dam because they had yabbies in the dam, fresh water yabbies, and you could with a piece of string and a piece of meat from Mum, you could go to the dam and drop the string in and move it around a bit, and then you'd see a yabby get on the end of it. So you'd quietly pull it in and with a kerosene tin

41:00 ...the kerosene tin was what we used to buy kerosene in. It was about a four or five gallon tin and you had a little pump that you would pump it out to fill your lamps with. So by cutting the top of that and putting a handle on it you had a bucket. A very useful bucket and that's what buckets were mostly in those days. So we'd have half a bucket of water and drop the yabbies in the water, and after we caught enough we'd put a fire under the bucket,

41:30 cook the yabbies and have a feast. And that was pretty good. We did that quite often. We also decided we'd build...another thing, we'd built a canoe out of galvanised iron, I must say, corrugated iron. So then you'd go up to the main road, Deacon Avenue on a hot day and you'd collect bitumen off the road, hot bitumen. It would melt. Different to what they have today.

## Tape 2

00:33 **So just finish the story about the canoe.**

Yes. The bitumen used to melt on a very hot day and usually it would be summer time when we made the canoe. What we'd do, we'd just get one sheet of galvanised iron, usually corrugated iron. We'd bend it like that and pull the ends in and make some holes in the end...or usually the holes were there because it would be an old sheet off a roof or something or other. Then we'd pull those together each end so we had a sharp end each end,

01:00 and a bow in the middle. And then by going up the road on a hot day and collecting this soft bitumen, we'd bring that back and then we'd cork the ends. Now that was quite satisfactory, the corking, but the problem was, whether we put it in the water, we could never balance enough to keep it upright. So we always ended up in the water anyway and it would be sinking. So it wasn't a very successful operation I can tell you.

01:30 But it kept us occupied for hours, there's no doubt about it. By the time you'd found a sheet of iron, wired it together, got the bits and made it, and then it wasn't successful. You could spend a couple of days doing it.

**Was this on the river, on the Murray?**

No. The Murray was a fair way from us and we wouldn't have been allowed to go to the Murray anyway. It was on the dam on Colin Smith's property which was quite a nice size dam, but it was deep enough at that stage to get ourselves out of it if we fell in.

02:00 We were I suppose, around about 10 or 11. Maybe 12, when we did that sort of thing so we were able to swim enough to get ourselves out of trouble. So that wasn't a problem.

**So these wonderful childhood days in Mildura came to an end when you moved to Melbourne. Can you tell me about those circumstances?**

Yes, yes. In 1934

02:30 my parents must have been discussing what we should do. We weren't...naturally as kids we didn't realise what was going on. But Dad was not making any headway as far as the farm was concerned. His

mother and father had both died, one in '33 and one in early '34. And his sister Daisy who was unmarried was living on her own in the family home

03:00 here in Cheltenham. It was pulled down just recently and as usual a couple of units have gone up on it. So they must have made the decision that they should come back to Melbourne. Now Dad having been a tailor, I think he had decided then that he would go back into the tailoring trade. So they sold up everything, and as I said earlier, they got about 60 pounds

03:30 for everything and two suit cases of clothes, two kids, and Dad was about 48 and Mum was about 46, I think she was. They came to Melbourne from Mildura and they lived at 127 Sharman Road, Cheltenham, where we were too, of course.

**Can I just ask why they had to sell...they sold the farm...**

Yes, to clear their debts to the bank and end up with 60 pounds. That was the best

04:00 way, the best thing to do. Now this couch that you see here, was a couch that was owned by my grand parents, and I've had it recovered since we came to this house. But I've kept it in the period, and that's where I slept when we came to Melbourne, on that couch, as a 14 year old boy initially. Mum and Dad took the

04:30 front bedroom where my grandma and granddad had been. Auntie Dais and my sister occupied the second bedroom and there was no other bedroom. So that was in the dining room of the house and that's where I slept for a little while. I had slept on that previously when coming down from Mildura as a young boy. And we had holidays at 127 Sharman Road. So I've got an affinity with it,

05:00 and when Mum and Dad died and Auntie Dais died, it was in their possession and I inherited it. So I'm very pleased to have it because it's just a part of our family history I guess, my growing up. But a little bit later a bedroom was established for me in really a passageway between the kitchen and the bathroom in the house. A single bed was put in there and that was my spot until I joined the army.

05:30 But things were tight and Dad didn't start back into tailoring straight away. But his father had been a ... my grandfather, he had been a stereotype operator. A stereotyper is a man who works together with a the big melting pot where they melt metal of all different sorts

06:00 to make a metal plate which is used then to print the print. And granddad who was a man who for 50 years did different things, for a good many years of his life he worked on a stereo pot, the big metal pots with big ladles and that was where he was working at the end of his life. And his son Bob also worked at the Argus office in the same department.

06:30 Dad was able to obtain casual work at the Argus office. It wasn't a lot, it was casual, and in between times he did anything. Like most people did in the 1930s, they took what they could, they weren't easy times. He put up fences, he mowed lawns in Toorak and South Yarra, in the finer homes in there, with a push mower for two and six a lawn. Two shillings and sixpence a lawn.

07:00 He would do three in a morning and come home, if he just did the three and that was it for the day. But it bought something. Seven and sixpence bought something. A loaf of bread wasn't very much, a pint of milk wasn't very much, so it all helped. Today it sounds ridiculous, but the average wage in those days was probably somewhere around three pounds a week. I'm not sure, but maybe something like that. And we existed like that for a couple of years and they

07:30 wanted me to do better than just do nothing, so they asked me if I would go...or they might have told me I don't know. They probably told me that they would like me to go to a business college. And so they started me off at Bradshaw and Everett's Business College, which was an old building roughly where the

08:00 opera house, or where they call it now...just over Princess Bridge, the Arts Centre, I suppose. The Arts Centre, roughly in that position. I would go by train, walk across the bridge, down through Snowden Gardens which was there, at that stage of the game, and to the school. I did that for about a year and a half. And it was accountancy or book keeping and that's where I felt I was going, to book keeping and

08:30 further on to accountancy. I did...what else, typing, shorthand. The typing's come in handy now because I can type on the computer and use all fingers and thumbs, which even some of the young ones can't do. They pick away with two fingers. So I think there was English and perhaps one or two other things. So I did that for 18 months and then

09:00 one day some visitors of ours who had lived in Mildura and were visiting Mum and Dad, and Mr Harman worked for Griffith Teas, you may have heard of Griffith Teas, they're still about but not the force that they used to be. And Mr Harman said to Mum and Dad, "Is young John ready to start work yet?" And Mum and Dad said, "Possibly. He's going to school, but possibly." And Mr Harman said, "There's a job as an office boy

09:30 at Griffith Teas." And he said, "I believe John could get it if he applied." So with that I applied and I started at the age of 16 as an office boy with Griffith Teas. I continued with my studies at night school at Bradshaw and Everett, and that was three nights a week from seven o'clock to nine I think it was, and

then I caught a train home to go to bed and then to go back to work the next morning at eight o'clock.

- 10:00 Ok, I was learning things. So I was at Griffith Teas, not as the office boy all the time. I did get a promotion along the way. I became an order clerk for the country orders. They had commercial travellers all around Victoria and the Riverina and they would post their orders in and I was doing the processing of those orders together with another chappie, processing them
- 10:30 ready for despatch to the various area or people they had to go to. So that's about what happened there. Anything else that you needed to know? I suppose when we came to Cheltenham, my grand parents were associated with the Methodist Church and so we continued then with our association with the Methodist Church. I played tennis.
- 11:00 I became a member of the Senior Boys Group. We had lots of fun. We had picnics and we went away for weekends together. Some of the boys went up to the Dandenong Ranges. We got there by pushing our bikes and our gear. No cars so you did it the hard way in those days. Today you couldn't set up a tent on the banks of the creek at Monbulk. I think you'd get smartly removed. But we had a number
- 11:30 of good camps up there along the Monbulk Creek doing all the things that young men of 16 and 17 would do. Not getting into any trouble but just having a good time. Usually some of the girls would come up one of the days, Saturday or Sunday because somebody had had a car or a truck and we'd have a day together. And that was really just good,
- 12:00 clean fun. And that's how we grew up, or most of us grew up in those days. I got associated with a Sunday School and I think I taught Sunday School for a little while until September, until war was declared. So a very good few years. Young people mixing together, girls and boys, doing things that girls and boys should do together to get to
- 12:30 know each other.
- So this was '34 when you moved to Melbourne and you went out to work. So what was your awareness as it got into say '36, '37, '38 about the coming war? What were your thoughts about it and did you have an expectation early on that you would enlist?**
- I don't think I thought about it very much. I can't remember thinking about it very much. I was well aware
- 13:00 that there were problems over in Europe. But it was such a long way away. Europe's a long way away from us in those days, not today, but it was the other side of the world. You were concerned about what was going on, but I don't believe I had a thought that I might end up in uniform and going away, until again it was one of those boy's weekends that we had,
- 13:30 about half a dozen of us up at Healesville. We were camping up there and we got up this morning and someone went into town and picked up a newspaper and here's the big headlines, I can still almost see them. 'War Declared'. It was a declaration of war that had come in, in Britain, and Germany of course, was invading around France and those places and our...
- 14:00 Mr Chamberlain [Neville Chamberlain Prime Minister of Britain] I think it was. He had come back to say there would be no war, but anyway war had been declared and it was on, and sobered us all up. It sobered me up, it's coming closer. But not realising even then that I might be involved, you don't know. When you're young you don't sort of think about those sorts of things. You think about them but I don't think they're the top most priority on
- 14:30 your thinking list. It happened later on, of course. We came home and I continued working at Griffith Teas and continued going to classes at Bradshaw and Everett Business College until we got into the early 1940s, and then things were starting to get sticky and we had 6th Division had gone overseas and we were well aware that Australia was well and truly
- 15:00 involved in a conflict, and ought to be. The reason I say ought to be is the fact that quite different to today, the population of course was much less than it is today. It think it might have been around 4 million, I think. And most of the population had close links to the United Kingdom because most of us, even if our parents hadn't
- 15:30 come out, or some of our parents had come out from England, or Scotland or Ireland, the previous generation had. My generation, both my mother and father came out of the 1840s, so they had been out for a long time. But my heritage together with the heritage of most people in Australia was with England, Ireland and Scotland. And so
- 16:00 it was felt, they were regarded as the mother country. That word was used quite often...the mother country. And we felt we needed to support them. That's how I started to feel in the beginning of the 1940s, that if I could do anything I should support the mother country. But at that stage of the game the government was not taking young people, you had to be of a certain age before you could enlist.
- 16:30 And even when I did enlist, I was only 19 and I put my age up to 20 and I still had to have my parents' consent. So you couldn't just say I'm 18 and join up. But different people did different things to get in the army, and I had to firstly get the permission of my parents, because they still had to give their

permission. I'm very grateful to them for the way they handled

- 17:00 It, they were wonderful. I was the only son, and when I said to them, I would like to join up, we talked about it. They didn't say no I shouldn't, but they knew that I should have been 20, and they knew that once I got a bit older, and the war was still on I would have wanted to go and do my bit anyway.
- 17:30 But at the same time my cousin Bob who was about four years older than I, he had decided to join and so, Mum and Dad talked to Bob and said to Bob, we'll sign for John to join up if you'll look after him. So that's how it turned out. There were no recriminations from my parents. They were totally supportive of what I was doing,
- 18:00 but in their hearts there was sadness which I didn't think about at the time. But as I've got older and have children of my own, three boys and a girl who haven't had to go through that particular exercise, I often think that their hearts must have been pretty heavy at times, particularly when they knew what we were involved in another six or nine months later. But
- 18:30 that's how I came to join the services on the 30th July 1940, at the Melbourne Town Hall, around about 11 o'clock one morning.

**So tell me about that, turning up at the Town Hall and the atmosphere?**

A sense of excitement, a sense of adventure, a sense of the unknown.

- 19:00 Bob and I, together with another friend from the Methodist Church. Bob wasn't a Methodist Church member but he lived in Cheltenham. But John Wright was another young man about Bob's age and actually they happened to be partners in a sports training business. Bob was into golf and he was a professional golfer. John was in tennis and he was a very good tennis player. So they were in tennis and golf in the city.
- 19:30 So they decided to join up and they closed the business down and the three of us went to the Town Hall together. And there we joined a long line of other young men, and we went through the induction process of the usual things. Name, address and all those sorts of things, and then past the doctor who gave you a cursory examination and asked a few questions. And if you could walk and you could see
- 20:00 you were right. I can't remember all the things we went through but we were there for quite some time with the crocodile queue as these procedure were done. Then when that was finished we were sent out to Royal Park near the zoo there which was called Royal Park Recruit Reception Depot.
- 20:30 And there ...we got our uniforms, if I remember rightly at the Melbourne Town Hall. And I think we might have gone home with those sorts of things and had to report back the next day to Royal Park, which we did. That was the start of another different lifestyle. And something I haven't forgotten - one of
- 21:00 men I met that day and slept in the tent with that night, I can still remember, was the man that we're burying tomorrow, Frank Washburn. He's been a good friend of mine every since. That first day and first night at Royal Park. The first thing I noticed, we had lunch...or tea. No, I'm pretty sure it was lunch. I've never eaten such
- 21:30 a disastrous meal. You can imagine a whole generation growing up virtually overnight, nobody really knowing what they're doing and you've got cooks, supposedly cooks in the kitchen supposedly knowing what they're doing. But the meal that I can remember having, compared to my mother's food, was absolutely revolting. However we survived.
- 22:00 But some of the men that had been inducted and had been into the camp a few days before were already in the tent that Bob and I were allocated to, and Frank Washburn was in that tent too, and there were others who had been on leave. There was a fair bit of leave given from that camp because it was just a matter of getting people together at that stage of the game. And I remember going to bed on my straw palliase.
- 22:30 It was straw in a hessian bag and it felt terrible. But I was sound asleep and about midnight in came through the flap of the tent somebody singing away and slobbering away, and it was my first experience of anybody who had had too much to drink. And he was maudlin drunk. That's all you could say about it, maudlin drunk. And his bed happened to be
- 23:00 over there and my bed happened to be here. So he fell over...there was eight of us in the tent. He fell over us all to get over to his corner. That as a rude awakening I can tell you. Anyway, I got used to that sort of thing after a while. I didn't drink myself. So that was a rude awakening as you can well imagine to
- 23:30 somebody who had grown up in a different atmosphere. But that's the history, bad meals and a quite a bit of fun at night. But we got to know Frank Washburn the next day quite well and a few others of similar feelings I suppose. It's amazing how people with similar likes and dislikes gravitate together in all groups. It doesn't matter if it's a tennis club or a progress club. That's been my experience over
- 24:00 the years. People who have the same interests in life seem to some how gravitate together. That's my experience anyway. So there we were at Royal Park for a few weeks. We had to get up on parade at six

thirty I think it was every morning. We had to line up and learn how to march and how to march in three, and how to right reel and left reel and halt, and all those regular things, the basic things in army life.

- 24:30 It was really a matter of just getting the people...a totally disorganised group of men, young men together to make them an organised group of men. That's what that initial work in the first few weeks was. None of us knew where we were going to end up or what was going to happen. But we had a Regimental Sergeant Major who was in charge of us, who
- 25:00 was very strict but good, and very fair. So he licked us into shape fairly quickly initially. I think about two or three weeks after we had gone into the reception depot, one day we had an officer come out and said to us, "There's the first light anti aircraft unit in the Australian Army has been formed.
- 25:30 Anybody who would like to join an anti aircraft unit, step forward." And that's the way you were getting people. If you wanted to be in an infantry unit, they would be doing that sort of thing. If you wanted to be in something else...this day it was anti aircraft unit. And so a few of us looked at each other and said, why not. So we all stepped forward out of the ranks and so we were gathered together and enlisted. And before long, a few days we were down at the Werribee Racecourse
- 26:00 where an induction of people from the Caulfield Racecourse, which had been a recruit reception depot, and Geelong, there had been a recruit reception depot down there, and then at Royal Park. So there was about 900 of us arrived over a period of 2 or 3 days at Werribee Racecourse which had been made ready for us for training. It had been selected by
- 26:30 our CO [Commanding Officer], Lieutenant Colonel John Rowden it turned out to be. He had been to Puckapunyal to visit a site there and he asked to have a look at Werribee Racecourse and he chose Werribee Racecourse because the air force were using Laverton Point Cook, and also just a landing strip just over the road from the Werribee Racecourse where the planes were...the students were flying but they were landing and taking off from this landing strip, and as they took off our CO
- 27:00 thought we could use that, as an anti aircraft unit to learn how to focus on planes and all that sort of stuff. Plane identification and so forth. So at the Werribee Racecourse, that was interesting. There were three batteries of 250 men plus others. Seven Battery was on the open seats of the grandstand. They slept on where your feet went.
- 27:30 Where you sat, the next one you had your feet on, in tiers. Eight Battery was underneath the grandstand and in tents, and Nine Battery was in the horse stalls and in tents, but they did take the excreta out before they put them in there. And there our training started. Very interesting as far as the army was concerned. You see the equipment was almost non existent, and it was proposed
- 28:00 that we be what you called a Bofors 40 millimetre anti aircraft unit, but I don't think there was a Bofors in Australia. We never saw one until we got to the Middle East, after we had been through 8 months in Tobruk. But what we had were a few beaten up First World War Vickers machine guns, and it was those that we were supposed to practice on. Not with live
- 28:30 ammunition because there was no ammunition to spare. So all we could use was practice drill in pulling the pieces down and putting them together again. Drills in loading them and unloading them, so we got used to a drill procedure for doing things in the army, and that's the best we could do. A lot of route marching, a lot of physical activity. All in an effort to build us up physically,
- 29:00 and that was probably one of the most important things that needed to be done. Well I had been, you might say, a desk person so you couldn't say I was physically fit. But there were many young men who had come off farms and they were physically fit. But everybody had to be physically fit, so it was constant. But they were good times at Werribee because we were getting to know each other. Getting to form associations and
- 29:30 getting to know the people that you felt comfortable with, some you didn't, and we all found our slots. We formed into not only the battery that we were but from the battery we were broken down into troops, and from troops into gun crews. So you can see how the evolution comes about. I was lucky enough to be given...I had just turned 20 at that
- 30:00 stage. No, sorry I was still 19. I hadn't turned 20, I was nineteen and a half. And somehow or other I was singled out to be given two stripes. So that was...I don't know how that came about. I've got a rough idea but I don't know for sure what it is, so I can't say. So anyway, I got two stripes even though I was one of the younger ones there. But as I said to one of our officers whom I will see next Thursday
- 30:30 week, tomorrow week. I said to him only recently, "How did you select the suitable candidates for Non Commissioned Officers initially?" He said John...he was an officer at the time, and he said, "John, we were told by our CO that we had to look out for prospective young people who would be able to accept responsibility of
- 31:00 having stripes." And he said, "That's what happened, and then we would recommend certain ones." He said, "They didn't all get them but some did." And apparently that's the way the system worked. They just kept their eyes open and thought, well ok he should be ok, he should be ok. And that's how the stripes were given out. So then we trained like that up till December, the 29th of December, and a week

or so before that we were told

- 31:30 we would be going overseas. On the 29th December at 3 o'clock in the morning we were woken; we packed up all our stuff; we cleaned up the palliasses and got rid of all that; we were on a train around about six forty five at Werribee; and we entrained at Port Melbourne. All of these things were supposed to be secret but the number of people who were around railway gates and railway stations,
- 32:00 there were hundreds of people lining the way. It was incredible, and right through to Spencer Street Station. Most of the guys had written notes hopeful of being able to throw them out the windows which they did. Whether they ever got to where they were going I don't know. Most of them would have been blown under the train and disappeared into thin air. So we got to Flinders Street Station where I remember we were given two
- 32:30 hot pies and a cup of tea because we had had a very early breakfast at Werribee, and then we were...I can't remember the train...I think the train had an engine on the other end and it took us down to Port Melbourne on the same train to Station Pier where the big liner the Mauritania was at the pier. I think it might have been its first trip with troops on board.
- 33:00 I was lucky to get in a cabin for four with original bunks in it, and it was very comfortable. I had a very comfortable trip. It was an exciting day, an exhilarating day, and so much happened that it's hard to recall it all.

**What about your family. Were you able to make contact with them?**

I don't believe I was, we were not supposed to.

- 33:30 They knew we were going away, but we weren't...because we had had, I think it was four days leave, a week or two prior to that and we were allowed to tell them we were going away, but not in any detail. But we didn't know ourselves.

**What did you know?**

From memory we just knew we were going overseas, but not to where to. But we knew on the 29th, or just a day or two before the 29th that we would be moving out, and

- 34:00 we'd be going overseas. That was as much as we knew. And I guess it had to be that way because who knows what spies might have been around. And there were submarines around. We had a submarine after we left Fremantle. We had a submarine which in the middle of the night went through one of our convoys, went through the convoy of about seven ships, if I remember rightly. The Dominion Monarch, the Armateer[?]
- 34:30 the Queen Mary, the Mauritania, and another one or two, but that was just a few of them. But it was necessary that these things be kept as low key as possible. We went a long way towards the Antarctic before we got into Fremantle. We were quite cold and went right down and then turned back up into Fremantle. We spent half a day in Fremantle before then heading
- 35:00 off through the Indian Ocean.

**So how was it different for you being an officer?**

I was a non commissioned officer, I only had two stripes which gave me some responsibility which others, the privates or gunners in the artillery didn't have. I could be in charge of a picket line that might be guards on a guard or whatever. It might

- 35:30 be a night picket where you were patrolling around an area and you'd have to change the picket. The whole six or eight would be on duty at once. You might have part of them sleeping for three hours. It might be one on and three off, that sort of thing. You'd sleep for three hours and then you'd get up and go back on duty again. Or a bombardier or a sergeant could be in charge of that sort of thing. The sergeant had a superior
- 36:00 rank to a bombardier of course.

**But in training, because you got those stripes while you were still at Werribee...**

That's right. So you'd have a responsibility to a group of people at some time doing something or other, yes.

**So what were your areas of responsibility?**

Very, very simple. Perhaps in those days...quite frankly I just can't remember that I must confess. Well I know we had responsibilities. We had responsibilities to make sure

- 36:30 that the men in your troop were on parade when they had to be parading. I remember on one occasion when we were sleeping underneath the stands, we had to parade every morning at six thirty, well one of the responsibilities of a non commissioned officer was to make sure the men were out of their billets and on parade at six thirty. That would have been a part of my job. I remember on one occasion we had a guy who had a guy who was sleeping next to me on the floor of course, sleeping next to me.

- 37:00 His name was...I shouldn't say his name, no. He's dead now anyway. But Jim, I'll call him Jim....he must have had a girlfriend I think in Werribee and he was out every night. He never got home until some ungodly hour in the morning. He shouldn't have been out but he used to just nick off. So he got the name of 'the Owl'. Why would he get the name of the Owl, the Night Owl?
- 37:30 And to get him out of bed in the morning was sheer hell. And I remember on one occasion when he had to be up by six thirty and he wasn't stirring, and as I left to go on parade, I had to go out, I chucked a boot at him and that stirred him and he got out on parade. But you did have those simple responsibilities really. It was a matter of how you carried them out too, how you got on with the men.
- 38:00 So you had to use a bit of psychology at times and not be a dictator but an encourager which was far the better way I found, of getting things done that you wanted done.

**How many men were you responsible for?**

I think there was something like...I don't know the exact number, but it was something like 250 or 300. There were four sergeants, four bombardiers, and four lance bombardiers.

- 38:30 That was the...because when you went to a gun position, a Bofors gun which we were designed to have, you would have a sergeant in charge, a bombardier second in charge, and the lance bombardier was the next one, and a number of other gunners as the crew that serviced the gun with ammunition and all sorts of other things.

**Did you have any reason in wanting to join the anti aircraft?**

- 39:00 No, nothing at all. We didn't even know what we would do. We were just in the recruit receiving depot and we were just waiting to see what was going to happen. It was the first thing to happen. There had been no call for artillery that I can recall, and no call for infantry or any other units and this...probably they didn't do that until after
- 39:30 a certain number had been in camp for a while, and once they had all emptied out they would be bringing new recruits in and they'd start the process all over again. But it just happened that this anti aircraft regiment was being formed and it was the first one that was called for when we were on parade. So we thought, well why not.

**Did you have any idea what it would entail?**

Nothing. No idea at all. Just pure...

- 40:00 that was pure luck...luck? I mean we lost a lot of people, but it was just one of those things you do. Ok, it sounds ok, let's go. Hope for the best.

## Tape 3

- 00:31 Ok. So we left Spencer Street Railway Station down to Port Melbourne where the Mauritania was at the birth, and we were all loaded through the gangplank and up on to the Mauritania. By my records I understand I stepped onto the gangplank at 7:28am, and was escorted to or billeted or put into a cabin
- 01:00 with four berths which was as it was when it was taking passengers. It was very comfortable and we looked forward to having a good visit. Not a visit, but a good trip. You'll have to change that somehow won't you. Ok. On the boat, there were something like 5000 soldiers on the boat.
- 01:30 Different regiments and units of course all heading in the same direction. It was either five or six ships in the convoy including the Queen Mary, which of course couldn't come into Melbourne and that had loaded with troops in Sydney and it was waiting outside the Heads the following day. We anchored off Dromana for the night waiting to go through the Heads when the tide was high the next day.
- 02:00 And we went through pretty early in the morning, together with the other ships, the Dominion Monarch and the Armateer and one or two others. And we picked up the Queen Mary and we headed off south and went pretty low down to the Antarctic and we were told that this would be to avoid any submarines across the Australian Bight. Then we headed north into Fremantle where we anchored there for a day and had a short leave
- 02:30 in the afternoon.

**What was going through your mind when you did embark and how much you knew about what lay ahead?**

No, I don't think...I think the excitement of going onto a ship. I had never been on a ship before. It was interesting to see a ship and be on a ship and to have a trip on a big ship. I don't recollect any real

- 03:00 deep thoughts about it at all except that it was an adventure. No, I think that's about all I could say

about that. We had a quite a good trip over to Colombo. We had a few scares...one or two scares on the way. We were escorted by either one or two destroyers if I remember rightly. They

- 03:30 were out on the sides and they didn't come close to us. But they were vetting the surrounding sea I guess, to watch or hear for any foreign submarines that might be around. We understand that did some manoeuvre at some stage of the game, but we got to Colombo quite ok. There we had a days leave at Colombo. Again it was interesting to see the local population and the way they came
- 04:00 swarming out to the ship in their little boats, calling for money and different things. And the guys would throw money over, the odd coins over the side and the kids would dive down and try to get them out of the water. All exciting stuff to a young fella that had really come from the country. We had a day ashore there and had a look around the bazaars and bought a few trinkets and things. I don't know what's happened to the little tribe of elephants that
- 04:30 I bought, they seem to have disappeared. Maybe they've gone off into the bush again. That was an interesting day, and we saw as much as we could in that day. We then had to transfer from the Mauritania onto an English, or a British troop ship. That was, you might say, not exactly a good experience because although it was a fairly new vessel it hadn't been refitted
- 05:00 for quite some time and our sleeping arrangements were in hammocks over the mess tables. It was...the atmosphere down there was not good, so I together with a number of others, we chose to sleep up on the deck. Take a couple of blankets up on the deck and sleep on the open deck as we were travelling from there through to Haifa, through the Suez Canal. The food was not good either.
- 05:30 The flour I think had been on board the boat for years or whatever, although it wasn't that old. But we were quite thrilled when we got some bread to eat on the [HMS] Devonshire for the first time. It was fresh bread and it looked like grain bread, a grain in it, something new. On close examination we found it to be weevils. So the bread was full of weevils and that's how the flour must have been. But however, we
- 06:00 ate the bread and ate the weevils because we reckoned they had been cooked so they had to be alright. So the best part of the food that was on that particular boat was red covered Edam cheeses. It was like a cricket ball, much bigger than a cricket ball. It was just beautiful cheese and being a cheese lover, the taste was great and put that on the bread you didn't need to worry about the weevils. So we had
- 06:30 probably another few days from Colombo...I can't remember exactly how many days. We had a good trip on that really. It was different. It was exciting again, and we entered the Suez Canal, to see the canal ahead of us. The desert on one side, on the right hand side, and on the left hand side which was Egypt with a certain amount of growth along the
- 07:00 bank with civilisation where on the other side it was just desert. And we sailed through the Canal through to Port Said and then up to Haifa where we disembarked. Then trained to go down to a camp at Hill 95, I think it was, that one near Gaza, down Gaza way where there's a lot of strife at the moment, which is sad to know about.
- 07:30 So there we found that tents had been put up and we moved into the tents and we had little woven cane beds. You might say woven cane about two feet wide and six or seven feet long in each of the tents on which we put our blankets and we slept on those.
- 08:00 The unit was there for not very long really, or some of it wasn't. Within about six days, 8th Battery...do you want to talk about that...

#### **The entire regiment.**

The entire regiment was at this camp. That was all the 900 of us, although there were three batteries in the Regiment. There was 7th Battery, 8th Battery and 9th Battery. I would roughly

- 08:30 say 300 to a battery. And the Battery is divided into troops. And there were three troops in each battery, A, B, C and D in 7th. A, B, C rather in 7th. D, E, F in 8th; G, H, and I in 9th.

#### **Which one were you in?**

I was in originally, but things changed as time went on, but originally I was in Don Troop in 8th Battery.

- 09:00 On parade a few days after we arrived there, five days after, our Battery Major, or it might have been the CO came out on parade and said, "8th Battery has drawn the plum." That were the words he used. "8th Battery you've drawn the plum.
- 09:30 You're going to North Africa to the Western Desert." Great excitement. What are we going to find there because we knew the 6th Division were up there at the time and had been fighting a battle against the Germans to stop them getting into Egypt. So that's all we knew. So immediately we were packed up and taken to a train and we then took this train across the desert
- 10:00 to Kantara which is on the Suez Canal. There was a ferry there that crossed the canal, and we were shipped across there and we got on another train, and we were then...in that train taken to Alexandria

which is a port on the Mediterranean. And delivered to a pier, I suppose you would call it.

10:30 That's where we waited for a freighter to come in and take us up to Tobruk. I don't think we...I think we may have known we were going to Tobruk at that stage. I'm not sure about that but we knew we were heading to the Western Desert anyway.

**And what news were you hearing from the Western Desert?**

Not a lot because we had no newspapers. It was only what was fed to us from the authorities.

11:00 And there were no radios of course, you we were just dependent on what we were told. And I don't recollect that we really knew a great deal except we were going to the Western Desert. I've got a strong feeling that it wasn't until we were on the boat going up to Tobruk that we found out that Tobruk was our destination. We also found out that 6th Division had captured Tobruk and were pushing the enemy further on towards

11:30 Benghazi. So the trip up on the Warsaw, a little Polish vessel was not very big. It had our Battery on board. It had a few other troops, mostly Libyan soldiers. They had no facilities at all on the boat, for the two or three nights, I think it was, that we were on the boat.

12:00 They just sat up on open hatches. They had nowhere else, just with a blanket around them all night. That sort of stuff. We at least were taken to the...a few decks down...not decks, a stairway down, and it was just where a hatch had been over that deck. We had palliasses stretched around those decks. But we discovered there were some hundreds and hundreds of tons of explosives

12:30 right underneath us which wasn't a very pleasant thought. But however, it was much better than walking and we didn't walk on water so we were stuck with it. But there were two or three hatches and we were just all on these hatches. And the atmosphere was absolutely feted. You've got all these bodies in a closed in area, no ventilation, you can imagine what it was like.

13:00 And bodies that hadn't been washed for a day or two as well. That didn't help matters much. My cousin and I chose to find a spot up on a very narrow bit of deck where the officers' cabins and the bridge and so forth were. There was just a narrow passageway down each side of the boat, probably about six or seven feet wide with a rail. So we took our blanket and the palliasse that we had

13:30 up deck and we slept up there the first night. It was pretty good until midnight. We woke up. We were sleeping top and tail because of the gang-way on the side. We must have changed direction during the night and we found that instead of being on the leeward side we were on the windward side. The wind was blowing like billyo and it had started the rain. I put my head out from under the blankets and

14:00 ...we'd been issued with a thick camel hair blanket. They were beautiful blankets for warmth. It was absolutely saturated on the top, it was still right underneath. And Bob, my cousin's was exactly the same, so we thought about it for a minute and decided there was nothing much we could do. So we just pulled our head under the blanket again and stayed there. So we did. But some time, an hour or so later we must have struck heavy seas and maybe just changed direction a little bit again.

14:30 And we shipped to sea over the front of the boat and all the water came rushing down these two gangways on the side. And the first thing we knew we both got lifted in the air a few inches and slammed back down on the deck again. So by the time we put our head again and had a look, everything was just totally saturated. So we decided that the only thing to do was to go down stairs. So we did, leaving our wet palliasse and wet blanket where it was.

15:00 That's no use, forget about that. And we went down stairs. We no sooner got down stairs into this feted atmosphere, Bob who had a weak stomach said...I've got to go up. So he spent the rest of the night over the rail. I was lucky enough not to have to do that. I stood there with him in the fresh air but I must have had a stronger stomach. So that was an eventful night. The next day dawned bright and sunny which was good to see. And

15:30 here's these poor Libyans. They had been sitting up on the open hatch all night. Our blankets had both disappeared and they had obviously gained another blanket. So we thought good luck to them. So we were sunning ourselves off and drying a few bits and pieces and we could smell...where we were we could smell food that was issued to us on that trip.

16:00 We had taken hard rations in our packs. We had the bully beef and some hard biscuits, and that was it. And it was such a cold night that night before that we had been asked if each...I think each two people, would throw in a can of bully beef and they'd heat it up. They heated it up alright. They put all this bully beef in a big copper and topped it up with water, and then we had a pannikin full of watery stew. But still it was warm. But there were no other rations on board.

16:30 Not for the troops anyway. So anyway, this day, the next day, we could smell something beautiful cooking. Bob and I had found a steep little ladder going up beside one of the cabins and we looked up and went up the ladder and found it was the top of the kitchen. The roof of the kitchen. There was a hatch up and we'd been up there sunning and drying ourselves off. We looked down through this hatch. It was about lunch time and the

17:00 cook down there was Polish. He couldn't speak English. But we could see he was cooking meals for the

officers...the crew I suppose, the officers in the crew. So we made sufficient gestures to indicate that it smelt very good and is there any spare? We got the nod to send down your plates, so we sent down our dixies and he filled it up with roast pork, apple sauce and vegetables. And boy, was that a great meal.

- 17:30 I've never forgotten and I'll never forget. So we thanked them as much as we could in language they didn't understand, but I think they knew what we were doing. So that was good. These are some of the nice things that happened in other situations. In that particular boat, the Warsaw, when we went on board initially we checked out the
- 18:00 toilets and if we could have a shower and that sort of thing. And they were absolutely revolting. The toilets were just a structure built off the boat and over the side at the back of the boat. Just a seat with a hole in it, and the sea underneath some 20 or 30 feet down. So all you did there, you sat on the hole and hoped for the best. The wash room was again just terrible, I've never seen
- 18:30 anything like it. It had wooden lattice floor over it. But underneath the lattice there was soap wrapper papers, there was filth, there was hair, there was anything you cared to talk about, was down under that. We had to clean it up before it could even be used, which was pretty disgusting really. But however, you've got to do these things when you've got to do them. So some of the boys got to work and cleaned it up so it made it habitable
- 19:00 anyway, having some ablutions. So that was the Warsaw. We arrived at Tobruk Harbour in the morning, one morning. At that stage of the game the 6th Division had been through Tobruk about 3 weeks before. So all was quiet you might say on the Western Front. So we arrived there and the aldis lamp flicked to the headquarters of the harbour people and nobody knew who we were, what we were and what we wanted to do.
- 19:30 Nobody wanted to own us. So we sat there all day until just about sunset and then we were given permission to come ashore. Lighters, like barges came out and took us all ashore, and then we were told we had a four mile walk to where we were going to camp the night. So it was up gear again and on the shoulders and away we went in the darkness now at this time, being led by somebody to where we were going to camp.
- 20:00 It was to a place called Wadi Odo, four miles from the harbour. And there at Wadi Odo we just threw everything down on the ground when we got there ...I don't know what time it was, into the night anyway. And we just lay down there and had a sleep that night and then looked about in the morning to see where we were. And a wadi, as you probably know, is just a depression which had been a creek or access to the sea. The sea was only down a few hundred yards.
- 20:30 But there was no trees, a few odd scrappy bushes. We spent the next weeks while we got ourselves sorted out and we were told then...of course we had no guns. We had arrived there with I think one odd 303 Lee Enfield for about every six men, or something like that. That wasn't going to do much good to fight a war. So we were told that there was ammunition and anti aircraft guns scattered around the desert that the Italians had left behind,
- 21:00 and to scrounge what we could. See how they worked and that would be it. So out of the 12 gun crews for Bofors we made up 18 of these smaller anti aircraft crews, so we rescued a lot of this equipment from around the desert. Brought them back to Wadi Odo, stripped them down, found out how they worked, cleaned them, found ammunition and tested them out.
- 21:30 And so with the gun drill we had been learning on Vickers guns we had to make up our own gun drill for these because all the rounds were fitted into trays...10 or 12 rounds in a long tray. They were fed in on one side and the empty shell cases were taken out in the tray on the other side. So it was a constant round when you were in action. You had a couple of loaders that were making sure the trays were kept up this way and a couple were taking them.
- 22:00 They couldn't afford to drop them because the gun was traversing around from time to time. If they weren't cleared out of the way you could be tripping over and falling and that wouldn't have been so good. Anyway a few weeks there and then we were told that would be going up to Benghazi where the 6th Division again had pushed the Germans and the Italians, and on the way we left some gun crews at
- 22:30 Barce and some at Derna which were other small ports on the way to Benghazi, which was about, I don't know about 300 or 400 kilometres up along the coast. And the remainder of us went up to Benghazi.

**Sorry, before we go up to Benghazi, can I just ask what impression you had of Tobruk when you landed there. What did you see of the aftermath of the fighting there?**

Oh yes, very much so. There were a lot of burnt out vehicles.

- 23:00 The buildings...it wasn't a big town but a nice little town really. Not that we got the opportunity to see much of it. But the wharf, we could see the church...a typical tall church, white. All the buildings were painted white which made it look quite impressive. But it was a small village and there were nobody much around. I think they had all disappeared somewhere. They had probably been evacuated. There might have been a few around. But just a few people but I didn't get the opportunity

- 23:30 to see much at all, other than go to the hospital on one occasion. But you certainly saw...yes. In the harbour, there were ships sunk in the harbour, some partly submerged, others fully submerged. Pocked marked buildings and certainly many vehicles around that were burnt out. One thing that was interesting was the ingenuity of the Australian troops.
- 24:00 There always had to be a scrounger and no matter what, it was possible for them to get it. At Wadi Odo for the few weeks there, we found out, somebody reported that there was a big food dump put in about a mile across the desert, and it had all sorts of things. I had a look at it and sure enough it was piled high with boxes probably up about 8 or 9 feet high.
- 24:30 There were passage ways all through this big dump and I reckon it must have been at least a kilometre square each way. And it was a dump that had been brought in apparently by the government or the army chiefs. It had been brought in and it had all sorts of stuff there. Stuff for the hospital and a range of things. But the food looked good and we had heard reports of it. But the British Army soldiers were guarding this
- 25:00 dump. They had a permanent guard there, night and day. So that was a bit of problem and nothing happened much there for a day or two. Then we got the message that there was too much stuff being lost from the dump and they were going to change the guards from the British to the Australians. They reckon they would be much better. So that was right down our alley. So our guards would go over. And we'd say now when you get over there
- 25:30 check where the peaches are or the condensed milk or whatever we wanted. And we'll be over tonight. So night would fall and there'd be these shadows disappearing across the desert at night and you'd whistle up a guard and say, "Fred, where's the peaches", or where's this or that, etcetera. And we'd come back with our bags full of good food. Now poor old Harry Reed, he was the
- 26:00 cook in 8th Battery, and at that stage of course, it was communal cooking and he would do the cooking. So when we got this different sort of food, our huts that we were building to live in there, we'd call down to Harry, "Harry, what's on today?" And he'd say, stew or something. We'd say, "See you tomorrow." Poor old Harry was cooking and he must have been throwing half it out I think because we were eating so well. But it didn't last for too long,
- 26:30 of course. Those things never do. But it was an interesting thing. It doesn't take the Australian soldier too long, or many of them to find out the good things about life, even if things are tough. And that happened even in some of the prisoner of war camps, I understand. I was fortunately never in one. So we were at Benghazi and we took up positions there. The town, there was still quite a lot of
- 27:00 people in the town and they applauded the Australians and they were very friendly and very good. They probably did the same to the Germans when the Germans were there. They could go along with whoever was in charge. They were tops. But we had no trouble with the local population although we were told that we must watch out for any lights that were shining at night. And we had permission to shoot the lights if they
- 27:30 were there. And they soon went out if you did too. But my gun position was on one of the harbour moles. It was an artificial harbour with concrete moles that went out and made a square harbour, with an entry at one point. They were built in a L shape with a high bottom on one side and a lower level where the transports could come along and the ships could pull into the lower section. So I had one there for a few weeks.
- 28:00 It wasn't for very long in my case and for three other of our gun crews, but the remainder of our gun crews anyway. There were probably...there must have been about eight around Benghazi. I hadn't been there for very long when it was decided that some anti aircraft defence was needed back at Tobruk at the Al'Adam Aerodrome which was a drome about 20 miles outside Tobruk itself.
- 28:30 So I was sent back with three other guns to come back to Tobruk which we did. So myself and others who did that, missed the Benghazi Handicap as it was called, when a lot of our troops had been sent to Crete and Greece. And the strength of the 6th Divisions was diminished and the Germans pushed again and they pushed back through Benghazi and then eventually our troops came back. A number were
- 29:00 captured and killed of those who were coming back, and Tobruk then became a fortress. And that was around about April, early April of 1941. I can go on from there if you wish?

**Yes, we'll just go back a little way. I was just wondering...you were still using the Italian...**

Yes, all that time.

**What were they called those guns?**

Beretta, 20 millimetre.

**Can you tell**

- 29:30 **us a little bit about the actual scrounging of the Berettas. What that entailed and how you transported them back?**

We had vehicles, there were vehicles there to help us do that. They weren't our own vehicles at that

time because we didn't go into Tobruk with any. But there was the Army Service Corps. They did all sorts of ferrying of food and all sorts of things, and trucks were made available for us to pick up

30:00 the guns. They were not light, but half a dozen men could lift them up onto the back of a truck. So that's how they got back. It was a matter of going around the desert with a truck, and finding them and lifting them up, bringing them back to Wadi Odo, stripping them down and seeing if they were ok or not. Or cannibalising some to fix others and that sort of thing. So that wasn't

30:30 a big effort really. It took a few days to gather them together but over a few days there was quite a lot around so we got all that we needed.

**What other sorts of things were you finding out in the desert?**

The guys picked up various souvenirs where soldiers had left in a hurry and...I didn't go looking for that sort of stuff. I was, as a non commissioned officer I had duties to do. So you didn't have as free a range

31:00 as the other guys who were able to get out on their own sometimes. Just the usual bric-a-brac of war really. A lot of rubbish of course. One particular night that I went over to get some food, coming back we got caught up in the middle of a pretty big air raid and there were a lot of coloured lights around and

31:30 sheltered under the body of a burnt out truck, but they were all over the place. And of course I think...if they broke down and you were in a retreat situation, the same as they were when they were coming back from Benghazi, you either burnt it or you pushed it over the edge of a cliff, because you didn't leave it for the enemy to be able to use later on. You destroyed everything as you went. That's the philosophy of war I guess. A pretty wasteful sort of

32:00 philosophy but that's the way it went.

**So was that the first air raid that you had encountered?**

It would have been one of the early ones because that was just a week or two after...see mostly the Germans were getting defeated at that stage of the game and they didn't have a lot of aircraft available to do what they could have done. And so it wasn't until Rommel [Erwin Rommel German Field Marshal]

32:30 was reinforced and had more air force available that we had the air raids and that didn't happen 'til mid April. About mid April or thereabouts and we had lots and lots of air raids after then. But that would have probably been...yes probably one of the first I reckon. It wasn't close to us. It was over the town but we were just...it was shrapnel and stuff falling on the ground from the bursting shells up in the air.

33:00 The stuff drops down all over the stuff. We heard a few things drop down so we thought we'd get out of the way just in case one happened to find us.

**All the Italian resistance had been mopped up at that stage?**

Yes. Nothing there, no resistance whatsoever. We didn't strike any resistance, my particular gun crew and three other gun crews who had come back to Al'Adam, we didn't strike anything. We had to evacuate Al'Adam very quickly one day

33:30 as the Germans were only a couple of miles away from us, but we got the message and we did evacuate quickly.

**This was ...**

This was before the fortress, before Tobruk became a fortress, yes. It would have been about the beginning of April that would have been, or the end of March.

**Before we get there, if I could get an idea of your general impressions of the people, like the Arabs and the culture**

34:00 **shock you might have encountered when you first arrived in the Middle East?**

It was certainly different I think, as one of our men wrote in his diary at one stage...now I can't think of all the things, I wish I could. I've heard this....if you're on guard and you see an Arab

34:30 approach and he doesn't stop, shoot. If he's got a rifle there was something you did there. In other words, don't trust them, anything could happen. I never struck anybody who was a problem. But we had to be very careful, even in camp when we first arrived with the first rifles that we had. We

35:00 were told never to leave them alone. If you go to sleep at night, sleep with the rifle beside you because they could come into the tent and pinch things. Now whether this is true or all story, who knows, but this is what we were told. They're very good at relieving you of your goods and you wouldn't know they'd been in the place. We did take good care of that sort of stuff and our own possessions. Even though we had guards on during the night you can't have a guard on every six feet,

35:30 and apparently they could move pretty easily and pretty quickly. But personally the Arabs I met in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, were just ordinary people like you and I. But I suppose they felt that had to be alright because they were in an occupied country. Now in Benghazi the locals there....we didn't have a

lot of time with them but we did go into town to buy some bread

36:00 on one occasion, and they couldn't have been nicer to us. So I wouldn't speak disrespectfully of them at all because I didn't experience anything.

**So you were in Benghazi for a couple of weeks?**

Probably three weeks I suppose at the outside, yeah. Then we shipped out probably another three weeks

36:30 before the retreat from Benghazi took place. And that was very difficult for the guys who were in it. There were some Italian or German officers, probably German, dressed in British officer uniforms who at times directed our troops the wrong way. Instead of telling them...because there were MPs [Military Police] and different people directing traffic.

37:00 There was only one road from Benghazi to Tobruk, a bitumen road and a narrow one at that, and some tortuous passes both at Derna and Barce. The waddies were very steep, and very winding sort of roads and some detours were made out into the desert and that was organised by some MP's or some British officers. But there was a couple of places where I understand they were not British, they were Germans directing people

37:30 the wrong way out into the desert where they were captured. We had quite a lot of our unit in our battery captured on that retreat. Some were killed and quite a number taken prisoners of war, largely because of that sort of happening, being directed the wrong way. But a

38:00 lot were saved by one of our WO1 [Warrant Officer], the only one that a unit has. The Chief Warrant Officer. He was with a group of our men and he was told by a supposed English officer to go this way and follow this track. He said, "No I've been told to go this way and that's the way we're going". Those that went that

38:30 way ended up in the bag, in a prisoner of war camp. And he got his men back to Tobruk. So it was a pretty difficult situation. One of my friends who was driving a truck. What had happened, the RASC [Royal Australian Service Corps], the Service Corps, they had petrol at different points along the side of the road, off the road but along the road.

39:00 And the truck that Bill was driving was choc-a-block [full] with gear and people and stuff. He was running out of petrol and came to a dump and said I've got to fill up. And Bill was a big fella, a big farming boy. In fact I expect to see his wife on Thursday at the funeral. Bill himself died 25 years ago with a heart attack. And Bill had been used to handling sheep,

39:30 was off a sheep property, throwing sheep around and pushing them around and doing all sorts of things. A big strong man. He races off the side of the road and picked up two cases...the petrol was in these tins that I talked about, kerosene before. Two tins in each case, just a light deal case. He picks up a case in each arm and ran from the dump back to the car. Now that's adrenaline and strength.

40:00 I couldn't never have done no matter how much adrenaline I had running. But that was reported to me by somebody who was on that truck. So he filled up with the necessary petrol, enough to keep him going. If a truck broke down and couldn't be fixed in a hurry they would just push it off the road or push it over a cliff and either walk or try and get on the next truck that came along. It was not a very good retreat but there was no way they could do it any other way.

40:30 And they got a lot of men back safely and we ended up with about 20,000 men in Tobruk, mostly Australians, the rest were British.

## **Tape 4**

00:33 I think we've got back to Al'Adam haven't we, yes. The Al'Adam aerodrome or whatever you call it. It was built by the Italians as they colonised Libya and it was used by them and then by the Germans when they came into North Africa, and later on when 6th Division pushed them out it was used by the

01:00 allies and that's when we came back to Benghazi, for guns, came back early to Benghazi to give anti aircraft support there. We dug in and we were there for a few weeks. Then one night I had a phone call from our officer to say there were Germans outside the perimeter, not far from Al'Adam. "We're coming in with a truck to pick up your kit bags," and that sort of stuff,

01:30 "And you'll need to be ready and I think you'll need to evacuate Al'Adam." He said, "I'll ring you in the morning". And he did at about five or half past five or something like that. He said, "Pack up. There will be a truck out to pick you up very soon." We raced around and we got ourselves organised with ammunition boxes and the guns ready for the truck. When the truck came he said, "I've got to pick up another gun as well."

02:00 So we had two guns and our ammunition, back packs and ourselves and assorted gear on two trucks

and it was stacked on. It was stacks on the mill I can tell you. Anyway we got back into Tobruk and it turned out that although we were away from the buildings at the airport and didn't know, and it turned out that the air force men who were there evacuated during the night,

02:30 they didn't think to tell us. Not that it mattered because we didn't have a transport anyway, we had to wait for a truck. Then my gun was put on what's called the North Shore, right on the edge of the sea of the harbour. A good spot, a good gun position, it had been there before. It had been there before. A cement floor, good walls and we had good living quarters in a building about 50 or 60 yards away.

03:00 There we spent I think probably another couple of weeks, another week or so anyway. And the other guns were scattered around the harbour also.

#### **This was mainly to protect the shipping lane?**

Yes to protect the ships coming in from dive bombing. We were no good for high level bombing because our range just wasn't there. But our light anti aircraft guns were particularly effective against dive bombing. And it was in Tobruk

03:30 I'm told and believe that it was the first time that light anti aircraft gunners fired all the time that planes were diving at them, or down at them. The reason being it was felt that by continuing to fire as the plane was coming down, could cause the pilot to deflect from his course, and thus the bombs not land where he intended them to land.

04:00 I think that was proven in practice pretty well. And although we didn't fire, that I can recall, at a dive bomber on that particular gun site, we did have some high level bombing. We did let go a few rounds but it was higher level bombing that what I think we would have been effective at. We had...I should go back and say that at least the tracer in the shells, that's the coloured

04:30 tracer that's in the shell would perhaps be seen by the pilots and could cause some consternation that there was a bit more lead up there than he thought. That would be the only deterrent in my mind for a plane that was a bit too high for us. But we did have one night. We were called out and took post on the gun and...but we were bombarded with some very heavy bombs and

05:00 even though there was no damage done, we had a lot of shrapnel that landed all around us. We had one bomb that landed about 15 yards away and created a bit of havoc. But fortunately nobody was injured. So the other signs of war were not good. I went down to the sea one day...it was there I had a swim in the harbour, most days we were there. And that was really wonderful

05:30 after being out in the desert where water was very scarce. Our ration of water in Tobruk during the fortress days was something like a pint a day. That was for everything, washing, cooking and drinking. So it had to be conserved very much, and I'll digress a little here and say that while we're talking about water

06:00 was...my particular way of dealing with that was firstly to put about three quarters of an inch of water in a pannikin. I'd clean my teeth and with that water I'd then shave, and then add to that water...and I'd use a washer, I'd wipe myself all over. We cut our hair short because of the lice and so forth, so we didn't have to worry about combing our hair or washing our hair. We could just drag a wet rag over it.

06:30 That's really how we lived for at least from mid April through to 30th September. Occasionally, very occasionally, I think twice that I can remember, did I get near the sea to have a swim. And the first time it was such a joy that I went in clothes and all and forgot I had my watch on my wrist so that was the end of that. And then

07:00 on, I think, two occasions we might have had a 44 gallon drum of sea water delivered to the gun. But that was stopped because the petrol shortage...all the petrol had to be brought in by ships and it was considered they couldn't afford the petrol to run the trucks to deliver the water around, so that came to a halt. So being by the sea for a few weeks, or whatever it was, it was a joy. The down side though, apart from all the

07:30 ships that were half out the water and were sunk...on which anti aircraft guns were placed, by the way. So they were still used as a base for an anti aircraft gun. It was the deaths...and one morning I went down and here's a German soldier in uniform...well not fully dressed. He was in uniform and I recognised it was German. He was floating in the water, very bloated, and obviously

08:00 whether he had come out of one boats that had been sunk or what, I don't know. But he was in the harbour anyway, had been in the water for quite some time. Very bloated. So I didn't do anything with him. I just anchored him there and rang the authorities, or rang our headquarters and they organised a recovery team to come and pick him up. So he would have been buried in the Tobruk Cemetery. He had his name on him and they were able to identify him.

08:30 But he was again somebody's husband perhaps, or son, certainly somebody's son. And there would be grieving wife or parents or children back wherever he lived. That was the down side that each side had to put up with. But after that, for whatever reason, we were taken away from the North Shore. It was apparently decided we were needed somewhere else in Tobruk.

- 09:00 At that stage Tobruk was a fortress and we were sent out to near a place called Fort Pilastrino. It was an Italian fort. It was only just out of town a bit, a couple of miles. We were perhaps a couple of kilometres away from that. There we experienced our first shelling from the Germans. So it must have been fairly early after it became a fortress.
- 09:30 They were outside. They had artillery outside the front line where our Australian soldiers were. It was then....I'm not too sure if the 6th Div had been withdrawn. I think it might have been 9th Division then. We were placed near some trenches. It was sort of trenches where infantrymen came back from the front line to have a rest.
- 10:00 They would be up there for a week or two then they would come back and have a rest away from the front. Very unnerving as an infantryman on the front line...where they would be penetrating the enemy every night. They would send out patrols to penetrate into the enemy to put them on edge so they didn't try and overtake the front line. So they would come back and have a rest down there. Well we were ... and also artillery were back there too. We gave protection for the artillery against dive bombing
- 10:30 and protecting the infantry people who were having a rest back there. We were there for some time. I remember we were talking to an infantryman this night shortly after we had put the gun position in position, and got ourselves settled in. There was a pop over the other side and then we heard a noise, and myself and another guy who was standing with me,
- 11:00 we went to ground like rabbits into a burrow, into a bit of a depression. He laughed and said, "Don't worry about them. If you can hear them don't worry about them. They've gone over the top so forget about them." You hear the noise after they've gone past. You don't hear it before. You hear the pop the other side but you don't hear the noise after it has arrived. It's gone past by the time you hear that. That was a good lesson to learn. But we didn't...I don't think we had any dive bombing action there that I can
- 11:30 recall, until we were shifted to another position. You don't know why you get shifted to other positions. An order just comes, ok you've got to go to so and so and a truck arrives to pick you up and it takes you somewhere else. It was at that position now I remember. We were in the midst of a dive bombing raid, and that was another thing. I personally, our gun personally brought down a plane
- 12:00 that was dive bombing and it crashed a few hundred yards away. After the action I went over to have a look to see what was what and the remains of a pilot, very badly burnt of course, was lying there. You could identify him quite well. You could see what had happened. And I thought, here again is a young man, probably a young man because most of the dive bomber pilots were young men...like myself with a mother
- 12:30 and father, brother, sisters and maybe a wife if he was old enough to be married...and he's now gone and he was trying to attack us. Well that was the game. So you can't reflect too much on those things, but I acknowledge the fact that war isn't really the way to resolve things and shouldn't ever be. But it doesn't seem though that the war yet had been able to do away with war.
- 13:00 It is still continuing in various parts of the world. I don't think in the end result it achieves anything. However, we were there to do a job and that's what we were there to do. Conditions in the desert were sometimes difficult. Well certainly the water side of it was difficult. And the heat at times was difficult. And I remember in this particular gun site, we
- 13:30 had our gun with sandbags around it to protect us when we were on the job. But for living quarters all we had...somehow or other all we had, we'd scrounged from somewhere a big reddish coloured tarpaulin, or sandy colour really, not red. And we were able to pick up...there were 44 gallon drums all over the place, so we stood some of those up and we put those around
- 14:00 the edges and we put this whole tarpaulin over the drums and that's where we spread our blankets and where we ate and whatever. It was only 44 gallon drum height. I remember lying in there one day. It was the midst of one of those very, very strong dust storms and they had just come out of nowhere. The sand was so fine it was like powder.
- 14:30 It would leak in everywhere. It didn't matter where you were. It didn't matter where you were, it would get everywhere. I remember lying in there and there was nothing happening. Everything just dies. No action, no anything, so you just go down and rest. I was resting in there...we all were, resting in there. Sleeping if you could, if you couldn't sleep you didn't. When I got up, when we moved later in the day, I think it had died down
- 15:00 everything, just everything inside was covered with...like powder. It was in your eyelids, in your ears, everywhere. If you stood it would just drop off you like...in any cavity at all it was there. And I remember my brother-in-law, he wasn't my brother-in-law at that time who was in the 2nd/23rd Infantry Division,
- 15:30 and he was...Infantry Brigade rather...and he was...battalion, I'll get it right in a minute...battalion. And he was in the front line there and was involved in all this infiltrating the enemy every night. He was a very nervous wreck at the end of the war and died too young. He said to me once...their rations used to come up on a truck after dark. And this night they came up and
- 16:00 he and a couple of guys looked in the back of the truck and they could see custard tart with cinnamon

on the top, part of the rations. "Oh, cinnamon tart...cinnamon or something or other, custard, with cinnamon on the top. Great!" And the guy who was driving said, "That's not cinnamon mate, that's sand." So they were quite disappointed. That was the way the sand could get,

16:30 just everywhere. So they were some of the difficult days. And heat was another, and the lack of water was another one, on days like that. Stinking hot days when nothing was happening. I know I and others have been underneath...although...I'll go back a little bit. We had a couple of English guys who were a part of the Royal Army Service Corps, Jeff Debbet and Stan Thirly.

17:00 They were two guys who were the drivers of the truck. I don't know why we had the truck, but we did. So I remember getting under that truck one day, badly dry. We needed a drink of water but we couldn't afford to have anymore. We were under the truck and sucking little stones to make saliva in your mouth. But we survived.

17:30 **Just before John you mentioned bringing down that German plane and seeing the pilot. Was that the first hit that you had?**

That would have been I believe, the first plane we put any metal into, yes. We had many, many engagements after that. My diary would show that.

18:00 I can't remember. But sometimes there were literally dozens of planes in the air at once diving bombing. And usually they would be in threes, a flight of three, and they would pick a particular target and they would come out of the sun. You couldn't see what they were doing or where they were going until they actually came out of the sun. You could hear them up there and you knew they were going to dive somewhere,

18:30 so you had to be watching the sun, and this is the reason that I have cataracts and that's been admitted by the Department of Veteran Affairs. It can cause cataracts. You have to look at the sun and just stare into it, and that's not easy to do, and it's not nice to do and we all know it's not good to do. But that was the only way because there was no point in firing until you could see the shadow of the plane coming out of the sun.

19:00 And that's when you could start to fire. You all had to be ready at the gun trained on the area where you thought it was coming down into the sun and be ready to pick up the direction and the trajectory and so on. And the lead on your...and you had to judge the lead on your ammunition, so the ammunition and plane came together at the same time.

19:30 And usually they would come in threes. And the object of firing as soon as you saw them was to let them know that you were onto them. Keep firing as long as they kept coming. So long as you could keep firing it didn't matter how far they came. But once they let their bombs go I would always say to the guys, go to ground because you couldn't do anything about it after that. But hopefully you had deflected them enough, particularly when

20:00 they were on to you which happened on a few occasions. And the longer you could fire at them and they would deflect, the greater chance you had of survival. And that's how it seemed to work. And a few times when they deliberately targeted my gun, and we did that and we got away with it. I think only about twice in all the firing we did. And you'd fire at other

20:30 planes that had been attacking and if they were leaving something else that they had attacked you'd still fire at them if you had a chance.

**How was your vision. If you were staring into the sun, we all know that that effects your vision for a while. How did you spot them?**

It was very hard, very hard. But you'd get a flicker of a shadow once they started to emerge from the sun. But as you probably realise, tongue in cheek, that we were issued with very good sunglasses, which was our natural eyes.

21:00 No, we managed. We managed somehow. Don't ask how.

**Can I ask...you described very beautifully how the planes came in using the sun. What about on the ground? What was going through people's minds? Was there a system in place and what was each man's role?**

On the gun crew? That's what gun drill was all about. Getting it so implanted in your mind

21:30 that even under pressure you would still do the job that you had to do. There was only one gun layer on the Berretta there. The gun layer sat in the seat directly behind the barrel and the breech. And as the Number One as I would have been in my case, the senior sergeant...or the Non Commissioned Officer on the gun, the only way we could traverse the gun around 360 degrees

22:00 was by holding the seat that the gun layer was in and traversing the gun around by hand. So I had to get the right lead on the plane and tell the gun layer to raise and lower the barrel to get the right angle on the barrel, so it was a coordinated game that we played, the two of us. There were two gun loaders. One would be the one who was actually putting the plate

- 22:30 with twelve rounds of ammunition in it, 20 millimetre. They were about 10 inches long the shells themselves, in the tray. No, they wouldn't be that long sorry. They were about 7 inches long and there about 12 to a tray. And as I say 20 millimetres or just under an inch in diameter. A tray would be fed in this side but it would have to be taken out the other side
- 23:00 by an unloader on the other side. Otherwise you would trip over them if you had to traverse the gun around. So it would be taken and just thrown on the side of the gun pit. So there would be two gun loaders. One would be actually putting them in and picking up a new tray ready to feed in directly after that. The guns could fire 240 rounds per minute. That's a lot of lead going up in the air.
- 23:30 They might only be that long, the lead going up, about 6 inches long at the outside probably. But they could do quite a lot of damage, hitting the right spot and going in so rapidly.

**So back at Werribee you had been using the old Vickers machine gun without ammunition...**

Without live ammunition.

**And then you're in the thick of it here....even though you had been well trained and drilled. How long did it take before you were accustomed**

24:00 **and confident on the real thing?**

I don't know. But we felt confident enough. We had at Wadi Odo when we collected these guns, we took them down to the beach and had practice firing. We didn't have a lot of practice because even though there was a lot of ammunition around, we weren't permitted to waste it.

- 24:30 But we had to try the guns to make sure they were working satisfactorily, and we had to have some knowledge. But just how much we fired with each gun? I don't think it would have been more than perhaps a couple of trays. And one of the biggest problems with the guns was that they jammed for very little things. You'd be half way through an action and suddenly the gun would stop.

- 25:00 Well it was my job as Number One to try and fix the stoppage, and sometimes you could. It might be something in the breech that wasn't quite working properly, or a shell had jammed and by pulling the tray out and the shell out you could go again. But sometimes that was the end of the action for you because the gun would fire and you had to get your artificer out as soon as you could after the action.

**Artificer, sorry?**

- 25:30 He was a gunner. He was really I suppose...what would you call him in civvies life? A man who makes tools, a tool maker. Does that sound like it? Can do fine engineering on tools and things. 'Slicky' Wright. He was our artificer. Slicky Wright, I reckon he came from Fitzroy. He was built like a boxer, he could work like a slave. He cursed like nobody's

- 26:00 business and drunk like a fish. But boy, would he work when a gun wouldn't work. But he wasn't the sort of guy you'd invite home to dinner. Better cut that out. There were all sorts in the army. But when the chips were down that's when the sharp axes got into operation and they really knew what to do.

- 26:30 And Slicky worked hard at his job. But that was a failure with these guns that they ...and I think probably a lot was to do with the number of rounds we were firing and the heat generated in both the breech and the barrel caused a lot of the stoppages. They weren't heavy guns in one sense. Now with the Bofors later on....now, I never had a gun crew with the Bofors. I was promoted

- 27:00 to a troop sergeant and that meant that I was the senior sergeant over four guns. So I never actually manned a gun...I knew how they worked...I would give drill and that sort of stuff, and later on I became a Warrant Officer which was a different role again. So I can only speak from the point...but I don't think they had the same problems with the Bofors which were a more heavily built gun, and more effective

- 27:30 I suppose. Bigger range as well. But we did very well. And we reckoned, the 8th Battery reckoned that they were the cheapest that the government employed for using ammunition that wasn't theirs; guns that weren't theirs; and didn't have to pay for it either. We thought we did ok. And over the period of time in Tobruk, 8th Battery brought down, officially brought down 23 planes, damaging

- 28:00 about 14, badly damaging about 14 others, and wounding about 100...and out of that 100 some could have crashed further away, who knows. It depends on the extent of the damage. So we didn't do too badly with not having had any armament.

**Should have got a pay rise for that.**

Yes, we should have got a pay rise. A dollar a day. A shilling a day rather. I've forgotten what it was now, but it wasn't very much.

28:30 **Can you tell us about the men in the crew in those early stages?**

Yes. When you get a lot of people together like that, you get all sorts of people. Bob my cousin who was on my gun grew for all the time we were in Tobruk. He went off because of sickness once we got to New Guinea. We lost him then.

- 29:00 They didn't always stay the same, the gun crews, for varying reasons. Some would get sick for some reason or other and go to hospital and he'd be replaced by somebody else. But generally speaking, I had one man called Eric Harrower. Eric was an older guy than I. I was the youngest in the gun crew. How that happened I don't know. Eric would have been probably 10 years older than I.
- 29:30 He had been an employee, if I remember rightly, in the railways in some capacity. A nice guy, a good guy, a very argumentative guy. Needed a bit of carefully handling. My cousin Bob, I knew him well enough and he was ok. He'd keep me in control and I could keep him in control. Another guy at one stage who was married
- 30:00 but he also had a lot of girlfriends. An interesting story just comes to my mind. We were at one of these gun positions...I had about four or five gun positions at Tobruk over the months. And he would write to his girlfriend...his wife rather, and I said to him one day, "Why are you using carbon paper?" He said, "I'm writing to my girlfriends at the same time." Apparently
- 30:30 what he did, he wouldn't put the name up top you see. Then he'd go through them all after and put, 'Dear (Wife), whatever his wife's name was, and then the next one! You're not listening to this....? I couldn't believe it. No, we were all different. I'm just trying to think of specifics. I had in one case, it was in the gun position near Fort Pilastrino where we'd been engaged in a pretty heavy
- 31:00 action, and it was early in April. I think it might have been round about the Easter Monday, I think the date was. We had finished the action and we thought to relax for a minute. The planes had all gone, the adrenaline had stopped and you had to start and clean up in case there's another one. I look around and one of my gun unloader's had disappeared and
- 31:30 I said, "Where's 'Pringy'?" Everybody looked around and no sign of Pringy. No sign of him. So I had to write a report on the action and I reported that Pringy had disappeared. Under the pressure...we're all different, and I don't blame him in the slightest. He had cracked it and disappeared. He ended up in Tobruk and was picked up and was shipped out. I never heard what happened to him.
- 32:00 But he couldn't take the pressure that we were under. And I guess there were others like that. But we're all different. I was disappointed for him because he probably would have been disappointed in himself too. But we didn't ever see or hear of him again so, whether he was hospitalised or whether he was put out of the army, I don't know.
- 32:30 But that's just one of the little things that happened on my gun crew. I don't know what happened on other gun crews. As far as the other guys were concerned...they sort of changed around a lot so it's hard to think of specific... But they were all different. They all had their good points and we all had our bad points. I'm no different to anybody else. But we had one of our gun sergeants, he
- 33:00 received a Military Medal and...and he got that because he was seen to do something that we all had to do. As I said before, stand up while an action was in place and the others had gone to ground, and try and clear a stoppage. That was...medals are given out where people are seen to do things. And they're reported and acknowledged as being ok. And that's fine, good luck to them.
- 33:30 In our case, most of us, I don't think there would be any gun, any one of our gun sergeants...I was a bombardier at that stage who didn't have to do that sort of thing. We did it because you knew you had to do it. No other reason but that.

**So that's deemed an act of heroism but it was something that was ...**

Automatic, yes. Just automatic. But that happens. It doesn't matter.

**And you say everybody coped with the pressure in their own ways?**

- 34:00 Yes I had no problem. That was the only time I ever...the gun kept firing. There was no doubt about that. We kept on loading ok, but we didn't realise that Pringy wasn't there. He had disappeared.

**Were there other ways that men copped with the stress? Were their outlets?**

Have a cup of tea after an action. That was about it. We had nothing in Tobruk at all other than

- 34:30 just to be on the gun, and only a couple of times did we get a chance to go down to the sea, and then half a gun crew would go down. Headquarters made up a gun crew of odd bods [odd bodies]. They would leave half a gun crew on a gun crew and put three or four others on the crew from this odd bod range. They'd get a couple of gun crews like that and take the others
- 35:00 down to the beach. But that didn't happen very often because again petrol was a problem, and they were keeping the petrol for the urgent needs of the place. Not for relaxation.

**How did the chain of command work? It sounds like you were acting quite independently, but what were the lines of communication?**

Well we still had our lieutenant who was in charge of us and there was a troop headquarters of probably...there might have been two drivers I think, and a clerk,

- 35:30 the officer and probably there would be a troop sergeant. So there would be probably half a dozen or so

in what would be a troop headquarters. Each gun there in Tobruk...each troop had six guns, not four, and there would be a sergeant or a bombardier in charge of those six guns.

36:00 And the troop headquarters would be responsible for the rations going out to those six guns because we had to cook for ourselves. That was another interesting exercise. So they had responsibility to see that water was distributed. And there was one man who used to come around with a water tank. Like one of those old Murphys. I think they call them Murphys or something or other. It was a tank they could haul along behind a truck. He would dole out...Doug Simpson

36:30 he would dole out to each gun crew...if you had six men on your gun crew and you were due to get a pint of water a day, you got a pint of water. You didn't get a pint and a quarter, you got your pint. He was a great bloke. A very good man for the job. You couldn't twist his arm because that's what you were supposed to get and that's what you got. There was no point in trying to get anymore because it didn't happen. So troop headquarters and the

37:00 lieutenant were in charge and they made sure and everybody were looked after ok. Food got out and water got out and so on. And he would visit occasionally. After an action, each of us who were in charge of a gun, at an appropriate time would make our way somehow to headquarters...we sometimes had a vehicle and sometimes we didn't. We might have had to wait to give a report.

37:30 He would want to know how many rounds we had fired and any particular incident that needed to be reported. They would then go through to Battery Headquarters and I guess filed in someone's dust box somewhere.

**So you were mainly dealing with the Troop Headquarters...a Major...?**

No, he was a lieutenant, and the Major was at Battery Headquarters, then he of course would get all these reports which would end up in his headquarters.

38:00 But we would deal just with our immediate troop lieutenant and he would take it on from there. That's the structure.

**You were just saying before about the cooking being an interesting aspect. What was it about that?**

Well most of us hadn't done any cooking had we? So what would be do? Well most of us ended up by finding an empty ammunition box. They were usually box about so big, steel boxes with a door in the front

38:30 and we turned those into ovens. If you had anything you could cook in an oven then you could. But our rations were pretty basic. There was the likes of blue boiler peas, hard peas that you would buy...I don't know if you can even buy them these days. But they're just hard dried peas and I can remember the first time we cooked...I can't remember where it was now. But we decided we'd have some...

39:00 or one of the guys decided we'd have some peas for dinner this night, and they must have thrown a whole heap of these peas into a round boiler. Before we knew where we were, they had all swelled up with water and they were spilling out over the top of the boiler and there were peas everywhere. But we learned. We got bread occasionally. They used to make bread in Tobruk and if you were lucky you got a little bit of bread every now and again.

39:30 But there was always the army biscuits anyway. We used to break them up and you could make a porridge out of those, or you could make those into a base for something. You name it. I don't remember much about the food, but you got enough, but it was tinned everything. I know we were issued tinned herrings and tomato sauce, and they were British Army stuff. They must have had them for

40:00 breakfast. It was revolting stuff. I couldn't have looked at a tomato and herring...a herring and tomato sauce even now. But I suppose it was food. But fresh fruit and fresh vegetables were non existent. We might have got an orange occasionally I think. And that was the reason we were eventually pulled out of Tobruk before the battle at El Alamein started.

40:30 ' The idea was for the Army to fight a battle from El Alamein and join up with the forces in Tobruk to push the Germans...because the Germans had got up towards El Alamein at that stage. They had reinvigorated themselves and gone back up again towards Egypt, and we were to break out, that's right.

41:00 Break out of Tobruk and join up with those coming down from Egypt. And it was decided that having been on the rations that we were on for so many months...I think that was from April through to September, that our fitness level wasn't good enough to be able to do that. So we didn't think it was any different to what it always was. I guess the authorities knew better.

41:30 So it was decided to relieve the garrison in Tobruk in September and fill it with fresh troops so they would be better able to break out. The whole thing went astray and that's another battle altogether. So I won't go into that. But that was one of the reasons. They thought we mightn't have the get up and go or the energy.

## Tape 5

- 00:32 From near Fort Pilastrino we were then shifted to near another infantry position, another part that actually goes out to the Al'Adam Airport. We were there for some time, but there we were in view of the enemy so we had to dig in there at night. That was ok and it was cooler at night
- 01:00 anyway than digging in the day time. We had to then sleep during the day. It took us a day or so to get in, it was pretty hard and rocky. So we got in there ok, but we had to sort of lay low a bit and not show ourselves too much. That wasn't a very difficult position anyway. We were there I think, mainly because there was a penetration through the
- 01:30 infantry lines at one stage of the game and also our little bit of armour that we had was going out through that way on that occasion. And I remember whilst we were there...I don't think we had much action there as such, but I remember waking up one night and I could hear the rumble of tanks coming in and I thought gripes, have they broken through and are we in their way. Are we going to be squashed. But it turned out to be some of our own tanks that were going out
- 02:00 towards the front line and were going to dig in out there somewhere. So that was a bit of a non event. So I don't think much happened there except we were there. A little bit later than that, our last position was out near a well known feature called the 'Fig Tree'. It was a big fig tree that grew there. I don't know who planted it but it had been there for many years and it had a cave underneath it which was used for a bit of a headquarters of some sort.
- 02:30 We were probably about half a kilometre away from it and we had a gun position there and it was called Happy Valley. It wasn't much of a valley but a bit of a depression. There we got a lot of shelling from the enemy and we could see a lot of shells landing. We had one night...we were anti aircraft protection for an Australian Artillery 25 pounder unit right there and they had had a truck take some of the
- 03:00 soldiers...one of their trucks took some of their men down to the beach this day and they came back with quite a few people in this truck, and unfortunately a stray shell came in at dusk and this was when the Germans used to shell. It was mostly around about dusk. And a shell came in, landed right in the truck and blew them to smithereens. That was one of the unfortunate things that happened. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I had very good views of ...
- 03:30 ...a few hundred yards away of shells falling and seeing three or four men who had come out of a cave in a depression, and I think there was a headquarters over there of some sort where they printed a bit of a newsheet which went around the place every now and again called the Tobruk News. I've got a couple of copies of those in my archives.
- 04:00 The shelling came over this night. I think indiscriminate shelling mainly, not to any particular place, and these guys happened to be walking across. And they were as though...what's the word? Little figures that you dance around on strings...puppets. They were like puppets on strings. I just couldn't believe my eyes. They were getting blown around. Whether they got injured or not I don't know. But just the
- 04:30 explosion and the force of it was blowing them over and blowing them around this way and that. And it was only for about 30 seconds or so while half a dozen shells landed amongst them, they were like puppets on strings. And in that fading evening light...the sun was behind me and I could see them against the background of this low hill. Here they were with the shells exploding and these puppets just flying around all over the place.
- 05:00 It was an incredible scene to see really and something I don't think anybody would see very much. I still remember it very clearly, very clearly. Anyway, from the Fig Tree site, that is where we finished our tour in Tobruk, and we were finally evacuated.
- 05:30 Some soldiers were sent up from Alexandria. They had been on the harbour for about 18 months I think and I think they might have wondered what they had come to. And again, half our gun crew were taken away and we received half of them. We trained them on the gun for a day or so and then we were taken out and they came in. Then we were back nearer Tobruk Harbour
- 06:00 and gathered together at a battery. But whilst that was happening and I was still on our gun crew, another one of those unfortunate accidents where the half of our crew that had been repatriated back to near Wadi Odo again, they were lining up to get a Comfort Fund issue at a tent where this stuff was being handed out. They were queued up and every morning for some time there had been a high level plane fly over Tobruk. It seemed to be just taking
- 06:30 observations. It never did anything, it just flew over. But this morning it flew over and it dropped some bombs. The guys, so used to the bombs being dropped for months there, didn't really take too much notice. They knew they were coming down, but a casual attitude and they didn't do anything about it, and they weren't told to take cover, and one bomb landed right on the tent. We lost a number of our guys that day
- 07:00 that we shouldn't have lost, which is very disappointing. It shouldn't have happened. But it did, like the truck with the 2nd 12th I think, Artillery, 25 pounders, lost in their truck. Just one of those things that shouldn't have happened. It was just one of those things that did.

**You say shouldn't have happened...do you mean they could have taken measures to ...**

Oh, they could have scattered yes.

07:30 And maybe not three or four kills, but maybe one might have been killed. But they obviously hadn't watched the bombs falling down properly. If you watch the bomb or bombs you can usually tell whether they're going to go like this, or whether they're going to go like this to where you are. But you've got to watch them and be careful...that's if they fall in the day time. At night time all you hear is a rotten shriek.

08:00 So that was very sad and I often...not often, but I occasionally think of those guys on the verge of escaping...not escaping, but leaving Tobruk and they were killed. So there we are.

**Was there any...other than the sound of the planes or the whistle of the bombs, was there any other warning or was there**

08:30 **no one forward enough to be able to...**

Not really, no. The noise of the ...the engine noise to start with, and then when the bombs fell you would hear an increasing...because they were designed to do that, to scream as well. It's a fear thing, a fear factor as well. And also it's the guidance things on the back like a round circle with some fins on side and that's to sort of keep the bombs

09:00 on a certain track, if they're going for a certain target. They create a scream with the air going through them at a great rate of knots. The same when you whistle over the top of a bottle, you get a whistling noise. Anyway, from there we all ended up back at the camp and we were there for a day or so, and then we were to board a destroyer one night. And at about nine o'clock at night we were taken to the wharf.

09:30 We got to the wharf about nine o'clock and we all lined up on the wharf. We had to be ready. Dead silence, no smoking, dead silence and we were told the destroyer would be in later on. The destroyers had to run and other small crafts, some with supplies and things for Tobruk had to come up from Alexandria and at certain times they were in range of German and Italian aircraft and could be bombed.

10:00 Just before dark they could be bombed for a certain period. They had to risk a little bit there and some were sunk. And going out of Tobruk they had to leave no later than, I think it was 1 o'clock or something like that, early hours of the morning to be outside the range of the planes when it became daylight because they knew they were safe if they got to a certain distance. It meant they couldn't get into Tobruk

10:30 until about midnight. They had to leave by one I think it was. They had to unload hundred's of tons of stores and load on anything that was going out. It had to be a very quick manoeuvre. It meant split timing in everything that was done. So we were told that this was the case and we had to be very slick with everything we did and obey every instruction we were given.

11:00 And so we didn't realise that the ship was actually in the harbour. It came in...there was a wire net across the harbour to stop submarines. The net was removed apparently, the ship came in and it came up to the harbour and it docked beside us before we even knew it was there. We didn't see or hear a thing. It just suddenly appeared. They Royal Navy my boy, they were magic.

11:30 I couldn't speak more highly about the skill or the dedication of the Royal Navy. They were great guys and more about that shortly. So it pulled in and we just had to wait there patiently for a while because some people had to be taken off. There had to be some hospital patients taken on board first and then there were stores that had to be got off. They were got off one end of the boat.

12:00 Then we went on and within the hour we were away, but we were directed down stairs, into the bowels of the boat where anybody who needed a bed could use the sailors' beds. They gave up their beds for anybody...anybody who was sick or whatever and we were looked after...not that

12:30 they had time, but they treated us very, very well and anything they could do they did. Within an hour we were away and out through the boom gate again. We built up to 45 knots and when we got up in the morning...I don't know if we slept, but when we went out on deck we were allowed to go out on the deck in the morning, we were still racing along at 45 knots. This great white bow coming out the front of the destroyer

13:00 and we didn't have any trouble. I think we must have got out of range anyway. Then we arrived at Alexandria, and got of the destroyer there. That was the HMS Jackal, a British ship. Fantastic. Absolutely fantastic.

**So the replacements in Tobruk were Australian?**

No, they were English troops

13:30 that had been on anti aircraft sites around Alexandria.

**And travelling with you on the Jackal was it just infantry or was it artillery and the works?**

I don't know who else might have been on but I only remember that our unit was on. There wasn't a lot of room and we had...there were a few hundred troops. There must have been the best part of 300 of us.

14:00 Two hundred and fifty anyway.

**And what about the equipment? All the equipment was left there obviously?**

Oh we left it there and the people who came up they took that over. They must have wondered what they had struck. They had been on Bofors at Alexandria and then they came back to these pip squeaks.

**But there had been a chance for you to basically brief them?**

Yes that's right. They were there for enough

14:30 time to be briefed on it. To understand what they were and so forth. It wasn't very long, not more than 24 hours or 36 hours or something like that.

**What was that like leaving Tobruk knowing that there was still work to be done, and you had been there, knew the place...**

We were disappointed. We thought why do we need to be pulled out at this stage. There's still work to be done. But when you're in the services you do what you're told. It doesn't quite work like that today does it. If you don't

15:00 want to go somewhere you say I don't want to go there. So I understand, but that's beside the point. But back to Alexandria and then we hopped on board a train again and we went back to Palestine. Back over the Suez Canal at El Kantara, onto another train on the other side and back into another camp

15:30 that had been set up and ready for us. And some of the other parts of our unit had arrived back there already. 9th Battery had been in Syria and around about Egypt or somewhere or other. They had come back into Palestine. And 7th Battery who had been in Crete and had got badly devastated in Crete, the balance of their Battery had returned. So we got together for the first time in 9 months I suppose.

16:00 Yes, nine months or about. And that was a good time because it gave us a chance to sort ourselves out and certainly have some better food which was encouraging. And also I had a chance to have some leave. I had a couple of days in Jerusalem, a couple of days in Tel Aviv. And it was

16:30 seven days I think in Cairo, we did the sights of the Pyramids and the Sphinx and all the other places where some people would go that shouldn't go.

**What would you mean by that John?**

Oh well, as far as I was concerned. I remember our CO, Major Stokes said

17:00 that when we were going on leave in Cairo, he said...just what were his words now? Dash I've lost them. Anyway he said to be careful. Don't do what your mother told you not to do, or something like that. But most of us investigated to see what it was like...the brothels of Cairo. Boy oh boy, they were terrible. I can tell you that.

17:30 We didn't go alone, we went in a group. We made sure that we were safe. But unfortunately some men are not as careful as others. They ended up at the doctors after a while. But that would happen with all armies I guess. a mix of people and a mix of ideas and a mix of morals as well.

18:00 But it was interesting. Another thing there at Cairo, there were others who went... we had to have \$200 in our pay book before we were allowed to go. So you had to be cashed up in effect. A couple of others who I can think of who went with us in our group. Coming back on the train...we're talking about seeing different things in Cairo. One guy said to me...I said to him, "What did you do?"

18:30 And he said, "I remember getting to Cairo, and I've got a vague recollection of seeing the Pyramids, and now I'm on the train." He was drunk the whole time he was there. He remembers nothing about a visit to Cairo. What a shame. But again we're all different.

**Well in Tobruk, had there been any grog?**

No, virtually

19:00 nil. We might have got a bottle of beer once, or twice only. But that wasn't important. There was so much other stuff that had to be shipped up to Tobruk, in danger, getting it there, and much of what went was sunk anyway. It was a huge task just to get the necessities there without any pleasures. So no that was virtually non existent.

**And you didn't drink?**

No, I didn't

19:30 drink.

**You smoked?**

I was smoking then. I didn't smoke before I joined the army but I did smoke then. There were so many times that you would be sitting around. It would be 'pick up packs'. 'Put down packs, pick up packs'. And each time you'd sit for another half an hour or three quarters of an hour or three hours or whatever, when you were waiting for something to happen. So to while away the time, I started to smoke.

20:00 But then, as I said before, when I got out of the army I gave it away. There was no point, and it was hard to sew. I took up tailoring so it was hard to sew and smoke at the same time, and dangerous as well.

**...perhaps the bit about the padre?**

We didn't see...the padre...the Salvation Army padre in Tobruk. Yes there was one and I think I only saw him once.

20:30 He had a large area to cover and he probably went where he was most needed, but he was very well respected and everybody...in fact the Salvation Army generally were terrific people. There wouldn't be anybody who I know of who wouldn't have admired the work that they do for the servicemen.

21:00 And they still do in the community for that matter. I think only once that I can recall did we actually see him at our outfit. But there were so many little places spread all over the place that you couldn't expect the man to be everywhere at once. It was quite a fair area altogether within the fortress and 20,000 troops. But I think they were a very, very necessary

21:30 part of army life.

**What was your experience with this padre on that one occasion?**

Nothing in particular. But a person who was able to sit around a gun pit and talk to people, man to man, about anything. And I think it's the class of person who takes up that job who needs to have the abilities to converse with anybody at any level.

22:00 Not a lot can do that in my experience. I think of a padre we had in Palestine when we first came back into Palestine from Tobruk. He was an Anglican padre and he was a man who really wasn't able to be one of you. He seemed to be a man who was in his own little world.

22:30 There was no affinity at all with him. Not that he wasn't a well meaning man and did his best, but he didn't relate. Whereas a couple of Salvation Army padres that I had got to...well one other I got to know was at the Werribee camp before we went overseas...Padre Munro. I don't think they call them Padre, but they might do. He

23:00 was just loved by all...but he was at our camp all the time while we were there. He was loved by everybody, even the reprobates in the crowd. I shouldn't say that. They weren't reprobates, just different to others. He really wanted to come away with us but he was man probably in his early 60s at that stage so he wasn't allowed to go away. But this man in Tobruk was equally as good. He always had something in his bag

23:30 or his pocket, writing paper, pencils or something that you needed and didn't have. He was always able to provide something if you needed it. But he was a man you could talk to about anything you wanted to talk about. Not that I had occasion to talk to him about anything in particular. But I do know that he was well respected and well known throughout Tobruk.

**So can you cast your mind back to that actual time**

24:00 **when he came to visit?**

Not really. I just know that it happened.

**So how many people were there in the gun pit?**

I would have had ...it varied a little bit from time to time, but normally around about seven.

**So the padre would...**

He would just sit around and have a yak. He might say a prayer, usually did when he finished up. Other than that you would talk about all sorts of things. No doubt his usual forte ...

24:30 but I don't know, I can't recall what we did on this occasion, but it was probably to leave us a message of some sort, but end up with a prayer and talk about everything in a friendly, humane and natural way. Just to sort of show the flag...that we had his support of whatever we were doing. They were good people.

**So that would be really good for morale wouldn't it?**

Oh yes,

25:00 absolutely. He would just drop in and sit with us in the gun pit. That's what they mostly did....anybody who did that sort of thing because we spent most of our day around the gun, because that's what you were there for. You had to be ready to do whatever you had to do. You couldn't be out digging in the

garden or something like that.

**So what else were you doing in the gun pit apart from smoking and waiting for the planes to come over?**

25:30 Talking. We had to maintain the gun everyday and that meant in the harsh conditions, there was a lot of dust around. That had to be the breech of the gun and in fact the whole gun we used to clean regularly to make sure it was not full of dust and cobwebs and things of that nature. And many times they could be long days if nothing was happening, but ok, you just had to put up with

26:00 that. That was part of the deal. You just had to be ready if something happened...you were ready for it. And all your equipment was ready for it.

**So is that where you wrote your journal? Did you write much of your journal in the gun pit?**

Oh yes, the little diary. And we wrote letters of course. Most of us spent a fair bit of time writing to families and friends and whatever. As a matter of fact I read a bit of my diary

26:30 not so long ago where it said I spent most of the day writing the letters and I had nearly caught up with all the letters I had to write. So that was a job and it was a regular job for all of us. It used to irritate the officers occasionally because they had to censor the letters. And that was a big job for an officer to do. And my cousin Bob, he was a prolific letter writer.

27:00 He could write to his wife every day and write 8 and 10 pages a day. And you couldn't say anything about what we were doing so what he wrote about, don't ask me. And I can remember one of our officers, Wilbur Reed, he was an ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] broadcaster pre-war, and he went across to Western Australia and was a broadcaster over there. He told Bob that he would love him to keep his letters

27:30 a lot shorter. But however, you've got quite a few guys under your control and you're responsible to read all their letters and cut out anything with a razor blade that they considered not right to be sent. A big job.

**Was this your job?**

No, not mine. Our lieutenant, the officer in charge of the troop.

28:00 So there you are. And as far as the Salvation Army padre was concerned, I can't tell you any more than that because I can't specifically get back to the conversation.

**That's ok. I just thought I'd prod.**

That's ok.

**I'm curious about the letters then. If people were writing that prolifically, and like you say they all had to be read and censored. So presumably the**

28:30 **men would be very aware of what they weren't allowed to say?**

Yes we were. I think most of us, or all of us would not intentionally put something in that they thought was really wrong. But I do know that officers did censor them all, but they probably got to know who they didn't have to worry about too much, and whom they had to watch perhaps and got a bit carried away. But that was their responsibility.

29:00 **Yes we've heard stories of people writing in code.**

Yes and that was done by some of them. I know I didn't have a code, that I can recollect. But I do know that some had some sort of code that they would send messages. But what sort of messages, who knows.

**The other thing I'm curious about too, is you said before that**

29:30 **inside the Fortress it was a big area, 20,000 troops, how big was it? Can you describe what it looked like in size and the physical aspects of it?**

Well the coastline, was basically, apart from a few irregularities...you might say it was a straight bit of coastline with the harbour coming in at one section towards one end...

30:00 the eastern end that would have been. Then the line of fortifications that had been built by the Italians some years before, were a semicircle around and up the coast towards Benghazi, right around to east of Tobruk. They were fortified with concrete pill boxes

30:30 and trenches. I don't know why the Italians had built them, but anyway they were there. They were the fortifications. I'm just guessing here at the moment but I could probably tell you. I've got a map out there on the wall of my office which has probably got a scale on it. But that's out there, if you'd like me to have a quick look.

**So we've seen the map but the viewers haven't.**

31:00 **So if you could describe...**

Prisoners of war. Yes there were quite a few prisoners of war in Tobruk who had been taken and they were in the prisoner of war cage. The Italian soldiers were very happy to be prisoners of war and they were very cooperative. In fact in one of the gun crews that I had and in fact I think it was the one down near the cage, the ground there

31:30 was just almost solid rock. It was very hard to dig a gun pit and we were having a struggle to get it in and we needed some extra labour. So our lieutenant arranged for three of the prisoners from the prisoner of war cage to come and give us a hand. They were nice guys. I've got their names out in a note book out in my memorabilia. I can't think of them off hand, but they're there.

32:00 So they came in this day and we were struggling to get a gun pit down. We had to build them of a certain diameter to house the three legs that stabilised the gun. One of them shook his head and said, "No, no, don't do that." They didn't speak English and we didn't speak Italian, but they indicated that they knew a different way. So they got to work and they built a small sandbag

32:30 ...with sandbags, a little mound about 18 inches to 2 feet high, a solid little thing. Then they took the legs off the gun because they could be unbolted. They asked us to get around the base plate and we all held the base plate, we lifted the gun up and across, and underneath the base plate was a big metal spike, like so big. So we had to hold the gun up and we dumped it down on the sand bags

33:00 and that metal spike buried itself in the sand bags. Now that was enough...and the sand bags were a certain width around, so the whole base plate was flat on the sandbag and the spike held the gun stable in the sandbags. And it worked fine and so it meant we didn't have to make the gun pit quite so big because with the legs on it we had to have it big enough to get around...because we had to work and step around over legs. We didn't want to step high over

33:30 legs, so if we could get them out far enough we could step over the smallest part or the lowest part which was on the ground. So they happily set this up and we got the gun pit right, they set it up and we were right. into action. And here's our enemy of such. But their heart was not in fighting. They didn't want to fight. It was Mussolini who wanted that. So that was one sort of little interesting exercise

34:00 with prisoners of war. But we didn't see much of them. But mostly they gave themselves up very, very easily because their heart wasn't it. And that was proven when some of our men became prisoners of war, were in Italy in prisoner of war camps there for a while, and the people were very, very good and helped them in every way they could. On one occasion I know

34:30 there was a guy who was a prisoner of war and he wasn't at all well, and they were going through this town going somewhere else. And this lady looked down at him and saw that he wasn't at all well. She went away and came back and she just let her skirt fall and a nice fat sandwich fell out onto his bed. But she wasn't game to pass it down. But she hid it there and just sort of walked near the bed and just let

35:00 her dress go and it was obviously hidden in the bottom of the dress. That was the sort of thing that some of the Italian people did for many of our POW's [Prisoners of War]....when they had the opportunity.

**So within the fortress in the POW camp, was that just like a holding camp or did the POW's stay there?**

Well I don't know because we were static on our gun positions. We didn't get away from our gun positions so we weren't able to roam around at all. You

35:30 were there and you stayed there until you were relieved. And so...actually our army didn't want to keep them there because they had to be fed. My guess is, as they had the opportunity they would have shipped them out when there was space on any of the boats that were coming in, because feeding them was just another hassle. The food had to come up from Alexandria on a regular basis.

36:00 It wasn't available in Tobruk itself except what could be brought in. The same happened in Tobruk when it first became a fortress. There were many more soldiers, allied soldiers there than there were later...a few months later, because there were too many to keep feeding and to keep water up to and all those sorts of things. And so they cut...I think it was close to 30,000 troops there initially.

36:30 So they closed it down to 20,000, evacuating the others and trying to keep it down to a minimum that could be supplied with food, petrol, with water and whatever was needed to keep the place going to hold the fort really. And that would have applied to prisoners of war. They wouldn't have held them any longer than they could have, it was just wire cage, just wire around. There was nothing

37:00 pretentious about it at all. It was pretty basic.

**So getting supplies in was difficult you were saying?**

Yes it was because it all had to come up from Alexandria. There were small boats that would run the gauntlet quite often. They would go so far by night then they would shelter in a little harbour. If they were in range of aircraft, they would shelter in little bays during the day and

- 37:30 then they would sail on, for however long they could, the next night to another little bay somewhere or other. There was quite a lot of stuff bought up that way in little small crafts really, as well as the navy using the navy boats, and it was navy mostly. There was no, you might say, civilian freighters that came up. They were a no-no. It was all by fast destroyers.
- 38:00 **Ok, I don't know if there's anything else about that. So, let's move on now. So you got orders... this was from February to September you were in there?**
- That's right. Then we came back into Palestine. We came out on the Jackal.
- And how were you feeling by the time you got those instructions, the orders**
- 38:30 **to evacuate? How were you physically and mentally?**
- Well, I felt quite ok. I think most of thought we were quite ok. But it was the authorities that must have decided that because of the diet we had been on, which had been pretty ordinary, we wouldn't have been fit enough or strong enough to make a push out of Tobruk. That was the plan, to push out of Tobruk and meet up with the Alamein people
- 39:00 who were going to come down from Alamein in that battle that was called Battleaxe. So that's why we were withdrawn and put fresh troops in. They would have been more adequate. However things changed dramatically and that didn't happen. The Alamein Battleaxe wasn't won by the allies, and so the Germans did eventually overrun Tobruk and the people who were there. But that wasn't their fault.
- 39:30 We would probably have been overrun if we had stayed there too. They had been able to build up their troops dramatically on what it had been, so it wasn't the fault of the new defenders in Tobruk in my estimation and in reading some of the military stuff. It wasn't the new defenders' fault that it fell again. It was this fact
- 40:00 that the forces were just too great against them, and the Battleaxe thing coming from Alamein collapsed and the Germans defeated the allies there. But they couldn't...the Germans couldn't take it any further than that because they were having trouble of course with the Russian front that had been established, and that was taking troops over there, and a whole range of issues that stopped the Germans
- 40:30 taking it any further into Egypt. They sort of defeated the Australians and the English in that battle and the allies were only just able to hold their own where they were before. So Tobruk eventually fell after that.

## Tape 6

- 00:33 Ok. I think we got to where we were back in Palestine and we were settling in. We had much better food of course there and recreation, and finally...of course the Japanese were in the war at that stage of the game and things were not going too well for the Allies in the Pacific. We didn't hear a lot about those things because without newspapers and without
- 01:00 radio, you only heard what you picked up from rumours and what might have been said by some who got information from different sources. But at that stage the Australian Government decided they wanted Australian soldiers back in Australia or we needed more soldiers in the islands to try and defeat the Japanese who were just rampaging right down through all the Pacific islands
- 01:30 at that time. Java was under threat, so this is why even though the British Government didn't want us to come back to Australia. They wanted us to stay over there. Our Prime Minister at the time, I think it might have been Curtin [John Curtin], insisted that the Australian troops come back to defend this part of the world. That's the next thing we got told...that we would be returning
- 02:00 not necessarily home, but we would be leaving Palestine. We assumed...I don't know if we assumed or we really knew...we didn't know where we were going but we knew we were heading off. With that we had to pack our guns and pack everything up again and by this time by the way we had been issued with some of the Bofors guns that we were supposed to have before we went to Tobruk.
- 02:30 But the other batteries, 7th who went to Crete and 9th Battery who went to Syria, they both had received their guns, but we got ours after we got back from Tobruk. So everything got packed up and away we went and we went over to Suez and in that direction and we...I think it was the port of Suez
- 03:00 where we embarked on a variety of ships. The majority of the battery...no the whole regiment rather, came back on the Andes which was quite a nice liner...not a huge one but a nice liner. The guns were all placed on various freighters. Two on this freighter and two on this freighter, and they were anti aircraft defence on these little freighters. Now they travelled much more slowly
- 03:30 than the liner the Andes. Well I came back on the Andes with the bulk of the troops and others came back on these little freighters. We came back to Adelaide where we were billeted. This is an interesting exercise. When we got to Adelaide we were told we were going to be billeted with private people and so we were. We go onto trams after we disembarked and our particular unit was taken out to a suburb

called Paradise. Sounds good

- 04:00 doesn't it. There we got to the football oval and lined up and the families had been selected or had offered if they could take troops, and many of the places had four soldiers. Some could only take two. We were all told where we were going. We met the people who we were going to. We went there with our packs on our backs and we settled in for about six weeks.
- 04:30 I can only say that the people of Paradise in South Australia on that occasion were just magnificent people and couldn't have looked after us better. Four of us stayed at a little...it had been originally a little hotel. It was the end of the tram line and this little hotel had closed from a hotel and was then a milk bar and a little tiny grocery shop.
- 05:00 The people who ran it, Mr and Mrs Fox were really beautiful people. Mr Fox he bred pigeons. He liked to race pigeons but he also used pigeons...and they used them... with meat rationing and all those sorts of things those days, they used the pigeons for meat as well, from time to time. And there is nothing better than a beautifully roasted pigeon. I can tell you, it was very nice. I'd never tasted one before and I've never had one since.
- 05:30 It's not something you see on a menu anywhere. But there's nothing wrong with a pigeon. The flesh is lovely. And Mrs Fox was a tremendous cook like a lot of ladies are. She provided us with meals fit for a king. I went from I think about twelve and a half stone to thirteen and a quarter stone in no time. I was definitely corpulent.
- 06:00 So that was definitely a very nice six week stay and they we were told that we were needed in Western Australia because of the possible threat of Japanese landings in Western Australia. So we ended up in Perth to start with. But prior to that, just talking about coming back. I had just forgotten this point. We got to Colombo on the way back and
- 06:30 we sat in Colombo Harbour for a week. Now we wondered why we were sitting in Colombo Harbour for a week instead of going home, if that was where we were going. But it appears there was a distinct possibility that we were going to Java because we had all our equipment. But that was on freighters to start with, but in the meantime while we were sitting there in Colombo Harbour, Java fell and the 8th Division virtually suffered badly.
- 07:00 And so it was then decided that instead of going to Java we would return home and eventually go up along the coast of Western Australia. So the Regiment was then spread between Perth and Onslow. Onslow's up beyond Geraldton so it's a fair way up. But 8th Battery of which I was a member, we were lucky enough to draw the plum and we had some of our guns spread around Crawley Bay which is on the Swan River
- 07:30 at Nedlands, not far from the University. And we had some very nice gun sites and some very nice troop headquarters on the river. And there we spent a few months. That Crawley Bay was the seaplane base where the American Catalina seaplanes used as a base and they were going out on 24 hour patrols around
- 08:00 the Coral Sea and other different places doing reconnaissance work and other things as well. They were beautiful old aeroplanes. They would land on the river and it was beautiful to see them come in. They were like pelicans coming in landing. So we really didn't have to do any hard work there. Some of the boys were up with guns where the airport now is in Western Australia and
- 08:30 it was called Guildford. It had been a golf course and they turned some of the fairways into runways, and some of the fighter planes were landing there. A funny story there. We had had such an easy time, or everybody around Perth had had such an easy time for a couple of months that they had got pretty lazy I think, or we all had. I was a Troop Sergeant at that point. I didn't have a gun crew but I was responsible
- 09:00 for the next in line, our lieutenant who was in charge of the troop. But my cousin who was still a gunner on a gun out at Guildford, he told me one day that our major had a red tabbed general or lieutenant general or something or other come, and he was showing this man off his gun positions
- 09:30 you see, and he came around to Bob's gun crew and out of the blue, the CEO [Company Executive Officer], not the CEO, the CO I should say, the CO called out, "Change barrels," because the Bofors came equipped with two barrels and if you were in an action you could only fire so many rounds out of one barrel and then you would have to change the barrel because it would get distorted with the heat. "Change barrels." Well
- 10:00 talk about the confusion. There were two tools that were needed to take the barrel off. One at the breech end and one up at the other end. They couldn't find the tools to start with, so it was a great kafuffle while everyone ran around like WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s [chickens] with their heads cut off looking for these tools. And finally the Black Bess...Black Bess I think it was (or was it Phil Stokes?) ...it doesn't matter,
- 10:30 he turned his back in disgust and walked away. So his little display to the General didn't do him much good. But neither did it do much good to the gunners because they did gun drills...I think it was 8 hours a day for the next three weeks. So they knew exactly what they were doing and how to do it. But these

are some of the little things that happen and that just a matter of getting complacent and thinking everything was right.

11:00 Anyway that was an interesting stay at Perth and there many of our boys...when I say many, quite a number met girls and married girls from Perth and then went and settled there after the war and brought up their families and so on. We then we up to Geraldton and around the airport at Geraldton. Nothing much to tell there because nothing happened. And then down to Pearce Air Base and did the same thing there. The hotel on

11:30 the corner was a problem there. That's another story. Hotels always become a problem.

**Well tell us that story?**

Well the Bullsbrook Hotel was out of bounds. There was a gun position...if the hotel was here there was a gun position at the front gate, and that was just disastrous, particularly for those guys who were on that gun crew. They liked their grog. I happened to be the Troop

12:00 Sergeant over all those four guns and so that made a few problems on my part. But I also had, on my staff, one guy who was a driver, quite a good guy normally. He went on a bender every now and again. He came in one night, it was around about tea time...whether he had been on leave or not I can't recall. But he came in and he was just rip roaring drunk.

12:30 And I thought I've got to get him sobered up or quietened down or something before the Lieutenant sees him. I didn't want him to get into any trouble and he was in trouble enough with me. So if I could save him from any worse trouble then I would. So I thought to myself, what will I do with him? We were all living in a small little cottage and the shower and the laundry were all in together at the back. So I thought ok I'll get him under the shower to start with. He was a bit of a mess. So I thought, well I'm not going to get all my stuff wet, so I stripped

13:00 off to my underpants and I stripped him off and we got under the shower, me holding him as best I could trying to get cold water over him. More of it got over me than him I think. So here we are wrestling with each other. Me trying to hold him up and him trying to fall down. And in walks a reinforcement with his pack on his back, all looking spic and span. He had been dropped off from a truck. I was talking to him on the phone a couple of

13:30 days ago, not about this. But anyway he looks in the laundry door. He could hear a kafuffle, looked in and here's Jim and I with next to nothing on and wet as you could possibly hope to be, and Jim in a real state. Anyway I don't know what Les ever thought of that episode but it was a very good introduction to a new member of the army.

14:00 Ok. So that's gone. It's history. It's one of those little things that happen.

**Why was there a gun position right there?**

Well the aerodrome was right there and it was in a suitable position for an anti aircraft gun to be sighted at. That's the short answer. But it was an inappropriate place certainly. So there you are. The Bullsbrook Pub, it was a beauty. However, that's

14:30 Pearce, then after that we separated again. The regiment as such had virtually disintegrated because we were what are called corps troops. And corps troops can be sent anywhere and can be broken up. They don't have to stay. Like a battalion of infantry stay together as a battalion. But

15:00 we being anti aircraft, we could be dispersed to where we might be wanted. They mightn't want 12 guns in one spot. They might want four there and four over there and four somewhere else. And that's what happened in West Australia. We had four around the Catalina [flying boat] base. We had four up at Guildford and we had another four up at Onslow, I think it was, which is a long way, hundreds of kilometres up the coast.

15:30 There the officer in charge, the senior officer of that troop becomes the commanding officer of that group. And that happened with the other batteries as well. I think eventually we absorbed some of 7th Battery as well.

**So with these other bases, you said you had the Catalina base and Geraldton and Pearce. What sort of planes were there at the different bases?**

16:00 Well, the Catalina is a sea plane at Nedlands, Crawley Bay. Up at the aerodrome at Geraldton it was normal air force planes. They would mostly have been a bomber because they were a bit far away for fighters. But when you further up to Onslow and up that way, they had fighter landing strips. They were closer to the action and fighters could carry enough fuel to get somewhere and do something. It was up there

16:30 that Louis Truscott killed himself, up around Onslow way, coming back from a mission I think it was. Just the general run of air force planes, bombers more particularly out of Geraldton.

**Actually that was something I wanted to ask you about Tobruk, just the types of planes....I don't know, you might have explained this, but it wasn't clear to me.**

17:00 **Just the sorts of planes that were coming over and that you were firing at and recognising?**

Mostly German planes and most of two types, or the sorts that we were firing at. One was the Ju-87 [Junker Stukas Ju-87 dive bomber] which was a bomber, and the other one was a Ju-88 which was more of a low level bomber. There were some other bigger planes...Dornier was one.

17:30 That was a high level bomber but they were out of our range, but the heavy anti aircraft used to engage them. But a lot of...during our period in Tobruk, the Ju-87's which dived out of the sun and were the ones that really were pretty hard to handle. They could manoeuvre well and

18:00 they were the ones that used to make us sit up and take notice, and make the adrenaline flow. And then there were a few little planes. There was a little plane, there was a Henshaw, 'Hatti'e Henshaw we used to call it. It was just a German plane and it was an observation plane and it would fly around gently every now and again doing observation work. I don't know if it ever got shot down or not, I can't recall that. We had nothing much at Tobruk at all. We had about three Hurricanes when Tobruk became a fortress.

18:30 And they did a valiant job. All they could do was shoot up quickly, try and have a look at what was going on, really not engage in any battles, but they would try and go up when there weren't any planes around and have a look at the enemies lines and have a look at what they were doing beyond the perimeter, and then quickly come back and come in. But they finally all got shot down. Just the three of them all went eventually. And there was a little plane called the Lysander which again was a little observation thing. It wasn't a fighting plane.

19:00 It was an observation plane that would whip up and then get back quickly. If it wanted to have a look. So our own planes were non existent really.

**So with the enemies' observation planes, would you fire at them?**

Oh yes, if they came within range, they were fair game. If you can shoot a duck you'll shoot anything else.

19:30 Well we're over in Perth now aren't we, or Western Australia.

**Yes, it's interesting the...**

Yes, something I just overlooked before. So over in the west. Really in the west there was nothing much other than training and you could have long periods of ...what I would have thought was boredom, but I read in the diary sometimes that I had a busy day doing this and doing that, and I can't even remember doing it now.

20:00 There's lots of things you've done in your life that you forget. It just sort of disappears.

**So your time in W.A.[Western Australia] Were you there with the expectation that you would be going into the Pacific?**

We had no idea what we would be doing. You just do at the time what you're told. You don't know whether you're going to be there for a week or a month or a year. There's no forward knowledge as far as the average soldier's concerned.

20:30 The hierarchy might have some ideas but we didn't have any idea. But finally it must have been in...I think I've got the dates over there. It must have been in 1943 then I think, because we must have been in the West for at least 12 months. We eventually ended up in Queensland and a little bit of mucking around in between I think.

21:00 We might have ended up somewhere near Newcastle for a short period of time. For what reason I don't recall, but it was only in a transit camp at Helidon outside Brisbane, at the base of the Toowoomba Ranges there. There again we didn't do anything except a bit of training, that's all. Then we finally ended up going through by train from Brisbane

21:30 to Townsville. That was in the summer time I know because it was stinking hot and dry. And finally after two or three days camping in Townsville, we were put on board a ship and went up to a place called Buna on the coast of New Guinea. It was one end of the Kokoda Track...

22:00 the track across the Owen Stanley Ranges. There we were given positions around the coastline and also at the local airport, the Dobodura Airport. That wasn't near where I was so I didn't see much of the airport but that was just another experience. But there again we didn't suffer any enemy attacks.

22:30 That had stopped by the time we got there. As far as my Battery was concerned, that basically as far as I was concerned was the end of the war because we did nothing after that. 9th Battery were up at Milne Bay and Oro Bay and they did. They were involved in the Battle of Milne Bay. Again that's where the corps troops comes in, you can be here and other parts of the unit can be somewhere else. But New Guinea was a different kettle of fish.

23:00 As I say there was nothing of any consequence to do. We just had to watch out for any armaments that might be about but it had all been cleaned up pretty well by then because the enemy had been out of

Buna for some little while by the time we got there. But it was certainly a different environment to the desert. I wouldn't have much to say there.

23:30 I could give you a pretty fair idea of what the regiment achieved, but that's probably not of great importance to know.

**What were you protecting once you were up there?**

What at Buna? Well as far as we were concerned, where I was it was only on the coast and protecting shipping that might have been out to sea and being attacked, or

24:00 any planes, enemy planes that might have flown over there. And the Dobodura Airport which was a base for our planes. There could have been attacks on that airport so it was a bit of airport security and to stop, if possible any aircraft from bombing or dive bombing or strafing the airport there. That would have been the main thing where I was. But up at Milne Bay they were probably protecting other things. It might have been

24:30 airport, it might have been artillery, I don't know because I wasn't in 9th Battery. So I can only speak of my experience and where I was. And it was the luck of the draw where you go. It was the luck of the draw...we could have gone to Crete and been wiped out. So that's the problem with service life, you can get extremes of action and you can get extremes of nothing happening.

25:00 And that sometimes can get very varying on tempers and contact with one and the other. We spent a lot of time playing cards would you believe it in New Guinea in the tent, because there was nothing else that really had to be done.

**So there was no signs of the enemy?**

No. They had all gone.

**So why were you being kept there?**

25:30 Well the war was still going and I suppose if you leave an area open for attack, the attack might happen and it could be lost. But the tactics of war they're up to other people to decide and the ordinary people like myself are just the pawns in the game. You do what you're told and do as you're told

26:00 and hope for the best. So long as you get fed, that's half the battle. The native population that was still around there, they were very good, they kept to themselves a lot. They still had their village and village life but it must have been severely interrupted by what had been going on.

26:30 We didn't come in contact with them very much. I did go to one of the villages near by...I can't think what the reason was now and I had forgotten about it until now. I don't know if we went there to be entertained or not...might have been. I think one of the pastimes for some of the guys was climbing coconut palms and knocking the coconuts off the top. It was pretty good when they didn't have long pants on and they slid down the trunk

27:00 when they couldn't hold themselves any longer and they would take the skin off the insides of their legs. That was a bit of a worry. But there's nothing much that I can speak about New Guinea personally because I didn't...I was only there for probably two months, and then I was seconded with another sergeant to come down to Randwick Racecourse and do a course. It had been decreed by the powers that be that the 8th Battery of the 2nd/3rd Regiment

27:30 would become an airborne regiment...an airborne battery rather. That means that we would break our guns down, pack them in an aircraft, we'd put parachutes on them and on ourselves and throw them out the plane and jump out after them and put them back together and away we'd go. So the other sergeant was an Australian born of Japanese parents and his parents were largely responsible for the rice growing

28:00 that now occurs...they were the first rice growers up in the Murray region. They had been very well educated Japanese people and came out many years ago, and Tac was born in Australia and he was just as Australian as you and I. And he had great difficulty to be allowed to go to New Guinea because of his complexion and looks. He looked Japanese.

28:30 And it was said, look you can be on guard one night or coming along in the dark and a guard accosts you and sees your face, you're going to be a dead man. And he said, "I know that, but that doesn't worry me. I want to fight for my country." He regarded Australia as his country, why wouldn't he. He was born in Australia, grew up with Australian kids. So finally he won the day and he was allowed to go.

29:00 So he and I were selected to come down and do the course, and by the time we finished the six week course at Randwick, I was very pleased we didn't have to jump out of a plane. They were only that high off the ground so that was fine and we didn't need a parachute. And we passed what ever we had to pass, and we were heading back to go back to New Guinea. And we were told when we got to Brisbane, don't go any further they're coming back to Australia. So sure enough they did eventually come back to Australia.

29:30 We hung around Brisbane for another few weeks until they turned up and then the unit was in camp in Brisbane and I don't know what we did for a while, but there was a lot of boredom there. But I took up

again the studies I had started at Bradshaw and Everett Business College and I was heading towards accountancy by correspondence and that was what I was doing

30:00 with my spare time up to the time that I was discharged. I met my wife in Brisbane during that period and we married. We married right at the end of the war. That's her photograph over there. And so then being married... oh VP [Victory in the Pacific] Day had happened and so the army was starting to be broken up and all married men were given priority to finish up.

30:30 Most of the others who were single were kept in taking down tents and clearing camps and all that sort of stuff it was probably into 1946 before they were discharged. So I was back home again in November 1945. Married in September '45 and it was then a matter of what will John do for a living.

**Was that one of the reasons that you got married**

31:00 **when you did...was that the sort of thing men thought about? As a way of getting out early?**

Not in my case, no. It may have been but I've not heard of that particularly, no. It just happened that I...I had been engaged actually to a lass in Cheltenham here during the war years. I got engaged when I was home on leave on one occasion, and then I broke that off because she decided she

31:30 didn't know whether she wanted to keep it going. I said think about it for a while. So she thought about it for awhile, and didn't do anything about it. So I brought the matter up and brought it to a head and said well look, that's it. Either make up your mind or we're finished. So I was free and I happened to meet Val in Brisbane and liked her very much and we got on well together, and we got engaged. Her father came

32:00 post haste down from North Queensland where he lived to check me out, which I suppose is fairly normal isn't it. And incidentally, very strange but he was a tailor too. My father was a tailor and I eventually became a tailor also. So anyway we were married on the 30th September 1945. We had a nice honeymoon and then we both came down to Melbourne.

32:30 There's quite a bit of time at the end there insofar as New Guinea is concerned that really, apart from being there and doing what we had to do, there was no interaction with enemy. I'll tell you what was done a lot in New Guinea amongst our crew anyway, and that was the making of souvenirs. And that was a big thing in New Guinea...out of toothbrush handles,

33:00 out of shell cases, you name it, anything at all. There were many capable people. There was one man Frank Hands, I'll probably see him tomorrow. Frank was a jeweller and made nice jewellery. And he was right into making things out of all sorts of stuff. But men had to have something to fill in their time. I had things to do mostly because I

33:30 was a sergeant and I had four gun crews that overall I was responsible for. There were rations that had to be delivered because we were still all doing our own cooking. So provisions had to be split up. They'd come in bulk to troop headquarters. I wouldn't deliver it all the time, there would be other people at troop headquarters who would do that (You need a cushion in your back?).

**That's alright.**

34:00 So it was important to have something to do. I went butterfly hunting. I caught quite a lot of nice butterflies and I mounted them. I haven't got them now. The kids destroyed them taking them to show and tell at school and all that sort of things. They were beautiful butterflies. Quite a lot of people collected butterflies and mounted them on cardboard and cotton wool and covered them over with cellophane

34:30 and that sort of thing. You had to do something to fill in your time absolutely.

**I've got a few more questions. One of them is to do with your Australian Japanese friend and how he was received and treated by the other men, and what his experience of being in New Guinea was like. I mean for example was he ever at risk or threatened?**

35:00 No I don't believe so. He was very well accepted in the unit. He was a fine guy. I got to know him quite well in the six weeks that we were down in Randwick. We did quite a few things together. He was never looked up as being inferior or different. He spoke like an Australian, he had no accent of course, no Japanese accent. He only looked Japanese, that's all. No, very well accepted by the guys.

35:30 I can definitely say that.

**When you all went over there and there was obviously other troops there, was there any odd reaction?**

Not to my knowledge no. But Tac wasn't anywhere near me. He was in another troop at that time. So I didn't have daily or even weekly, fortnightly or even monthly contact with him. I only caught up with him again when we went down to Randwick

36:00 for the course. He never ever said anything to me that he had had any problems anywhere, and certainly not amongst our own fellows, he was another one of us. And he was a sergeant, a good fellow, very capable. He died a couple of years ago.

**Because by then the anti Japanese feeling would have been very strong?**

That's quite true.

36:30 And I think that was the concern of the hierarchy who didn't want him to go to New Guinea...in case he was fronted by somebody who thought he was a Japanese in an Australian uniform.

**So did you have any incidence at all...I mean you were going over there half expecting that there would be enemy who you had to defend yourselves against. Was there any incident or anything**

37:00 **that had you on edge?**

Not in New Guinea, no. The only thing that had me on edge was when I had to fly back to Randwick for this course, was flying in an Avro Anson [fighter aircraft] from the Dobodura Airport to Port Moresby. It had to fly through the mountain valleys. So there was a mountain here and a wing tip there and a mountain there and a wing tip here, and ...

37:30 That was the only time. That was the worst part, and sitting on the floor of the plane to get there. That was uncomfortable, probably as uncomfortable as you are at the moment.

**Oh no, slightly more. So in coming back to Port Moresby...was it Port Moresby and then straight back to Australia?**

38:00 We had to stay at Port Moresby for a few days before they could get us on another plane. We stayed in an American camp and the food was absolutely fantastic to what we were used to. There was even ice-cream as I remember. Because the Americans can't do without their ice-cream can they. But I was appalled at the conditions of the tent lines in which we lived. In

38:30 our army you had to do a tent line...pick up all the rubbish regularly. You couldn't throw your rubbish out the tent. Not on your nelly. But everything that the Americans seem to use they just tossed outside the tent. I couldn't believe that any officer would allow the amount of rubbish, any rubbish outside tents as I discovered there.

39:00 It wasn't a regular unit camp. It was a transit camp, I know that. In other words there were itinerant people coming and going all the time, but just the same. I was in one of those in Brisbane waiting for the people to come back from New Guinea. I was...as a sergeant I was given the responsibility of one row of tents and I had to make sure that the people in those tents kept the tent lines clean.

39:30 I had to make sure that if they were going on leave I issued them with a leave pass. I had to make sure that they were back in camp when they should be. Now they weren't anybody to do with our unit, they were just other itinerants like myself, but I had that responsibility being a non commissioned officer and I was given that job to do because I was that, and I made sure it was done. But I've never seen so much rubbish around tent lines as

40:00 I did in Port Moresby. It was terrible. It went against my grain. Maybe I'm too hard a task master, but I don't think so. But that's just a little incident. You can wipe it off the record.

## Tape 7

00:31 Would you like me to read this little page? This is April 14, 1941. It's a Monday. And it's Easter Monday of that year. "At 3 this morning our Lieutenant came around and said a push by Gerry was expected, so we were on our toes. At 6am he came around again and said the push had begun

01:00 and there was a possibility a few tanks may break through. We watched dozens of our tanks go forward. It was a great sight. At 7.15 something we all wanted to see began, an aerial battle. Five Jerries [Germans] came over first and Hurricanes [Hawker Hurricane fighter plane] and ack ack [anti aircraft] fire were into them. More Jerries around and nearly together, one Hurricane and three Junkers

01:30 came down near each other. One Hurricane had first brought down two Jerries when another four came on his tail and he crashed in a steep dive. Other Hurricanes were forced down by two Jerries. After getting one he then flew about 20 feet from the ground from side to side to evade machine gunning.

02:00 While all this was in progress around us and as we had no guns we gave Hepworth a hand in spotting and carting ammo [ammunition] from our position to him. In the midst of it all Bob and I shared a tin of pineapple for breakfast. In the afternoon a Hurricane was shot down and dived into the ground at a terrific speed, bursting into flame and smoke.

02:30 They also bombed the hospital ship in the harbour and damaged it. I don't know if there were any casualties. Altogether 15 Huns were brought down and three Hurricanes." That ended my entry for that particular day.

**So the Hurricanes that were brought down were Allied planes?**

- 03:00 They were fighter planes yes. And they would have been manned by Australian pilots but whether they were Australian planes or British planes, I'm not too sure. But that would have been the last time I think that they flew because if they didn't lose them all that day, there was one left and that was soon despatched also. But they did a great job. Well you could see by the number of German planes,
- 03:30 there was four and there was three and there was something else and just a few Hurricanes doing the best they could against a much stronger foe.

**And why were there so few planes?**

Well America hadn't come into the war at that stage and when they did, they pushed up the number of planes dramatically with their manufacturing knowledge

- 04:00 and ability. Whereas, Britain was fighting the Germans on the front in Europe and all their efforts were expended there and they had nothing much to send across to the Africa region. And that's why we were just so short of planes at the time. The worm turned later when a lot of stuff was produced in the United States and equipment
- 04:30 and machines and aeroplanes and tanks all became much more readily accessible. But that takes time. But just at that moment we had very little in the Middle East.

**So the anti aircraft regiments were absolutely critical?**

Absolutely, absolutely. Very critical indeed. In fact I think without the anti aircraft guns, light and heavy, Tobruk

- 05:00 would have certainly fallen because of the strength of the German Air Force.

**So can you actually recall that day that you just read about?**

I can. Not every item. But I can remember...in my mind, I've always felt that Easter Monday, and that was by accident that I opened up that page. Easter Monday was a very, very busy day as far as attacks on Tobruk were concerned. There are others and I'm sure I'd find

- 05:30 them through here, but that's a typical day when there was a lot of action. And there were quite a number of days like that. There were other days when there might have only been two or three or four planes over. But there were some days when there were droves of them coming over. And they were pretty exhilarating and all the other adjectives that you could think of.

**And this is what you witnessed from the pit?**

- 06:00 Yes, from the gun. It would appear that day that our gun wasn't working because I said here we helped John Hepworth with his ammunition and so forth. And that happened occasionally. Sometimes if the gun packed it up completely, it would have to be taken away. I couldn't repair it on site and they would take it away, take it back to the workshop and bring it back again. Usually it would be no more than a few hours but it happened, we were minus it that day apparently.
- 06:30 Which is a shame. It would have been a good day too...but however. There were other days.

**Ok. So...Could you take your glasses off...no it's alright you were reading about Tobruk so...**

Yes, I couldn't have read it without my glasses.

**So we've just discovered that**

- 07:00 **there was about 3 months after you left Tobruk before you got back to Australia...**

It was a bit more than three months. It was March or something I think when we left. The 17th I think, and we didn't get back to Australia until the last day or late in October anyway. Late September rather. So October, November, December, January, February...at least five months anyway. And that time was occupied with receiving the Bofors guns

- 07:30 that we should have had at the start of the war but were just not available, and learning all about them. Gun drill, pulling them down, putting them together again, series of gun drills. To be able to close it down and hitch it onto the tow bar of the truck or whatever the prime mover was, all with speed. They were built to be a
- 08:00 mobile gun and we had to practice all those things in case we had to move a gun in a hurry, if it wasn't in a hurry. And move it in a hurry. And even out of a pit and all those sort of things needed to be known. So your gun crew worked as a team and they knew exactly what they were going to do all the time. And not like the problem we had in Western Australia where no one knew how to change a barrel. And so a lot of time was taken up in gun drill. A lot of time was taken
- 08:30 up with stores that were required to go with them. That was one of my responsibilities as a ...I think I was made a Troop Sergeant at that stage. Yes I was. So I didn't have a gun as such.

## **Where were you based while you were doing this?**

In Palestine, near Gaza at a camp

- 09:00 There were a lot of camps right along that particular strip of land in Palestine between...I can't think where it would be, but down around the Gaza way. There was a lot of flat country there. There were orange groves and a lot of Jewish settlements around too. We went to a Jewish Kibbutz one day and that was very interesting the way they worked those. Possibly still do...I don't know.
- 09:30 We went to Gaza one day. A much different looking city then to what I see in the paper today with the high rises and things of that nature. It was...my recollections are that it was almost like a mud house city with narrow streets...I guess there must have been some wider ones around somewhere. It was an interesting visit as far as I can recollect. A typical
- 10:00 what I would say, a typical Arab village. Nothing very spectacular about it at all. I was interested in going to some of the bazaars in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem, and watching the weaving of carpets. The making of all sorts of things with very primitive methods
- 10:30 of doing things in many cases. Methods that would have been used in biblical times even. Where people were manufacturing things with little machines that they worked with their feet...like, what would I call them. I'm no technical person am I? Using their feet...not necessarily
- 11:00 a treadle, it might have been just a thing that spun around and they just kept that going. It might have had a little cord that went around something and they'd work it with their toes and it would spin around and that would drive something else, you know. All sorts of things like that. So they were interesting visits. But you don't get a chance to really get to know any local people. You only see them as they
- 11:30 see you when they're talking about trying to sell you something, and they work very hard at doing that. And usually they're asking about four times what it's worth. So if you start half way down the scale and work down from that you'll get somewhere near the right price. And for a fairly country boy I suppose, it was all very exciting and different,
- 12:00 and I think visually uplifting to see what others do as well. And even though they are doing it differently, they're doing it their way, and mostly doing it very well. So I've digressed a little I think from what we were talking about.

### **So let's talk about the Bofors.**

- 12:30 **So they arrived and this is what you trained on but you didn't have any while you were in Tobruk. And then they arrived. Were you given any indication as to when you'd get a chance to use them?**

No, we didn't. We didn't know ever when we came out of Tobruk and came back to Palestine. We didn't know.

- 13:00 The officers might have known but as far as the other ranks were concerned... they've arrived, great we've got our guns! And that was about how it worked. The other batteries of course had had theirs. 7th Battery before they went to Crete and 9th Battery got theirs also. So we were the last of our Regiment to get them. They were a very nice gun. They were originally made in Sweden, and they were later copied and made in Canada, probably under licence I guess.
- 13:30 But they weren't as good as the Swedish guns. The Swedish guns were an excellent finished gun. And I think we got some Swedish guns, but later on when we had to leave them where they were, I think we got Canadian guns that weren't finished anywhere near as well, and we had to do a bit of cleaning up and filing of rough bits and pieces.

### **Otherwise you could have had problems with them in the field?**

- 14:00 Not necessarily problems but the parts that were rough were the parts that were exposed, and perhaps if you were in a rush in an action you could snag yourself on rough spots. I suppose they were producing them as quick as they could, the mechanisms were quite ok, that wasn't a problem. It was just the body of the thing, the transport parts that were a bit on the rough side. We would just go over them with a file and file down the rough spots so they wouldn't damage anybody.
- 14:30 No big deal.

### **So did each crew just have the one gun that they were responsible for?**

Oh yes, that's true. One crew for one gun, that's quite true. But we had to leave our guns from time to time. The ones we brought back from the Middle East and had over in Western Australia. When we left Western Australia we had to leave those in their gun position and they were taken over by another unit that had been formed.

- 15:00 In fact formed with some of our own fellows that were asked to transfer over and start with this new unit. So it meant we started all over again with other guns once we came back over East. I think we were issued with them when we got to Queensland and took those up to New Guinea.

**And you also said you were managing the supplies**

15:30 **as well while you were in Palestine. You talked about one of your other tasks in Palestine. What do you mean by that?**

I don't know about managing supplies, I don't think I used those words. Not in Palestine. We were in camps in Palestine and I was just another sergeant.

16:00 I think I was a sergeant there, if not I was a bombardier anyway. I did have occasion in Perth, our guns were spread around, we would get the rations, or anything that had to go to the guns would come to Troop Headquarters and it was my responsibility to see they got where they had to go, even to the fact that if they delivered a sheep for the four guns to headquarters, I had to cut the sheep up ...nobody else wanted to do it.

16:30 So I had to cut the sheep up. A bit here, a bit there and a bit somewhere else. I'm being silly I guess but I had to make sure that everybody got what they were supposed to get, whether it be food or whether it be something else, ammunition or whatever. It all came through Troop Headquarters and as the senior sergeant there it was my job to see it got dispersed. So if there's nobody else to do it, who does it? I could delegate if there was

17:00 someone there, and sometimes there wasn't and sometimes there was. But really that's about all I could say about that. I had other responsibilities but not in those sorts of things. Packing up...when we packed up to leave Perth. I remember reading somewhere in some of my writings somewhere that I had a very busy time getting all the stores packed up. Now what the stores were now I can't remember.

17:30 But everybody's got to have stores. If you leave your house you've got to have something that has to be packed up to go from here to there, you've got to pack up something. So I guess there was a range of stuff that had to be packed up. So that was one of my responsibilities anyway. The lieutenant would say that's got to be done. So if I had to organise it, I'd either do it myself or get someone to help me or whatever.

18:00 No great deal. It was just part of the job I guess. Like packing up here when you're finished.

**So back to the Middle East and Palestine. What else did you do over there?**

Palestine? We marched a lot I can tell you that...to get fit again. We had lectures on different things I suppose. It would be on the guns. The guns were fitted

18:30 at one stage with a predictor which instead of having...the Bofors had two gun layers. One that raised and lowered the barrel and another one that traversed it around. And then a predictor was made available. It was a square box about the size of a refrigerator I suppose, and lots of little dials and lots of little things you twisted around. And you looked the aeroplane...no, you focused something on the aeroplane

19:00 and gauged its speed and with that you put that in with one and then you would ...there were all sorts of things. But we didn't use them very much, they weren't very satisfactory, they were too slow. So there was a lot of training on those for a while, and in action they proved to be not very satisfactory anyway. So we didn't persevere with those. We didn't take them up to New Guinea.

19:30 Look I don't know. It was...you might say it was a restful time really in between time. We did have route marches and we had lectures and we certainly had gun drill. We had leave. I don't remember much else than that. But the days were reasonable. There was guard duty always and duty around the camp at night and daytime, and somebody was responsible for that.

20:00 The troops would have responsibilities at different times. It was all mapped out and certain non commissioned officers like myself would be responsible for maintaining a guard on say the front gate for four hours. So you had a certain number of men with perhaps two on the gate and another two or three doing other duties around the camp, sentry duties around the camp. The camps weren't enclosed in wire cages or anything like that.

20:30 They were open so you'd have guards posted at different places and they had to be changed every four hours for twenty four hours. So that's six changes during the twenty four hours. And those who were off duty would be sleeping or playing cards or something or other for a while, and then back on duty again. So there were other duties such as that that had to be attended to.

**And the route marches, what was the purpose of those?**

21:00 Fitness, and discipline I guess is another way of putting it. We walked a lot of the tracks around our camps over a period of time. It's all a matter of fitness and in between times it would be...there would be a sports meeting every now and again between our unit and another unit up the way. We'd get together somewhere. It might be athletics. It might be running. It could be a football match and

21:30 things like that. Things to relax the men and take their minds off other things and give them some normalcy, rather than seven days a week just doing the same things. And that worked pretty well really. By the time you had written letters and played cards and did this that and the other. Went over to the canteen, and those that wanted a drink could have a drink at the canteen there.

22:00 There were picture shows of a night. I've forgotten where they had them now...whether it was in the open or in a hut, I can't remember. I think they were in a big hut. It wasn't a big hut because it used to get so full of smoke you couldn't see the screen. So there were activities such as that in camps in Palestine because there was no conflict in Palestine. It was a holding place for soldiers. They would be going somewhere or coming from somewhere.

22:30 Reinforcements coming in ready to fill in vacancies in units where they had lost people through injury or that sort of stuff. So even though it wasn't hectically busy, there was constancy about whatever we were doing, but you had ample recreation time.

**So why do you think your battery got kind of a soft option?**

23:00 **I mean given that you had battalions coming from the Middle East and going straight over to New Guinea and into the Pacific?**

I think they came over earlier. The earlier batch that left the Middle East, I've discovered, a bit earlier than we did, they went straight to Java and they immediately got caught up in the conflict there and most of them ended up...if they weren't killed, then prisoners of war.

23:30 And I think that was the lesson that the authorities, I suppose the generals, were trying to work out. Do we send anymore to that area. And that's how we missed out going because of the loss there. They could see there was no point in sending more troops into that area. They could be decimated in no time. So that was why the option was taken to bring them back to Melbourne

24:00 and protect the west coast of Australia as much as possible because there was a big armoured division in that area too...up Carnarvon way. And anti aircraft was already available. Some of ours went up that way but there was more available to go up if it was necessary. And I think they would have shot some more up from the east if anything had happened.

24:30 But it didn't happen as it occurred. So that sort of fizzled out and the Japanese were starting to fizzle out as well. Even after we left the west and went back to Queensland and up to Port Moresby and Buna, nothing happened there either as far as we were concerned because the war was really starting to go against the Japanese at that stage of the game. The Americans were well and truly into the war.

25:00 Inroads were being made on the Japanese quite severely. So I think the hierarchy could see that that was coming to an end. But they just had to have troops there anyway initially, even though it was running down, they just had to make sure it didn't get to Australia, anymore than it did in Darwin which was a lot more than the average person or us in the army had any idea of. We were led to believe that there was just a few minor attacks on Darwin

25:30 but I think there were over 200 air attacks on Darwin which was never published in the papers.

**So you went on to do some training that was sort of a development in your skills I guess, parachuting. Can you describe exactly what that was? Parachuting out of planes with your guns, dismantling them and so on?**

I can't explain it because I didn't have to do it.

26:00 Thankfully. But the powers that be decided that the 8th Battery would become an airborne battery and so for that reason, as I said before, I had to do this course with Mario Tacasuka at the Randwick Racecourse. It went for six or eight weeks or something like that. Don't ask me what we did in all that time

26:30 but we must have done something because I passed, so whatever I did must have been alright. But we were training to understand the evacuation from an aeroplane in a parachute and pick up our guns and equipment on the ground when hopefully we all got there in the one piece.

27:00 Now I didn't feel too comfortable about this. I don't mind flying in an aeroplane but I had never thought of opening the door and jumping out. That goes against my grain. But however you do what you're told to do. The training involved...they had just a timber mock-up of an aeroplane there with just an open doorway like you'd expect to find. All we did there was to pretend we were loading the plane with a gun

27:30 and we had to learn how to stack it and keep it from flying all over the place if the plane got into trouble. Then eventually when the time came to know at what point to chuck the gun out, the ammunition and whatever else had to go out, and follow out ourselves. But as I say, we never had to put it into practice.

**So were the guns attached**

28:00 **to a parachute?**

Yes, they had to be otherwise they would have been damaged. They had to land reasonably softly anyway because you wouldn't want the barrel to bend or whatever. Oh yes, that had to be done. We didn't even train with proper parachutes. They didn't have them to spare. So it was all mock up sort of stuff. Really in me, I felt it was a pointless

28:30 exercise. I suppose we would have ended up with better knowledge than the ones back in camp. And you just had to work from there with a basic knowledge. You just have to work from there with the real stuff. So anyway that idea was scrapped because they found with the war diminishing they didn't have to think and do that any further. So it really wasn't taken any further. Other than us training, we never got to give that training to our gun crews.

29:00 **But the point of it was because it was difficult to get...**

See there were no roads in New Guinea of any sort and if they needed to put anti aircraft protection somewhere, it would be a very difficult job to get anything...even field guns. Well field guns were dropped out and parachuted out of planes up there. And I think this was an extension of that idea. Roads were non existent and it was raining. If there was a track you'd never get through it anyway. So the logical thing was to drop things in by air.

29:30 So they dropped a lot of food and different things were dropped by air into some of those places. And it was an extension of that. But as it happened it didn't have to happen so be it. I'm still here with my feet on the ground.

**And had it been done before? Was there any sort of precedent?**

Only with 25 pounder artillery guns. Well they're a shorter barrel, heavy set, compact gun, whereas an anti aircraft gun's got a longer barrel

30:00 and a different type of construction. So it was quite satisfactory to drop 25 pounder's out. That worked ok.

**So you never got to jump out...**

Never got to jump out of a plane. I'm not disappointed.

**Ok, well that does bring us up to the point at which**

30:30 **you were told that the war was over.**

Yes it does. Shall I continue with that at the moment? Well I came home and I was discharged. I think it was the 30th November 1945. That gave me about five and a half years in the army. At that stage I had been a Warrant Officer

31:00 for about 18 months, which was the senior Non Commissioned Officer in the Troop. So I was going to go to an officers training school at one stage of the game, but that again was towards the end of the war and it was cancelled. All further courses were cancelled. I've still got all the papers there somewhere. I don't know why I keep them, but they're there.

31:30 So that was fair enough so I didn't have that opportunity. But that's ok.

**Had you thought about making the army a career?**

No never. No never. Some did afterwards. They went ahead for quite some years and signed on for another period of time. Not too many. I think we were pleased to come home and get back to normal things. So anyway I got back to Melbourne and my wife,

32:00 who had been my wife for two months at that stage of the game. So we rented a house...we didn't rent a house actually, we were loaned a house for six or eight weeks. My uncle had lost his wife and he said, "John would you like to mind the house while I'll go away?" So I said fine. So we were there for six weeks, then he came back and said he was going to sell his furniture and he was going to move out and his daughter and her husband were going to move into the house.

32:30 That's fine. For a hundred pounds I bought the bedroom suite, the dining room suite, kitchen furniture, some carpet squares and we rented my cousin's house. We put Uncle Jim's furniture into there and sometime about the end of January or thereabouts, we settled into our own home at Highett which is just adjacent to Cheltenham.

33:00 There we stayed for three years. And meanwhile, getting out on discharge from the army I didn't know what I wanted to do and this was a big question I had just before discharge. I thought well, the army was offering guidance, not counselling but vocational guidance tests. So I thought I'll do one of those and it might tell me a direction. Do I continue with

33:30 and go into accountancy, that profession, or will I go trade wise. So I did this test, and I think I might still have that report in some of my papers there somewhere. After doing the test it was decided that... whoever did the critique, said I would probably be successful in whatever I choose to do. So that was great wasn't it. That left me exactly where I was before.

34:00 So I thought it was up to me to make the decision. So I thought about it and thought I don't think I really want to be an accountant sitting in an office all day. I think I might take up the same trade as my father. Dad by that stage had gone back into the tailoring. He went back into tailoring about 1936 and had his own shop in Cheltenham. So I said to Dad, "If I take up tailoring Dad, what do you think about that?" And he said, "John..."

- 34:30 And I said, "When I'm finished doing it in the city, I could come and join you, if you want me." He said, "That would be nice". But he said, "I only ever have about three months work ahead. What will happen when we catch up?" And I said, "I wouldn't worry about that, let's see what happens." So I started work with a tailor in the city. He had about four staff there making coats and I learnt my trade sitting on a bench about
- 35:00 three feet off the floor, crossed legged as my master did. And I learned tailoring. And it's a comfortable way to learn to sew particularly on heavy garments. You haven't got the garment pulling away from you. You have it laid out nicely around you, particularly if you're making overcoats or tail coats or those bigger garments. So old Harry was my master. He was working for the boss
- 35:30 and I was given to him. He didn't like using a sewing machine. He preferred to do everything by hand. So I had to do all his machine sewing, so very quickly I learned how to put together ordinary suits, dinner suits, tail suits, overcoats, because he made all of those things. A good grounding for me. And he was a very clever and capable hand tailor. Beautiful stitches.
- 36:00 And he was a good critique. He didn't do it but he could almost rap my knuckles if I didn't do what he wanted. So in three years or so that I did that course I qualified as a tailor and received my certificate, and Norm Sol the boss was very pleased. But I said to Norm, "I think I had better leave you Norm." I said, "Your business is not as busy as it used to be, and I don't think you really need me now."
- 36:30 And he said, "That's alright John." I had observed that Norm had become rather accustomed to drinking down at Johnny Connell Hotel down on Flinders Street and he was neglecting his business and the business had gone down hill as far as business was concerned. So I said to Dad, "I'm finishing up at Norm's place, I'll be down in a few weeks." He said, "OK John. I hope we can keep
- 37:00 enough work for you." I said, "Don't worry about it." Well Dad and I eventually took over the business and Dad retired and I kept on with the business and it could have still been...no it wouldn't have been going today because things have changed.

**Can I just ask you a few questions about that? Were there any problems with getting fabrics after the war?**

Yes, a lot of problems. If you

- 37:30 had been a regular buyer of fabrics for years from a certain supplier or different warehouses that sold fabrics, they would give you a quota as it was available to them. So Dad did get a quota. Norm Sol got a quota too. But because...even three years later when I joined Dad, it was still not easy to get and I used to go to the city every day. If you were in the city and they had something special
- 38:00 you could pick up a suit length or two. So I did that every week. I would go in and go to the three warehouses that we dealt with to see if they had anything. "Yes we've got this roll today that's extra, do you want some of that?" If you liked it you'd buy a length and you'd know that somebody...if you felt it was satisfactory, you'd know you'd sell it ok because even the customers knew it was hard to get. But yes it was difficult
- 38:30 but we managed.

**Were you ever short of supply?**

No, we always got it. Even if we had to wait for awhile. We got supplies and satisfied our clients.

**Where was the workshop?**

In Charman Road, Cheltenham, in the main shopping centre. In 1936 Dad...there was a tailor there and he went broke and

- 39:00 Dad said to his sister Daisy, "Daisy there's an opportunity for me. I can go back into business again." But he said, "I need 30 pounds to buy a sewing machine, can you help me?" And Daisy said, "I can help you with 30 pounds Jack, here it is, buy a sewing machine and away you go." Dad still had his shears and different rulers that you needed with scales on. And he had enough knowledge in himself
- 39:30 to be able to cut patterns again. He taught me pattern making and so away we went.

**But your training was in the city?**

Yes, my training was in the city away from Dad.

**Whereabouts in the city?**

In 64 Elizabeth Street, on the first or second floor. I've forgotten now. Either one or two. It was a small business by standards of business but there was one, two, three, four tailors making coats. And you can

- 40:00 make...hand tailoring you can make two and a half coats a week. And he had trousers and vests generally made outside by others, tailoress who specialised in trousers and vests. So with one two three...what did I say? Five of us...well I would have been a bit slower at that stage, so probably about twelve, fourteen suits a week, which was quite a nice little business really.

40:30 **So it must have been good to get out of khaki and army greens?**

It was good, and get your first city suit.

**Did you have a lot of men coming in after the war? Was business good? Was there like a surge of people wanting to come and get their civvies?**

I don't know if you'd say a surge, but I mean we must have had a surge because Dad had enough to keep he and one coathand going. He had a lady coathand working for him. When I joined so that must have meant more were made and we never ran out of work.

41:00 So there must have been an increase in business. But I introduced later on...it was probably in the 50's. I joined Dad at the beginning of '49. I put in men's wear into the store, it was only a small shop, a small amount of men's wear. I put in trousers and sports coats. Ready made sports coats and trousers and I could see there was no men's wear store in Cheltenham, so maybe a men's wear store would be ok.

41:30 But we had to extend the shop to do that. So we extended the shop back and put the tailoring in the back and I turned the front part of the shop into a men's wear showroom. And that grew and that grew, and then later on we did another major extension, as much as we could do on the property. We went upstairs as well as down, as well as extending up stairs, and put the tailoring workroom up stairs. Then in 1973..

## Tape 8

00:31 **We sort of talked about your experiences at war's end coming back to Australia. Can I ask, what do you remember about the actual end of the war? The bomb's in Japan and the surrender as well?**

I remember very well I was in Brisbane on the day that VP was announced.

01:00 It was a great feeling of elation and jubilation that it was the end of it. Obviously there was a lot of cleaning up after that but the war had finished, and my thoughts were, that's great. We'll be home and we'll be doing what we wanted to do and what we should have been doing. Great elation that it was finished and the killing would cease.

01:30 **And were you able to at any time...I guess you were very busy, but were you able to look back on those years and reflect on what they meant to you personally?**

No not specially. I just regarded it as a period of my life that was different. I was lucky that I came home pretty much unscathed. Or unscathed as far as any injury was concerned. I believe my outlook on life had been broadened a lot, and I think that was good.

02:00 I think it stood me in good stead over the years. The opportunity for having responsibility as a bombardier and sergeant and warrant officer. I think that was unsought but was thrust upon me, but I think that that gave me more strength that I would have thought I might have had. So much so that I was confident enough over the years to

02:30 take steps in my business life from the time I started with Dad, right through to when I retired in 1989. At that stage I had a business with over 100 employees, Australia wide and I had a sense of satisfaction. And I believe a lot of that could have come out of the service

03:00 I gave in those five and a half years, and responsibility being thrust upon me at you might say a reasonably early age. Because I did have responsibility for the men who were in my gun crew. If I made the wrong decision at any time that we were in Tobruk and put the men in danger, that was on me. Thank heavens it never had to happen. But I was conscious of those responsibilities

03:30 and I've always been conscious of my responsibilities in the community. I think because of that I've wanted to contribute somewhat to the community and I have done just that over the years. Firstly in certain things in the church, I've accepted my responsibilities there as various officers in the church as necessary. Not in recent

04:00 because others come along to take those places. And that's how it should be. But in more recent years I took on the secretaryship of the Regimental Association. Other's had carried the can before me so it was time for me to do my bit. I'll continue to do that whilst I can. I had the opportunity...I didn't have the opportunity, I was nominated as we talked earlier, to do a voluntary job

04:30 for the community in the cemeteries of this area, and I've done that now for 37 years. I'll keep it going for as long as I can do, and I have no qualms about that. I've taken on other simple jobs such as Secretary and Treasurer of a Garden Club at one stage for about eight or ten years or something like that. Not that I'm any gardener, but at least somebody has to pay the

05:00 bills and do whatever is necessary from a secretarial point of view. But I think I owe a lot of that from perhaps the confidence that I got from my early responsibilities.

**Yes, you said you went from bombardier. You led a crew, up to troop sergeant where you were basically in charge of ...**

Four guns yes.

05:30 **So tell us a bit more about that role because we didn't really go into detail?**

Well it's probably more of an administrative role than anything. And it doesn't matter what you're doing and what organization you're in, there has to be administration from top to bottom otherwise it just doesn't work. And it was a matter of coordination and administration of the gun crews and the troop headquarters.

06:00 I was just another link in the chain of administration. Nothing that I could pinpoint exactly at this stage of the game except that I just had to make sure that everything happened, when it had to happen.

**Were there occasions when you might have had influence up the chain of command rather than passing things down? Even in Tobruk when you were with the crew.**

Well no, no influence there at all

06:30 because you were working so independently really, even though there was a troop headquarters there which you don't see. You see the lieutenant occasionally. No, I don't think so. It was more down than upwards. More down than upwards I would think. Particularly in a role such as in an area of hostility. Maybe in a camp, you could suggest

07:00 things to a lieutenant, but normally they get instructions from higher up anyway, so they sort of come all the way down the chain and I'm getting towards the last link in the chain.

**It's harder for things to go up the chain than down.**

Exactly right.

**Were there not any times in Tobruk for example where you might have realised there was a problem with equipment or morale or something and perhaps a suggestion or a word in the right ear, be it the lieutenant or whoever, might have affected some change?**

07:30 Don't think so no. I can't recall anything like that. I think we all knew that things were so tight and what you had you were lucky to have. Yes I don't think so. In certain circumstances I guess there might have been opportunities of dropping a word in the right ear, but it wouldn't have happened very often

08:00 and nothing is brought to mind.

**When did the term Rats of Tobruk come into play, do you know?**

Well I think it was whilst we were there actually. And it came through from...it might have been Lord Haw Haw [William Joyce - radio propagandist for Germany] think, who was a broadcaster in English. Just who he was I'm not sure. He broadcast for the German people. He broadcast in the name of Lord Haw Haw.

08:30 And it was he I think who termed us the Rats in Tobruk or something like that. They will trap the rats in Tobruk. I'm pretty sure that's where it emanated from.

**While you were in Tobruk had that already been coined, were you aware of the phrase?**

I think we were but I'm not 100% sure. But I have a feeling we were

09:00 because we all lived in holes. I mean there was nowhere else to live. You had to dig yourself a hole. The worst part in the holes was that there was scorpions right through all that country. You'd dig a hole, usually a hole for two and you'd try and get some boards to put over the top and sandbags over the top of that to make it as secure as possible. Just leave an opening to get out. And of course around the edges where it had been cut out there would be loose dirt and rubble and stuff. And in the middle of the night

09:30 you'd hear a bit of rubble fall down around your head and you'd look up and think is that a scorpion that's disturbed it and fallen down with the rubble. Many times we've got the blankets out in the middle of the night and up and out of the hole and shaken the blankets and trying to look around with matches for the scorpions.

**How important was humour in those situations?**

Humour? Well you get a bunch of blokes and there's always humour. It doesn't matter. I mightn't be you,

10:00 it might be the bloke next door. But someone else will always have something funny to say. It was important, but it wasn't sought or particularly done. It just happened. You would always find someone to come out...if you were sitting around for hours waiting for something to happen, someone would come up with something and it would just break everybody up. You know, just those minds that some people

have got. I can't pinpoint anything in particular, but I do remember one occasion

10:30 we were sitting on the pier at Alexandria waiting to get onto this Polish vessel to go up to Tobruk. We had been sitting there for hours and along came an Arab barber and he had a little three legged stool and a bit of material to put around you and cut your hair and that sort of stuff. And he was going around finding guys who wanted their hair cut. One of the guys suddenly sat on his stool and he

11:00 had a beanie on actually, a khaki beanie. 'KO' Bell his name was. He sat on the stool and the guy put a cloth around his neck and KO just lifted his hand up and whipped his hat off his head and he was as bald as a badger. We were all around and we were all bored stiff but we were waiting to see what was going to happen. We all roared with laughter but this poor Arab,

11:30 he wasn't at all pleased. He had been taken for a ride and he couldn't see the funny side of it. It just gave us something to laugh about for a few minutes. There was always humour around that place and it didn't matter how bad things were, someone would say something and call out or do something.

**I notice in the notes there was a story about you throwing a hammer at your cousin or something.**

Don't talk about that.

12:00 Well the latrine and facilities on a gun position in Tobruk and most positions are pretty primitive, but they did supply us with what we called thunder boxes which was a box with a hole in the top and nothing in the bottom of course. So we'd dig a hole and put the thunder box over the hole and sit out there for all to see. Everybody knew what was going on. You didn't have to hide it. But you'd sit there and for some

12:30 reason or other and I don't remember the episode, but Bob and I had had an argument about something and I don't know what it was now. But occasionally tensions got to you and little stupid things would set you off. It never happened to me greatly at all, but to some. But this day Bob and I...we were good mates really, but he must have got my goat and I had gone crook at him for something.

13:00 He went over the thunder box and sat there and he must have been calling out to me, and I must have been calling out to him while he was there and the next minute I got so exasperated I picked up a hammer and chucked it at him. Fortunately I didn't hit him but that was always a bit of a laugh between us later. How your feelings can get away from you at times and in times of tension. But no, tension was there from time to time, certainly.

13:30 But it didn't last for very long. Just irritants. When you're living so close together for so long and not getting any break at all, seven days a week, twenty four hours a day, it could go on for weeks and not even leave the gun position. You can understand it did happen. But it was never a major issue as far as I was concerned or my gun crew was concerned.

**Yes I can totally understand that, but how else might it exhibit itself?**

14:00 I never heard of anybody, amongst our own members, having a fight about it. You don't know what goes on in the next gun crew. So I can't answer that one for you.

**Was there any competition between the crews?**

None at all. We worked as...whoever got the best results we all congratulated them.

14:30 Never any competition. Never thought about it. We were just there to do a job and we all did it the best we could.

**You spoke a bit earlier John, I think it was the first time your crew had shot down a plane and your feelings about seeing the burnt pilot and so on. What was your general opinion of the enemy, the German pilots that you were fighting and what they were doing?**

They were good pilots. The German Army guys were

15:00 good. Rommel their General was an excellent General. Abided by the Geneva Convention to the letter and I couldn't speak more highly, as far as I know...I didn't have personal experience, but talking to some of the prisoners of war who were taken prisoner in the desert. I can't speak about when they got to camps in Germany and Poland under the SS [Schutzstaffel - 'protection squad'; Nazi paramilitary organisation], that's a

15:30 different story. But the Africa Corps who Rommel was the boss, they were excellent soldiers; they abided by the letter of the law, and they gave our soldiers as prisoners of war as much help as they possibly could, as we did to them, and the Italians of course too. It was one of the good things that comes out of

16:00 war, that there was a standard in those days of proper behaviour, and many of the enemy and ourselves upheld that. But I think on the bad side of it, on both sides I think there were people who didn't, and I think that probably applies to the Allies as well. That not all were as good as they could have been. But no, in Tobruk I never heard a word.

16:30 And the airmen were very brave airmen. There was no doubt about it, what I saw they really did their job well. They were out to get us, and they tried hard to do that. So, I think excellent. The Italians were a different kettle of fish. They didn't want to be in the war so they were quite happy to throw their hands up at the point of being captured. I think one man walked amongst a group on one occasion and just told them they were surrounded and that they

17:00 were prisoners of war, and they just said, ok. They could have stampeded over the top of them. So they were quite happy to be captured and not be involved in the war anymore.

**I just noticed that flicking through the book that there were a number of Polish soldiers who came in. Did you come into contact with them?**

No, I didn't particularly. But I know there were Polish people there.

17:30 But I was rather amazed. I think it was about two years ago, that I received in the post a medal from Parliament, with my name engraved on it and all the rest of it. There was, through the Polish Consul here I believe, medals were set out from Poland to be presented to Australian soldiers. I wasn't called to a meeting

18:00 about that for some reason or other. I don't know why, but it didn't matter anyway. But mine was, eventually got to me by post. I think it was by post. And a very beautiful medal it was too. I think they must have tried to get hold of names of Australian soldiers who served in Tobruk at the same time as their soldiers did. That's all I can think of. I haven't been able to get any better information than that....

18:30 I did hear that the Poles had run out of money to make anymore, so they decided they'd call it quits. But I just don't really understand why any should have been sent out to Australian soldiers anyway. But some of them did work together in certain areas in Tobruk. But they were good soldiers from what I understand.

19:00 **Do you remember if you were still there on the anniversary of the invasion of Poland. I notice again in the book that there was supposedly a big raid on that anniversary in early September.**

Look I don't remember that at all. I don't remember. I'd have to read that up again. I haven't read that through for quite some years, and I forget little bits and pieces particularly if you haven't been involved in it yourself.

19:30 My bad memory.

**What about the Aussie infantrymen. You did mention a bit before.**

Fantastic, fantastic, the best. No doubt about it, the best. The things that they did were just marvellous really, and I would put their work on the front line in penetrating

20:00 the enemy, through mine fields and getting their way back in, very often unhurt and even sometimes with prisoners, very edge of the nerve stuff. They did magnificently, magnificently. For a bunch of guys who were

20:30 ordinary guys before they started off, but well trained. Like the SAS [Special Air Service]. I mean they've got some wonderful raps at the moment for work that they've done over in Afghanistan and in Iraq. I think our infantry soldiers, 60 odd years ago were equally as good. They were not armed like they are today, but yes, I couldn't speak more highly of them.

21:00 They were great.

**And have you any idea of what their opinion was of you guys?**

No, haven't any idea. Haven't heard. I hope they didn't say that all the did was drop spent shells on them. No, I don't know Colin [interviewer].

**Obviously the siege of Tobruk has gone down in Australian history, and I guess in the history of the war as such a major event**

21:30 **in that you were able to hold back the Germans for such a long period of time. And that hadn't happened before?**

Yes that's quite right. By holding them back it meant we tied up a lot of German forces in Africa that were badly needed in other parts of the world, particularly Europe and Russia, and that was probably the biggest factor, in that

22:00 we tied up a lot of German troops who just had to stay there because we were there and that was a plus for the war overall, I think. Not only the fact that we held Tobruk as a fortress but that we tied up so many Germans. And the amount of shipping that we were able to sink as they were trying to get stuff across the Mediterranean,

22:30 there to keep them supplied with all sorts of things. Well they had to be all supplied from Europe. With food, with extra ammunition, with whatever was needed, and to keep a force...I don't know how big a force they had there, but it must have been quite a few thousand. Many thousands and again the

logistics of all that food, petrol, water and all the rest of it that would have had to have been brought across. And the amount of shipping

23:00 was absolutely tremendous I believe. And all that I think helped to shorten the war in Europe.

**What were the keys to the holding of Tobruk for so long?**

The keys I think were the...yeah, I'd say for sure was the strong performance by the infantry on the front

23:30 line, and if they had been prepared to just stay in the trenches in the fortifications and repel anything that came at them, and forget about any penetration, I think we could have been overrun. But the idea was...and I don't know whose idea it was, probably one of the generals. It might have been Wavell who was the general at the time, was to,

24:00 if we kept probing out into the enemy, you were keeping them on edge all the time, and you take the Indians, the Sikhs and the Ghurkhas, they were like wraiths in the night. And they would go out, and the story was, true or not I don't know, but once they took their dirk or dagger. Dagger of some sort, whatever they called it in the Sheik or Ghurkha language,

24:30 they didn't put it away until it drew blood. And so they'd go through the line like wraiths in the night. They were clever soldiers. And they could surround a gun emplacement out in the German territory, or it might be Italians, or might be Germans, and they could knock them all off and come back in through the lines and the Germans wouldn't have even known they had been there until the next day.

25:00 And this was the way in which the enemy was kept on edge all the time. And that was regularly done. And the risks that the infantrymen took were not slight because the Germans had planted and continued to plant landmines all out the front wherever they could. So it was a matter of finding a track through those landmines

25:30 without blowing themselves up. And in the dark they had to know how to find their way back to their own trenches too. So they had to lay lines. As they went they'd take a string line out with them and lay it as they go along, and then as they finished what they did out there they'd find the string again and follow that back knowing it was a safe way back into the trenches. Nail biting stuff really and I think that that saved

26:00 or strengthened the Allies' hold on Tobruk. It prevented the Germans taking action and feeling confident about it.

**We've already discussed how vital the anti aircraft regiment was. I want to get an idea of how...I mean it must have been incredibly difficult 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by your guns practically,**

26:30 **how does the body and mind cope with that for 5 or 6 months straight?**

Interesting question. I had never thought about that. But it did. Maybe because we're so very adaptable. We must be adaptable. And again of course we're all young. I think as young people...are you still young Colin? Say yes.

27:00 When you're young you can do incredible things really. You can go all night and not bother having any sleep. You can spend a couple of nights without really going to bed and you'll survive. When you're my age, unless you go to bed about half past eight, nine o'clock...that's not strictly true. But you find you just can't exist. And I think the body is so resilient when you're young. And also when you're in a situation like we were

27:30 in Tobruk, there were days when nothing happened, particularly later in the months that we were there because the enemy were busily tied up in other places and really all they were doing was maintaining a presence outside the fortress. So there wasn't the same activity as in those first couple of months, April and May. They were very busy months. And even though we might have been stuck on the months mostly, we had time when we could lie down and have a sleep during the day

28:00 or maybe if there was nothing much happening at night you would sleep all night. I mean have a few sentries on so a few of us would get up during the night and be awake in those cold desert nights and my word, they were cold. Even if the days were hot. I've stood on guard in Tobruk of a night. Full sleeve dress on, overcoat,

28:30 balaclava, a leather jerkin over the overcoat...not sleeves in it but over the body. And I don't know if I had gloves, I'm not too sure about that, and still cold. Still cold. In the morning, almost from day break it starts to get hot straight away. But just those cold desert nights that you get in inland, even in inland Australia. Real cold night.

29:00 But ok you dress for it and that's it. But we coped with it alright. I was never conscious... I mean it would have been nice to have been doing other things certainly. You think of what else you'd like to be doing. I'm sure you did. But you know you're there for a purpose, so you're there and you just do it. Is that one from Nike, just do it.

**You have sort**

- 29:30 **of described what it was like to be in action. Now I'm just wondering if you could describe for us one of the more hair raising confrontations. You described the first time you shot down a plane, but perhaps there was a time when there was just a real buzz of activities, when maybe there were more planes than normal?**
- 30:00 I don't think I can. I probably could have if I had been in that retreat from Benghazi. There were some hair raising things in that which I didn't take part in. There were many actions when the adrenaline flowed very strongly over those two months of April and May.
- 30:30 When planes are dive bombing at you and you could see bombs drop from underneath their wings, and you know the bombs are going to land very close but you have to keep firing to try and deflect them before they release their bombs. Once they release them we would continue to fire when they swung away, then we would go to ground when we could see the bombs were about to hit the ground near us. That was a sensible thing to do.
- 31:00 But what you're saying exactly, no. I was possibly, with a few of the others in the unit lucky not to have those really confronting experiences, such as you mention. And probably about, there were about four gun crews that I can mention. That was John Hepworth's, and Ron Bryant's and my own, and Jack Whittle's who just
- 31:30 by luck were some who missed that rather horrific stuff on the way back from Benghazi to Tobruk because that was pretty rough. So I don't think I can answer that any better.
- I'm just wondering if there was anything more at Tobruk. I've got a couple of questions about New Guinea as well.**
- 32:00 **I'll just check my notes. I've got a note here as well about the English. Now I might be incorrect here, but I've got a note that the English took over the administration at some point, was that the case?**
- Well they must have done, or they could have done. When we left most of the Australians were evacuated from there at about that time and so possibly it went over into English
- 32:30 control. But I'm not too sure of that.
- So you were saying before. Most of the men there were Aussie's...**
- Yes they were. About 15,000 out of the 20,000 were Australian.
- So otherwise it was English and ...**
- Yes and a few Polish and some Ghurkhas and Sikhs. But they weren't big numbers. They would have comprised....I think most of the artillery, not all, but most of the artillery that was there
- 33:00 was Royal Horse Artillery, English Regiments. And also the heavy anti aircraft were British as well. So they would have been a section of those 5,000. And a good section of that 5000. There were Polish people who I think were infantry, and the Ghurkhas and Sikhs were infantry as well.
- 33:30 When they left I don't know.
- But it sounds like you wouldn't have had much to do with them?**
- No. Because we were isolated out on the desert really and we were a mile or two...well it varied, but we might have been a mile or two back from the Front, or two miles back from the Front, or three miles sometimes. You were out there on a patch of dirt all on your own. There might be artillery...when we had the guns near the artillery
- 34:00 we were always away from. We weren't bunched up with them. We were away where we could overlook them. So if anything was diving on them we could get some good visibility at them. They weren't diving straight at us as well. We used to communicate quite a lot with the guys. In my diary I know there's notes about visits from the English...whatever it would be, the infantry or artillery I should say. And we had a good old talk, or sang a song or played
- 34:30 cards or something or other. Anything to pass the time away. And a lot of the time at night it would be passed that way, sitting around with fellows who would walk over from a few hundred yards from where they were in the artillery lines, if they weren't firing, visit with us and yak about anything at all that goes on, as you do, but we didn't have a can in our hands.
- Was there a lot of talk of home?**
- Oh yes, we always talked of home. Yes, always. Always.
- 35:00 That was a prime topic of conversation.
- What did you miss most?**
- I suppose just home. But I knew I was doing what I chose to do and so you do it. But it was always good

to get home, as it is when you go away for a holiday. It's always nice to come home.

35:30 **Is there anything else you'd like to add without us having to prod or probe? Anything you'd like to get down on the record?**

Gee whiz. That's a difficult one. I suppose one thing I always admire and wonder is how an organization such as happened in

36:00 1939, 40, in Australia or anywhere in the world really. A war is suddenly thrust upon you and the organising of getting so many troops into uniform, and trained, and equipped. The organization behind that is terrific. It's not all perfect I realise that. It's not all perfect.

36:30 But it's a huge task. But on reflection I suppose there are people, even today who are in government and in roles that are making sure that if war broke out tomorrow, they know exactly the processes that would happen. For instance, how would we clothe them. That would all be organised right now. How do we get all those number of boots for all those number of feet.

37:00 How do we do this, how do we do that. I'm quite sure there would be a plan, but at the time when I joined, I just thought it was an enormous task. It would be an enormous task. I'm not belittling it. But I think there has to be a plan there somewhere that someone is responsible for and that must be updated on a yearly basis, a regular basis anyway. So if anything

37:30 does happen to...a need for a country to be defended, that there's a plan put into action to know exactly how that's going to be coped with. But that's just a reflection of my own. I don't know if it is there but I think that's the only way it could be done, and that would have to be the case. I don't believe

38:00 that we need to have wars, or we shouldn't have wars and risk the lives of so many people. And today of course it's not only the service people who are risk, it's whole populations, that seems to be the way it's going. And that's really sad. People who have no reason to be affected are affected. But I don't know what can be done about that.

38:30 But I also think on the other side of the coin is that...as I say to myself, I believe that the desire to serve your country is strong as it should be, and in my case I believe seeing I came through the exercise, I believe it strengthened my character. I think I handled it the right way.

39:00 But unfortunately some people didn't handle it the right way and that's sad because a young man who was a sergeant just before me, became an officer and he ended up a wreck after the war. Not for any other reason...he became an officer and had access to the officer's mess and he became an alcoholic

39:30 and his afterlife after the war was total disaster. And he was a most efficient and popular sergeant and officer. So it's all up to you how you handle your life.

**Is there anything else you'd like to add John?**

No, I can only say that I'm pleased to be able to contribute towards what's been

40:00 done today. I hope that what I've had to say will be helpful to future generations. I've endeavoured to be truthful and that was nothing that I was ashamed or frightened to answer...even though sometimes little facts maybe not quite right.

**Thank you very, very much.**

Ok Col. It's been a

40:30 nice experience really. You've taken me over a lot of ground that I haven't really thought about for a long, long time. There's been too many other things to think about.