Australians at War Film Archive

Ronald Thomson (Tommo) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 16th September 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/902

Tape 1

00:30 **So let's just begin at the beginning as we were saying.**

Well, I was born in Prahran on the 30th August 1923. My Mum and Dad had two other children before then, and the first I remember really,

01:00 was going to Sycamore Street, East Malvern. There was the three of us then, and another one on the way, and we ended up being six children. And we had a beaut growing up period. And I must say right from the word go that I knew what a shilling was worth

01:30 from my youngest days that I can remember. And I knew that was the controlling thing of everybody's lives, which it was, and probably still is. Early days, there were six of us of course. We had a wonderful time together, and in the street, there was twenty-seven of us, really, and we had a beaut backyard. We had a cricket pitch.

02:00 A full cricket pitch in the backyard. We played footy [football] a lot, like straight up and down. It was great, really wonderful. The happiest times that I can remember is all of us getting around the sink, doing the washing up after the evening meal. We used to fight like cats and dogs, but loved every minute of it.

02:30 And they were the best days of my life, I think, the early days. And we had a pretty good training in as much as you had to be honest, very, very honest. And you had a lot of consideration for the other person. I never underestimate anybody, you two in particular. At this stage, I have no, I would never underestimate what you're doing,

03:00 and that's been all through my life. I've employed a lot of people, and I think it's the only way to go. And you don't find it too much these days. I went to school, state school, at Murrumbeena State School, which its thing of note was that it had its own swimming pool. A big one in the school yard,

03:30 and any misdemeanour you did, they'd just chop your swimming away. So it was a perfectly run school, I can tell you. They had hellishly good teachers. The story about myself is that I used to sit out in the street, out in Hobart Road, and the headmaster got hold of me well before I was four year old, and took me into the bubs [kindergarten]. So I started school when I was four, and I remember that

04:00 and the little girl I sat with, we're still in touch with and have been great friends all our life. And so is Joy, actually. She lived in the same street as her. The schooling there, I loved it, but all I wanted to do was get out and work, and when I was nine,

04:30 I got a job as a paper round on the corner of Waverly Road and East Malvern Road, and that was, the first pound that I ever earned is still up our wall in the family home. And all the pound notes that we ever earned first are still there, with our names on them. And, but to me that was the beginning of my life. Inasmuch as when I was ten,

05:00 ten to eleven, I was getting the equivalent of three pounds a week, which was top money even for grownups. I would start work at five o'clock every morning, and I had a six-wheel pull trolley. I'd go to East Malvern Station and bring the papers up to the shop, sort them all out and sort my own out and I delivered three hundred papers of a morning, which was a lot.

05:30 And I used to get tuppence a dozen in the morning. And nighttime, school got out at four o'clock those days, not half past three like it is now, four o'clock, and by half past four I was down doing papers again, and my day finished round about six, half past six. And I enjoyed that too, because I learnt a hell of a lot about people and how to treat them,

06:00 and how they treat you. Mostly it was all good, but there was a few bad ones as well, where they'd give you a paper and they'd fly off and wouldn't pay you. But I'd remember them the next time, I'll tell you. So that went on for quite a while, but during that period I had to leave home, and I went up to a farm in

Poowong, because there was too many at home, and things were tough around 1928.

06:30 And Dad went on the dole for a while, which broke his heart, and he was an interior decorator and he did a lot of work, but up on the farm, I enjoyed that too. I got the princely sum of two shillings a week.

07:00 And the farm life was absolutely wonderful, and I could have done that for the rest of my life. There's no doubt about that. You'd start at half past four in the morning. Mind you, I was between eleven and thirteen at this stage. And my job was to get the cows in and the paddocks themselves around Poowong were very, very steep. And I was strong enough. I was always fit.

07:30 And my job in the cow yard was to milk eight cows night and morning by hand. And I'd go to the Poowong school as well, and it was good. Really good. Inasmuch as, you know I, and I've said all my life, that a person with a bit of dirt under their fingernails will do me as a pretty good sort of a worker,

08:00 and a pretty good sort of a person. And usually that is so, when it's honest dirt. There's pretty grimy, a lot of grimy dirt around. But that was good, and that went on for a couple of years, and I came home, and of course, I walked into the papers as soon as, and that went on for a little while, and I went to Caulfield Tech [technical college], because a fellow up at Poowong

08:30 was one of the directors of Phoenix Motors, where I eventually ended up after I was fourteen. The day I was fourteen, on the 30th August, I went and got a job at Phoenix Motors, High Street at St Kilda. And I knew after the first week, that was where I was going to be for the rest of my life.

So did you go up to the farm on your own, or with brothers or sisters?

No, rode a pushbike sixty miles,

09:00 and my pushbike cost fifteen shillings, as I recall. It had square wheels. It was a racing bike. Fifteen shillings it cost, and go like the wind. I had that until after the war really, and down there, I started work sweeping the floors which, in retrospect, I think,

09:30 was one of the best things I have ever done, because I was in many workshops later on, and I can always remember those early days where you had to have everything spick and span. And it was. And then I went onto the machinery, and I started learning a lot and I wasn't going to go to the tech school at all. I wanted to do the practical thing without the knowledge,

10:00 which was a little bit wrong, but I did read everything that was thrown at me regarding engineering, and I was shown a lot by the people there. They were all wonderful tradesmen. Turners and fitters, pattern makers, and they were assembling a motor car, which was the Flying Standard [type of car], which came out from England in boxes and two people were assembling Flying Standards.

10:30 And if you can just recall that today, how motorcars are put together, there's lines and lines and lines [assembly line]. Well, we had two people, and they would produce four motor vehicles a week. Just themselves. And they used to drive them into town to Lane's Motors, and all it was was the chassis, the engine, and a seat tied onto the chassis.

11:00 And we got the princely sum of five shillings delivering them, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I was under age and everything else, but I knew what it was all about. Anyway, after a little while, years went by, and about the second year I was there, I joined the Army reserves at Caulfield, and that was excellent,

11:30 because I was always interested in military things. Dad was in the 8th Battalion, and First [World] War, and that was terrific, and I can remember in those years, Phoenix Motors and the war training, or army training was excellent. And we used to go up here, next door to the Springvale Crematorium, on this side of it, and we'd walk from Caulfield to there

12:00 of a Saturday morning and sleep out in the paddock Saturday night and come home Sunday. That was all pretty good training, really, for what came later on.

You said the reserves, or the cadets? What was that?

It was in the reserves. I've got a photo of it there. And it was good training, along with the turning and fitting that I was doing, in my day job.

12:30 Inasmuch as everything had to be right, and the tolerances that they accepted those days was a thou [thousand] and a half. And that was the maximum tolerance that you were allowed when you were building stuff. A thou and a half, which is not bad really, but sometimes, even now, it's a little bit less than that, but not much. So...

What were you working on?

13:00 I was doing all sorts: engine lathes, grinders, and everything in the finish, which was absolutely marvellous. I could do anything. And I'm not skiting [boasting] when I say that, I hopped into everything and I did my job. I got paid for it fairly well. Well, in those days anyway. And I thoroughly enjoyed it, and if you enjoy your work, you do a good job. There's no doubt about that.

13:30 And just when the war started in 1939, they kicked us out of the army, because we were too young, and

that was the beginning of the 37th Battalion, which I caught up with later on. And we, for two years or so, the military stuff was coming through and one of the jobs that we did do,

14:00 was to make and repair the firing mechanism for the Wirraways [Australian-made fighter/trainer aircraft] for firing through the propellers and it was only a small aluminium box, really, full of gears, etc. It was attached to the motor of the Wirraways. And thoroughly enjoyed that. That was a pretty good achievement. The very small gears, and it was all precision work, and it was wonderful.

14:30 And when I was eighteen, and I remember the day so much, Dad said, "There you are, you're eighteen now, and you're not going in the bloody army," as he said. I said, "No, Dad." And he said, "That's it. You just put your head down and keep going." And I said, "Righto," but the second day I went and joined up,

15:00 which was promptly squashed by Phoenix Motors. So the next day after that, I went elsewhere, and got called up. And which, being called up, is a different thing altogether, and I went and had a medical within a fortnight, before September, in 1941, and when the papers came through,

15:30 Dad went stone mad of course, but unfortunately, I didn't take any notice of him, and I went into the army on the 18th January 1942. But at work, I was in charge of the night shift, and I was eighteen years old, and I thought that was, I achieved what I wanted to achieve and it was quite a good start.

16:00 Of all the lads in the street, we lost two, in early stages before the war. They were killed for various reasons. But it was our early life was hard work, which I enjoyed. It was the best learning period that I had,

16:30 and kept me in good stead for the rest of my life, really. And above all, you're taught to be so honest, and whatever you did you did to your best of your ability, and if you made a mistake, admit you've made a mistake, so as you can correct it there and then, sort of thing. And that's the way I've lived ever since. So that's about my upbringing. It was two, three stages really.

17:00 It was up to about nine years old, which all the kids at home, we got on so well together. And five of them are still alive. My elder sister died some four years ago. But the others are all around and the telephone rings quite constantly. The family home is still there, and my youngest sister is still living in it.

17:30 And she'd be worth a couple of million today. Well, the house itself and the land, of course, is in the middle of East Malvern. You could put four double-storey flats on it, no worries at all, with plenty over. But those early days were really good and then the early working days taught me how to save.

18:00 I used to give all my money to my mother because those days, bringing up the family was pretty tough. But I do say for dear old Mum, I had two hundred and forty pounds in the bank, which I didn't know about, when I joined the army, and she gave me that.

18:30 She was crying her eyes out, and so am I.

Do you want us to stop for a little while?

No, I'm all right. That was a fortune, which she could have spent but didn't. And it was there until after I came home,

19:00 and I never spent that for years afterwards. I just couldn't. But anyway, the workdays up on the farm, it taught me to consider animals and to do your job. And there's other things, there's certainly other things in life besides human beings. The animals are a very big part of it. And they feed the community, you know, left, right and centre,

19:30 and one of the things on the farm we used to have to drive the cattle from Poowong over to Loch every second Tuesday after sale day. And there was an old cow there, and the jolly thing could hardly walk, and the old uncle said, "What do you do with that?" And the auctioneer said, "Oh, well, we put it on the train, send it down, cut it up, and put it into tins and call it Spam [processed meat]."

20:00 I've never ever forgot that. And I thought how rotten things can be, but possibly not so, because he said that as a joke, I think, but I was never sure. And being never sure of anything like that, well, you know, I made sure later on. We have a crook pigeon in the backyard right now; well, he gets looked after like a long lost uncle.

20:30 And it can't fly, but I don't know where it perches yet, but anyway, I'll find it. But we're looking after that. Our early life was one of learning right up till I was eighteen. And the hardest time, of course, was walking from Caulfield to Springvale of a Saturday morning. And that's a distance of about eight, nine mile.

21:00 When you're fourteen and fifteen it's not much trouble, but when you look back on it nowadays, it's a hell of a long way. And we had horse-drawn limbers those days, which would take out all the stuff for the horses, and I was involved there. I was right at home. No worries whatsoever. And they had a couple of ponies that the officers rode, whether they could or they couldn't.

21:30 But they were pleasant days, they really were. And I was determined to go into the military, and my father, you know, I can remember going to the Anzac marches with Dad, and in the early days I'd be on

his shoulder. And they used to have their reunion in the Old Melbourne Town Hall, in what they called the Lower Melbourne Town Hall,

22:00 which is a huge, it's still there, a huge room where these soldiers used to assemble, and the march those days finished down at the MCG [Melbourne Cricket Ground], on the MCG. And all the bands would be playing out there in the middle, and thousands of personnel of all, navy, army and air force, not so much them, but they'd all be there carrying on like pork chops

22:30 and having a real wonderful time. And I used to really look forward to that, and there again, I learnt a lot how to duck, inasmuch as that I'd never do the rash thing, or I did later on. But I tried to assess what was right and what was wrong, and as it turned out, it was jolly good training for what was to come.

23:00 And that was my early days really. I met Joy then, when I was seventeen and a half years old, and we used to go the dances at Carnegie on a Saturday night. Of course, we walked from Tranmere Avenue, to the RSL [Returned and Services League] Hall, and I had the princely sum of three and sixpence, which would take us to the dance, that's thirty-five cents in today's money,

23:30 and we'd get admitted and we'd have a lime soda on the way home. And that was that. And that went on for a little while, right up till I went away actually. So I guess that's my early days, but you can ask me anything you like.

I have got a couple of questions. You talked a little bit about your dad and him being a veteran of World War I. Also how he wasn't very keen on you signing up.

24:00 **What did you know of his experience?**

When Mr Menzies declared, on Sunday night, "As a consequence, we are now at war with Germany," he looked at my eldest brother and myself, and he said, "I hope you two don't come to the age when you can go to the war." Prior to that, he had a bullet in the left buttock,

24:30 and I always said, "Why, was you running away?" And of course, he always used to take a swing at us for that, but he got a bullet in the bum, as he called it, and he was at Gallipoli, and the stories that you hear of it. It must have been absolutely deplorable, and what they had to go through without food

25:00 and washing, and removing the dead and all the rest of it, he never mentioned it. Never. And Joy's father was the same. He was in the 14th Battalion, and years later I got the same experiences all over again. And they were exactly the same. They didn't vary, and the answer to that was, he did not want us to go into the army,

25:30 and that was that. And we always used to take notice of Dad, but Jack and I were both in the army. Jack's my eldest brother, and he went into the Signals. I don't know how he got into Signals, but anyway he did, and he was there most of the time. He went up to New Guinea as well. He came out of it fine, which was wonderful. Now, what's your other question?

26:00 **You said that you understood from an early age the value of a shilling.**

Yes.

And it sounds like you actually understood that before you earned your first pound on the newspaper rounds. What was it that led to that, that understanding?

Pardon?

What led to that understanding? What gave you that understanding?

Well, in those days, there would be four children then and, you know, things were tough. Really tough.

26:30 Dad was an interior decorator, and he worked for my uncle, and one of his jobs was, he worked at the Alfred Hospital, painting the interior of it, and by the time they started one end, and got to the other, they'd go back where they started and go again. One of his other good jobs was the ceiling in the old State Theatre. It's still there.

27:00 You know, where the stars were twinkling in the blue sky, etc. He used to have to go in there and start work at eleven o'clock at night, and go through till nine o'clock in the morning doing that. A bloke named Shingfield, and himself. There was only two of them. But even so, money was very, very tight, and food those days was quite expensive.

27:30 And not only that, they were paying off the house, of course. And there was not enough money to feed us properly. And there was only just, some two weeks ago, Dorothy and I were talking, and something came up about meals, and what did come up was bread and milk sop for breakfast.

28:00 Do you know what that is? All it is is bread with warm milk poured over it and that's your breakfast. In all the times, I never heard any of my brothers or sisters complain about food. And clothing was most expensive too, although when Jack was growing up, if he had a red shirt, of course, I had a red shirt later on. And that's the way it was.

28:30 And things were tough, and I knew that you had to earn money to live. And I was just after nine year old when I started working and I stopped in 1982. I didn't stop in 1982. I went for another five years elsewhere. It always was, and it still is, our present salaries

29:00 that keep you and your family going. And even so today, with what I call huge amounts of money being paid for a weekly salary, it's not enough, usually, for the people on the lower wages because of the rents or paying off the house, and to feed the children and whatever. There's just nothing left.

29:30 And having had a lot of experience over the last twenty-two years at this sort of thing, being an advocate, I know what it's like. And it's still the same. Nothing has altered. Nothing. The cost of running a household is rather a lot, and currently, right now, my next door neighbour has been a next door neighbour since we moved here,

30:00 and he moved here. We built the houses together. He's going through the same thing now. He's eighty three, he had six children, and his wife died some thirty years ago, but, at that stage, thirty years ago, the cost of living was no better, and if not a little bit worse, than what it was in 1939 and '40.

30:30 And I knew, and I still do, right to this day, the penny in the pocket is the one that you treasure most, because you put it towards whatever you're going to put it towards. And that was my understanding of the pound, as I always quote, in the first place and it hasn't changed over the years. Like my daughter is living here with us.

31:00 You know, they're not quite that bad, you know, you still value what you're doing and the rewards are there for it, which is, to me, it's nearly everything in life. Nearly everything. I don't care who you are, what you are, brigadier, general, whatever. Makes no difference. And because at the end of the day,

31:30 when you put everything together, no one's not much different at all. But we are quite happy with what we've got, but it's been a hell of a lot of hard work to do it. And I've never regretted any work. The longest I've worked is three and a half days without stopping in my earning days. And in the army

32:00 I've been awake for over a week because of circumstances. So, nothing changes really.

What else do you remember of the Depression, obviously you understood that you had to work, you had to earn a pound somehow. What about your friends, other kids, how were they struggling, their families?

About, I would say, about the same. See some of their parents, one lot of parents

32:30 had a greeting card. I can mention the name I suppose: Rose Printing stuff in Armadale. So they were well off. And Johnny Pierce, his father had a government job, and he ended up, J L Pierce, with all the transports running up and down the road there. So it was a mixed bag that we had in the street, but some of them were just the same as us,

33:00 but they all knew where to come to play cricket, and get the fruit and the vegies [vegetables] and everything was at our place. Because we had a beaut backyard and Dad had a wonderful vegetable garden, and we had WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s [chickens] as well. So, that was it. We all understood what we had to do and what was available. And we never cheated on one another, ever. Not ever. And I'm so proud of all that.

33:30 **Did you mother have to work?**

No. Well, yes, she worked all right, bringing up six kids. Oh, yes. That was Mum's job, and like I can remember dear old Mum. They were slaves those days. They were really slaves, like there was no washing machines, you had the old copper and that copper stick. And if you played up you got

34:00 one hit with the washing stick and you didn't play up for another two or three years. I got it a couple of times, I think we all did. But the things, you had a bath once a week, and you had a wash every day. And I used to love it when it rained because I'd strip off and out in the backyard, and stand in the rain and clean myself off that way. I still love that.

34:30 It's one of the nicest feelings anyone can have really, is to get out in the rain and soap yourself down, and I was as fit as a mallee bull of course. I ran for our school and down at Olympic Park, and I was second fastest in Victoria at one stage. But those times have been unleashed now. I played football,

35:00 which I loved, and I played cricket and I played baseball. The only injury I got was two stitches right there. So, you know, the money itself, to answer your question would be that my father's wages those days was three pounds five shillings, which was top money for a tradesman.

35:30 And my wages was just under that when I was twelve. Not much. About two and sixpence under that. And I gave it all to Mum and I didn't know she was banking for me. I never knew. But anyway, and I bought a Stits rifle [German .22 calibre rifle (phonetic spelling)] and I used to get a few rabbits here and there, which supplemented the meat situation, because you couldn't afford meat.

36:00 No doubt about it, you just couldn't afford it. That was all I think. But you can ask any question you like about the early days. I've written a book on that part.

What about your schooling? It sounds as if you were really keen to just get out there and work and get your hands dirty.

Yes. Well, yes, I was.

36:30 The very first job I ever had was at Rexmo lawn mowers and that was a Rolls Royce of hand-pushed lawn mowers. I wasn't there too long. But then I went, in between there and the farm and going to Phoenix Motors. That was the turning point of the whole life, and I had to come back, and Mum actually had to pay a pound a week for me to work there,

37:00 in the beginning. It was very common. The parents paid your wages for the first month. And which would have broke her heart really, but it was paid, and after that, after paying a pound, I got twelve and sixpence a week. And that was for forty-four hour week, including Saturday morning.

37:30 And I used to ride my bike backwards and forwards there, and in the wintertime, dear old Mum, she used to fill the handlebars up with hot water, put a cork in one end, put a cork in the other end and away I'd go. We had hot handle bars in the frosty mornings. We don't get frost now like we did then.

38:00 Oh, there was lots of things like that, that were absolutely marvellous.

You said once or twice you got the washing stick. What sort of behaviour or misbehaviour would warrant a whack with the washing stick?

A cheeky remark mostly. I still do it of course, just mostly a cheeky remark. And one of Dad's statements was absolutely true. He said, "I don't care what you do, where you go, if you deserve a whack."

38:30 He said, "You'll always come home to bed. And I won't forget." Which he never did, you know. I admired my Mum and Dad. Marvellous. They really were. But Dad ended up with one drinking problem, which I don't agree with it at all, but I don't say that it was wrong in his stage,

39:00 because he worked terribly hard, and when I was selling papers at East Malvern, and he was on sustenance pay, he was working on the old railway bridge, about four hundred yards away from where I was working. That was pretty tough for him. It was. You know, to have one of your children, like, psychologically,

39:30 that would have broke your heart, I'm sure, and I'm not insensitive to those sorts of things either. I've heard them all. I've heard them all. Again, and again, and again. When you sit in a chair in everybody's kitchen and listen to their story of why they want assistance and so on, nothing varies a great deal.

40:00 It's all a matter of living and trying to maintain your health, and trying to maintain the food and your clothing. And I must say that nearly all of the military people that I have come into contact, own their own home. Nearly all of them. Not quite. And that was, I think we all everywhere had a very good lesson,

40:30 that you needed your own home. And one of the big things Dad wanted me to do prior to army life, was down at East Malvern where I used to sell the papers, the land was selling for fourteen pound a block. When I come home, they were fourteen pound a foot. It was a big difference. And of course I told him he didn't know what he was doing, etc, etc, but that was a mistake, and that still happens today.

41:00 I heard a story, just last week, where a young person, he's a relation, he bought a house for eighty-three thousand dollars just two years ago, and he's selling it currently and it's two and a half hundred thousand. And so, in reality, it's just the same now as what it was then.

Tape 2

00:30 **You're telling some really interesting stories. And then if I feel, or Cath [interviewer] feels, that we've maybe missed something, or skipped something or something could do with more detail, we'll go back there.**

Well, the early army days were unreal. Like, nowadays it's unheard of, but I'm very pleased it was, because we were, I was fit. I could run like a deer. You're not rolling yet, are you?

01:00 **Yes. We're rolling.**

Oh, I could 'run like a hairy goat' as Dad would say. I was extremely fit. I was eleven and a half stone, and five-foot-eight and a half. I could almost do a hundred yards in even time, and I expected everybody else to do the same, but that didn't happen either. But that's how I was.

You said you were second fastest in the state?

01:30 In Victoria. I was.

What age were you then?

Thirteen. And as it so happened, one of my tent mates, Georgie Williams, who was a mate for four years, he was the fastest, and he was about a foot shorter than I was. But boy, could he go. But that's all changed now of course. They're doing, as I heard, 9.8 seconds.

02:00 Every second is nine feet, so that's a long way. You couldn't touch him with your arms spread out. But anyway, what would you like now?

Well, you were going to tell us a little about, let's hear about the reserve days. Why did you join up with the reserves?

They had good boots. Like, they issued you with the army boots and they were extremely good boots, and I couldn't afford to buy decent stuff like that,

02:30 and they issued them for nothing, and they issued you your clothes, which there was no restrictions on whatsoever. They'd give you two sets of everything and that was great and they kept me going right through till they kicked us out. They kicked us out because we were too young. There was three of us. And two of them joined the navy, and I went into the army later on.

03:00 But the early days of army, what they did, was to again teach you to take orders to the letter, and to obey orders, really. To take them and obey is a little bit different. Sometimes there's a lot of dissent about taking orders. To obey them is fully understanding what you're doing and doing it.

03:30 And that was quite a good part of it. But up at the grounds where they used to have the firing practice, where they taught you how to fire a rifle properly, and my first rifle was a Lee Enfield .303, 1916, and that was in 1937 that I got that rifle, and it was a nice one, and of course, Dad when he saw it, he wouldn't have a bar of it.

04:00 But he used to clean it for me, not that I couldn't, but he did clean it for me, and I let him, of course. I think he hated it, but he did that anyway. But it was good. It was once a week and every third weekend, and for that they paid you two and six a night, and two and six a day for the weekend.

04:30 But I'd come home and do paper rounds after that anyway. But we went down to the old Williamstown rifle range, and I got my certificate down there, about firing a rifle. I used to have to fire like that, but I'd be using this eye across the sights. And I had my left eye, right across the rifle, because this eye is still not good.

05:00 And they used to go crook at that, but the result was all right, so they left it alone. That was on quite a bit. They'd take you down there by train, and the train would almost go right into the rifle range itself. But it was very good training for what was to come later on. And as I said,

05:30 they were the battalion that I joined, or that they put me in, when I was called up, which was rather strange. But anyway. Can I go on with that now?

Yeah. Well, I'm interested to hear, yes, the progression from that, and what you knew of what was happening in Europe with war looming, and then your decision to join.

Well, in Europe, I'm afraid most Australians at that stage

06:00 weren't taking notice of. What they were taking notice of was their own people in Africa, and Crete, after Crete. And that's all I was taking notice of too, and I used to pore over the dreadful pages where the people had been killed, etc, and they'd write down numbers of wounded, and you know,

06:30 that was appalling, really, and it gave me the feeling, yes, I want to go out there and do my bit. When the Japanese came in, there was no hesitation whatsoever, and when the letter, Mum didn't know I'd gone to have a physical, and when the letter arrived, she knew it was an army one,

07:00 and she gave it to me and she said, "I want to be here when you read that." And I opened it, and there it was, it was a call-up on the 18th of January. And she didn't, she didn't do anything. She just wheeled away and went. But that was a pretty sad sort of a couple of days,

07:30 but eventually, like all mothers, she came around and gave us a great big hug. Mum was a great big lady, and she had arms that would embrace you, which I miss rather well. And it said, "You'll report to the Malvern Drill Hall at 8.30 on the 18th of January, 1942, at 0800 hours. You are to bring a cut lunch."

08:00 All right. So that was it. So I got all dressed up in my nines. In those days I had a beautiful sport shirt that I loved, and an action back sports coat and light grey trousers, and tan shoes. And we get down there, and by that night, they weren't so tanned shoes. The shirt was rotten, and the coat was marked all over the place.

08:30 They marched us down to Armadale station, we got on a train there, and went to Spencer Street, and we got a steam train up to Seymour. But going up I sat next to Georgie Williams, who I didn't meet til another twelve months later on. The same unit. And we got, we were unloaded off the train into open trucks,

09:00 standing up, with big sides on, so you couldn't fall over, and you were really packed into them. And we

went to a place in Nagambi Road, and it was the 37th Battalion. And the first night, or first day there, when we got in there and unloaded, the first they did was call the roll, of course, and there was no one missing, and they allocated you to tents,

09:30 and you had the evening meal. And just before the evening meal, there was a hell of a dust storm, and of course, the evening meal was casserole dust, and so that was a good beginning. But the next day they called the roll again, six o'clock in the morning, and put you into various platoons and I went into B Company, and it was the 3rd Platoon,

10:00 and they issued you with the army hat, slacks, and a shirt then, on that day. No underclothing whatsoever, and the next day they lined up, there was three thousand lined up to get the injections, and there was five doctors and about twenty nurses, out in the open, and in five lines going up.

10:30 And getting all of the injections, and the TB [tuberculosis] one, that gives you a reaction, and unfortunately for one of our fellows, it was a stinking hot day, the sun was out and we were all stripped to the waist. I was always brown anyway, and he got sunburned after that. They discharged him from the army in a week's time, because it spread right over the whole, when it festered, the fester came right over his front,

11:00 and he was in a hell of a mess. But I often, I never caught up with him again, but I would have liked to, inasmuch as to see how they treated him. But there was three thousand went through, and on that night, there was twenty- three only lined up for the evening meal. And what they did with us, I was one of the twenty-three,

11:30 they issued us with canteens, and we went around tent by tent, trying to give them a drink and feed them a little bit, because they were in a hell of a mess. I don't think they ever did it again. That was the days when they were giving you the injection for meningitis, which was a needle in the rear end. And halfway through the day, they cut it out

12:00 because nearly everybody that had it passed out. And they never ever did it again. Not throughout the military days anyway. And that was one folly that I've never forgotten. I didn't have the injection, but I suppose I would have been one of the ones that would have went down. Not everybody went down, but nearly everybody.

12:30 And those days at Nagambi Road were very good days. You know, the usual bull ring stuff. Practice and rifle, because I'd already got an A1 Rifle Certificate, which I always made sure that everybody knew about. That part of it was right, and they wanted to give me rank. I wouldn't accept it,

13:00 and I never accepted it, right the way through.

Why was that?

I didn't want to. Just didn't want to. Although I accepted rank after the war. I got plenty of rank. But anyway, no, I was one of the boys, and they used to have a nasty habit, if there was any misdemeanours around the place,

13:30 which there were plenty of them, because you get a number of blokes now or then, some scallywag would do something which was wrong. And what they used to have, as a payback, there was a thing called 'chasing the lantern' and they'd put you on parade and put the lantern on a hill, or whatever. And you could see the lantern which would be about three or four mile away,

14:00 and what they didn't tell you, there might have been the Goulburn River between you and the lantern, and everybody had to get there. Not all of them did, but when I came to the river, I had no hesitation at all. I just stripped off, rolled them up, and left them on the bank. Tore over, tied the boots around your neck, and tore over to the lantern, put your clothes on,

14:30 but that happened quite regularly. Ten o'clock at night. It was good, and in the place they had Bren gun carriers [light armoured tracked vehicle, for carrying mounted Bren light machine gun, but also used for other equipment, reconnaissance, resupply, etc] running around, which I knew I wanted to keep well away from. I just didn't want the mechanical side of that at all, because they were so quick etc, etc, and very dirty, and they weren't going anywhere really,

15:00 and so anyway, by then of course, you'd been issued with the full kit, which again was the hat, the long sleeved shirts, two khaki trousers, two sets of boots, two blankets. I've still got my blankets after all these years. One's on the bottom of our bed, and one's out in the caravan. And a ground sheet, a rifle, all the webbing and the bayonet of course,

15:30 and my bayonet was like a razor. You could shave with it. And, not that I ever used it. But anyway, that's the way it was, and they did march, march, march, march, march. And all of these fellows were eighteen to nineteen years old. They all weren't fit.

16:00 And on a day, and I wished I'd have kept the date, I know it now, I've got it written down, they said, "You'll put all your gear together and do it properly. Pack your kit bag, and your kit." Your water bottle had to be filled, and your blankets rolled with the ground sheet around the, and all in all,

16:30 it was about eighty-three pounds that you had on your back, and they marched us out the front gate,

and I thought, “Oh, where are we going, I wonder.” Rumours were rife then. And we had everything. There was nothing left in the camps, bar the tents. And they got us over to Mangalore railway station. There’s an engine there, full steam up, “Oh, we’re off somewhere by train.” Hmmm.

17:00 We kept on going past Mangalore, and we marched up to Albury, which was a hundred and sixty mile away. And we marched, full pack, all the way. And they did that for one reason only. It’s to get everybody fit. I must admit I shed a couple of pounds, but a lot of them shed more than that. And we went up through the rocks at Beechworth,

17:30 and this is in July mind you, and Beechworth’s all rocky and very, very cold, we were not to light fires or anything, and on the way we slept where we stopped of a night time. And I knew one old trick. You sleep under a barbed wire fence, which is a big joke, but it’s not a joke. You sleep under a barbed wire fence, the frost goes out like that, and you’ve got about fourteen inches of clear ground underneath the barbed wire fence.

18:00 And you sleep underneath there and the frost won’t come anywhere near you. I did that, and I passed that on, and at Benalla we got a frost and there was a lot of them quite ill. But we were all right. The nine of us were all right anyway.

Where had you learnt that trick?

Up on the farm. Oh, it’s well known, or I thought it was. But when we got to Bonegilla,

18:30 same old story. We march, march, march, and they taught us how to cook a meal and meals being bully beef, M&V [meat and vegetables], and goldfish: herrings and tomato sauce. And what they were doing was digging a little two-inch trench along there, and you put your dixie [metal food container] across the trench and had a running fire in whichever way the wind was blowing.

19:00 If the wind was blowing that way, that’s the way, to take the smoke away, and that come in handy later on. But we were doing all sorts of things there, and I won a bit of money there, inasmuch as they had a quiz, an army quiz, operated by somebody that came in for the purpose, and we were neck and neck. Two lots of us were neck and neck.

19:30 And then the question came, which was the very last question of the day. It was, “All right, when did Australian, American, Germany, Russian, France and Japanese, when did they all fight together on one side, in war against another foe?” Do you know?

20:00 **We’re talking the Great War [First World War], are we?**

No. German, Russian, French. It was the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1901. And we lost two personnel in that war. And I’ve never ever forgot that question, and we got two hundred pounds. And of course, it went into the B Company funds, which they didn’t have any,

20:30 but they made a fund. But anyway. That was good. And anyway, that was in the 37th Battalion.

Sorry.

We got on the train there, and somehow or other, they used to give you leave to go into Albury,

21:00 and something that’s on my sheet, I was AWL [Absent Without Leave]. I’d never been AWL in my life. But it’s on my sheet. I was AWL for two minutes, but they recorded it. Anyway, we got on the train and it was a stop/start situation. They’d whip us off the train, and march us for a day, onto another train, march us for another day, and we ended up at a place called Kagaru, just near Beaudesert in Queensland.

21:30 And the day we arrived at Kagaru, the red flame trees were all out, and magnificent, but we walked from Kagaru over to Beaudesert. All night. And coming off a train trip and to walk for all night, wasn’t too happy about that, but I got appendicitis there for some reason. Anyway, they didn’t operate.

22:00 I was pretty sick, and they sent me home, well, back to the tent for four days. And then we sort of crisscrossed all the way across Brisbane and we got up to Maryborough. A train again, and marching. They marched, marched, marched, and we got to Maryborough on, I don’t know what date.

22:30 On a date, they called out Thomson and Arthur Lee. And we met at the Headquarters Company office. We had to be full pack, full everything, and they transferred us to the 53rd Field Park Engineers. And I didn’t want to go, but I was pleased I did now, of course. But we ended up on the beach,

23:00 just out of Maryborough, where the engineer company were towing targets three mile out to sea for the artillery to fire at. And of course, Arthur and I, what did they do? They just bunged us in one of the boats there and then, and fortunately the artillery were not bad shots,

23:30 and the target was at least a quarter of a mile behind us, but we were three mile out to sea, and on that particular night, we hadn’t even booked into the company or anything, and the sar-major [sergeant-major] said, “Oh, you can sleep there for the night,” and that was on the front veranda of a house, so that was no hardship for us. We just put our kit under our head, and groundsheet and blanket, and you could wrap the groundsheet completely over you and tie it up.

24:00 It would be like a cocoon. But the ground is a lot softer than a veranda, I can tell you, and that was our introduction, and of course, the next day, they had to march back to Maryborough, which was fourteen-odd mile, and of course, the old sar-major, Maurie Beck, said, “We’ll try you new recruits out.” “Oh, yeah, you will?” “Yes. We’re marching for fourteen mile.”

24:30 Well, we just come off a march of sixty mile around Maryborough. And I always remember the first words I ever had with our company commander at that stage, Perce Morling, a lieutenant. I had the rifle, holding it by the barrel, over the shoulder. “Hold that rifle properly, sapper.” You know, I didn’t know who he was talking to.

25:00 “You, in the second row.” I didn’t know what a sapper was. Everybody in the Engineers was called ‘sapper’ whether he was a sapper, lieutenant, major, or colonel made no difference. He was a sapper. But anyway, we got back to Maryborough and we were issued, landed into a tent, who should be there, was Georgie Williams, who I went into the army with,

25:30 a fellow named Herbie Parker, and the other one was Laurie May, and we stuck together nearly three and a half years after that, and there was two additions later on, when they were eight-man tents, and we were good mates all through, until they died off. But I always remember when I first met Perce, who turned out to be a good friend, and still is, he’s still alive. He, “How long have you been in the army?”

26:00 “Seven months, sir.” “Oh.” Things changed dramatically. And, “You’re a turner and fitter?” “No, sir, but I trained as one.” “Right, good” he said, “Can you operate a lathe?” I said, “Yes, sir.” “And can you weld?” ‘Yes, sir.” Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. “Right,” he said, “You are now a third grade engineer sapper.”

26:30 That was nine shillings a day, because we were on five bob a day before that. But yeah, righto, good. So I understood that bit all right. And from then we did a lot of quick shifts. We ended up at one stage underneath, camped outside Toowoomba, and we dug an ammunition dump, which I believe is still there, underneath the Toowoomba football ground.

27:00 And they used them all around Australia, same sort of thing, where they stored ammunition. There’s one in the Frankston Dandenong Road on the left hand side, it’s still there, and I would hazard a guess that it’s still there. You know, we did that with horse-drawn tumble scoops. And of course, there was a couple in the outfit, in the 53rd Field Park,

27:30 there was people that had operated horse-drawn scoops anyway. So that was on. When that was finished, we shifted to…

How did the horse-drawn scoop work?

It’s a tumble scoop. It’s about a quarter yard and it’s got two wooden handles, and you held the handles. If you dug it in too hard, you’d go straight over the top. But that was all right. I knew what I was doing there without any trouble, and I did have my stint at that.

28:00 Then we went to Maroochydore, which became the Brisbane Line, and it was fully fortified, because they thought the Japanese were going to come in there, and one of our main tasks, which I’d love to do today, was to march up and down from Maroochydore to Caloundra at midnight, and when the full moon was out and it was getting warm anyway,

28:30 October/November, it was absolutely wonderful. The temperature was wonderful. And we were issued with five rounds of .303 [five bullets of 0.303 calibre]. What for, I have no idea. To get rid of them, you’d get rid of them in a very big hurry. But that was it. And you used to have to give them back every morning, and sign for them, and sign them back.

29:00 But we did do a little bit of bridge building there, which I had studied quite a bit over the years. And the bridges were made with deflatable boats, which twelve men each side pulled them up like that, and you run planks across them, and even tanks could go across them. But that was done. All this bridge building was done in between eleven o’clock at night and three o’clock in the morning. Always. I don’t know why.

29:30 In Australia it was, anyway. On this particular day, the tide was going out, and we went out of the bay we were in and we hit the tide, and the damn thing was running like that at midnight (indicates whirlpool), and of course, the old admiral sergeant-major was on the top, full port, full starboard, and luckily, we came into an eddy and went across to an island on the other side. And we had to wait until the tide changed before we could row back across the river.

30:00 We could have got drowned that night, there’s no doubt about that, but Hughie [soldier’s god of the weather, wind and rain, etc] must have been looking after us I think, because it was pretty hairy. The river used to run like made. The river comes out at Noosa now. And on a decent downpour that they had some time after, the river forced its way straight through the sand dunes at Noosa where it is now,

30:30 and came out. And where our camp was - we were right next to the river at Maroochydore - is now built on, bowling greens and the whole works. But that was very good training, inasmuch as we put our notice, we were all bored stiff. We weren’t doing anything, and we had a complete engineers outfit there, and we put a notice in the board at the local paper,

31:00 and the local notice board down the street, anybody wanted any machinery repaired, please let us know where it is and we'll come and fix it. We were inundated with that, from farmers all round the place, and we had a great time, really. They supplied us with fresh fruit and everything. Terrific. That was good. And we even did a lot of work

31:30 at the Nambour Sugar Mills and we did lot of big maintenance work there. And that went on for quite a while, and then we camped up at Nambour, and we got a hell of a flood and got washed out. Everything, our beds and everything, all got washed away. Our rifles and all, but we got some of the rifles back, but didn't find a lot of them, and then we were all re-kitted from there. And then we went

32:00 across to Ipswich, which was the taking-off plant anyway, and by then I was fully aware of the people that I was going to work with for the next few years, and we knew exactly what one another was capable of.

So, sorry, the purpose at Maroochydore, was it considered training, or was it defending the Line.

No, that was guarding the Brisbane Line as they called it.

32:30 And there was many, many thousands of military people, right from Maryborough, right through to Brisbane. You know, artillery, battalions, engineers, of course. Right away. And they were going, the stinking part about it all is that they were going to allow the Japanese to land, as afar as that. And of course, there's a lot of resentment even up there today

33:00 on that fact and it should never have happened, And we, in Australia, didn't have the knowledgeable people in Parliament, not that we've got them now I guess. But we didn't have the people in parliament then that understood what could or couldn't happen. Because you could move troops very, very quickly, and if the Japanese could have come in,

33:30 you should have realised that they would come in by the boatload. And you can only come to one point. That's where they'd unload. And you'd be on them like a ton of bricks. But they didn't. And they held that line for a good six-odd months, and then they woke up to themselves that it was irrelevant, anyway. They took us down to Ipswich and there we were really sharpening up all of our equipment and getting it in first class order.

34:00 We had a four by four truck, which had a lathe, a drill, an electric welder, a compressor, and a little 25 KVA [Kilovolt Ampere – measurement of energy] generator - the only one that was ever made during the war - and it was fully equipped and could supply all of our needs. Or anybody else's for that matter.

34:30 It was a full workshop on the back of a truck. A little truck and I've got photos of it. And that was designed and built by Perce Morling, and it did serve a lot for the first year we were over in New Guinea, anyway. But they put us, one of the hilarious little trips I've had in my life, they loaded us on to open trucks at Brisbane,

35:00 in the loading yards there, and there was Bill May, Arthur Lee and myself were allocated this open truck, a railway truck, with our truck. And in between our truck and the front of the railway truck there was about ten feet of nothing. And they said, "You're in there for four days, four days and four nights." And we were. And you can imagine, the first thing that springs to anyone's mind is toilet facilities,

35:30 which were zilch [none], and all the way along the line you were fed zeppelins on a cloud, which were sausages and mashed potatoes. And we got to one spot up past Maryborough, and we hadn't had a wash, and of course, the old railway towers, water towers, someone had the bright idea we could go and have a shower under there. So we all got stripped off,

36:00 in the truck, fortunately, in the railway truck, and flew up to the thing with a towel, soap, and we were all, you know, nearly two and a half hundred people having a shower, and the train blew the whistle and the express train went through. And of course, incredible. Anyway, with that, the train started moving off,

36:30 and we had to hightail it, and I can remember getting on the moving train, which was, you know, rather stupid at the time, but no one got hurt fortunately, but it wasn't the train driver's fault. And the next thing we arrived at a place called Innisfail. And we arrived at Innisfail at ten o'clock at night. We unloaded the trucks, which in those days, the whole train,

37:00 you could drive straight through the train. The backs of the trucks and the front would come off, not come off, they would lay down, and you would drive over the whole thing and back the trucks right out. And we moved from Innisfail to a place called Ravenshoe [Atherton Tableland], which would be about thirty miles, and no lights, no nothing, stinking raining, and quite a bit of mountain mist. We had to drive by the two slits in the headlights and the taillight.

37:30 And fortunately, we were, Arthur and I were in about the third truck. He was the only one who had a licence, just by the way, and we got to Ravenshoe without mishap. And all around that area, when you're going around bends, the road is divided, and you've got a very narrow roadway there, and you've got another one there, but in the middle of the road is big rockeries. They're still there today.

38:00 But anyway, we got there without any problem, and of course we didn't get out of the trucks that day. We just stopped in the cab of the trucks, and slept there all night, and in the morning, of course, the tents were struck and put up etc, and we were at Ravenshoe for some time. And I had a job too, along with Waghorn and myself,

38:30 we had to go and reinforce a road bridge, because they thought that the tanks were possibly going to go through there, and we were putting eighteen inch logs and reinforcing the trestle bridges. And one of the things that I've always said, in all of the lectures that I've given, I had one of the most pleasant nights I've ever had in my life. Right next to the bridge we were repairing

39:00 was a house, and a dear old gentleman living on his own. And of course, we used to feed him and whatever. And he said, "We're going to the dance on Saturday night." and we said, "Yeah, righto." Didn't believe him, but anyway, at eight o'clock on Saturday night he said, "Well, I've knocked off. I'm going to have a bath." And everyone looked at each other stupidly. I don't think he'd had a bath for months. And he said, "Come over at ten o'clock."

39:30 We were all clean, and we were just going to lie down and go to bed. Anyway, he had an old A Model Ford ute [utility] and four of us got in the back of that, and he drove straight into the forest, and he drove at least thirty-odd mile, and we came to this dance hall in the middle of a forest. Over towards, oh, where that beautiful railway station is,

40:00 Mareeba, or something, name like that, and this beautiful hall there, and the two of us went in, and there'd be about a hundred and fifty people there and the dancing hadn't started, and we were introduced to everybody in the hall, which was absolutely wonderful. And the dancing was incredible. And one of the dances was the Lantana Waltz. We're, "What's that bloody one, Lantana Waltz. Never heard of that."

40:30 Because we used to love dancing. And anyway, all the blokes and the sheilas disappeared out the front door for ten minutes, and they came back in. Oh, that's no good. We didn't know what we missed out on. But anyway, after that they had a sit down roast dinner, at three o'clock in the morning. And the little old fellow came over and said, "How are you going, fellows, all right?" He said, "Would you like a drink?"

41:00 "Not allowed to drink, sir." He said, "Would you like a drink?" 'Yeah, all right." He said, "Good, here you are." And he gave us all a bottle of beer, and it was, and we got back to the camp by the bridge. No one came out, they'd left the morning breakfast there for us at the camp, because we weren't there, and that word went back very quickly, and of course they checked up on us straightaway. But we arrived back there about half past seven

41:30 and they'd had breakfast out there before seven from the camp, which had been, and at ten o'clock, of course, the sar-major rolled up, "Where were you?" I looked at him, and I said to him then, I said, "Listen, don't go crook. Go over and see the gentleman over in the hut." And with that Maurie turned on his heel, and away he went. He came back. He said, "See you later." That was it. But that was, we did reinforce the bridge and that was about it.

Tape 3

00:30 We were working on the bridge, and we were instructed to go back the following day, which we did. And of course, there was nobody there, all of our people had moved out to Mt Garnett. There was to be a parade, and of course, we were ferried out to there eventually. And they were all in brand new shirts, trousers, putties, the whole works. Everybody was spick and span

01:00 and by that stage I'd been issued with a Bren gun. So of course, I had to take that on parade, and they're pretty heavy and non-manageable sort of things to carry around, And that was all right, we got to the parade, and (interruption). We were out at the bridge and they came out and said we were going back the next day, which we did.

01:30 It was only Waghorn and I, and when we got back to the campsite there was no one there, they'd all gone to a place called Mt Garnett. And we were driven out there, and I was issued a Bren gun for that occasion, and I had it then for a couple of years, really, unfortunately. But anyway, we get out to Mt Garnett, and the whole of the 7th Division were on parade.

02:00 And all in correct, and these military parades of that nature, to my mind, are well worth to see. I saw one just some, last November up in Sydney, and I enjoyed that to look at it, anyway, but on this particular occasion, we were told that Blamey [then General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces] was to review the troops.

02:30 And, but unfortunately, two weeks before, General Blamey had insulted the 57th Battalion [21st Brigade AIF parade at Koitake, 9th November 1942; 53rd Battalion was attached] over in New Guinea and called them cowards to their faces, which didn't go down too well, and I don't know the circumstances of how he got out of there, but I should imagine it would have been in a bit of a hurry. Anyway, when they were on parade,

03:00 his jeep arrived and the whistles blew, and of course, when he arrived, started from the left hand side, and the biggest blurt [booing] started that you've ever heard in your life, and he drove right through without stopping. His wife was with him. And it was justified, because the battalion that he had definitely insulted was, it wasn't warranted at all

03:30 and I still believe to this day that he got his deserts, because the battalion were not equipped to do what they were supposed to do, and they lost quite a few lives doing it. And anyway, the officers themselves were all called up the next day and were all dressed down rather well, but I don't think the officers took much notice of it, because we never heard anything at all.

04:00 But what happened then, which we didn't know about, was that we were all on review ready to take off to New Guinea. We should have known that, but we didn't, and of course we went back to the camp at Ravenshoe, and we had to pack everything up into the trucks. And we only had about half a dozen trucks, and our engineering truck was there, of course. And it was all loaded on

04:30 and everything was great. We were, all the tents were struck and loaded onto the trucks as well, and that was it. There was just bare ground there, and we all had our packs and everything. But that would have been the coldest night I've ever struck in my life. When you get frosts and colds up in Queensland, especially around that area, the frost looks like snow, and as thick as, and about midnight what we did,

05:00 we emptied four forty-four gallon drums of diesel oil on the ground, and spread quite a bit of petrol over, through it, and lit it, we all slept in between that for that particular night. Whether we slept or not, I can't remember. But that's how we survived that night. We would have frozen anyway, but that's how we didn't. On that particular day we

05:30 went into Townsville, and we got onto a Liberty ship [ships built rapidly for war service, using welding rather than riveting]. There was some thousands on that Liberty ship, and it took off from the wharf almost straightaway, and immediately we struck a hell of a rough sea, and I being one of the lucky ones, wasn't seasick at all.

06:00 Because I'd been used to our own boats, etc, and there was only a very small number and of course, we had the duty of trying to go around and trying to feed them what they could, and drink what they could, and, but it was, you know, that ship smelt like billyo because they were very, very ill. During that voyage, an American light cruiser came up alongside us,

06:30 it really came up very quickly alongside, and they must have talked to one another, and immediately it took off again, and that was the only bit of excitement we had bar all the sickies on board. And we got to Port Moresby, and all the sickies, you know, they had to put their packs on, there was nothing else to do. They put their packs on, were loaded onto open trucks again, motor trucks,

07:00 and across the main road, across from Moresby those days was a big sign, "Through these portals pass the best damn mosquito bait in the world." And how true that was. We were at Moresby, we went onto barren ground of course, and put the tents up, and we didn't do much there at all,

07:30 so we knew that the tents weren't going with us. Whatever was going to happen, we didn't know at all. And we were given the Sunday off and we went to one of the villages, which was out over the water at Moresby, and of course, the village itself was interesting to see, and it opened my eyes a little bit on how other people lived,

08:00 in the real primitive state. And we got back to camp, and on the very next day they picked out Colin McWaters, Waghorn, Williamson, and this fellow that was cold up the bush later on. I forget his name. I shouldn't because I had it all yesterday in my mind. Anyway, there was seven of us,

08:30 and they took us over to at the end of Jackson's Field [main airfield in Port Moresby, named for Squadron-Leader John Jackson, 75 Kittyhawk Squadron], where there was a D4 Caterpillar tractor [medium bulldozer] just standing. Second hand one. It wasn't a new one at all, and I had been to two diesel schools anyway, where I'd seen a D4 Caterpillar tractor. And the instructions were that we had to strip it and get it ready to go onto biscuit bombers [Douglas DC2/DC3 transport aircraft used to drop/land supplies], and it was to be in three parts,

09:00 and we were told we were allocated with nine biscuit bombers. Well, this is all new work for me and for everybody else too. And as I said, we had no sergeants, no corporals, no one. We were on our own. So we took the bull by the horns, and first thing we did was undo the tracks, and laid them out each side of the tractor.

09:30 And undid the transmission from the engine, took the blade off and its arms, and the overhead gear, we took it off. That was easy enough. And then we were given an A-frame [A-shaped lifting structure], which I had never seen before. Don't know where it came from. And the A-frame had perpendicular RSJs [Rolled Steel Joints] of twelve foot high and arms that spread out to seven foot each side of it,

10:00 and they were on four six-inch wheels, solid cast wheels, and that was what we had, to strip it down and try and put it in order. But we were issued then with a Fordson tractor, which was one of the old steel wheel ones, had the iron cleats. It was a petrol and kerosene thing. And the other one was a Farmall.

10:30 It had two wheels in the front, which were shaped like that, and two big wheels at the back, which were very, very handy at that stage, and later on. So we got them all down, and we had it spread over a little bit of an area, perhaps say fifty feet, hundred feet, and we had to bring them all together, which we did do, and had them so that they could be loaded onto three planes, when they arrived.

11:00 And the engine and a few bits went together. The tracks were to go together. And the transmission in the other one, which was all right. Now, how the hell are we going to lift them into the plane. While we were working on that, and it took some days, and what happened at Jackson's Field, and if I break down I'm sorry.

11:30 Some, the 31st or 33rd Battalion were like that at the end of the field, and they were all in the trucks waiting to be loaded onto planes, which was the case, no matter where it was, anywhere in the world. And with that, an American plane which had been sabotaged, bomber, didn't get off the ground and went straight into them. The official word was there was eighty-seven killed there and then,

12:00 but I reckon there was well over two hundred. Why they say this in the papers, and Australian politicians do this, I don't know, but there was eighty-seven killed. In another paper I saw later on after the war, there was twenty-three killed. I listened to a lecture just recently where a nursing sister had just arrived into Moresby couple of days after us, and their first job was to look after a lot of people,

12:30 a lot of soldiers that were in the blast. Now, why we weren't killed, I don't know. But we were sitting behind the tracks, which were rolled up and wired up, and we were having the inevitable cup of tea, which was something, and bits of the plane and everything else, flames and everything, went right around us. But the explosion noise

13:00 is partially to blame for what happened to me. I got a perforated ear drum later on, in the military, but at that stage, my hearing, because of the blast and everything else, it is, unless you're in it, you can't really explain the enormity of it all. But the worst part of it was, there was heads, arms, bodies, whatever, spread over a big area, and of course the trucks were all smashed to smithereens.

13:30 That particular battalion was disbanded. Of course, we were there, and we didn't know what to expect. But we had to clean up a lot of the debris there, and it was years later I met a bloke from the 2/4th Battery, over at Heidelberg, and that's why he was at Heidelberg, because of cleaning up that mess of people.

14:00 I got my dead meat tags [identity disks, worn around the neck] out especially to show you today.

How did it actually happen? (Interruption) Yes. It would be good to go back over that story just a little bit, and one of the things, perhaps we could start with, is how it actually happened. What do you understand?

Well, the plane was sabotaged, and we were told later on that the person who did it was hung.

14:30 Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but that's what we were told. We were told lot of things that I never ever believed in a period of time. But that's how it happened. The plane was sabotaged and it didn't get off the ground. It was fully loaded with bombs, and fully tanked up with fuel. And, of course, to have that to go into trucks, fully laden, which the trucks would weigh quite heavy, and of course, the impact was enormous.

15:00 It was something like two and a half hundred yards away from where we were. And the flames reached us, and the blast reached us of course, and all you do is put your hands up to your ears. You do that automatically. And I can still see the flames coming at us, and knew, well, oh, well, this is it, but we were the only two there.

15:30 This was young Wags [Waghorn] again. How it happened, why we didn't go, I don't know. But we didn't. And luckily, we never had much time to think about it. Luckily, two days later the planes arrived and we were allocated nine planes to put our gear on. And we weren't told where we were going at all, but how this stuff got onto the plane

16:00 was they had a lot of Angau [Australia and New Guinea Administrative Unit] people there, lovely people, native New Guineans, which we became very friendly with some of them, and they worked their butt off to load these parts onto these DC3s [Douglas DC3 transport aircraft]. And the DC3 door was at least nearly five foot off the ground, and they put carved trees to make slides for the stuff to slide up,

16:30 and to see them just manhandling the stuff up to put them in the door, was wonderful to see. But they did it. They never had a mishap at all. And it went in fairly well. We had to turn the engine, and the transmission. When they got in, we had to turn them inside the plane and slide them up the floor. The floors of a DC3 aircraft were made out of aluminium and they were H section, like that. And of course,

17:00 they'd all been dinted and things from other things they'd been doing over a period of time, I guess, and we eventually got them loaded in one afternoon. And with that, they said, "Oh, well, you've got to go and get your kit and come back here immediately." So we went back to the camp and got our kit and came back there immediately. And in the morning, we took off, of course, and they said, "You're going to Nadzab"

17:30 and Nadzab being across the Owen Stanleys and into the Markham Valley. John Lobb was with us at that stage, and he showed us where we were going, and he said that there is a very meagre airstrip there at the moment, and there was no opposition. We were told that then, which became absolutely strange, as it so happened.

18:00 We were told that there was no opposition and there wasn't any opposition whatsoever. All right. We were up in the air an hour or so and the word came out from the cabin saying that there was too much fog in The Gap [a seven-mile wide gap in the Owen Stanley Range enabling aircraft to fly through at 8,000 to 10,000 feet in clear weather] and they couldn't fly through it. Well, you know.

Which gap is this?

Up in the New Zealand [he means New Guinean] highlands. The highlands come up like that, and you fly right through the middle of them.

18:30 You could see, the next morning, you could see the villages, etc. That's a different story. We were up in the air and we came down at a place called Tsili Tsili, which would be half an hour's flight from where we had to go. I still say to this day that it was very clear through The Gap and they just didn't want to go for some reason or other. And the nine planes came down,

19:00 and they were all there, and when we did land, on the strip in front of us was a plane that was to take the Australian paratroops. The very first paratroops that were ever put down anywhere in the world. And it was the first American parachute drop that was going to; we also. But they came in from Jackson's Field.

19:30 Now that night we slept under the wings of our plane. We could sleep anywhere, no troubles at all, and which we did. In the morning the old man came around and he said, "You, you, and you, got a job for you." It was Harry Williamson, Roy Waghorn and myself. They strapped parachutes on our back, and we went into an aircraft, which we had never seen before, a DC3. Had no doors on it. And we went in there with a lot of other people,

20:00 and he told us we were to go in and just have a good idea of where the planes could come so as we could assemble the stuff, which was fair enough in itself. But Harry Williamson was, I reckon, nearly forty-five, and Wags was like myself. He was just a nineteen year old lad. So to me, it didn't matter. We didn't care what happened. We'd do anything, and I never had any concern whatever.

20:30 But what I remember of it all was the very last thing the person in the plane told us, that when you look like hitting the ground, run like hell, because that takes the momentum off the dropping. "Yeah, righto." So I remember doing that. And the parachute that I had, we slept in for the next two nights. And Wags, he rolled his up and he was going to bring it home, he said, and Harry's was all right.

21:00 We did actually see the last of the Americans coming down, and they lost one man, who candlesticked [parachute did not open properly], unfortunately. That was the only killing. But there was no opposition at all, so they could have come in the day before. They could have. I didn't like to say what I think, but you can have your own conclusion, but we could have been there the day before, and I wouldn't have had to go down in a parachute.

21:30 Not that it worried me in the finish, but that's been a bone of contention. There is nothing on the records, anywhere, to say that we did that, which is a pity, and our army diary is not anywhere near complete. Because what we did from then on was quite amazing. I can't say that I enjoyed it, but I worked like hell for some six-odd months.

22:00 We put the tractor together, and immediately we did, the Americans wanted it. But they didn't get it. And we would have shot them had they tried to take it.

How did they get this across to you, that they wanted your tractor?

They just wanted it, because we didn't know how to use it, that was their words, which was a lot of bunkum. Oh, Gordon Stokes we had, who was a bulldozer operator from here, and poor old Gordon's not with us any more, but we, what we did,

22:30 we cleaned that little airstrip into a big one, and within, it took us twelve hours non-stop, to put the tractor together again. And the next four hours it was working flat out, just going backwards mind you, to just flatten all the kunai grass and removing any stumps or whatever that could have been there. And I would think that within eight hours

23:00 planes were coming in in their hundreds and unloading and taking off immediately, because I thought the ground might sink because of all the equipment they carried. It was enormous. It all came in and was all unloaded by hand. And another thing that greeted us, there was a big company of Angau people on the ground, the day before we landed.

23:30 And I meet that commander of that every month. He was there on the ground the day before the parachute came down. And all they did, they walked over from Tsili Tsili. They'd been there for some time, and they were there, their purpose was to unload the planes, which they did do again the same way they put them up. Marvellous people. Lovely people. So we put everything together, and when it was, the place was in full operation,

24:00 we had to go up to Lae, which was then a little bit of combat there. And we had to go up in a jeep [light four-wheel military vehicle] to do a job, which I'm not going to tell you about, and we did the job all right, and we got to Lae and come back. And the road itself was just mud all the way, and it was terrible.

24:30 But then they were using the airstrip, and we were at our little two-man tent, we were out sitting on the road where the aircraft were landing, right alongside that. And I was in a tent with Wags for some four months there. And that worked fairly well, then all of a sudden, a big flight of American fighters was coming down, and unfortunately, they were coming down three at a time.

25:00 Well, it wasn't a big aircraft landing field that we had at that time, but it did, and unfortunately, the outside one came down and hit a decent log and it took the wheels off it, and came over, and the pilot got out of it unscathed, and he came over and blew the hell out of us for not cleaning up the airstrip. So we just let him go on his way. He walked away, he was satisfied, he went crook, but we could have shot him. But we didn't. And that was about the only misdemeanour there,

25:30 and that particular strip was used to take the prisoners of war away. And one of the things - detriment to the Australian army - was a Japanese soldier came in; he had a gold tooth. That gold tooth was raffled. And I feel very crooked about that, and I could have done my block quite easy at that sort of thing, because it's not on. And anyway, what did happen was from that stage

26:00 they started to build another airstrip three mile away, in a different direction. We were in a north-south situation, they made one where it is today, on the east-west situation, and it's a big airport. And I've not been back there. I'd like to see it but I haven't. And they more or less closed this airstrip down. And from then on, what we did, we walked our tractor over mountains

26:30 to get to a place called Dumpu in the Ramu Valley. And we did pull the tractor down again, and load it on another makeshift aerodrome. And they put it together at Dumpu.

Can we just stop there and just go back, recap [recapitulate] on a couple of things, and get a bit more detail. One of them is your first parachute jump.

Yeah. Go on.

Tell me a bit more about…

Well, there's nothing to it really. All you do…

27:00 **But something I was curious about was why they wanted you to parachute. Why you didn't go overland?**

Oh, too far.

From Tsili Tsili?

Too far. Would have taken two days. It would have taken two days. But the parachute jump. A lot of people make a big thing about it. It was nothing. We were, gee, you go to Luna Park, you get just as big a thrill. It was nothing. All I can remember about is the big boot in your back.

27:30 And the parachute was attached to the plane by a two-inch cord, flat cord. That goes from the top of the parachute to the rail up in the middle of the plane. And you get to the door and you have your hands both sides, and 'phhht', you're out. That's it. And we were about three thousand feet. And it took, oh, ten hours to come down. I know it was only about two minutes.

28:00 But I was running when I hit. But no trouble at all.

What was the terrain like that you landed in?

Flat. Very flat. But trees. Actually I should have brought the photo of it. It's down at the barracks, actually. It was in the New Guinea Gold paper, and that paper was eventually got hold of by the Brisbane Mail and they have the whole detail of it. The whole lot of it.

28:30 And can be readily got. I had it, and by the time I distributed it to everybody, I left myself without a copy. But the big copy, or the photo is at the army barracks at Oatley, and you can pick out where the three of us were in the air. We were just about, oh, just about to land, and we had less than four hundred yards to move back to where we decided that's where we're going to be.

29:00 As it proved, it was worthwhile, because when the planes came in, we did the stupid thing. Lit a fire, to let them know where we were, and, it was only a little fire. But wasn't approved too well, here and there, but that's where it was, and they came up to us and they were unloaded in less than two hours.

29:30 And of course, we had hard work then to get them all together. But we had the A-frame and the tractor was in three planes, but the little Farmall and Fordson tractors were godsends at that stage because they could pull all the stuff and pull it all together, and all we had to do was put the two cogs of the transmission onto the two tracks. We had them perfectly parallel to each other,

30:00 and parallel at the end, and we just dragged it up over there, and levered it up and put the cogs onto

the tracks, and put little stands underneath the front of it, and brought the engine up to it. And then we did have a little bit of trouble joining the engine to the transmission the first time, because there's no give anywhere at all, but it got there, but it took us twelve hours to put it together, non-stop.

30:30 But then what was the worst part about it, and nobody thought about how to feed us. Because we were just seven, and we were transferred to another, under the control of another part of the army, which was in the further formation. But they weren't with us at all. We were on our own. Seven of us. And it was two days later

31:00 and John Lobb knew what was going to happen, so he just hopped on a plane and went back to Moresby and brought back a cook and food, which was two days later. But between time, all we had was gold fish [herrings] and black currant jam. And have that for two or three days and see how you get on.

Can I just also ask you, it was assumed, or there must have been some intelligence, that led them to believe the Japanese were in as far as Nadzab?

31:30 There weren't there. There was none there and they knew that. That was the intelligence report that came back to us. And we knew that, before we left Moresby, and why they didn't take us straight through, I don't know. And I've never found out, No one will tell me. But it just seems so strange that we could go, be told that there's no opposition, and it's in all the books that you read, there's no opposition, and we came down at Tsili Tsili for the night.

32:00 **What's your theory about what happened? Do you have a theory on it?**

Yes. But please don't ask me. It's not. I don't like rubbishing people down, because they have a reason for it. We knew what we were doing, but we were in the hands of the American air force, and that was it. So, you know, you've got to abide by their rules, and I have my theory, yes,

32:30 but I'm not going to repeat it. But it turned out that our part of it was spot on. What we had to do. And dear old John, when he said, "You, you and you." He realised that it, like we were just kids, very adventurous and so on, except dear old Harry. He'd just come home from the Middle East. But he didn't object at all,

33:00 and away we went. And we did perfectly well, all within sixty feet of one another. And there was no problem at all. And all we were interested in, was clearing out of there and going over towards the trees, which we did do. And there we set ourselves. This is where we were going to be,

33:30 and we knew that the seven of us could park in the trees, and we would be out of the sight of everybody and that's it. And as it so happens, that's the way it was. But the planes came and took off about thirty feet in front of our tents, which didn't matter, because once it come half past five at night, everything ceased. Twilight over there is twilight like up in Queensland. Dark within a quarter of an hour.

34:00 So after six o'clock, the war stopped. But we never ever, in all the time I was there, we never put a guard at night time at all, we just went sound asleep without worrying.

Can I take you back a bit to when you joined, or when you were transferred to the 53rd Field Park, and how that came about and what you thought about it?

Well, yes, when you get called up

34:30 or join up or whatever, you've got to say what you were doing. I was doing turning and fitting, and of course, that must have been caught up in the records, and they just transferred us out. See, George went to the 10th Field Ambulance and he was transferred from the 10th Field Ambulance to the 53rd Field Park, because he was a welder, and a damn good one as it turned out. And I being a turner and fitter, and Arthur was a plumber, fully qualified plumber, Arthur was.

35:00 He worked for his father. And that's how it happens. Nowadays, you can straight into the Engineers, straight into the Artillery, or wherever you wish to go, and they will consider putting you there, but any engineering is automatically a sapper.

So how did you feel about the transfer?

I thought it was lousy at the time, because I wanted to stop with my battalion. But now, after a further three and a half years,

35:30 I wouldn't have had it any other way because I was doing what I loved, and doing all what I did for the rest of my life. And as it so happened, the people themselves were wonderful. Last week, we went through Orbost, where three of them came from, two of our tent mates lived there and owned the big pub there. I just went there for old sentiment sake.

36:00 They're all dead and I said 'G'day,' and we went and had a cup of tea and a sandwich on the Snowy [River] banks, which we had talked about for years, and that was rather nice. That was last week. That answers the question. They just allocate you out, and you don't, you didn't have any say whatsoever.

Why was it called Field Park?

A Field Park, there's no more such thing, nowadays. And a colonel told me just two years ago

36:30 that we had too much, oh, too much equipment, which was a lot of baloney. But anyway, a Field Park was that they had anything and everything, like build roads, bridges, cut coal, wood, supply water, you name it, any engineering feat at all. Explosives. Everybody was an explosives expert.

37:00 Like we all could have been terrorists. At all. I was taught how to use plastic [plastic explosive (PE)], and I've never forgotten it. I was taught how to set booby traps, and I've never forgotten it. And as a matter of fact, we're going to Puckapunyal next Saturday. Do the very same thing as an experiment to other people. And well, that's it. I was pleased I did,

37:30 because it did serve me for the rest of my life. But that was, that little episode getting from there and to Dumpu was rather intensive, but then it got worse. Inasmuch as we hadn't lost anybody til then, and at Dumpu, on the day we rejoined the company, they were all alongside the river at Dumpu,

38:00 and they'd formed all up, and the seven of us marched in. It was incredible. But they were all told that they had to relinquish some of their food because we were getting it all up the front, which was a lot of baloney. But anyway, we went back to our old tent mates, etc, but I was still given to look after the D4,

38:30 along with the 25 KVA sets, and one of the little jobs I did there, as a fill in, I made a refrigerator for the hospital, which was just around the corner, out of kapok [cotton wool filling] mattresses. It had a wooden floor and kapok mattresses, and the door was a kapok mattress, too. They were all pulled together by ropes and the power plant was, cut a hole in one mattress at the back,

39:00 push the refrigeration plant in, which was complete, and seal it up around it. All you did was start the motor, and you had a refrigerator. It worked. And I had to maintain that for a couple of weeks. And it was just before Christmas time. If I break down now, don't worry about it. The tractor went out, and I was always well on the tractor. Like, I knew exactly what was happening to it.

39:30 And Colin had taken it out and he'd gone up to Shaggy Ridge. Why, I still don't know. But he would have done a job up there, on that day. Transferring something out, getting wounded, or whatever. Doesn't matter. Anyway he come back, and it was Christmas Eve, and he came onto the road, and he had to do a right hand turn over the river. The river was about twenty feet wide around the river, and straight down. He came down the road, did a right hand turn, swung around too much,

40:00 straight in the river, ran over and killed him. This was Christmas Eve, and the rotten tractor didn't go under the water, but poor old Colin was underneath the track. It drowned him and killed him, and he was one of the seven. That was the first person that I lost, and his brother was in our unit, and that shouldn't happen, that brothers should be with other brothers. When anything like this happened, it upsets everybody,

40:30 and being professional people really, like all tradespeople, etc, they more or less know a little bit about what's going on. When anything like that happens, it hurts very, very hard. And Colin was, oh, five foot nine, twelve stone, dark black curly hair. As full of life, and could tell a yarn with the best of them.

41:00 And he wrote a bit of poetry, which I tried to find last night to show you, and I had it. It was all about a little jeep. But anyway, that's a different story. I must find it. But anyhow, that was Christmas Eve 1944. and just to make it worse, Colin had already made a little cemetery at Dumpu, and he was the second one in it,

41:30 and that was hard, you know, we buried him there. You know, we had to make a coffin which we did, and that was that, and just a little while later they sent the six of us home on leave, which was pretty good. I don't remember much about the...

Tape 4

00:30 **No, no, it would be good to hear about the different men in your group.**

Well, yeah.

Who they were, and like what you were just saying?

OK. Well, our group was the OC [Officer Commanding] of course, John Lobb, and he was the proprietor of Laxettes [brand of laxative tablet], and we always say, we always used to tell him that he give us the irrits [diarrhoea] during the war, and afterwards as well. But he became head of Legacy [ex-service philanthropic organisation] here for a year,

01:00 and he was a nice, wonderful man. His batman [officer's assistant] was Bruce somebody, and his classification was marksman and he could bring down a spider. No worries at all. Very good, and at this stage, I still had the Bren gun and I whispered in his shell pink ear, that the Bren gun's no good to us. He said, "No, it isn't, is it?." He said, "Well, if you can do something about it, do it."

01:30 Well, you've only got to give a nod and Waghorn was away. He came back with seven Owen guns [sub-machine gun, 9mm calibre], and we all had Owen guns then for the rest of the period, and ammunition.

And that was easy because we used to just have to walk out to the strip and get some. No problem. But anyway, when we got to Dumpu it was different story altogether. After Colin was killed,

02:00 I automatically took the D4 over, and we used to have to go up there. And what it was, in some time, and I got there, at Shaggy Ridge, below Shaggy Ridge, where the artillery was, there was two lakes right in the mountains, and they were on the south side of the lake, shooting up over the mountains at the ridge. And after every half a dozen salvos [fire emission by all guns],

02:30 they used to have to move the guns in case anything came back at the same spot [counter-battery fire]. Nothing ever did. But we did this at night time. And I have brought wounded out and dying, on sledges, at the back of the D4. At that stage, there was only four jeeps at Dumpu. We had one. And on the days that I didn't take the tractor up I took the jeep,

03:00 and a couple of times they would strap the wounded across the bonnet, one each side and one across the back, and you'd have four with a passenger. And you'd only take them down so far, where the natives, and the native carriers and the other jeeps, would take them away, and I did that for, oh, a couple of months or more.

Was that a dangerous job for you to be doing?

03:30 Oh, let's say I wouldn't do it for a living, and yes, it was. As it so happens, I got fired at once, and he missed. But it never worried me. It didn't worry me, because I had a dirty big blade in front of me, and I always travelled with it up, you know, just above the engine height. You'd have to be a pretty good shot to have a go

04:00 single shot. With a multiple-shot machine gun, you could. But with a single shot, no, you couldn't, because you'd be moving up and down quite a bit.

But what about getting out of the tractor, and having to go and collect the bodies? How did that work?

How did…?

How did, once you got into the area where the wounded and dead were, you had to get out of the tractor?

Oh, yes, Oh, yes.

Did you have people assisting you?

Oh, yes, there was always the native carriers there,

04:30 the Angau people, which all the stories you hear are absolutely true. They're wonderful. And I must tell you another story, where in the tracks coming out, where the troops walked in single line, they formed a little gully where they're walking, and of course, when it rains, the water and soon they just trudge up through there. And I did see this,

05:00 and where it, two little riverlets came in like that, and the troops were coming down, in between the centre of them was a Salvation Army man with a little fire running, with an umbrella over the top of it, with hot coffee. And he was handing them out with the old milk cream tins, and they'd just drink it and drop the coffee there,

05:30 and somebody would pick them up and wash them in the riverlets, and I never found out his name. That cup of coffee cost me a fortune. I can't go past the Salvation Army people. They have cost me a lot of money, but I don't regret any of it.

06:00 I was pleased to get out of that. When they, the Wirraways, cleaned up Shaggy Ridge, eventually all that was on Shaggy Ridge was tree stumps. No greenery at all, it was just bare, where they'd plastered it. And that left the road open to Finschhafen [to Bogadjim and Madang]. At that stage we were pulled out,

06:30 and with that we went back to Dumpu. Yeah, we stopped at Dumpu for a little while, and I don't know how, I can't remember how, oh, yes, I do, now. That's right. I went home on leave from Dumpu and then I came back and the unit had left Dumpu and gone into Lae,

07:00 and a week after we got back, the six of us, John as well, the whole unit went home on leave. And they were, I remember, one of the first jobs I had was to drive truckloads of them in to the boat, and they went home on the Australia ship, which was a luxury ship then and that was that. And it was there that we just had a holiday at Lae.

07:30 We were right near the beach, and of course, we were catching fish. There were just twenty in the camp, I suppose, and it was just like a holiday. There was nothing going on at Lae at all. It was all up past Finschhafen by then. And we were more or less given the run, do what we liked. Of course, the unit came back, and Arthur Addison,

08:00 a sergeant we had, dismissed us all one day, said, "We're going swimming. We're going to have a look at a ship," which had run aground in the harbour, and it was a Japanese ship. Had been there for some time, and the front of it was nearly out of the water. In the back, the propeller was just sticking out and

Arthur Addison said, for some reason, “We’ll go and see if we can remove that propeller”, which was about, the middle of it, was about six foot under water.

08:30 “Well, yeah, righto, we’ll have a go.” And of course we went out there, and we had our boots on. That was a must, because you get cut out there, you didn’t know what you picked up. And we were mucking around there, trying to get it off. And Arthur, I can still see him, he tapped me on the shoulder, and he went up. And as he turned around, his left foot, boot, got me right there, in the ear,

09:00 and I passed out. And why I didn’t sink, I don’t know, because you’re supposed to sink when you pass out in water. But I came up. And of course, I was unconscious and I ended up in the hospital, and I had a perforated ear drum, and I was in a bad way for a little while. And I had my twenty-first birthday in there, that spell, and I remember the birthday.

09:30 I’ve still got the present, where they give me a burr and brush set [tool set], which was in a Red Cross parcel. Somehow or other, they made a birthday cake for me, which I really appreciated, and I was a good month in there, but eventually I got out. The ear had grown over, but I’ve had a headache ever since, even to this day.

10:00 And I’ve lived with it, and I’ve got tinnitus [ringing in the ears] quite a bit of the time, like bells are ringing in your ear. But anyway, we were there for a while and then...

What hospital did you go to, Arthur?

The 2/4th, and very big hospital there in Lae, and that’s the Heidelberg people, of course.

Were there many other injured people there in the hospital?

Oh, yes. Wounded.

10:30 **What’s it like. You were there for a month. You would have...?**

Oh, yes, lots of wounded. See, they’d work on them until they could get back to Australia. And they’d get them right until they were good enough to move, and then take them right out altogether for discharge or back to your unit. But if you were going back to your unit, you didn’t go back to Australia. Nearly all the ones that were sent back to Australia were discharged after a while or whatever, and that’s another story, I guess, so.

11:00 **And who were the medical staff working there?**

Oh, one was Refshauge [later Major-General Sir William Refshauge], the father of the one that’s doing all the stuff up in Sydney now. He was the one that gave out the order for the Atebrin to be taken for the malaria. Because I had malaria at Dumpu two or three times, and you had to wear long sleeves, and never any shorts any more, which was all right I guess.

11:30 I did have malaria three or four times at Dumpu, and I ended up having dengue at Lae, which is a horrible disease. But anyway, eventually, we all got on a Liberty ship to go across to Bougainville. We didn’t know what we were going to expect there,

12:00 and the Liberty ship was full loaded, and our dear old truck was left behind, unfortunately. I never saw it any more. And the Liberty ship was quite good. It was a pleasant trip over. But getting off the rotten thing, of course, you don’t come off on a wharf. You come down a rope ladder. And they broke a couple of ankles and knees and so on, with the ship going up and coming down. And you were a weight with a full pack on board.

12:30 Well, I never let go until I felt the deck coming up, and I must have had about three inches, but that was about it. And they took us ashore in barges, and we didn’t know what to expect, but when we got to shore, the whole shoreline had been blasted by the navy boats. All the big trees didn’t have any leaves on them at all. It was just bare. But there wasn’t any opposition there at all, only about five, ten mile out.

13:00 Plenty of opposition. So we were there for quite a while. We parked on the beach for two or three nights and then we went into a well-organised camp, and the tents were all together, and they were in great long rows. Three rows. The three companies were all in a row. The main office and main tents were up the top, full of officers. I never saw officers at all.

13:30 Not ever. Never come near me, I don’t know why. But anyhow we had our own little group, which went out and did everything, anywhere. It was a well-run camp. That was the only time I was ever called on to do a night picket. Never been, done a picket in four years, up til then and I thought that was rather strange, but anyway, that was something.

14:00 We were, we did the water point there. We dug water there for the wagons to come in and fill up with fresh water, and it was about fourteen feet deep. I went out there for a holiday and it was all right. It was a holiday.

Where were you based on Bougainville?

At Torokina then, and we ended up at Honiara, what they’re talking about today. And Honiara those

days was nothing.

14:30 There was nothing there at all. Not anything. And we were right alongside the river. And Torokina was quite good, quite a holiday, and we didn't get into any trouble there. Well, we did get a little bit of trouble, I guess. We come across a native canoe, which held eight people, and of course, we decided we'd take the canoe and go and get some fish.

15:00 We took a few grenades with us and rode out to the fleet that was going to Leyte [Philippines] at that stage. And we were running all around them. We should have got shot, but we didn't. But we got a lot of fish, too. But unfortunately, Roy Dopper had a grenade in his hand, outside the canoe, and held onto it too long, and blew his hand off. He drove the lift at Myers [department store] after the last war for about thirty years.

15:30 But that was Torokina and it was in May, Friday afternoon, and Arthur Addison, which is the staff sergeant, came rattling on the tent, "Eh, Thommo. How would you like to go to a school in Melbourne?" And of course, he got the biggest raspberry this side of the black stump. "Go on. Get out of here, you stupid old so and so." He said, "You're to be ready in one hour and a half." I said, "You're fair dinkum."

16:00 He said, "Yes, I am." Well, what I came home with was about one hundred and fifty letters that weren't going to be censored, forty two-ounce packets of tobacco, a shirt, my pack, my belt, hat, and that was it. I never had, oh, and my two blankets, because you never went anywhere without your blankets or groundsheet.

16:30 And that afternoon, I got into a DC3 which was on the milk run, which, would you believe, started in Perth and landed at Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Townsville. And of course, it went up to, it took off from Torokina. But the outfit had moved to Honiara at that time.

17:00 But anyway, I was on that plane, and I was given a pass, which I never looked at. My travelling orders.

I don't understand. What school were you being sent to?

An engineers school. All about tractors, and I wasn't told that. All I was told to be ready, and I'd get a VIP [Very Important Person] pass, which I'd never heard of before. And what had happened was

17:30 that I was given the pass, and all I had was just the minimum of gear, and I should have brought everything home with me, because I had no clothes at all. Anyway, I get on the plane, and that night he stopped at Milne Bay which I'd never seen before, and of course, then it was a luxury place of big row of pine trees, around the bay, but from the shore

18:00 the water went straight down, and the ships landed straight across. You could still see the submarine net there, and it was all fair dinkum, etc, but the pilot said, "We'll be off to Townsville, half past four in the morning." Right, good. Well, I was right. I slept on the floor in the, ah, people who was directing traffic there. And I flew down

18:30 then the gorge you go and spend thousands of dollars to see now. The coral out from the island?

The Great Barrier Reef?

Yeah, I saw the Great Barrier Reef in beautiful morning sunshine. It looked like Dunkley's window of years ago. Absolutely beautiful. And that was all right. He landed at Townsville and he said, "You've got your pass?" And I said, "Yes."

19:00 And I still didn't look at it. "Here, there it is, help yourself." And of course, he handed it to the MPs [Military Police] that came over and took one look at me, and, "Yes, sir, come on, sir, sir, sir." And the pilot said, "Don't worry about it. We're going down to Brisbane anyway" he said, "Righto, stop on." So I stopped on board. And I said, "I'm not going to argue." But anyway, I stopped on and we eventually landed at Brisbane

19:30 and I had a little walk around Brisbane. He said, "Don't go away, just stop there." He said, "You've got one of the best passes there was." I said, "I don't know why?" But anyway, he said, "Haven't you read it?" I said, "No." He said, "Read it." "This person is to arrive in Melbourne as soon as possible. Urgently." So anyway, Addison had put that on.

20:00 So, as it turned out I was walking around Brisbane, and the pilot said, "Look, we're not going any further, but I've just talked to the co-ord [coordinator] over there. That fellow is going to Sydney in about ten minutes." So I just ambled over there to another DC3, hopped on that, and we eventually arrived in Sydney, and the sergeant-major there in charge of transport, he took one look at it. He said, "You've got to be in Melbourne by Monday morning."

20:30 And it was now Saturday afternoon late. So he said, "You can go by train." I nearly fell over. Anyway, I did go by train to Melbourne, and I arrived on the Sunday afternoon, late, and I was given a pass to go home for the night, to report to Kooyong Road in the morning. I said, "What about clothes, sir?" He said, "Where are your clothes?" I said, "I haven't got any."

21:00 He said, "Oh, come with me." So I was fully equipped in Sydney with clothes at the QM [Quartermaster] store and I had a thing called the AB83 [Record of Service book], which I'd never had, which is full

record of what you've been issued, because we were never in the one place long enough to get them. Anyway, he issued me with one of these. They took my photo and put it on them. And I was issued with everything. Two more blankets.

21:30 I desperately tried to get another groundsheet, but I didn't. But anyway, I arrived home, and I got a taxi from Royal Park, and Mum was sitting on the veranda, and she fell off almost. That was it. So I ended up at the school the following afternoon. I hadn't seen Joy till then. We weren't married, we were engaged,

22:00 and as soon as I was out of there, I had to ask permission to take off because I was supposed to go back to Royal Park. But I knew damn well I wasn't going back to Royal Park. So I then hopped on the tram, which was about two hundred yards away, and Joy lived at the end of the tram terminus, and I got there, and I met her at the railway station when she was coming home from work. Of course, her mouth came open, and anyway, one thing led to another

22:30 and I said to her, "We should get married" which we did on the 7th of July.

What, you proposed to her on the street?

Oh, no, I proposed prior to that. And yes, but we said we should get married now, which was good, which we did on the 7th of July. I had to complete school, after we were married.

23:00 And I got weekend leave, and we went down to Frankston. I completed the school, but it was nothing that I hadn't done before. And I passed that all right, and the day I reported back was the day that the war ended. Of course, they knew we were coming. They had to stop it. That's my story anyway.

OK. So, Arthur, we've sort of moved very quickly, really, haven't we, through those years.

They were the main things really.

So, now what would be good is to actually go back. Like we've been saying,

23:30 **go back and we can draw out a little bit more detail, if you can remember.**

Go for your life.

One of the things that comes to mind, first of all, is you said that when you got the letter, or you were told, you got the instructions that you'd be going back to school, and you were given, what, a hundred and fifty letters? And all this stuff.

All the letters...

Tell me about that.

Well, all the letters are censored. And of course, have you seen a censored letter? There's bit chopped out of it all over the place.

24:00 And of course, they could write anything, which they did too and I even got letters from all the officers as well. So, as it so happened, look, it was all right. But one thing that I did learn about later on, when they shifted to Honiara, they were coming up against opposition which was pretty good, because all of the troops, a lot of the troops had been coming out of China, and sent down there,

24:30 Japanese troops, pretty good troops, and if the war hadn't ended in the next fortnight, they would have been run over at Honiara with the troops that were up in the hills. They were very good. There's no question about that. And they all know it. And that was pretty hard to take, when I learnt about it, but it was a fact. When the day finished, the troops up at the front were getting a little bit of a going over,

25:00 which wasn't too good. But to answer your question with the letters, it was just a free-for-all, sending letters home uncensored. That was it.

And you weren't, you know, stopped or questioned about that, as you were coming through?

They wouldn't stop me, mate, I tell you. They just wouldn't. I would walk through brick walls, those days. I was pretty tough.

25:30 And I didn't take cheek at all. I knew exactly what I had to do, and I was given six blokes to look after and by gee, I looked after them. I didn't want any rank at all, but they all got home, except one. And what happened to him was, Gordon Stokes, he was getting off the ship at Townsville and being Gordon Stokes, he did an Irish jig on the little square platform,

26:00 and fell in between the ship and the wharf, and it came in and squashed him. The ship squashed him. Now that was pretty hard to take, and I was pleased I wasn't there. I had seen, there's more than those two names on the wall up there, but the ones I look for is Gordon Stokes and Colin McWaters in the War Memorial, I have seen them, and that was my war.

26:30 There's a lot left out, there is, but...

Can you tell me about the men, the group of seven? You started telling me a bit before, but

can you paint a portrait of each of those men?

Yeah, all right. All right. First up, the cook that John Lobb brought back was a shearer's cook. and could make a meal out of anything, which he had to at stages, and a very, very good cook. Lobbie's batman was a marksman,

27:00 and he was off a farm, but a good marksman. And I'm sorry, I've forgotten his name, but then there was Colin McWaters. He was a machine operator, bulldozer driver, front-end loader, not a front-end loader, not a forklift driver, because they never had forklifts those days. But other mechanical things.

And he was a poet as well.

Pardon.

27:30 **He was the one that wrote poetry?**

Yes. Waghorn was a turner and fitter, but his forte in life, he was to do with air-driven tools, all American stuff, and we did use quite a bit of that at one stage, and of course, he was only the same age as I am, but he was very good with air-driven tools, no doubt about that. He ended up with a fleet of trucks at Ballarat, of his own.

28:00 But, ah, oh, Gordon Stokes, of course. He was a machine operator. And I didn't know that he'd been promoted to corporal until they told me he'd been killed. That's it. But they, you could put your life in their hands.

28:30 And you could be quite assured that you'd be quite safe, if they could prevent it. There was no doubt about it, we were like a brick wall. And at nighttime, by the airstrip, you know, you could expect anything coming through there, and they never did get anything, but we knew exactly where everybody was on the ground. We knew exactly their escape route, if there was any,

29:00 and we were so exacting it was wonderful really. It really was. To make an airfield out of a ploughed paddock, which we did do, which was an achievement in its own. It was just unfortunate that they moved it. But why, better heads than mine, I guess. But they were a wonderful group, and after the war I went to work for Perce Morling, an officer, of course,

29:30 as a turner and fitter, and that's where I completed my time. But after that, I did a lot of other things, which do you want to hear now or not?

No, we'll just stick with the...

Well, the wartime.

You said before that your bond was so strong that you knew their escape routes. What do you mean by that?

If we had to move in a hurry you could, look, to grab your webbing

30:00 and your bag, which was always packed. When you were out in little bit precarious places, your bag was always packed. You could grab it one arm, and you'd have it on in half a second, and you'd be away. We knew where each other's stuff was, we knew where they were working and we, you know, we could assist each other, no worries. We did a couple of times, if you had to use it that way.

30:30 And nothing happened at all. It was just straightforward. But most of the time it was just plain sailing. But we did use the exercise quite a bit, twice we did, and there was no problem, and one of the things where we did use an exercise between us all, we were out of food. And the Markham River was running pretty quick, and they all do up there, and we had stacks of rope, and the natives had told us that there was a native garden over there.

31:00 You point your finger with a native, and it could be ten mile away. Right. So what we did, we strung out a piece of rope, it would be about a quarter of a mile, and went upstream, jumped in with the rope and went across the other side. Because we could swim like fish, or I could. And we took an inflatable canoe with us, which you blow up; nine sections like pillowcases and you build a canoe out of it. And we went over to the garden, and the bananas weren't quite ripe,

31:30 but that didn't matter. But there were stacks of pawpaws [papaya] there, and we brought them back, and there was three natives with us. And we filled the canoe up, and we lost a bit coming back over the river. We just tied it on with the rope and let it go, and of course, it went down the river like that, and bobbing up and down, we lost a bit. But we got some fruit out of that. Another thing, one of the jobs we did, was build rope bridges for the troops to go across at night.

32:00 And I don't know if you know rope bridges or not, but it's five ropes. Two under the arms, two down there, and one in the middle. And you put planks in the middle one for them to walk on, if you could. You just walk along and they walked across the planks. It would be rocking like billyo, but they worked, and we used to transport about, we did transport two lots of five hundred troops over at night time. And we had to bring them back the following night.

32:30 **What sort of strain would that put on the rope bridge?**

Well, no, not really. What you're saying, yes, there is. But what you did, you made what was called a Spanish windlass. A Spanish windlass is a round peg, about four inches round, and you wrap the rope around it, two or three times, like that. And you put a peg, roped a peg across there,

33:00 and it hooked around like that, with the rope going around the peg, and tightening up the rope and you could almost play a tune on it. And if you ever want to shift anything, use a Spanish windlass and it all depends how many rungs you put on it, and how many hold the bars, you could shift a house if you wanted to, with a Spanish windlass. And that's how we built that, and we'd tie that onto a tree, which is easy enough.

33:30 We did a lot of rope work. We did a lot of explosive work, too, bringing down trees, etc, but we did that twice. We moved two full companies of troops of a nighttime, and it was always done at nighttime because you're sitting ducks going across it in daylight. But we never lost anyone, which was good.

34:00 That's what our little group did. And all the time we were doing the things from the ridiculous to the sublime. One of the sublime things was digging for water. Why you ever dug for water, because it rained every bloody day. We had stacks of water, and what we used to do, the old groundsheet, put the groundsheet up and let the water run into our water bottles, and we were never short of water.

34:30 The groundsheet was the best bit of equipment that the Australian soldier had in New Guinea because it became a coat, it came down to there, out like that, and down the back the same. It had five buttons down there, and a big collar. But the only thing with the collar, when you wore a slouch hat, if you put your head back like that, cold water would run down your back,

35:00 especially at nighttime. I used to go to sleep sitting up against a tree at times, for various reasons, and that happened a few times. And you couldn't swear out loud, because somebody would know where you are. But it wasn't good. But that was a little group, well trained, and they were spot on. Spot on.

They sound like they were a group of entertainers?

35:30 Oh, yes, yes. Oh, Herbie Barker, he was a good sword dancer, and he did a lot of competition work here. His mother was in the Tivoli chorus line, here in Melbourne. So he was well trained to do dancing. And we had obvious singers, and it's quite surprising, when the tough gets tough, if somebody recites poetry,

36:00 you'd be amazed how the people listened. And this is what happened. We had a concert party with a fellow that used to be on Channel 9 [television station], with his wife. He came up with a team of ladies, and he insulted one of them on the stage. And before you could say Jack Robinson,

36:30 two blokes got up and clobbered him. You just don't insult ladies. Because they hadn't seen a female for a couple of years, some of them. And Bob...

Bert Newton?

No, no, no, no, no. Before them.

Bob Dyer. Bob and Dolly Dyer?

Yep. Hell of a good entertainer, but they clobbered him and he, you know,

37:00 and he realised, fortunately, what he'd said, and you know, he was quite apologetic. But that did happen. They did, I did go along to, in Torokina, I went to a market and I bought a, that New Zealand shell plate, which is here somewhere. But there was lots of things

37:30 that were available if you liked to go and have a look. I never went to church for the whole four years, because I was very church-minded because we had to go to church at home. Never went to church for four years, and I haven't been since. It's been quite strange in that regard, because I played tennis for a church team down here, for forty years.

38:00 Pretty good at it too. And afterwards I played bowls and whatever. But is there any other tapes that you want to do, or is there more to come?

Yeah. After lunch.

Well, from then on, the experiences that I had, you would pay lots of money to have these days. But even though they do the work, forget the work and enjoy the places you're at.

38:30 Absolutely amazing, and I travelled from one end of Australia to the other in a week, and Joy still goes crook about me not being home, and which was unfortunate, but war days, I've never forgotten it, and what I got out of it was a perforated ear drum, and a little bit of psychological effect,

39:00 on the effect of that blast and I was going to Heidelberg for quite a while. And I haven't been for a while, but I have got the headache and what is happening is, I'm currently being treated for temporal enteritis, which is the two veins from the temple, and they've done a biopsy and there's nothing there, they say, untoward, but they told me I could go blind in a very short time,

39:30 and I believe them, because I'm pleased that light's not any stronger. When everything's dark I can see perfectly. But I'm getting drops in my eyes, penicillin, three and four times a day now. But I'm fighting that like mad, you can bet your boots. And that happened, they carted me away from here at half past one

40:00 on the 3rd day of March, this year to the hospital. But it's nothing's changed. It's deteriorated a little bit. But I've got to keep going because of Joy, you see.

So do you connect that back to your war years?

I connect it back to the hit in the head, because I'm positive that that part of the skull's bent a bit there somewhere,

40:30 because why would you be unconscious for a couple of days. There must have been a hit of a decent sort of a whack. And to be in hospital, I can still feel those blasted tapers, that they put into your ear hole. And yeah, I do. I blame it all. See, the blast, you're deaf for quite a while. You know how you do that to clear your head.

41:00 Nowadays, I guess, everybody does, and it's not funny, I'll tell you. It really isn't. But then again, when you see war films, and your eyes are glued to it, you can put yourself in the same position in lots and lots of cases. The blasted Bren gun I had, I never ever fired it in anger.

41:30 I won't say the same about Owen guns, but we were the best equipped. Wags came back, where he got them I still don't know til this day, but he came back with nine. Nine of them. And he had two of them. Oh, gosh. But his story's a little bit different to mine. He got a couple of Japanese, which he was rather proud of, but I wasn't. But oh, dear, oh dear, but the stories Arthur Lee would tell you.

Tape 5

00:30 **Yeah, so Arthur, let's talk more about the nuts and bolts. Literally, what you did.**

All right. Are you right to go? Well, in joining the Field Park, as I said, we had this truck, which Perce Morling designed, and it had everything for a steel engineer required,

01:00 like the lathe, the welder, and the power to make it work out in the paddock anywhere at all, and the 25 KVA set was, well, we had two of those actually, and one of the stories that I remember very well, out of it, the V8 motors of those days, cost Field Park twenty-five pound each. Today, if you went to buy them they'd be many, many thousands, the same thing. And I thought that was rather dear.

01:30 But we did make our own saw bench. We had two four-foot blades, which we had a saw doctor to look after them. And we cut, actually cut down the timber, brought the timber in, and we cut it up into scantlings of all sizes to be used anywhere and everywhere. And if, say for instance, they had to build a bridge, and they built many,

02:00 usually to build a bridge they would make it up on the ground, on one side of the bridge, obviously, and on the other side they would dig out the ground itself for the bearers to go in. And what we'd do would put the bearers on the other side, then put the planks all on the top of them, and finish the bridge on top of the bank.

02:30 Now it if was no more than twenty feet long, all the tractor would do is come and tie it up and pull it over the river, and as it came over they'd lift the front of it up, and when it got over they'd just drop it straight into the holes, and the bridge was ready to use. So simple that is was just unreal. You see people today making hellishly good footings for bridges,

03:00 and of course, we could run, if we had them, which we didn't, thirty-ton trucks over them without any trouble, they were that good. The main planks, of course, were about eighteen inches across usually. And the natives used to call it diwai [New Guinea pidgin for 'wood'] was the wood, and it was not like our hardwood. It was softer than our hardwood. But there was plenty of it, and it was very, very straight.

03:30 And we used a lot of that. And of course I used a lot of it just to pull the finished stuff over, or you know, putting timber for the hospital. Making the hospital wards and the beds and all the rest of it. We did a lot of scantling for that, and a lot of that wood came from underneath Shaggy Ridge, would you believe. It was brought down by the tractor,

04:00 and we made our own sledge. Everything was brought down on the sledge. That was no worries. You could bring heavy amounts down like that. Also, the petrol tanks, which are still there at Port Moresby, up on the hill, our welders welded them together in 1943, and they're still in operation today, I believe,

04:30 but our welders put most of them together. You know, that sort of thing is first class, as far as I'm concerned.

So sorry, Arthur, when you were doing this work, who was calling the shots?

Each section had their own people and it was the section corporal, or sergeant actually did it. We did have officers, but as I said before, I never saw an officer. Not out in the paddock anyway.

05:00 Never. And the designs of them and so on, they did that as they went along. I don't know who did the form work for the steel for the tanks, but I guess that would have been done back here in Australia, I guess. And they were welded together in sections anyway, and of course, they'd be lifted up with a homemade crane, and then put in position, tacked in position, and then welded.

05:30 Yeah. That was quite a good structural job that we did. Building roads, yes, no worries, and we had the Armco [curved steel culvert reinforcing], cuttings that you put underneath the roads to let the water run from one side to the other. You dig, form the road first, and then cut the cutting across, put the Armco in and backfill them.

Sorry. What's the Armco?

06:00 **What's the Armco, for the ignorant amongst us?**

Yes, well, that's a steel…looks like corrugated iron, only bent. And the other thing, on the Bulldog-Wau road - I suppose you've heard about that - the Wau-Bulldog road was made by, we had to put a road around a sheer cliff. How you did that was that you cut holes into the rock, triangle-wise, like that,

06:30 and put a log across and held it up by hawsers to the top, until you secured it and then put one underneath. And once you got three of those right you could really lock it together. Now, it was built on the side of a perpendicular hill. And that road was built from Wau across to the Owen Stanleys for an escape route, in case the enemy broke through Lae,

07:00 and went through Wau and another easier route to get to Port Moresby. It was never used as such, but it was used to have vehicles over it, I know that. We did a little bit of work on there, but that was also done by the 2/4th [Field Engineer Company]. Quite an achievement in itself, to put the first three out. You can imagine a corner of the road, which would be, oh, not a forty-five degree angle.

07:30 But some of them were rather sharp, and you had to go around a corner on a perpendicular cliff, be careful. It wasn't an easy, but the Wau-Bulolo road is well documented. It was built as an escape road but never ever used as such. But there was quite a few miles of it, of that type of building. Wasn't all perpendicular walls of course.

08:00 But we did actually assist in that, but it was the 2/4th's job. And they were Field Company engineers, and they did a hell of a good job. They had a couple of tractors there, our tractor never went there at all, but a few of our personnel did. I was one of them. Other job was, of course, as I said, the refrigerator at the hospital. That was unheard of, really.

08:30 **What were the mattresses you used?**

Yeah, mattresses.

But made of what?

Kapok mattresses, they were.

What is that, sorry?

You know the ordinary spring mattresses you've got on the bed, the same size as that but they're filled with kapok. Kapok is a substance made out of, oh, it's a woolly substance, but it actually grows [a cotton wool from around the seeds of the kapok plant (from kapoq, Malay)], and it's pounded to pieces to make into this soft material.

09:00 And we made a wooden floor, which was about five-foot square, to suit the mattresses. It was like that because and we tied the corners up with pretty good rope. Stitched all that together so it was air proof, which it was. And the door itself was a kapok mattress. And we used the kapok mattress for the door at one stage. But that was terribly unsatisfactory,

09:30 because it wouldn't fit properly all the time, but we did cut a hole in it in the finish and made a kapok door that had a wooden frame around the outside. And a wooden frame on the inside, and that worked for all the time they were there, and that was a good job.

Who designed that refrigerator?

I don't think anyone designed it. It sort of fell together. It was never a design.

10:00 Never. We just got the material to make it, so we did.

So how were those decisions made? Was it just really teamwork, or did someone…?

Oh, of course, we had good builders and as I said, bricklayers. No building is different, no matter whether you wanted to build a dog kennel or a two-storey building makes no difference. The principles are the same. And with that it was. Another thing we did for the hospital. We had a lot of people that

were very interested in their surgical gear,

10:30 and we used to get a lot of surgical gear to sharpen, and that was all done with rouge, and teaspoons were a very popular thing. They used to press the teaspoons on the skin and the festers and things would come out the little hole. Well, we used to drill a little hole with a scoop in them, and they'd clean a lot of people up that way.

11:00 And splints and all sorts of things we would make for them. What they wanted, if we could make it, we'd make it. It didn't matter what. We didn't have everything that you'd lay on. We had blacksmiths who could weld steel together, not using any other implements than a hot iron and a hammer. And they were good. There were three of them. Colin McWaters' brother was one of them,

11:30 and that was quite interesting. I used to like that. Oh, blacksmiths. Painters. Of course, you wouldn't think there would be any need for painters in war, but the identification of various vehicles and equipment running along the road. You might notice they've got numbers on them and so on, well, somebody's got to do it and they did a lot of that. But you'd have to be in a pretty sound position to be able to, trucks and things. Aircraft. Painters.

12:00 We even had tailors, would you believe. They were never used. They were usually batmen for the officers. What else. Oh, no, oh, plumbers of course, wherever possible the fresh water, we used to like to dispense that out of, they were pretty flat tanks,

12:30 they'd be about eighteen inches, two feet high, and they were made out of tarpaulin, and as the water went in and the sides came up. They went in like that, on a curve. So you kept on pulling the sides out and filled it up with water. And that was the fresh water. It was looked after fairly well, and of course, there were little pumps to get it out. That was easy. You only needed some sort of electric motor.

13:00 We used to make electric motors, which you can do it easily enough, and just have a little trickle of water coming out all the time. Surprising how much you get out, but that, we did a lot of that. We did the water points for the big trucks to come in to. That was at Bougainville. The big trucks used to come in and go in underneath a big gantry, and they'd just go under with a hose, like you see anywhere in Victoria now; the same as that. We did all that.

13:30 That's what Field Park was all about. What you see on any municipal yard now, to get rid of the rubbish. And over at Bougainville was quite a novel idea. I wouldn't have thought of it myself. But what they used to do there was to - it was a big paddock, nothing on it at all - how the hell it got there like that, I'm blowed if I know.

14:00 But what they used to do was cut furrows in it, and fill each furrow up with all the rubbish that was collectable, from the hospital and anywhere else for that matter. It was all taken to there, and turned over, and once you turned it over, you did another furrow. There was that. We had attached to us were 230 LAD. LAD,

14:30 Light Advanced Depot [later called a Light Aid Detachment, electrical and mechanical engineers] and that was more or less what you'd call a garage today. And what they did, they were attached to us, but when we were at Dumpu, a plane came in and it had three parts of a 4x4 International [truck] in them. We never knew it was coming actually. But anyway,

15:00 we got it out of the plane, and when we went to put it together, they'd supplied steel plates to go into the chassis, and all of holes were reamed out with less than a thou clearance, which was excellent really, and we had to put them together. And the biggest part was to get them lined up

15:30 to get the bolts to go through. One thou is not much, but if you get it perfectly lined up, it's a hell of a lot. It just falls in. You see, what you've got to do and the exercise that was told me really at first, the human hair is two thousandths of an inch thick. Now if you're working on a thou and a half clearance, that's what you got. And that hasn't altered.

16:00 But we did all sorts of things like that. They repaired the trucks. My jeep there that I pinched, in two and a half years, the only thing it had wrong with it was a broken spring. And they fixed it up for me.

Where did you find the jeep, or where did you pinch it from, I should say?

It was being unloaded out of aircraft, and it was sitting on an airfield, and it was sitting there for a bit too long. Had no one's name on it, and had no one's papers.

16:30 So I just got in it, turned the key, and drove it away. We had it for two and half years. No one missed it. That's it. And what's more, it was a jolly Vauxhall. Now, that's unheard of, because they were a Willys jeep, but that was a Vauxhall made in England, and it was quite good, very good indeed.

Whereabouts was that? That was early on?

That was at Dumpu.

17:00 See there was only four jeeps that I saw at Dumpu, and that 4x4 that we got. Two of them were for carting wounded and bodies out. I have counted, and I've got a photo there. In the cemetery, there looks

about twenty-eight people were killed there, but because of the injuries, there'd be at least that somewhere else that you'd attribute it to. They'd die elsewhere.

17:30 But, you know, there are all sorts of things like that. The roads, up to, as they call, the front, you kept open right up till the last couple of hundred yards and with the rain that came down, which never seemed to stop, it washed away very quickly, and you had to go there and scrape it all away again. You didn't dig it out or anything like that, you just put the blade backwards and used the back of the blade as a grader.

18:00 **So what were your main vehicles? You had your jeep. There were the dozers. The tractors, did you say?**

We left the Farmall and the other one at Nadzab, but we took the caterpillar tractor everywhere with us in New Guinea.

18:30 We didn't take it to the Solomons at all. All they took was that jeep. We left our big trucks behind and I made sure that that thing went. It went onto the deck of the Liberty ship. It was on the wharf, and I put the hook around it, and up she went, and that was it. But at the other end it was a bit difficult, because we went off down a rope ladder. But it had to go on a barge, because no one was expecting this jeep to come.

19:00 But we got it. Anyway, there it is. Anything that was required mechanically, or building-wise, we could do it. At Torokina, the Americans were in beautiful billets [lodgings], no question of that, and there was a tree that would be seven foot through, across the girth. Big tree.

19:30 And it was right in front of one of their billets, and they came over to us to remove the tree. And we had an axeman. Oh, my goodness. He come from Marysville. I don't know whether he's still alive or not. But he had buckteeth in the front. But he was a huge man. I was pretty fit. But he was a huge man. And he walked around the tree,

20:00 and the billets were about thirty foot apart, and this tree would be a hundred, a hundred and thirty feet high. He walked around it and he said, "Oh, yeah, I can do that." And with a polite "Take off, please," or words to that effect, he started with his axe, which he had, two or three axes he had, and he axed it down on the appropriate side, where he wanted it to fall.

20:30 And he got a two-man handsaw, and two cuts he made in that. And she came down right exactly. So everything we did was pretty good, really, and I was always confident in everything we did. And I would pass it, always. I never ever knocked a job back. It was always good. I put myself in that position, where I did inspect a lot of things.

21:00 But they also wanted to make me take stripes and all that sort of thing, but I wouldn't do it and for one reason, you are away from the blokes. In the engineers, to be an officer, you had to be a graduate of the university. Not on your ability. A graduate of the university. And just imagine a graduate of arts being a mechanical engineer.

21:30 It's altered now completely. So I could go up and get a commission anyway. But you couldn't those days, and that was one of my main reasons that I really objected to it, the whole thing. But engineer-wise and Field Park, they made a lot of things. Boats, we did a bit of work for aircraft. Bridges. The hand bridges.

22:00 They were an exercise that were always done under a lot of duress because they were in that position, that they had to be done in the dark, and you know, with a lot of care and everything else because you put a lot of lives at stake. But it was only five ropes, and as I said, two under the armpits, one for walking, and two above that again.

22:30 **So this is like rope bridges to cross ravines and that sort of thing, is it, or, what would you be crossing, with the rope bridges, what sort of terrain are you crossing?**

On the one that went over, it was a river that was being supplied by a volcano. And in the river you could hear the lava going down the river. Boom, boom, boom, boom. It would be about fifteen feet deep.

23:00 Well, of course soldiers are not going to go in there, and if they're going into the front line, they're not going to go through water like that, and come out of it and be able to do the job. It's all very well to say you can put ropes across and drag them across. No, that's not on, because everything's wet and twice as heavy and perhaps, as a combatant unit, they're not as good as they should be. So the idea was to get them across dry.

23:30 We did it three times, we did. Five hundred went across and back, each time. They didn't lose anyone, which was good. We did that three times.

So how did you get across the other side to set up the bridge?

Swim. You swam. See, what you had to do was to, well, I'd tie a webbing belt on me, and fill it up with timber or something, so's it might float. I don't know whether it did, or it didn't. In the finish I threw them away and swam.

24:00 I had some white rope; it looks like rope you used to put on the old-fashioned windows [sash-cord].

White woven rope. Very strong, and whatever, because you had to pull the other stuff over with it. And once you got one rope across it didn't matter. You were right for the other. We had a hell of a lot of rope in stock. An enormous amount. Up to a good inch and a quarter in diameter, and that's what was used.

24:30 And as I said before, you use a Spanish windlass to make it taut, and you could almost play the piano on it. When it was taut, it wouldn't give at all. And you get ten people going across on a rope bridge, it would sag a little bit, of course it would, but that's as much as it would go. And it's quite sound, and if you've got a fellow with a full pack and everything going across, you're right.

25:00 **If, just thinking, you're ahead of combat troops and everything in order to set these up, aren't you, therefore at risk yourselves?**

The answer is yes, but usually, you didn't know for sure, but you were pretty confident that there was nobody around there. There was no one on your side, that's for sure,

25:30 but you wasn't sure of the other side, no. but if you had, say two or three hundred yards in front of you, and you could get half a dozen blokes over there, you were right. Nothing would matter. You could get the others over in safety anyway, because they would immediately go on a hundred yards and so and the first shots that were fired would be signal enough to cease operations, and that's it. But it never happened.

26:00 And they went across, came back the next night, and we'd pull it down, put it up again. And by that time, it was a well-worn track and it was no use to anybody, really. Yeah, we did that three times. But I enjoyed that work, I really did.

It's really interesting, Arthur, and you were saying that it didn't matter what the request was, you'd get it done. You'd get stuff made. How did you go getting parts?

26:30 Yeah, good thing. If it was timber, we'd get that timber by our own means. The timber for the bottom of the bridge, saplings and get them as straight as we can, and have them stored on each side, after we did the first one. And but usually we, nuts and bolts, we did have a lot of stuff that was no use to us whatsoever.

27:00 And they could improvise, yes, that's a good word. They'd improvise this and improvise that. We even made a piston for a motorcar. And we made that out of wood, and it worked. And another thing that we did, bearings on a 4x4 went, and we used leather as the bearings for the crankshaft.

27:30 Look, it got you out of trouble, but you tried to get another engine anyway, as soon as you can because you knew darn well, it would happen. Now, I must admit that I had a vehicle come home from Alice Springs once with a leather bearing. And we did that well after the war.

Not bad.

Well after the war. No, our outfit they were good. We even had dentists with us, which was something.

28:00 Don't know why. I've no idea. And our doctor was Dr Gassams. He was a veterinarian for Caulfield Race Course. But he was also a doctor, but we always reckoned he was a good horse doctor. Yeah, we could do anything, anything at all.

Earlier you told us about the airstrip. Where was the first one? Nadzab?

Nadzab.

28:30 **You did a couple of those. Could you tell us a little more detail, like you have been just now, about the construction?**

Well, at Nadzab, when we got there, by the parachute, we went to the trees and we were told that they would be about a half an hour behind us, so we lit a little fire, and we had a lot of green material to chuck on it, just to bring up a bit of smoke just to let Lobby know where we were, which we did do. When the half hour was up we had a little fire going,

29:00 and we put all the wet and green stuff on and they smoke like blazes. The three planes with our stuff on, arrived up first, and the ones with the tractors went around further. And if you've ever seen aircraft come in, they come in like that, and turn, like that, and the three came in and the Angau people unloaded them.

29:30 When we put the tractor together after twelve hours, we backed, it was no good using the blade, it was a ten-foot blade, to clear the land, because it was mostly all kunai grass, and we didn't know what was in there at all, whether it would be stumps or whatever. We did find a couple of stumps, blown over over the years, and we went backwards into it all the time, and we cleaned the whole thing, and we had it cleaned, oh, about two hundred yards wide,

30:00 and it ended up a mile long. We had that perfectly clean in the finish. It took some weeks, but the aircraft were coming in and out at a great rate of knots right from day one. And the bigger it got, the more they safely came in. and that's all you've got to do to put planes down. All you've got to do is have a clear passage coming in and a clear passage going out.

30:30 Not the airstrip, where they come in like that. Well, on the other one, where they built, all of a sudden some steel runway [perforated steel planking (PSP)] used to come in. That's the steel that's got the three-inch hole, corduroy strip sort of thing. It was made out of steel, and that's what the other 'drome was made out of on the ends; on the turning points was all corduroy and steel. Ours was just plain dirt.

31:00 There was not much dust around, up at the ends where they turned, because it was always raining. But they were quite firm and not muddy. They had, we had very shallow drain because sure as hell they'd miss the end of the runway. If you had a drain there, that's where you'd get them, but we just cleaned that

31:30 just by looking at the jolly thing, and doing it. No plans. Nothing. All they wanted was about two hundred yards wide or a little bit better. And as I said, one day a flight of American fighters come in and one was a bit too wide, hit a log, and took the undercarriage off. But that was the only mishap there at all. There was no, yes, there was.

32:00 There was a big American bomber came in. Four engines. A Liberator. A Liberator came in, which we'd never ever seen before, and he came in and swung right around in front of us, squirting our little camp with all the air and whatever, but directly behind him was a double-engined Fokker Friendship plane, First World War vintage, and it blew it straight over.

32:30 When he turned around, over she went. But the instruction how to fly that little plane was be careful banking and so on and so on. How we used that little plane was put a little grass cutter, for cutting hay in it, and that went up to a little airstrip, after we'd put it on its side again and put a few patches on the wings. You know, we could do that. Glue it on. But that's where it went. But the Farmall went with it

33:00 in another plane later on. But they used the grass cutter by manpower. Have you seen them? Oh, you probably wouldn't. The old-fashioned hay cutter goes like that and cut the hay in about a four-foot swathe. Well, manpower did the first little lot until they could get the plane in and get the Farmall out. And that's where it did eventually go, but I didn't know where it went really. But, that's the sort of jobs we used to do.

33:30 There's a photo there of the tractor going from Nadzab to somewhere else, and it broke down because of the heat in the kunai grass. The kunai grass would be seven to eight feet tall, and if it was a stinking hot day, it would be worse than any heat you would ever get. It was steamy, steamy, steamy, and very, very full of mosquitos

34:00 and a lot of vermin, a lot of vermin of all sorts, snakes, the works. And it broke down right in the middle of it. But it was only a fuel blockage I'm pleased to say. But I walked behind that for about a hundred and fifty mile from Dumpu, to the first stop, and it carried all the gear of course. And to do that strip, where it was going, now it would be a strip

34:30 smaller than that road out the front, in width, and of course a little aircraft would come in, and had been using it for some time, apparently. Then when we left, the DC3s could come in and go off, just, they'd come in, unload, go right down the other end, turn around, and go back the other way. They couldn't go the other way because it was so steep on either side, and the river was there also.

35:00 That was another job we did, but then we had to pull it down and take it into Dumpu, from there. But Dumpu had a fairly big airstrip which had been made by infantry battalions in there, and they'd stripped the ground quite a bit, but when we got there, you know, we just took over, not that they didn't do a hell of a job. They expanded it all.

35:30 Or we expanded it all, before it started going up the hill, and that's another job we did. At Bougainville, Field Park was of course the main water supplier for the whole of the troops on Bougainville, American as well. They even had a baker's manufacturer on Bougainville. We had to do quite a few repairs on the ovens, etc.

36:00 And I struck that later on in my life. Oh, motor vehicles by the score of course, and our friends used to crash them left, right and centre, without worrying too much. And we used to repair them. We used to make a lot of parts for them. Electronically, we were pretty good. We had very, very good electricians. Frank Dunn was the chief boy there,

36:30 and there was one thing that we did make, which is quite outstanding it is way, and they were called 'puffing poopers'. No, I'm not being rude. But what they were, they were half forty-four gallon drums; either end's got a solid backing on it. And on the top, the ones, we'd have to build a top on them with a hole of about eleven, and not about,

37:00 they were eleven inches and then make a funnel down, about that long. On the end of the funnel, that far, inch and a half down from the end of the funnel, was a piece of steel attached by a wire to the funnel, and that was the latrines. And how they were cleaned was absolutely wonderful. What you'd do, you'd put

37:30 a blow torch onto the little round plate, and have a drip, drip, drip of diesoline, onto that plate, which would burn, spray like that onto the bottom of the forty-four gallon drum, and at the end of the day, there would be, just a little, couple of spoon fulls of powder left there. After all these years, I was never quite sure that we didn't contribute a lot to the fellows that got prostates [prostate cancer].

38:00 Because they were always hot. Doing your business on a hot receptacle, which, you know, doesn't sound much. But you would be sweating a little bit, to sit there for a while. Even though, when it was out, of course, you'd use one lot today and the next lot tomorrow, although they were still pretty warm. I was never sure about that. But we did make them. We made them by the hundreds,

38:30 and I thought it was a well worthwhile job, because the conditions of the open pits is not too good. You know, they were atrocious things, and are today, there's no question of it. But they never went on with that anywhere in the military, as far as I know. We did them of course.

So where would they have been used? Mainly in the base camps?

Base camps. Yes. Everywhere. You know, anywhere.

39:00 To pick them up and chuck them on the trucks, no worries at all, because they weren't dirty at all. And that is the problem with pits. They do become dirty, not because they're pits, because they're actually used, and that's all there is to it. You just couldn't get away from it, really. But the water, the pits, and to keep the roads clean. One part of going down to Honiara,

39:30 the road was part of the river. And it was all right going down the river, all you did was took the fan belts off and just drove with the water. And you would have to drive at least a hundred and fifty yards down the river, because the banks were like that. There's only two places, even now, I believe, where you can go down, and that's where they did. But coming back, you used to have to take the fan belt off

40:00 and put her in low, low gear, and travel very lightly, bailing and all the rest of it. I used to put a sheet behind the radiator, and hopefully get through. But the old girl kept on going, and no worries at all. But the bigger trucks, a lot of them got caught. And then we built the air intake up right up, which you see today, you know. We were the first ones to do that, I'm sure.

40:30 That was at Honiara. But that was where I left it all. We could make anything. Our motto is 'Make and break'.

Sorry?

Our motto is 'Make and break', engineers' motto. And I was looking at a badge there, a 1914 job. The Australian engineers were called Royal Engineers only.

41:00 No it's Royal Australian Engineers, and that badge is worth a bit of money. Old Norm brought that back. Yeah, we could make and break anything. No doubt about it. Our prize article to assist us was the A-frame we had, and the ten-ton block and tackle that was with it, and two grab bars. We could move anything upwards of ten tons.

41:30 And all the other stuff was done, mostly brain work really. Yeah, Field Park was a good company to be with, but not any more, unfortunately. Because each, you've got bridge building sections. You have explosives sections. Turns and fitters section, etc, etc. Whether that's good or bad, I don't know. But that's the same as the, perhaps, the turning and fitting course that I did originally.

Tape 6

00:30 Have you got any questions about the war?

Just continue with what you were saying. You were saying that you were lucky with all that experience.

During the war or now?

Well, you were just saying...

All the experiences, yes. I think all of the experiences that we had, and what we did, served me in very good stead for what was to come in civilian life.

01:00 On the day that I was discharged from the army, and I was pushed around, up to Queensland and back, and up to Queensland and back, and then to the testing ground at Monegeetta, the other side of town, where I got, was discharged from really. I got into Royal Park to hand in all the gear, and I didn't hand in any gear whatsoever. And I was determined to keep it all, which I did do,

01:30 and the last words he said to me, "You can go home now, Mr Thomson." I didn't even say thanks. I was out the door and I got a taxi down to Tranmere Avenue, Carnegie, and that was that. And then we decided that we'd have a little holiday, which we did do. We went up to Moe, which was a big adventure for Joy, those days. She knew the people, etc.

02:00 We enjoyed ourselves for a couple of weeks, or so, and then we came back and fronted up at Phoenix Motors. And they said, "Oh, who the hell are you?" So there you go. Anyway, I started there and I

finished my time to get the certificate as a turner and fitter, and they knew what was going to happen. They hurried that along a little bit for me, and they said, “Thank you for coming back. Hooray [Goodbye]. See you later.”

02:30 So with that, I went to work for Perce Morley in the city. It was quite amazing for two reasons. He was making kids’ scooters, would you believe. Of course, there was a lot of money in scooters, those days, and that was all right, but one thing he did put me on was making a machine for wrapping up tablets.

03:00 Now that’s when it first started because John Lobb was doing the Laxettes just up in the top end of Swanson Street and he said, “Get him loose on packaging these tablets.” And I knew what I had to do. All I used was poly tape, and make a heater out of steel.

03:30 It was electronically heated to the shape of the tablet, and the other one the shape of the packet they were going to be, and so it came down and you had a dozen tablets in one hit. And that was all done by hand. And of course, that lasted about three months and then they said, “All right. Thank you for that. Here’s the money for that.”

04:00 “Thank you very much.” And then they just got it in the hands of an electrical engineer. Today that’s open slather everywhere. We never ever did get the royalties. Another job we did was tins, the fruit for Smorgon’s. The pineapples. And he wanted a machine to peel the pineapples and to tin them. Slice them and tin them. So that was easy work.

04:30 Just to peel them, all you did was whatever you could get the touch or coil, or whatever, to go around the pineapple and have the blade just sticking out past it. And that was held perpendicular and once they were peeled the perpendicular went down and a plunger came down and took the core out. And of course, it would fall over and go along, and a cutter like the bread industry, that I got into later, sliced it. And from there it was pushed straight into the tin.

05:00 And I always remember Mr Smorgon say, “Look, I get a farthing for every tin that comes out of there.” I said, “Thank you very much, where’s our share.” We never ever did get it. But that was a very, very interesting job.

So you actually put that together?

Together, yes. And we put the cooker together too where it submerged the tin into the water, and it went through a chain under the water like that. And by the time it came out again, it was cooked. And all they did is seal it by running the tin around and sealing the tin,

05:30 which is very easy to do. They’re still doing it now, but they were doing it well before I touched it. So that was that. And Perce said, “Well, you’re not going to stop here forever. Where are you going?” I said, “I’m blowed if I know.” Anyway, he and I both looked in the papers and there was a job at Blackwood Hodge, which was a Sydney-based firm looking after Euclids, big Euclid trucks. And he said, “There’s our job.”

06:00 So he said, “We’ll go and get that.” “Righto.” And damn me if it wasn’t down here, just before Blackburn Road. So I went in there, and a big American sitting behind the counter, Johnny Faunce. He took one look at me. He said, “I know you.” I said, “Where did you meet me?” He said, “In New Guinea.” I said, “Bulldust.” “Yes,” he said, “You had a D4 tractor.” I said, “That’s right.” And he said, “And you wouldn’t give it to me.”

06:30 I nearly fell over. Anyway, I became his service manager, and from there I travelled, looking after the Euclids for Theisses [Thiess Brothers] up in the middle of New South Wales in the coalfields there. They had a lot of Euclids there and down at King Island, they had a lot of Euclids there, and up at Eildon.

07:00 And I ended up, and the Board of Works were going to start up the Yarra Dam with the big trucks too, and I delivered the first Euclids up the Yarra Dam. And Gordon Stafford, who was the chief engineer, mechanical engineer anyway, said, “Look, how about coming to work for us.” I said, “Look, I’ve got a pretty good job here.” He said, “I know you have,” he said, “But come and work for us. They’re not going to be there forever.”

07:30 And he said, “The Board of Works is going to be here forever.” I said, “But I won’t be here forever.” And he said, “Well, possibly not, but we need you now.” Anyway, as it turned out, it was one of the, well, I had another job after that, and that was it. It was a very nice job. We lived, and prior to that I was travelling from Monegeetta to King Island,

08:00 Eildon and Renmark and all of the jobs there. I was servicing them for Blackwood Hodge, etc, and of course, Joy got sick of it and really crooked on it. She said, “Don’t come home, don’t come home at all”, which was fair enough at that stage. We had been travelling around everywhere, and Gay had just been born.

08:30 So I came home, and I took the job up the Yarra Dam and we lived there in a comfortable house, which they supplied. Everything found. And the top money was ninety-odd pounds a week. That’s a big difference from thirty. So we took it. And I was there for four years, fours years almost to the day. They had twelve Euclids,

09:00 that’s back dumpers. They had fourteen valley dumpers, which opened the bottom out like that, and lots

of other lighter vehicles. In all, there was about a hundred and ninety active vehicles all the time, which I looked after. And I had three shifts, and it was there that I sacked the only two blokes in my life. All in all, it was very, very interesting.

09:30 The earth machine that loaded all the earth on the trucks was a Euclid. And it had a big four foot wide belt on an angle, just cut into the earth and dumped it on the side. All of that machinery, at the end, I left when the last load went on the wall. All of that machinery was put under the hammer and they got good money for it. Nowhere else in Australia has done that before or since.

10:00 But the machinery being used was fit for sale, and kept on using. I was very proud of that, and I've got documents from the Board of Works to prove that. I was very pleased and proud of that. And then I, after that, a fellow from Readymix Concrete came out and he wanted me to work for them, and that was out at Brooklyn. So I thought, "Oh, well, I'll give you a go." So I went out there,

10:30 but I was never happy there. They were using those big concrete trucks that you see on the road. And what topped it all off, there was one bloke, he came in and was washing his truck. And the managing director of Readymix Concrete throughout Australia was there; just as they do, get around, have a look at the troops. And one of the fellows fell off the truck and I heard him say, "Pity he didn't fall off it yesterday."

11:00 I didn't listen to his reason at all. I just clocked him. And I walked out the joint and I never went back. And I found out later that I was applauded, etc, but he didn't last too long after that. But I was out of there. I just can't stand, that sort of thing is not on, as far as I'm concerned. If you're doing your job, and you have an accident, and you get treated like that. No, that's no on. So from there, I went back to Blackwood Hodge for a little while,

11:30 and I was doing stuff again all around Australia again, servicing, and as the manager. And again, Joy said, "That's it, darling. No more." So she applied for another job and got me a job at the bakery down here. Just a mile away. And it was quite amazing. I went down there for the interview, and they said, "How are we going to use you?"

12:00 And I said, "Oh, well, I can do anything mechanical, anything at all." And there was a professor from Melbourne University doing the interview for Gerald, and run by two brothers, Austral Bakeries. Of course the name got me in and that was past the post as far as I was concerned. The interview was going very well, and they asked me about, they were talking about tunnels and things. And I thought, "What the hell are they talking about tunnels?" All they were trying me out for was how I looked after personnel.

12:30 And we did lose a fellow up at Yarra Dam in the tunnel. When they were doing the tunnel, you had to count everybody in and count them coming out. And one day one bloke missed the count, only by one. He's still in the tunnel behind the concrete, which upset me greatly for a long time. But we aren't infallible, there's no doubt about that.

13:00 And I was very disappointed and most ashamed of myself, that that could happen. But anyway, this interview went off all right, and then Gerald and then John Hennessy came in. It was a mechanical place, and they were just building the place there. Some of the fellows were still using their greatcoats of a night time to keep warm because the building wasn't finished. And he said, "There's our position. You can look after the trucks, build the building, and look after the machinery."

13:30 "When?" He said, "Tomorrow. How about tonight?" I said, "No, it won't be tonight." He said, "How about making it tomorrow?" I said, "I won't do that either." I said, "Do you mind if I have a look around?" He said, "Go for your life." So I went and had a look around and I liked what I saw. It was all clean and tidy and the apparatus for building the factory was all marked out on the concrete out in the front, with loxins [used in joining concrete slabs]

14:00 and all you had to do was put the material down with loxins and then weld it all together and stand it up. Simple enough. So that's what I did. But before the interview was over he said, "We'll supply you with a motor car." I said, "No, I don't want a motor car." At that stage I was driving a new '49 Ford, old side banger, pride and joy of our life, it was. He said, "Oh, well we won't give you a car allowance."

14:30 I said, "That's all right. I just don't want your vehicle." I said, "Yet." He said, "Oh, righto." So that was it. And twenty-seven and a half years later is when I retired out of there. So I did thirty years of earth moving and then I came to the bakery trade. Now what happened, when I joined them, they had a branch at Surrey Hills here. They had a branch at Kilsyth, one at Tyabb, and one here. Five units.

15:00 They ended up with thirteen in Victoria, a couple in South Australia, and a couple in New South Wales. And here I go again. I'm travelling around from Clayton, Geelong, Colac, Ballarat, Mildura, Swan Hill, Echuca, Seymour, Morwell, Leongatha and Cowes.

15:30 And I ended up with seven and a half hundred trucks. I built the factory, finished the factory all right, and I put three and a half more tiers onto it. But that's simple. All you're doing is building a frame and lifting it up, and joining it together with timber and bolting that into place. Nothing I hadn't done before. And it was easy. But again, I had a wonderful crew. They were a beautiful crew.

16:00 And it was unfortunate that I did lose more people in that life than I did before. I lost five people. Killed

them. And one of them was with the new Fleetwood rear vision mirrors, which were square. It chopped a lady's head off in Kilmore. Two of them were thrown out of their motorcars

16:30 across crossings, one at Echuca, and one at Leongatha, and a couple more through, really, misdemeanours, of military personnel. Our bloke was going through a crossing at Shepparton. The other two, drunk as monkeys, cut across him and they cut him in half, and they killed the two service personnel. But I always claimed that, you know, them as ours. But I had some fifteen hundred people on my payroll.

17:00 I knew them all by name. I made sure I knew them all by name. I knew all their wives and when their children arrived, and what I used to do, and still do, is to have a diary. Write everything down, names and the whole works. And it worked for me, and when I went there, they did have some horses and carts over at Surrey Hills. They turned out a bit well.

17:30 We used to put exhibits in the show, which were absolutely crystal, really pristine presented, and the horses included. The trucks themselves were presented extra good, no doubt about that. And we changed from little Ford 10/10s to semi-trailers. In the finish, I was sending four semi-trailers to Sydney each night, and four would come down here.

18:00 We'd send up there to Sydney with the McDonald buns, and coming back, we would get pies, etc., and that went on for quite a while.

Sorry, Arthur, I'm just going to, I mean, as interesting as that is, I just hope we can still fill in a few gaps.

Right. Go for your life.

Of the early years, because obviously, it all relates. Sounds like your need to have to improvise and be ingenious in your early days as a sapper…?

18:30 I don't' know about a genius.

Ingenious, well, ingenuity, obviously affected the way you worked after, had a bearing on all of that?

Yes, that's right.

So I really want to get a good sense of what all those aspects were. In your notes it said something about, you also did salvage work. Underwater salvage work? And that came a bit out of the blue. What was the background to that?

19:00 In the army days. Yeah, that's raising little ships off the bottom of the ocean, which is so simple it's unreal.

Yeah?

Well, it is, all you had to do, especially if there's no sea running, all you had to do was to get the biggest vessel you could find and put a steel hawser down from one to the other. If the one in the bottom of the sea broke, bad luck, it wasn't worth salvaging anyway.

19:30 But if you could bring it up by its nose, it would come up, and the nose would come out of the water, forwards. And therefore you'd have a thing that would float, even if it's got about that much seaward. I knew that, and everybody knows it. And you can draw them up like that. Otherwise, we used to get a huge strap around them, two straps around them, and lift them up that way, with cranes off the deck of a floating crane, which we made,

20:00 and just bring them up, if they were big enough. But if you were lifting say, a twenty foot, thirty foot boat off the bottom, you're lifting that much water as well, and that's the heaviest part of it. If it had a hole in it, it was all right. If it didn't have a hole in it, it was quite heavy. I always tried to bring them out by the front if I could, and even so, I used to,

20:30 when I was lifting them by crane, I'd always lift the front at least five feet up more than the other ones, so she came up like that. But I never did any deep sea stuff. Only twenty foot, thirty foot of water.

So you'd be in the water yourself, as well?

Oh, a lot of the time. I'd have a look to see what we had. (Interruption).

21:00 So I wouldn't go over that, because it was out of our league. They have big hawsers running off huge things today, where they can lift, you know, that thing that fell over in Norway yesterday. No, South Korea, you know, they'll pull that back on its side, without too much trouble, but there'll be a hell of a lot made of it on the television.

21:30 I recovered a few boats, yes.

Well, what was the purpose of those salvage jobs? What did they want to find?

Well, mostly it was Cummins engines in them, and Cummins engines is what was in the Euclids in what

I was looking after before. Super-charged engines, and they all had Cummins engines in them. And they were all in the bay: some down at Lorne, Apollo Bay and at Portland.

22:00 I used to get around a bit doing that sort of thing. I loved it. But the thing is, I was never going to sell this house and this is where our roots were. And of course, Joy has lived here all the time, which is not fair, really, and in hindsight it's not. In the last years of my work down at the bakery, I used to have to travel around every branch. Well, in the last four or five years,

22:30 I took Joy. Every time I went out, she came with me, which was fair enough. All I paid was for the accommodation and food, etc, and Gay wasn't home, so it made a lot of difference that way.

You and Joy got married in '46. Is that right?

Hmm?

You were married in '46. It was just after the war wasn't it?

Yes. '46, July 7th.

Right.

23:00 And I was still in the army actually then. I went back on parade on Monday morning. I was there for another fortnight. That was pretty hard. But anyway, we did get away. We went up to Stawell, or Halls Gap, as it was known then. Oh, look, the things that I've done, and been, and seen, I've put down to my early life,

23:30 and accepting things as they are. And I think, also, that to respect everybody's point of view other than your own, is very difficult, but it's the only way to go, because you won't learn anything in this world if you do not understand the other bloke's point of view. And in the hundreds and hundreds of cases, you learn a lot.

24:00 You really do. And it put me in good stead for army life and in turning and fitting of course, army life, after army life, to the earth moving. I built the earthworks at Renmark, around the town there; hundreds of miles of wall there, to keep the river out. Up in Deniliquin, I did the channels up there.

24:30 I did up the Yarra Dam, which was one of my joys. I did the works down at King Island for the sheer light people [people who live atop the sheer limestone cliffs of King Island], and I did a lot of work for the people up the middle of New South Wales there. But I was well taught. My earthworks taught (sic) was done by Moore and something,

25:00 on the river bank at Brisbane. That's where the expo was in those days. They were very, very good teachers. And the army, I put down to my early army days, as to go ahead and accept the decision of the umpire sort of thing, and do it whether you agreed with it or not.

25:30 And do it. Do it properly. All the way through it's been like that, and when I finished in 1982, I did another little job with building refrigerators here in Oatley and carting them all over Victoria. For hire they were and that was quite an interesting job. You know, I went to many, many places for that. The Royal Show, the races,

26:00 any hotel in town where the machinery had broke down. And they always wanted me to fix the machinery. But anyway, I was there for about five years afterwards. I just finished, and about three weeks after I finished, I collapsed. Unreal. I did, I collapsed. I should have kept on going but I would have collapsed anyway, I guess.

26:30 I ended up at Heidelberg. And it was only this year that I ended up down here in the casualty ward. And I've taken good stock of what I'm going to do from now on. I wanted us to go away and see what we can do. We went up to Merimbula for a trial period just last week. Finished on the Wednesday. Whilst the exercise was very good,

27:00 we can do it a hell of a lot different, and I'd like to take her up the top of Queensland to show her all that land that we did go over, and I'd recommend it to anybody, because that part of Australia is absolutely unreal, unless you've seen it. You wouldn't believe it anyway, it's a wonderful place.

27:30 And I don't know how much more you've got to go there.

Well, we've got. Can we just stop for a second, actually? I mean it's a matter of, if you've had enough?

Go for your life.

So, still if we can fill in a few of those gaps there. You've told us about the unit and the team work, and what a great bunch of blokes they were, and yeah, we just wanted to hear about your experience with the locals, for example, the Yanks [Americans], I mean, other people you came in touch with.

28:00 I came into contact with them twice, once when they wanted the tractor and they wanted to get off. Another time where we were actually billeted [housed] with them, because we had nowhere else to go,

when there was six of us. And even the major went in with us, and we were parked there. But I found them most polite, really most polite. But once you come to the higher-ups. I used to just side step them. I wouldn't be in it. That's all I know about Americans.

28:30 But if you want to ask me about the Angau people. We've heard many, many stories about them. All of them are true. And at Dumpu, our camp was one side of the little river and their camp was the other, and they used to have their parties, which would run for two or three days and keep us awake and everybody was cursing their heads off for a while.

29:00 But all of our huts and stuff were built by them, and if you've ever seen a proper native hut with the straw roof, sides and open doors, there's no swinging door at all. They're beautiful. They really are, they were first class tradesmen in what they were doing. But then to go and talk to them, one of them in particular, he was a houseboy for Mr so and so, whoever he was,

29:30 and I said, "How did you get treated?" He said, "Very well." He said, "Why are you asking?" He knew very well. "Well," I said, "I'd be interested to know. Did they treat you fairly?" He said, "Yes, they did." I said, "Did you treat them fairly?" And he actually gave me that New Guinea shilling that I've got there. He was a delightful fellow and he was in charge of about thirty of them. But they were so gentle.

30:00 They were extremely gentle in their ways. They were not like a team of Aussies, which were quite rough when they wanted to be. I never saw them that way. They were extremely gentle, and with the wounded, look, they made it so easy for everybody else. And you had to get them out in a hurry, more or less, which you did, and it was quite uncomfortable for them,

30:30 but they were so gentle with them, and they had a fellow who would hold his head up and march with them, no matter how long it was. He'd just hold his head up and make it more comfortable. The other two marched him out. And they'd go down hills like that. Up hills like that. It was phenomenal, what they did. They were very pleasant people, and we fed them as much as we could, and we gave them what we had, and they gave us what they had.

31:00 Their camp itself was cleaner than ours like; there was no leaves. They were all brushed away by them. And they had about four billets, and their billets were woven beds, which were better than ours, there's no doubt about that. But they never had blankets or anything like that. But we used to give them blankets.

31:30 But I'm sure they didn't use them. They were wonderful people, and the fellow that was on the ground at Nadzab, he walked across from Tsili Tsili with them, and he was supposed to be in charge of them, but they were certainly in charge of him, inasmuch as they knew exactly what to do, where to go, and which hill not to climb over and whatever. He said it was marvellous, and he still speaks highly of them today.

32:00 And I couldn't speak more highly of them at all, because they were extremely honest and very, very gentle, extremely gentle. And there's often a photo around where the big bloke is blindfolded and the little bloke takes him across the river. The story of that is, that the bloke assisting him died.

32:30 The bloke that was blind, he was alive up until two years ago. He lived at Morwell. That in itself is an interesting story, because the natives got hold of both of those, and guided them both out. And they went out of New Guinea OK, but unfortunately, the tall bloke was knocked around too much. But the fellow that was blind got his sight back, no worries. That was an interesting bit where they were involved.

33:00 They didn't like carrying ammunition because they knew what it was. But they'd carry food and water and things like that. I don't blame them, not wanting to carry ammunition, because that stuff goes off with a big bang, unfortunately. But they were the only natives. Oh, in the, I did see a church up there at Lae,

33:30 which had been there for some time, and it was a very nice structure. The walls were only about four and a half feet. Had the pitched roof, of course, and had an altar in it. And the Japanese left it there, so it was, they must have had a fair ride with them, too. But I, unfortunately, had to shoot two, which wasn't my fault. It was their fault. But if I hadn't of shot them, they'd have killed me.

34:00 And that's as simple as it was. That's in the early bit, at Nadzab. I had to report that, and it went into a report but it's not recorded anywhere. That's my stinking part about it all. And they belonged to the Japanese, and they were sent in to get us. They didn't. But I was in the river at the time, and they were standing up above me. I was always taught, we had the Owen guns at that stage,

34:30 to take the Owen gun with you. And I was doing my job down there, and the Owen gun was there, and I turned around and he had his spear like that, ready to go, and I just grabbed the gun and as it come down, and opened fire on two of them. They were brought in for that one reason, which was, you know, I wasn't any good for two or three days after that. But we were so busy,

35:00 you just had to get on with it, and it was unfortunate. We had to bury them. I buried them, and did what I could, but it was so awful. I don't know whether I was responsible for anybody else but I wouldn't say I wasn't at all. We used to use explosives like nothing, and were pretty good at that, too. But, and strangely enough, we're going up to Puckapunyal Saturday next,

35:30 to do the very same thing. What we're going to do is use the hole as an exercise to build bridges across, and that's they're wanting us to do up there.

So was that the first time you'd fired your gun, be it in defence or in anger?

No. I did several times.

Before that?

Oh, yes.

Can you remember?

36:00 After that. Not before that.

OK.

After that. We were ordered to go up to Lae, which we did, and it was still active when we got there. It was still active, and I don't know, we saw the Japanese more or less on parade, on our right, and of course, all hell broke loose, because we were driving the damn jeep and the other crowd was sneaking up in the bushes on them, but we were mixed up in it, and that was the end of them and that.

36:30 But I don't know. Everything happens at the drop of a hat. And the decisions you make, you think are right, and you do it. That's the way you're taught. And I was lucky to be taught as much. Had I been a fraction of a second later, I wouldn't be here today, I know that, and neither would this other fellow. There was two of us down there.

37:00 But he was the fellow that wrote and said he was cold, up in the bush. Bourke. Bourke was his name. But anyway, yes, I did. But I'm not sure. You're never sure. No one's sure. And over at Bougainville, there was nothing like that at all. Nothing for us. There was when I left.

37:30 As I said, they [the Japanese] had wonderful troops. And they did get stuck into it at one stage, but they remained put, which was good, and they remained put until, well, they had nowhere to go anyway. They either had to go out to sea or cross a river. Well, they couldn't do either. They remained put, and they were there right til the end, which was good. I was pleased to hear all that.

38:00 **Did you come across examples of engineering works the Japanese had done? No?**

We saw their huts in at Lae, and they were very primitive. Open stick floors. Very dirty. Absolutely filthy. But they were human beings too. Spread over the floor of one hut was the remains of two or three of their wallets,

38:30 where somebody had gone through them and you could see that their wives and children and things, and that upsets you. That brings you down to earth or should bring you down to earth. I saw that two or three times. Well, we saw a Wirraway, not a Wirraway, a Japanese fighter, and it didn't have a mark on it, but young Wags wanted the electric spark arrangement off it.

39:00 He knew it was there and went and got it and took it. We had that for the rest of the war to light up our acetylene and oxy-welding torches. It used to throw a beautiful spark. But that was it. I never came into contact with the natives on the Solomons at all. I was always too busy doing engineering work.

39:30 As I said, water and 'puffing poopers' and things like that. But there was not much of it done, because over in New Guinea, everybody had large lumps of nothing. You had to make things, if they wanted something done, you had to make it on what you had, and we could cut steel, didn't matter into what shape,

40:00 with the oxy-acetylene. You could weld it all together, you could bore it out, turn it out. And one of our fellows made an automatic pistol for something to do, 45 [0.45 inch calibre] pistol. As soon as he'd finished it, they took it off him. But that's what you can do. But we did anything and everything. We certainly did.

Tape 7

00:30 **It was mentioned in the notes that when you went to Port Moresby that you had to get rid of, some way, and for some reason, you got rid of some excess equipment.**

Yeah. That's right.

What was that about?

Well, the worst thing about that, you had a lot of personal things on you, and unfortunately you did have one of those big sausage bags. We were told that everything had to go in there

01:00 and it would be locked away. It would be sent away, and locked away, until the end of the war, which we

did do. And it was a lot of private stuff, and our greatcoat, the uniform that you wouldn't need in New Guinea. Like, the heavy uniforms. All of that stuff went into, a few towels, etc. a pair of boots, like lightweight boots, and that all went away. And it was a good kitbag full.

01:30 And of course, everybody went out, and they sent away thousands, and they all ended up at Brisbane. A year later they told us that the whole lot had been burnt accidentally. What a lot of bunkum [not true]. And they sold it all. And I've still got the key of that on my dead meat ticket [identification disks]. We never saw any of that at all. We were never compensated at all for it, nothing at all. And that's what that all was about. It was a lousy thing to do really, whoever was in charge of that dump at Queensland.

02:00 Oh, where is it? I did mention it before. Anyway, it was supposed to be burnt in a big depot, which just couldn't be. You can't imagine thousands and thousands of kitbags, stowed on one another that were burnt. Mind you, once it got going, it would be pretty difficult to put out, I suppose. They were all in tarpaulin bags,

02:30 and very good stuff really. And they were all clamped together with D clamps to shut them, with a lock on them. And I've still got the key, but I haven't got the kit bag. Yeah, that was pretty sad. We never had any explanation for that. We didn't have any explanation for that, other than that they were all burnt. Of course, everybody said, "Oh, baloney."

03:00 But no, we never heard any more. That's what that was all about. When I left Port Moresby to go to Nadzab, I had the two blankets, the groundsheet, three shirts and three pairs of socks, no underclothes, none at all. And I had a couple of shorts and a couple of long trousers,

03:30 one pair of boots, and the puttees [ankle bindings over boots], and I didn't get the underclothes for about six months. Everything was pretty hard to get at times. But the hardest of all was a cake of soap. Very, very difficult to get, and a very prized possession. You can imagine, well, in our case, thirty blokes using a cake of soap, well, sharing it.

04:00 Wouldn't last too long. And we used to get the old Preservene soap. Can you remember the big blocks? Remember them? Hard as hell, but they're what cleaned us for a time. And you see, the poor infantryman couldn't do that, but we made sure we had some water, whether we dived in the creek or whatever. We'd soap ourselves off, we'd been in, and get clean that way.

04:30 That was the most prized possession, and I took a cake of soap with me. My teeth were rotten anyway, and I was endeavouring to get rid of them, one by one, which I did. And I got false teeth, and that was that. That fixed that problem. I took a few teeth out myself, but you've got to, because you couldn't keep them clean. My mouth was rotten anyway, so since then, no problem.

05:00 **You took them out when you were in the war?**

When I was nineteen, nineteen and a half, I took most of them out.

How did you do that?

I've still got the pliers.

Did anyone help you?

No. No, no, no. I got abused a few times. Never mind. See, once they started to ache and you were in that position, you couldn't clean them. You couldn't go to the dentist, that's for sure.

05:30 No dentist. But we ended up with one. You know, we didn't have the proper food or anything for quite a while, so, and my teeth were awful. It was no good having teeth that would bite into steaks. We never had them. But I did get false teeth, probably about six months after. And, but the gums were pretty hard by then. No, it was no problem

06:00 because we were only having bully beef or M&V, because we had no bread. Never got bread. Dried onions, which was the best food we could ever have, dried potatoes, dried eggs if you could get them and we pinched a five-gallon drum of fruitcake. Very, very good, but that didn't need teeth.

06:30 **Where did you pinch that from?**

At Nadzab. It wasn't destined for our table, I can assure you. We never had a table. Yes, we did. Tell you what we did do for a table at Nadzab. We cut down a few saplings, little fellows, and put them side-by-side on the ground. Yeah, that'll be right. And then we made a cross for the two legs and nailed a couple of planks across them that way,

07:00 and put the logs on them, and mixed up some ordinary dirt mud and smoothed it off. And that was there for all the time we were there. And the seat was on the side where the crosses come out. That was a very good thing.

So, working at the airfield, being based at the airfield, you would have seen, obviously, a lot of planes coming in, including supply planes?

Yeah, and going out. The ones going out, we did assist on a few of them. You know, the wounded, etc.

07:30 That was a little bit of a job really, because you had to take them up perpendicular. The plane would be up to here, the floor, so to get them there and transfer them, was quite an effort, but we did assist on that, quite a bit. But we did assist in the unloading of them, if we had nothing to do, which was on sometimes,

08:00 and on the old strip, of course. When the new one came into operation, it just ceased immediately and we were just left, or we weren't left long, we moved out altogether, walked out.

So do you remember any other, I mean, you got the five pound fruit cake, and you managed to find a jeep and your commanding officer got you some guns. Do you remember any other situations where you could have got access to supplies?

08:30 No. We never, in all of the time I was on the move, we never got any clothes issue at all. Refshauge brought out an instruction that we were to wear long sleeves and long trousers at all times, with gaiters [webbing anklets worn strapped over boots], to save the mosquitos, because of the malarial situation. Personal stores were very, very rare everywhere.

09:00 And food actually was too. Unless you were in the American army, and they seemed to get food that we had never, ever heard of and they were getting milk, for one thing. We never saw milk. Our milk came in little tubes, like toothpaste. And there was lots of things (interruption).

09:30 **What about bread? The Americans had bread, didn't they?**

Yes, they did. We didn't. We didn't even have biscuits for a while. The biscuits, of course, if you soaked them they swelled up and trebled their size. But on Torokina they had a bakery, and it broke down, and we had to fix the doors on that

10:00 because we were near to it, I guess. And they were cast iron doors, and we had to weld them up. We were the only people who could, I think. Anyway we did that too. I can't recall anything that we didn't do that we were required to do. And I was quite amazed some two or three years ago when I was told that Field Parks are no more, because they had too much. I just couldn't believe that.

10:30 But that's the way it is. There are no Field Parks at all now in this man's army.

For why? What's the reason?

Well, they said that they could divide the equipment up much better than what it was. Well, they can have all the Armco stuff, they can have lots of things I guess, but what we had on that truck, I'd like back, even today. The electronic, the 25 KVA,

11:00 I never struck them again until I got back up at Yarra Dam. They were our main lighting system up there out on the job and we could do anything, light up anything. You were talking about explosives before, we had a lot of explosives, and we had people there that could use them very expertly, and I used to like using the plastic because it was so easy to handle.

11:30 Plastic you can put it in your hands, no worries at all and jam it on anything, shove a detonator in, and whatever's there blows inwards. And we used to take, if we saw a palm tree with coconuts up the top, we'd bring it down just to get the coconuts, which was stupid, because the tree is gone forever. But mostly where we worked, today is under coffee. Dumpu is all coffee, and at Nadzab it's all coffee.

12:00 The hills up to Shaggy Ridge are all coffee. I've not been back. Perhaps I should. I don't know.

So with the explosives, were you being instructed to make explosives?

Oh, yes.

For?

Various reasons, yeah. They're still teaching us. They're still teaching us to blow up things, which today I suppose it's not necessary. But we could blow up bridges, boats.

12:30 Whatever you like. Moorings. Planes. Anything. We'd know exactly what to do. But we did not have to do any of that destruction in the wartime, only some buildings and a few trees. Divert a river we did, once. We diverted a river, oh, by about two hundred yards, because it was washing away stuff that had to be there, more or less.

13:00 We blew away a river mouth, which was well done, and it worked perfectly. Soon as you get a trickle of water going through anywhere pretty hard, it doesn't take much, make it wider, nothing much at all. You ought to try it some time, when you've got kids with spades, and you've got some water running.

13:30 Just trickle a little earth going, you'll soon see it go. And that's the whole principle of it all. But they are still using it a lot, and it's unfortunate that they are. They're still using gelignite. They're using plastic a lot. But they're still using a few grenades, too, which we had ample supplies of grenades, but never used any in anger at all. Not one.

Did you have anything to do with any of the signals companies?

14:00 Only to supply them with power, which we did do. No, all of ours was base stuff for signals. We had a lot to do with the artillery, and especially at Honiara. I've got a photo of it there somewhere. We did a whole job for the artillery.

14:30 Where the artillery had dug in just after the beach, and firing the guns that away, where they'd dug in, their wheels were sinking in the sand, because the sea was over the sand dune, at a higher level than what theirs was. And of course, you dig into the sand, and the water's right through anyway. Anyway, we had to shift them in a hurry, and while I was down there with three others, a landing barge came in.

15:00 And the water along Honiara, just the other side of the river runs parallel to the sand, like the waves are coming that way, sort of thing. And the landing barges had to come in there, and they used to put a hawser on the back of it. Run the landing barge up on to the beach and run a hawser from the back of it, out to the tractor, and the tractor would hold it, the same as you do the houseboats up at Eildon.

15:30 We had that there, and when I did that I thought, "God, here we are doing the same thing again." A fellow out of the artillery sent me a photo of that and he said, "Have a look at your ugly mug on that." Here I am sitting on a tractor, with a big hawser out to the ship.

You took photos while you were there?

I didn't. This was done by the artillery people. I'm not guilty but all the others would.

Didn't someone have a camera in your group?

16:00 Yes, Arthur Lee did. That's him there. And he had, and has still got it. You know, if you could do a photography job with him, it would take all day and it would be worthwhile I'm sure, but currently he's up in Queensland and won't be back for two months. But it would be worthwhile, I'm sure.

So, you weren't supposed to have cameras?

Oh. No. Oh, no. That was a shooting offence.

16:30 **So how did Arthur manage to have a camera and get away with it?**

Well, the films came up in loaves of bread. And we celebrated the birth of a baby with a bottle of whiskey which came up in a loaf of bread. And that was Frank Marshall's wife, on their first son, sent it up in a loaf of bread, much prized, and fortunately, it got right through.

17:00 And did you see that one up on the piano. That's worth having a look at.

Oh, the bottle.

See. It's a bottle of champagne with a lid through, arm through the first one, and the other one's holding his arm like that; things like that, but anyway.

So you had supplies coming through in your parcels?

I never ever received one. Never. But there was some that got through.

17:30 The mail, of course, was haphazard. Also because we were moving quite a bit in the finish, we were moving very much and we got used to throwing our pack on the back, and walking along wherever we were going. It was no trouble to walk fifty-odd mile. No worries. We did, but the last day up there I'll never forget, never. It was really hectic.

18:00 I'd just come in from the water towers, and to say you're going home to Caulfield. I couldn't believe it. It was in, not Kangaroo Road. Kooyong Road, Caulfield. Six houses or stores from the Balaclava tram. Ten minutes from home. And I just couldn't believe it. But my pass, I tried to keep it, but the sar-major pinched it.

18:30 They thought I was going to the intelligence department in Kooyong Road, up the other end. And it had on there 'Kooyong Road', and everybody was reading 'Kooyong Road'. They thought I was going, "He's an Intelligence man." Fancy saying that. But that was one of the biggest laughs that we had, of course, but I didn't realise that til after, otherwise I would have come all the way to Melbourne on,

19:00 instead of coming the last little bit by train. I went up and down to Brisbane four times after the war in the army. They didn't know where to put me, because I was trying like mad to get back to the unit, to pick up all my stuff, because I'd come home with nothing. And of course...

Do you mean to get back to Honiara?

Yeah, to pick up all my gear, which I'd left behind, because I wasn't allowed to bring it out.

19:30 But that wasn't to be. But I did get re-kitted twice more. I made sure I did. That helped the situation a bit. But just to dismiss me like, it was, "You can go home now, Mr Thomson" wasn't hard to take at all.

How did you feel about leaving your other crew behind?

20:00 Well, what had happened, we were married on the 7th of July, and a fellow named Mills was home from

the LAD [light advanced depot/aid detachment] and I only found that out by accident. I said, “Oh, you can be my best man.” “Yeah, righto.” And he was telling me that they looked like packing up, even though the war hadn’t finished, which I thought this was absolutely strange, because they were going to get run over if they weren’t too careful.

20:30 Anyway, Arthur, apparently, was sent home also, and I got a tap on the shoulder in Collins Street, waiting for Joy to come out from work, and here’s Arthur Lee staring at me. That’s the way it happened. And they sent young George, being a good welder, up to, oh, half way up the New Guinea coast. He did quite a job on the wharf there,

21:00 and he was there for another six months, even though, after the war finished, and they wouldn’t let him go, because of the job that he was doing. They all came home in rapid succession, and they brought home a roll call book,

21:30 which was promptly souvenired by the old man, and we never ever got it back, which was a pity. All I’ve got now is the first roll call we had at Swanston Street. And after that was, and I got, it’s got a lot of lines though it, “Died such and such.” And the one I’ve got now is our roll book of today, and it’s got twenty-nine names in it,

22:00 only seven of them are active, which is a jolly pity. As I said at the reunion, we get two and a half hundred there of great, great grandchildren, which is wonderful. And I’ve fed them for the last forty years or more, and it’s been a great time. But I’ve slowed down a bit, and that will be transferred, I hope, pretty soon. Not that I want to give it away, but that’s the way it is.

22:30 For years we had trouble having our own blokes carrying the banner. But now they couldn’t carry it anyway, and one of Arthur Lee’s sons does one side, and my nephew carries the other side. Gay carries one string, and Conroy’s daughter does one and the two Mills’ girls, these girls are all over fifty. And that’s good.

23:00 And the last two years, we’ve had an eight-year-old lad walking underneath the banner with one of those caps on, and I get a big thrill out of that.

Why does it mean so much to you?

Because of the camaraderie. There’s no other word for it. That’s what it is. And that word ‘mate’ goes a long way. Those fellows would give their life for you,

23:30 and you’d do the same for them put in a position to do so. There is no question of it, and I’ve seen blokes that have got something to eat, and the other bloke hasn’t. I’ve seen plenty of that. And you know, unless you experience it, and you are hungry and you’ve got nothing to eat, and the other bloke gives you some of his, there’s no words for it, none at all.

24:00 And it did happen a lot. Everybody shared everything. And you shared everybody’s sorrows. You shared all their joys. And you still do. A lot of the time, I’m told a lot of pleasant things that are going on around the place: various lasses being married and the blokes being married, etc. There are still a lot of sad things happening. Last week we got rid of our company secretary here.

24:30 Where his war diary went, he shouldn’t have given it to Lobby, but it’s a great shame. He must have. Because we haven’t got it and we should have it. Had we had it, we would be able to settle a lot of things quite amicably with a lot of people. And unfortunately, I’ve had to fight like hell to get things for them, and I just can’t do it any more. I can’t concentrate.

25:00 **Why? What does the war diary contain that is useful?**

Everything you did. Everything everybody did. Say, for instance, there was two hundred and forty in camp. The roll call would be taken each day, in each section, and a report would go to the officer, how many were absent, out doing a job somewhere or whatever, and the others were there present. Also, it would give him the RAPs [Regimental Aid Post] report for that day. And also for anything else that was significant, of where you were.

25:30 It solves a lot of problem nowadays, to get anything done. I happened to read those typewritten notes there, while you were away. All of that has been taken out of war diaries, and you can pick muck at it left right and centre, because there’s not enough in it to get the essential part of when Dopper lost his arm. Well, he lost it in a frivolous position.

26:00 But you don’t write that. He was on active service. He was getting food for the troops. It wasn’t recorded. It was recorded, on his discharge paper, he lost his right hand, but that, he didn’t get anything for it and he had a lot of trouble in filling out the form,

26:30 for the limbless soldier’s association. And that’s what I’ve had to fight for the last forty years for a lot of them. And I enjoyed it all, after the war. I’d do it all again, I guess, but I haven’t got the patience, I was going to say- I suppose that’s right - and I haven’t got the concentration either. Unless I write everything down in my diary, I’ve had it.

27:00 **That information that’s in war diaries, and testimonies, such as you’re telling us, today...**

It's not in war diaries. Not in any of them. And the Australian paratroops in the artillery, that went up in Tsili Tsili, in the war diary, it is there, but what it doesn't say is that the officers were not allowed to go.

27:30 Because General Vasey said, "It's too dangerous, and we can't afford to lose the officers." Now that is not printed anywhere, and it should be, because that's the way the Australian soldier was thought of. And, except by Lobby, of course, and it makes me boil, that you have got to prove that what you're saying has been done.

28:00 And it's very difficult to convince other people of that. That's why I'd be very interested to see this, and present it to somebody right under his bloody nose. And but, at the talk that I gave at the Waterloo dinner [Engineer dinner held annually on the eve of Waterloo (an engineer tradition started at Gallipoli)] some three years ago, I wrote all this down, and I had all that stuff on the table, and it took some of the question marks right away from some people,

28:30 which I was pleased about, and I was sorry I didn't do it some thirty years ago. One of the things that irks me, and still does, and it's still operating as such, in this city we have what you call a Military Club [the Naval and Military Club] and you cannot go in there unless you're an officer.

29:00 There was sixty-seven thousand killed in this war, most of them were troops. Not too many officers. There was a lot of officers. But to just get away with that is absolutely amazing, in my view, and I knew that before I went in the army, because it was the same then. I don't dislike officers, but I do dislike the way our officers were chosen, you know,

29:30 with a degree of arts, or something like that, to direct engineer personnel. We did have a couple of permanent army sergeants, they were good but they were not engineer sergeants either. One, Arthur Addison was an engineer sergeant. But none of them had, you know, engineering qualities,

30:00 put it that way. I guess they learnt a bit after four years from the fellows that they were directing. But I was real crooked on all of that.

Did you keep a journal yourself?

Yep. And you're not getting it.

So how frequently would you write in your journal?

Every week. And that's where all of this has come from.

30:30 And you couldn't, some of this is libel, you know, and some of this what you've got today is libel and you've got to be extremely careful. I don't care any more. I'm eighty years old. I just don't care any more. But what you're saying is the incompetency of some people is unreal, and they were incompetent.

31:00 Some of the people we were taking orders from. Why would you send somebody out for four months without food? You're not miracle minders in a land you don't know anything about. It's, and as regards the medical stuff that they should have known, they didn't pass on too well. It wasn't until much later on that we got the Atebrin tablets for malaria,

31:30 but I had malaria seventeen times. And the dengue was the worst, of course, that, you were non compos mentis [mentally ill, or in this case, very sick]. Out like a light.

Was there any treatment they could give you for that?

Oh, yes. Yes. You're flat on your back, and you're sweating like billyo, but freezing to death and it's awful. When I had the ear done, they were very, very nice. No doubt about that. They were sisters then, and that was very nice,

32:00 I lapped that up, no worries at all, but I didn't sleep for a couple of weeks. After that, I slept my head off.

So what you've been talking about, Arthur, is kind of round the area of ethics?

Ethics?

In warfare, and in that situation, and what I'm curious about is how you know, in your own conscience, what is right and wrong when you're in those situations.

32:30 **You spoke earlier about a Japanese POW [Prisoner of War] who had a gold tooth and you weren't happy about that being raffled. Can you tell me a bit more about that situation?**

Yes, all right. We built the little jail out alongside the airstrip, and they brought these four or five prisoners in. and one of them had a gold tooth. And an Australian, not one of my blokes, but an Australian knocked his tooth out, and raffled it, for money.

33:00 Work that out. And I won't tell you one other, which was absolutely callous. They killed a fellow and that wasn't too good. I'm not going to repeat that. That is libel. But I know it's true. Very true. I saw it. You know, Australians, whilst they're all angels,

33:30 and extremely good blokes, there is an element that sometimes arises where they're not. And with a

little bit of encouragement from people who should know better, they become animals.

So how were you able to, how did you express, you know, yourself in situations like that, where you weren't going to go along with the crowd?

Well, I called him an 'ugly looking whatever', whatever.

34:00 But all the others were willing it. And that was on the edge of the airstrip. Four of them. And he had a gold tooth, right in front. I can take my teeth out, no worries, but I wouldn't knock a fellow's gold tooth out because he was helpless. He was helpless. But I'm not standing up for the Japanese at all, but you don't treat people like that.

34:30 Because you expect to be treated the best you can, if we were in the circumstances, but I know we wouldn't have been. But because, stories that we got that was happening elsewhere, in Singapore, etc, and they stuck in everybody's mind too, but overriding that, you wouldn't do that. You couldn't do that to a man, or shouldn't do it to a man. But we did get the stories of what was happening, all the way along, Singapore, Sumatra. So we were quite aware of all that.

35:00 **Were there any other incidents where you were not happy with the ethics of maybe a commanding officer, or other…?**

No. Not really, or some of our own blokes, yes. They weren't clean in themselves. That was, oh, I'm going to leave that alone. That wasn't nice either. One of, two of our blokes, were absolutely putrid.

35:30 And they couldn't do much about it. But anyway, they shipped them out in the finish, which is what they should have done in the first place.

What do you mean by putrid?

Putrid. Filthy. Filthy dirty. Rotten, absolutely rotten. Their skin was falling off, and only through filth. You know, not washing and things like that.

36:00 We couldn't wash, but we washed in everything we could wash in. To have a wash as soon as look at you. Sometimes you didn't take your boots off for two or three days but when you did, you turned your socks inside out and put them on again. That's all you could do. But if there was any water around, you'd wash your feet. But, you can let yourself go, but these two fellows.

36:30 But, they're still alive, both of them, which is good, I suppose. We haven't seen them since the war. Not at all. But anyway.

So, I guess we'll wind up shortly. There's one last thing about the effect your war experience had on you. You talked about the physical impact. What about, has it had any psychological impact on you?

37:00 Yes. Because of the explosion and when I killed the two natives, and when I got the kick in the ear, I got this tinnitus quite a bit. They used to give me nightmares. And put together, were not very good nightmares.

37:30 When I come home, for the first three to six months, I couldn't sleep in a bed. You can ask Joy. I used to sit in the corner, with one of my blankets around me, and that's how it affects you. And it was quite a while after that that I did sleep in the bed, but I was having nightmares. And when I knocked off work

38:00 and had nothing to think about, of course, your mind reverts back to situations that you've had, and of course, you go bonkers. And at one stage of the game, I went in to get a pension, or to get acknowledged of what I'd done, and they sent me to a psychiatrist in St Kilda Road. And Joy came with me that day, and we came out of the place,

38:30 and you know the big steel lamp posts that hold up the tramway wires, and things, they're all painted silver, I leant on one of them, and I couldn't move. That's how good I was. Of course, they sent me out to Heidelberg there, to the psycho factory, in Ward 24. Because I had nothing to do, because I was having nightmares, and etc, etc. That went on now for six-odd years,

39:00 and I've been out of that now for nearly eighteen months. And I don't get the nightmares any more, like I'm kicking and punching and whatever. And that's not good. But I am out of the main trouble.

So these nightmares were coming to you so many years after the war?

Oh, sixty. But I had them all the way through. Had them all the way through.

39:30 When you have a quiet moment, you never have a quiet moment. Or something might go off, an exhaust might go off, and you're out, you tense right up. You really are. And I have heard a few explosions over the years, and you know, I'm ready to run like blazes, which is not me at all. I used to turn around and run right into it.

40:00 And I'm nowhere near as fit as I was, I can tell you. I could run all day. And it was only, it was four years ago now that I had to give up bowls, as when I was bowling the bowl, when I put one down I fell down and I couldn't get up. Every bowl. And that was caused by the head because of the sudden workings of

it. Don’t ask me how.

40:30 And in May this year, they carted me out of this house at half past one in the morning with the arterial enteritis and that’s what they’re treating me for now. So I gave everything else away, and I’m concentrating on my eyes. But they’re still playing up quite a bit. That one’s just about shot, but this one’s not too bad, but it’s still mighty sore,

41:00 which it wasn’t up until March of this year. But every soldier, I don’t care, if he went away, and especially to New Guinea, and especially if he was in the Rats of Tobruk outfit, into those, that sort of dugout situations, there’s not many of them left now. And we are a dying race. They’re changing, DVA [Department of Veterans’ Affairs] are changing all the rules right now.

41:30 A lot of them we’ve not heard of them, but so far there are a lot of things I really disagree with. But still, I’m only one of many. You can disagree as much as you like. What they’ve got written down to say what you’ll do, you will do and that’s it. As I said, I did write some submissions into the last government thing, and I thought this was going to be one similar to it,

42:00 and I didn’t want to be in this, but somebody put me in, left, right and centre.

INTERVIEW ENDS