

# Australians at War Film Archive

## James Castles (Jim) - Transcript of interview

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<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/916>

### Tape 1

00:30 **Well to begin with, thank you for today from the whole archive. We can't do it without your help, thanks very much. The first thing we need, as I mentioned before, is a summary of your life, so to begin with can you tell me a bit**

01:00 **about where you were born and your family?**

I was actually born in Sydney in Marrickville. My father, his family came from Tasmania, and my Mum was born in New South Wales, lived in country New South Wales. I was born in Marrickville. Shortly after I was born, my Mum and Dad moved into a housing commission house in Guilford on Sydney and I lived there basically all of my life until I went to the army. Went to primary school at

01:30 Guilford Public School and Granville Boys High School. Left there and joined the DMR [Department of Mineral Resources] as a trainee engineering draftsman and did a land and engineering survey drafting course. And it was at the end of that I was called up into the army, national service.

**Any brothers and sisters?**

Two brothers, one sister. One brother and sister still alive, older brother has passed away. I was in the scouts, became a

02:00 queen scout, played soccer.

**We will go into that in a bit more detail. How did it come that you were called up?**

Whatever came out of the ballot, registered and the number came out.

**And what happened then?**

I was notified my number had come out. I had to go for my medical, which I did, and I actually applied for a deferment to finish my tertiary education, which I did.

02:30 So I went in the army, passed the medical of course, went into the army at the age of 21 and got married just prior to going into the army. Had planned to get married later in that year but brought it forward.

**Can you take us through the places you trained before you went to Vietnam?**

Went to Puckapunyal in Victoria to do recruit training. Then went to the school of engineering at Casula to do engineer training,

03:00 engineer corps training. Was posted to a Reinforcement wing out there, which is where you wait to go to Vietnam. But during the process of being out there you do jungle training in Canungra to train for three weeks to go to Vietnam.

**How long did that whole process take?**

I went in the army February, and I was actually in Vietnam in September of '68.

**From when you arrived in Vietnam, can you take us through your role there and the places you served?**

03:30 I was based in Nui Dat 1 Field Squadron Royal Australian Engineers as a sapper originally. Various roles and operations, being mainly to support infantry patrolling in the jungle. Our role was mines, tunnel, explosives, that sort of stuff. I was there in September, during a big contact that came at Christmas the opportunity came and I was made a lance corporal, my first promotion.

04:00 Later during '69 I was made a full corporal and later was actually an acting sergeant before I came home. I did various things, as I said mostly infantry operations, support the infantry, but we did things like support armoured personnel carrier and tanks. They would do what they called 'road runners',

escorting convoys from Vung Tau, north into parts of South Vietnam, and while they were going through Phuoc Tuy, that was our province, so our guys would help them. Civil aid work. When we weren't out in the

04:30 jungle we would spend a week or two weeks in Nui Dat before we would go out again. So we would do civil aid work, build roads, culverts. In fact, I was in charge one time over there of actually putting three culverts on a local road, the whole thing, that sort of stuff.

**Were there any major engagements that you were engaged in during that time?**

I was, okay, probably the most known ones, I was the first person in on what they call the,

05:00 what they call mine-killing APCs [Armoured Personnel Carriers] to clear the Dat Do mine field ['Horseshoe' Minefield]. I have slides of that actually. I was also at the Bien Hoa rubber plantation conflict. We were flown in the afternoon it happened. A few other, I guess Christmas '68 was pretty bad. We were in, I can't think of the name of the mountains actually, the Warby [Nui Thi Vai mountains] Mountains, which I guess are west of

05:30 Nui Dat, which was a place I never liked to go, that was a pretty bad period, I was out there for nine weeks.

**What were you doing out there?**

As I say, supporting infantry. We had a section out with, I was in a mini team then working with a platoon. And for nearly a fortnight straight, my offsider and I, Rick Branch, we were following other platoons, finding bunker systems, clearing them,

06:00 having contacts, and we were just demolishing them all. And probably the worst contact we were in, there was five engineers, there was about eight, seven wounded, one killed, but there was five engineers actually flown home to Australia from that. That was my worst contact.

**This was around Christmas '68?**

It was actually on Christmas Eve, we were being flown out Christmas Eve and we came into a company harbour and one of the platoons had found this bunker system and they wanted us to blow it before we were flown out, the infantry were staying there actually. And I said, "I will take my guys out and help you."

06:30 Probably one of the worst decisions of my life. But we went out there and we actually went into a live bunker system, we didn't go into the one we were supposed to, they got off track and we got ambushed.

**After that what operations happened through '69?**

Through '69? Ah, Bien Hoa Rubber plantation, we swept through the village the next day. Infantry was going through a row of houses at a time with tanks, once they braced up the houses [fired machine gun rounds into the houses], forward

07:00 engineers would go forward and search the houses. Hard to put your finger on any particular contacts. When you are patrolling through the jungle, they just happen. Snipers. It was one of the ways the Australians were successful, I suppose, we patrolled one visual distance apart and they would take out one or two guys. Sometimes even when a contact would happen, it would be at the front of the column and it would be all over when you got there.

**Did you spend your entire tour in Phuoc Tuy?**

07:30 I spent part of my time, I think it was Bien Hoa airbase, it was north of Phuoc Tuy and it was the anniversary of the Tet Offensive and they thought they would put in, I think it was called the 'ring of steel', they were putting a defensive line through that part of South Vietnam. They were expecting a big attack

08:00 or move by the North Vietnamese to come south. And didn't really eventuate, a few contacts but that's all I think.

**So your entire time there was based from Nui Dat?**

Working out from Nui Dat, that's right. Yeah, get flown out on operations wherever they might be. It was interesting at the reunion in Sydney, a bunch of guys that I hadn't seen for a long time, some of the guys I was closest to over there came here for a barbecue on Sunday. We were talking about time out in the jungle. I was there for 366 days,

08:30 I came home on the 366th day. I spent 262 in the jungle. What people don't realise is that with field engineers, I guess, because we're replaced one-on-one, you tend to get close to a small group of people that you're out with in the jungle or that came out around the same time that you did.

**Can you explain what you mean by being replaced one-on-one?**

Well, look at infantry battalion. They all get loaded up, all of the support equipment,

09:00 got on the Sydney, or flown over, but went there as a full battalion. field engineers, and I am pretty sure

construction engineers were the same, we were replaced two or three at a time. I think I went over with two other guys into a field, and when your time is over they have to move another couple in to support you. Probably a good thing. I never thought about it until right now actually. I think there would have been

09:30 a lot more casualties had they been replaced doing the job we were doing as a group, because you learnt a lot from experience, just what to look for, for mines. All of that sort of stuff. Get to know the signs the North Vietnamese used to identify mines, and their hides and their caches and all of that stuff. The Long Hai Mountains, talking about how they did that, there was some really horrific contacts in

10:00 the Long Hai Mountains. Always disappointed me actually, I saw the papers out here later, very under-reported here, the casualties. I lost a few guys out of my section when I was an acting sergeant. But a lot of infantry guys, I think it was 5 RAR [Royal Australian Regiment] and I was acting sergeant, and I was actually asked by the company commander to go out and talk to about 19 replacement infantry guys that came out about what to look for and what to do.

**So to summarise your role, it was mainly delousing mines?**

10:30 Yeah, and searching tunnels and bunkers, demolishing them. I guess you would occasionally come across unexploded ordnance. American 500,000-pound bombs and those sorts of thing, we would destroy those, that was our primary function. The searching mines, tunnels that sort of stuff.

**What happened when your tour came to an end?**

I got on a plane and came home.

11:00 I guess that was interesting, you often hear it said that you just stepped off the plane and got back into society. Looking back on it, I don't think I thought about it at the time, but it certainly impacted me I suppose. My wife says, "They brought you guys home in the middle of the night." We got home here at 11 o'clock at night and that was when all of the protests were on, I can honestly say I wasn't conscious of that at the time. Probably because I switched off,

11:30 I had lost my father while I was over there and hadn't come home. So I really was distracted by that. I just got back into what I was doing. I was very lucky when I came home, because I had good friends that I worked with that I guess supported me while I was over there. Kept in touch with me. I went back to my job, and Valdet Partners, and I guess with them and I, and I was able to assimilate back into society reasonably quickly I guess.

12:00 I think about seven or eight years later, I think I had a reaction to, I lost some friends for some wrong reasons but I think that's what had happened.

**What job did you end up doing in your post-war career?**

Well, I was with the DMR, I went back to the DMR as an engineering designer. But it affected me, and I have said this constantly since coming out of the army. My strongest feeling coming out of the Vietnam

12:30 and back into the world was I was on the outside looking in. I tend to look at the world different to other people. For probably a year or so I found trivia hard to deal with, even the results of football games, you know? People would be really uptight or a bit head-up about what was going on in the local football comp [competition] and I would say, "So what? There are more important things in life." And I kept that with me, I guess, that ability to look outside things.

13:00 I always look at the positive of things, and I think the positive is being able to do that and look for opportunity, whether that's just me or my army experience enhanced it, I don't know, I tend to think it helped.

**What did you see of the protest reaction in Australia to Vietnam when you came home?**

Not much, except what was on the news bulletins. I really didn't focus on it. People ask me why I wasn't that conscious of it, I knew that it was going on

13:30 in America and I knew it was going on out here, but I just got on with my life. Didn't worry too much about it. I decided very quickly when I was in Vietnam, after about the second operation, we shouldn't have been there. In fact, I remember saying to our troop commander we came in from an operation, we used to always have a barbecue the first Saturday or Sunday night we came in from the bush,

14:00 and I was sitting next to him, because I had studied communism in the Leaving Certificate and I said, "We shouldn't be here. We have split this country to all of the industry, to industry in the north and rural in the south and 99 percent of the population is living on a dirt floor and the other one percent is living on the American black market." That was just my view of the world at the time I was over there. And the comment came back to me, "Be careful who you say that to you will end up in the brig [military prison]." It didn't change what I was doing, or affect the way I thought about it.

14:30 **Did you ever think about trying to continue your career in the army at any point?**

I did, yes. I was offered, actually. I was actually approached during recruit training and I actually filled out the forms and went through the preliminary interviews to do officer training. And the psyche office

at Puckapunyal told me going into the board, it was a full day you went with about 12 other guys and did some practical things

15:00 in the field and then interviews with very senior officers. This must have been brigadier or better, about five in a room twice as big as this on a chair like you're sitting on. Very small, they all sat up there and they just threw questions at you the whole time. And the psyche officer told me on the way in, "You're one of the better candidates going into this." And I got right towards the end of the interview and they said, "Where would you like to serve officer training, what corps?" And I had put down survey

15:30 artillery and engineers. And they asked me about that and I said, "Well, I have been called up in the army, this is my training in engineer surveying and I figure while I am here I might as well get value out for me and I will be more valuable to the army." And I saw two of these people go like that. And I never got in there, and I relayed this to the psyche officer, and he said, "You did the wrong thing, you never tell the army what is good for them."

16:00 But it was interesting when I came back to Australia, I was stationed after leave at 6ESR, Engineering Stores at Penrith. And the OC [Officer Commanding] called me a week before I left and asked me did I want to stay in the army and go into officer training? And because back at the previous unit they said, "Well, what would you think if you were in charge of an infantry platoon in Vietnam?" And I had said, "Well, I think it would be a waste of my time and the army's time." So I asked the same question and I didn't stay in the army. But I had the opportunity, and I have often thought, "What would have happened if I had stayed there?" Life would be different, but it is over, something you walked past.

16:30 **How did your personal life move on after the war with regards to family?**

As I said, I was married before I went. I always give my wife great credit for staying with me for the first two years I was back, because I had changed dramatically from the person she knew when I went away. She would say that as well. I had grown up a lot, I was pretty immature when I went, and I

17:00 was also a bit irresponsible when I came back, from a personal point of view. You go through 12 months, in Vietnam, in the job I was in, I was responsible for other people and leading own people, but in your own time, especially when you were in Nui Dat, as long as you could stand vertical and do work at eight o'clock and do what was asked of you and knock off at four-thirty, it didn't matter what you did after that, so we drank a lot, whatever. So in terms, you were very selfish I think, looking back I was probably pretty selfish.

17:30 **You became a father?**

I did a few years after, 1974, six years after. Two children, Cameron and Jodie. Jodie, they have both grown up to be very fine children. Jodie is married to a Canadian living in Vancouver at the moment. And Cameron is, as I told you before, he is in London at the moment.

**And did you retire from your work?**

No, no I am still working for the RTA [Roads and Traffic Authority].

18:00 As I said, I went back to the RTA when I came back. In about '90, I progressed through the design, planning, traffic engineering, traffic management field. Did some extra tertiary training, short courses. Actually, I did a short course in traffic engineering back in the early '80s and was actually lecturing that course some years later. In about '90, I was actually getting

18:30 very, we will go back a little bit; I was lucky. About every seven years, once we had built this house and the kids and in-laws settled, I had a number of opportunities where they seemed to be about seven years apart. Changes in direction at work, and I mean massive changes of direction. The first one, the RTA took over traffic engineering, traffic signalling and all of that I had a major role in that. Then we got into CAD design [Computer-Aided Design] and I got heavily involved in that. And then about '90s, late '80s, the

19:00 DMR was starting to change then and I could do, what I was doing easily and I was looking for a chance to get outside and start my own business, but I got an opportunity to go into the city and work in a IT [Information Technology] area from an engineering road business point of view. So I took that opportunity, and there was massive changes going on around the place. And I guess I have benefited from that ever since I am currently, I got to be general manager in the technology area and

19:30 currently manager of support services amongst other things, looking after the consistency of the RTA asset management, purchasing, well, delivery-type client/service-type function around the state.

**What contact have you had with the RSL [Returned and Services League] or any army type association?**

I still go to Anzac Days, I have had a couple of small breaks of not going, but I still go to Anzac Day. I joined Parramatta RSL when I first came back, and I was a member of that

20:00 for many years, and I just haven't kept up that membership in the last 10 I guess. I do get to some reunions that are held but I think they are being overplayed at the moment, there is a new reunion happening every five minutes. I should renew my membership to the RSL, I,

20:30 I probably will, yeah.

**All right, that's exactly what we were looking for. We have got all of that information, now we will go back and talk about it in detail. And where we will start with that is right at there beginning, your earliest memories of Sydney?**

My earliest memories of Sydney? Living in Guildford and going to school in Guildford, I guess. We lived in a housing commission estate. Good neighbours.

21:00 Society was different then. We had a lot more social interaction with neighbours. Socially it was more than what it is today.

**What sort of interaction are you talking about?**

Christmas parties, visiting people, having drinks with them, neighbours would talk over the fence, you knew everybody in your own block let alone next door and across the road.

21:30 I guess my parents had grown up through the Depression years, that was towards the end of that. They were all working class people.

**What did the people in the Guildford area do for a living?**

Mostly trade people, I would think. My Dad was an exception. He had been a tradesman, he was a carpenter but he was at that stage just starting to work high way up in the construction industry, work for a construction company. So he moved up. Mostly they were tradesmen, those sorts of jobs.

22:00 **What was your dad like as a person?**

Seeing he died when I was 21 in Vietnam, I had a huge amount of respect for him. Very practical person, very calm. Can-do, get-it-done person, and I know that because, it is quite interesting, in the last 10 years I have met a couple of people, and the way I know this

22:30 one of these guys who was a qualified engineer and is now retired worked for my Dad as a trainee with my father working at the Port Kembla steel works. And the way I knew, he was relating a story and it was my father he was talking about, it came right out of the blue.

**What sort of relationship did you have with him?**

Very close. It affected me considerably when he passed away while I was away. Missed him terribly when I came back.

23:00 **What would you do together?**

All sorts of thing. He was always one of these people tinkering with things, anything that broke, he fixed them. I would work doing that, sitting beside him doing all of that stuff. I was lucky in the children in the family, because he came from Tasmania, but at the time probably in his life where he could afford to go there once a year, and he used to go there for the Christmas period. Normally he would have Christmas with us, but as the kids got older he would go to Tasmania for Christmas.

23:30 I happened to be at the right age, sort of around 12, early teens sort of thing. For about three out of four years I went with him to Tasmania for Christmas for four or five weeks. They were the sorts of things. Went fishing with him. He was in charge of duplicating the Colonel Oil Refinery, so he knew lots of people out there to go fishing with and all of that sort of stuff.

**What do you remember about those trips to Tasmania?**

Being pretty free. Being over there with your father.

24:00 He went off and did things with all of his brothers and I had cousins my age, had a pretty free-run of the place. And I guess it was my grandmother was a matriarch, I guess. The family was the big thing, I guess, big family. My father was one of 13 [children], 11 living. And the Christmases we would have there, they would be nothing like, there would something like 60, 70 people at my grandmother's house for Christmas, very close. Just being in the country, free, very pioneering.

24:30 **How would you travel down to Tasmania in those days?**

Early times flew, but the last few times by car to Melbourne and then across on the Princess, the Empress of Tasmania boat.

**What was that boat trip like?**

Pretty good. It was overnight. Only had one bad one, I didn't get sick, neither did Dad, but about 80 percent of the other people on the boat did. To the point of the toilets being awash with sick.

25:00 It wasn't nice. But they were good. We always had a cabin.

**What about siblings, where did you sit in the family?**

I was the third eldest, second youngest, my bother was the eldest, a sister five years older than me and a brother five years younger.

**And what was your relationships with your siblings like growing up?**

I guess my older brother, up until

25:30 probably a few years before he died, bit distant because he was a lot older, about nine years older, so I was still a little kid I guess when he was starting work. My sister, probably one of antagonism, awfully close, but sister and brother five years apart. There is some antagonism in that. Got on each others nerves. My young brother,

26:00 I guess I was the same with him as my older brother was with, I was closer to him although when I came back from Vietnam he was about 16 or 17 when Dad died. I got closer to him when I came back and we are still pretty close.

**What sort of a young kid were you?**

Probably shy, not introverted, but

26:30 probably kept to myself a bit. I was comfortable with my own company I guess.

**What did you enjoy doing as a boy?**

I always enjoyed going fishing or tinkering with thing. I played soccer growing up, was in the scouts, I enjoyed that getting out in the bush.

**Can you describe the scout meeting you went to?**

27:00 I was in 1st Granville, actually got a letter yesterday for a reunion for 1st Granville, they have one every year, haven't been for a long time but I might go to this one. It was one of the biggest scout troops in the Hume area in Western Sydney. Based around Granville Auburn area. Strong, had a big cub/scout contingent and seniors, rovers, had three buildings. A scout hall, cub tent and a rovers' den, which was an old house.

27:30 Very strong, good camaraderie and people got on well. A lot of tough growing up though. I mean, yeah. It was good.

**What do you mean by tough growing up?**

Well, we did things that they wouldn't be allowed to do today, we had old games like the British bulldog and things like that. Have you ever played British bulldog?

28:00 A bag or a broken football bladder on the floor in the middle of the hall and get on each end and one team had to go to the other end and there was no holds barred, you just do it. I can't imagine kids being allowed to do that today.

**How were you at looking after yourself as a young boy?**

Probably spoilt a little. I would think I was probably pretty good at looking after myself, yeah.

28:30 As I got older, too, in my teens more so. Very independent. In fact, I would have been probably called a rebel in those days as I move into my teens, I was very independent. Didn't actually move out of home but had a very strong point of view.

**Would you get into fights?**

Never. In fact, probably the opposite. I was probably a coward then for want of a better term. Didn't have the confidence to get into fights, that's probably a better way to put it.

**While we're on that,**

29:00 **what was your point of view that was forming in your early teens that you held onto strongly?**

Sense of family and honesty, being straight with people. That's the sense of values which I guess was probably the biggest thing formed for me. Strength of family and being honest. Always tell the truth. If you don't tell the truth, it only comes back to bite you anyway.

29:30 So I guess I have stood by that and always been straight up front.

**Just back to the scouts in the late '50s when you were in the scouts, what sort of traditions did they uphold at that time?**

I think very solid, I talk about honesty and I think that's really what it was about.

30:00 I probably didn't say before, but I guess one of the things out of my family and the scouts is concern for other people, caring about the other person. Supporting the other person, being part of a team as much as anything. Honesty up front, caring about other people, being part of a team.

**Was there a greater sense of nationalism or patriotism associated with that?**

Empire, the queen [Queen Elizabeth II] was all, I mean, the queen was sitting up on all of the walls we

had in the scouts.

30:30 I remember being at the school at that time and the queen was visiting Australia at the time, and she drove past our school and we all went out and stood on the road while she drove past and we waved the flag at her. That was pretty strong. Probably pretty strong just being Australian too, being an Aussie was, I think we were developing pretty strongly at that time a sense of being Australia,

31:00 as a country.

**What did you know about earlier wars, the Second World War for example?**

I knew a fair bit about it. My Dad had served in the air force in the Second World War, only in Australia, he wanted to go over but he never ever got there. I had uncles that served in the war and overseas, and I guess great uncles that served in the First World War, so I was aware of what it was about. I guess we also studied war, it was taught at schools then too.

31:30 We learnt about it and we always celebrated Anzac Days at school growing up, too. One of the disappointments of today, where I think with the multiculturalism, we're losing some of that.

**What kind of Anzac Day celebrations went on?**

Had the Last Post, and there would be stories about Gallipoli, but there would always be a minute's silence for the last post. Those sorts of things. Raising and lowering of the flag.

32:00 **When you got called up to join the army, how important was that Anzac tradition to you by that time?**

I think it was pretty strong, I don't think I thought about it in terms of me going in the army. I didn't associate the two consciously. In fact, I don't think I ever gave any real thought to the morality of Vietnam or the war and me going in the army. I was probably at that time in my life where I was at a crossroads of deciding and maturing later anyway, and deciding I guess.

32:30 It was interesting, I went for a job interview when I was 18 with a construction company and the general manager was British, obviously, and asked me the questions: what would I think if I was called up and had to serve in Vietnam? And my answer was that I hadn't really thought about it. He didn't like the answer, but I hadn't really thought about it.

**In your teenager**

33:00 **years, there was a growing sense of youth culture?**

In what sense?

**Well, the generation gap between children and parents was growing, did you have any sense of that in your own experience?**

I don't think, it think it probably may have just been starting to happen. I guess probably 18 to 21, not as severe as has happened

33:30 since. I think it was just starting to happen then. I think I was more conscious of it after I came back and in later years. I mean, there was still a strong sense of family and parents were to be respected, I guess that was something I hadn't thought about either. Growing up in that time, you respected your parents and elders, that was very strong in those days.

34:00 **What was the biggest dispute you remember having with your parents?**

Biggest dispute. None come to mind. I think it was just me breaking out, probably with my Dad as I was turning 18 and wanting to do my own thing. Breaking the curfews, I guess. I can't remember any significant disputes.

34:30 Apart from my mother being a nagger and every child has to put up with that.

**What was your mother like?**

Totally family focussed. My Dad, being in the construction company, was out of Sydney a lot. Sometimes would work in the country and be home on weekends, so Mum bore the brunt of bringing us up and all of the trials and tribulations and good times that go with that.

35:00 The whole focus was on her to do that. So very regimented in the way she did things. Meat and three veg [vegetables], and it was always lamb one night and cottage pie another. Roast dinner Sunday and cottage pie Monday with the leftovers. Washed on Tuesday, very organised in what she did. Very much focussed unilaterally on the family and what was required.

**How did your family get on**

35:30 **financially? Did you want for anything?**

I can't remember wanting for anything no. Different times, I don't think so. We knew who we were and what we were doing. I guess you wish for things that you can't have, all kids do. No, we were never

deprived of anything, always ate and clothed well and mostly got we asked for, for Christmas within reason.

**What inspired your imagination as a boy?**

36:00 Not much, to be frank I just drifted along. I had a very strong feeling because my Dad was in the construction industry in my early high school years to be an engineer. Which I am not, by the way, I ended up in that sort of area, which I lost, lost it somewhere in my high schooling. Which was to my detriment probably, I only just got through the Leaving Certificate, lack of commitment and study more than any other reason.

36:30 Didn't have a vision.

**What were your main interests outside of school?**

As I was growing up? As I said, I was in the scouts, I played soccer. They're probably the primary things. Fishing with my Dad that was a big part of our life.

**Who were your best mates?**

I had a couple of good mates. There was a fellow Ray Bourke lived around the corner from me I went to school with him. Another guy Kevin Guge,

37:00 I remember going right through primary school with them and high school, we stayed pretty good mates. Ray was in the scouts with me. But I guess as we left school, they both left at the Intermediate Certificate, the School Certificate today. And we tended to drift apart then and I think I have seen one of them once in all of that time.

**What interest did you have in girls and when did that emerge?**

37:30 Probably about the time I was leaving school, I guess. That's not totally true, when I got into the senior scout because we used to run scout dances two or three times a year, and there was a network of those around Sydney then. They were very good. And certainly as I got older, 17, 18, and my mates, these two guys and I had other mates in the scouts, too. Once we got vehicles

38:00 we used to travel around Sydney a bit and go to these dances, so I guess that was the real time I started to get interested in girls.

**What were the courtship rituals of the day?**

Getting the courage up to ask somebody to dance was the biggest thing. Probably not as up front today. It was a big test to hold somebody's hand.

38:30 All of the steps were slow and long I guess.

**Can you tell us about your first car?**

I had a black FE Holden [car model]. My Dad helped me buy it, I bought that when I was 18, that was my first vehicle, had it until I went to Vietnam.

**And how did that change your life?**

Pretty dramatically, you're much more mobile.

39:00 I remember going right through primary school with them and high school, we stayed pretty good mates. Gave us a lot more mobility to get out and do things and be about the place.

**How did you meet your wife?**

At a dance. The Riverly [Reveille?] in Parramatta, big dance hall which was 50-50 dancing then. That's where I met her and her sister with a group of people.

**We'll just stop there, we're almost out of tape.**

## Tape 2

00:30 **I was wondering how big a deal was it to become a queen's scout in those days, I seem to remember?**

Pretty big. Stood in front of the governor, shook your hand, parents came long. It was a big deal.

**What did you work on to get that?**

Well, there was a whole series of badges that you had to do like hiking and venturing. I am trying to remember it all now. There was lots of things you had to do,

01:00 a series of badges. 'Dispatch rider' was the name of one of the, I can't remember. The 'bushman's thong' was part of it. In fact, I think that was prized more than the queen scout itself probably because of the bit of leather you got hanging off your shoulder. Yeah, I haven't thought about it too much. Yeah, just meeting the challenge and doing the things that needed to be done to get there.

01:30 **Can you tell us about the time you decided to leave scouts?**

It was about the time when I met my wife, that may have had something to do with it. You started to get to the age where you're interested in girls, working, there are a lot more distractions in life. I guess that had a lot to do with it. I got into the rover scouts and just lost interest, I can't think of any

02:00 reason, just drifted away. As with a few of the guys I was with through the scouts, all of the way through, a few stayed. I went to a few reunions, as I said I got this letter yesterday. I have been to a few, but I found I didn't have much in common with them anymore, don't know why that is. I am not a reunion person,

02:30 don't like going back and crying over spilt milk, looking backwards. Hearing the same things over and over again.

**The dances at the Riverly, what sort of music were you listening to at that time?**

It was the 50s, all big band dance music. Towards the end when we stopped going, it actually closed down, it was when the Beatles and the rock and roll, they were starting to bring that into the music I guess.

03:00 And it really didn't have the same atmosphere of people getting together and having a good time. It was a more individual thing, I guess. Just didn't enjoy going there as much. In the early days of the big band, you know, they had the barn dance and you would meet everybody and talk to everybody and it was good.

**What did you know of the rest of the world?**

What did I know of the rest of the world?

03:30 Only as I said, I studied communism and modern history at high school so I knew a bit about the rest of the world. It was probably more focused on local Australian things. Knew it existed, knew about America. Just coming through that post-Second World War, it was just the issues that came out of that that you were aware about in the world.

04:00 Certainly aware of communism and the Cold War, and those things starting to emerge after the Second World War. Nuclear, proliferation of nuclear weapons was happening around that time so we were conscious of that.

**What did you learn of nuclear weapons around that time? For example, were there any...?**

Well, the Mara Linga tests were going on, they were in the 50s and later. What did I learn about them?

04:30 Just that they were devastating and they could destroy the world, I guess that was the perception of a everyone at the time.

**You didn't participate in the 'duck and cover' [procedures in time of nuclear war] campaign training for kids?**

No, none of that.

**And of communism, what were you being told about communism?**

05:00 Had a very good history teacher actually, I can't remember his name. Tall elderly gentleman. Basically about the theory of communism, collectives and the way they worked. I never remember being taught anything about the suppressive side of religion or anything like that, it was the theory of communism and I don't remember a lot of it. In Russia and Eastern Europe, I guess.

05:30 **What were the reasons for the Cold War?**

Just a clash of cultures. Reasons for the Cold War? Just basically that. Capitalism against communism, they were the two things I guess, one wanting to dominate the other.

06:00 **Where did your family stand politically?**

'Queen and Country', I would guess more than anything, and Aussie, don't think would have taken a side, well, would have taken Americans' side I guess, but not consciously spoken about that I remember.

**Do you recall the Menzies [Prime Minister Robert Menzies] era?**

Yeah, I remember pig iron Bob selling all of the steel to the Japanese, iron ore to the Japanese. That was a topic of conversation when I was a kid, I was very young.

06:30 Yeah, he was an icon, but at that time as I said, Australians were all Queen and Country. I remember Bob Menzies being a very solid influence, but I was very young then so its really a name that's

prominent in my childhood memory of government and politics of the time.

**What were the politics of your family?**

My Dad would have been Labor.

07:00 It wasn't discussed at the time. Wasn't a big topic of conversation in the house, politics. My Dad would have voted labor, I think. You would know when elections were on, you might go to the school with the folks when they voted, never really talked about it. But it was mostly labour then, I guess, my Dad coming from that background.

07:30 **What do you recall of the cultural changes, especially from America in the '60s?**

TV [television]. Probably the biggest influence I would think. TV would have to be, rock music I guess, if I was going to say anything I would say TV. I remember in our house, my friend who lived in the next street I mentioned earlier,

08:00 his dad was a carpenter builder. I remember they had one of the first TVs in my group of friends. And the reason my Dad ended up buying a TV is because one of my sister's friend's family got one some time after that and we would go there of a night time to watch TV. That's why my father bought a TV. So I think that had a huge influence, I think it opened your eyes to a whole range of things. People are critical of TV, but I also think it expanded your mind about what was out

08:30 there and what was available.

**When was that?**

Early '60s. Couldn't tell you the exact date, probably a year or two after they came out in Australia we got a TV.

**Do you remember the Beatles coming to Australia?**

Yes indeed. Didn't go and see them but I remember them being here. You can talk to my wife, she got thrown off the stage trying to get a jelly baby that Paul trod on.

09:00 She'll love that going in the archive. But I remember them being at the hotel windows, they had on the news them being at the windows and the crowd across the ground. I liked their music.

**Did you go out and buy a plastic Beatles wig or?**

No, I had a Beatle haircut, wore the clothes.

**What was your first Beatles song?**

I would have to ask my wife, probably Yellow Brick Road.

09:30 No, We All Live in a Yellow Submarine. I don't think I bought Beatles records actually. I was more into surf music. Atlantics and the Beach Boys, all of that sort of thing. Didn't go to the surf much, went to the beach but not surf.

**What did you make of Bob Dylan?**

Like Bob Dylan, still like Bob Dylan.

10:00 It's the cultural changes, those things were happening then. An awareness of what was right and wrong and communities taking part in it.

**How did you see that in Sydney?**

I am not sure, prior to me going into the army I don't think I was consciously aware of that. I was more aware of the

10:30 Bob Monday issues with Greens in Sydney, which was after that period.

**What do you recall of the Kennedy assassination?**

I remember I was in the shower when it happened. I worked part time in Coles all through my high school years of a Saturday morning. I

11:00 was in the shower, my Mum came and told me it had happened. Dramatic, end of the world was probably the perception, like most people. I remember because of the Cold War most people saw Kennedy as one of the saviours. I remember thinking that that Kennedy was one of the saviours of the world as we knew it and would thaw the Cold War.

11:30 **Any interest in the space race?**

Absolutely. I am a firm believer in UFOs [Unidentified Flying Objects] and people out there. My biggest desire in my life right now, if they landed tomorrow, I would jump on. So I fully support the space race, the world can't stay in its orbit forever and we will just find a way to go on.

**But did you follow the moon landings?**

12:00 They landed on the moon when I was in Vietnam, which I through was quite ironic. I came in from the bush about three days after and it was still on the news. And I thought, "Here we are out in the bush killing each other and they have landed a man on the moon." It would be nice to spend that money in a better way, although I still think we should have done it.

**Prior to that did you follow the Gemini [space craft]?**

Oh yeah. For sure, the monkeys going into space, chimpanzees, that's was all pretty good stuff.

12:30 **It was a pretty interesting period.**

It was. All of the, we talk about change, but change has been going on all of your life really, but it was an interesting time. We were moving into the modern era, technology was just exploding. I think it was exploding faster than it is today, we are just adding bits to computers now. We haven't had any real breakthrough.

13:00 **What did you know of Southeast Asia?**

That it was there and the Vietnam War was on, I guess.

**When did you first hear of the Vietnam War?**

When we started to commit troops there. No, when communism, I guess Menzies were talking about it and the earlier politicians that hordes would come down and invade Australia. That was the story behind it all then. I probably became aware of it when I was in high school, a little bit after.

13:30 **How were you?**

I didn't ever think, apart from those sort of issues, the communism sort of issues, not about Australia being part of it or anything.

**What association had you had with so-called 'new Australians'?**

I went to school with them. Went to school with Italian, Maltese people.

14:00 Had no problems with them, I think we are all stronger for it and I think some of those are too. Wogs and wops, but we all got on great, we might call them that but they would come back and have a joke at me for having big ears. I think it is all part of growing up and toughening yourself up. They were just somebody else I went to school with.

**Asians?**

Weren't many of them around.

14:30 Only later, since post-Vietnam I guess, when Asians have come into the country. I have no problem with any, I think that's one of the beauty of Australia, certainly through that era, whether it is today I don't know, but certainly through that era. Australians took people as they came, it didn't matter what race, class, breed whatever they were. I don't believe there was any deliberate conscious discrimination at that point. There may have been in

15:00 other parts of Australia. But I never experienced a thought of it even, and I don't know people who did then. Didn't know people that thought that way.

**Australia committed troops around '65. What do you recall of that time?**

"All the way with LBJ" [Lyndon Baines Johnston -US president at time of Vietnam War] and we were going to stop the hordes coming down to the middle of Australia. I remember it happening. I remember the

15:30 likelihood, I would have been about 15 then, no older than that. It was something in the back of your mind, your number might come out of the barrel and you might go. I don't think I thought we should or should not have been there at that time.

**What were the dinner table discussions with your family?**

About that? I really can't remember. It probably just would have been discussed in passing

16:00 with the rest of the news of the day. Maybe there was discussion about whether conscription was right or not because I can't recall anything specific about that. I was noncommittal until my number came out, I never really thought about it.

**Amongst your friends was there any dissention or talk?**

None at all.

16:30 Rarely came up if ever, I can't remember it coming up. I was working then when my number came up. There was nobody where I worked and it was a period in the DMR there was lots of recruiting, so there

was lots of young people in these organizations, and I was the first one to be called up. So none of them really thought about it until it happened to me.

**What did you know of how the ballot was done for the national service?**

17:00 About as much as I know now. Just that they just pulled lottery marbles out with birth dates on and if your birth date was called out you were called up for a medical.

**Did you see this on television?**

Probably did, I don't recall. It would have been publicised.

**Just on television, what television shows were you keen on at the time?**

Outer Limits,

17:30 Bonanza, gee so many years have passed I am not sure what was on TV then, I guess. Certainly Bandstand. Six O'clock Rock. Rawhide. I am trying to think.

18:00 **And how did it work to get your number drawn out?**

As far as I know, a birth date came out, all boys with that birth date were called, you had to then register and you were called in for a medical and I went into the city for my medical. And I firmly believe now that they used the medical to poll people that they wanted.

18:30 Because I went to Vietnam as they were moving into establishing Nui Dat as a base, basically as a small town. And that was interesting, of all of the people that were in my field engineer troop going through SME [Society of Manufacturing Engineers to become Certified Manufacturing Engineer], no probably going to Vietnam more so, there was something like 45 people had educational qualifications above Leaving or High School Certificate.

19:00 Might have been a trade of some sort, plenty of linesman that could put up the lines around the place, and carpenters and builders, all of that sort of stuff. I might have had a cynical view of that, but I firmly believe they used the medical to populate with the people they wanted.

**The steps to get your number drawn out, what was the registration procedure and what did you know of the requirements to register?**

19:30 Gee, testing my memory on how that happened. I think there was probably notification if your birthday was in a certain period, you had to then register. Or maybe the dates were pulled out and you then had to register. One way or the other.

20:00 **Was there a public information campaign about this on television or what?**

We knew conscription was there. Do you mean at that level or the level of actually doing it?

**How did you know conscription was there?**

Well, it was publicised, quite a political event at the time that we had conscription. We had national service prior to that but it was only three months, a bit like our CMF [Citizens Military Forces] I guess through the Korean days.

20:30 **And how was this explained to the public? What was your idea of why they were conscripting?**

So we had the numbers to support the Americans in Southeast Asia and we didn't have enough permanent forces to do that. To meet our commitment we had to do that. I never thought about the pros and cons of that, right or wrong, until after. I started

21:00 to think about it I guess when I was in Vietnam.

**How would you describe your sort of understanding of that process of conscription at that time?**

Close to ignorance prior to it happening to me. Ignorance, that was it. Conscription was there, that was it, didn't know how it was done apart from birthday ballots, wouldn't have thought about it too much.

21:30 **How did you find out your birthday had been drawn?**

Got a letter in the mail saying I was conscripted and I had to go for a medical. I think my mother got the letter, she hadn't opened it but she knew what it was when it got there. So it was waiting when I got home. She wasn't impressed.

22:00 **In what way did she express her...?**

Just being really upset about it. Reaction to a tragic event, I guess, would be the best way to describe it. Because I guess once you were conscripted, there was a high likelihood that you would go to Vietnam. That was the perception and it was probably pretty right.

**Just on that topic, other people have told me it was voluntary even if you were conscripted?**

Rubbish,

22:30 no way. I went through recruit training, there was corps training at SME, and there was an area as I said called the Reinforcement holding wing, once you were assigned to the Reinforcement holding wing you were going to Vietnam, no questions. You might have been given a choice of where you would like to serve on a piece of paper, but you were just assigned there. You were allotted somewhere and that's where you went.

23:00 Within a few weeks, you would be in Canungra doing jungle training and within a few weeks after that you would be on a plane.

**Was there any moment in that process where you could have ticked a box and not gone to Vietnam?**

I could have registered as a conscientious objector and probably have got out of it, postponed or not gone. And I didn't even think too much about that until about I had come to Canungra to do jungle training, and when I came back, we were in three rooms in the Reinforcement

23:30 holding wing, and I had a room even though I was living out. And when I came back one of the guys that was in the room with me he had actually got his date to go to Vietnam and so had one of the other guys that was in with me. He had actually gone into town into hiding and registered as a conscientious objector. And we thought, "Wimp." That was the attitude, he was a wimp. There was no thought that maybe he was right.

**How did that process of registering as a conscientious objector work?**

24:00 There were a number of organizations that supported conscientious objectors. I don't know a whole lot about it. I know that you registered and then you had to go through a legal process and support your case that you were a conscientious objector.

**How much consideration did you give to that?**

None at any time. Being older and wiser I have thought about it a lot with my son growing up and getting to that age,

24:30 thinking, "If they did something like that now, how would I react?" And I would have wanted very strong convincing of the cause.

**The letter, what did it say?**

Can't remember, official I think. You have been selected, blah blah, I don't recall the words, a pretty standard formal letter.

25:00 Turn up at a certain point for a medical. And when we actually went to the medical and were found fit to serve turn up at Central Station on such a such a day at such a such a time to go in the army.

**25:30 Discussions with your family about this?**

I know I think, they were all obviously upset. The thing that did happen, as I said, my wife and I were planning to get married September or October of that year, '68. My wife's mother at the time, her sister was getting married prior, she said we could bring our wedding forward if we wanted to.

26:00 That was probably the biggest thing that happened. So I got married on the 8th of January, '68. I can't remember discussion in my family. My mother was very upset about it and I am sure my father was, but as typical of men then and maybe today, kept pretty much to himself, but you could tell he was upset about it. More so my Mum.

**What about your fiancé?**

She is out there, would you like to ask her?

26:30 **Well, I don't know. I would like to know from you. I will check in the coffee break.**

She was pretty upset about it, I would say. You willing to talk about that, darl? Ask her at the coffee break.

**Why the need to bring your marriage forward and accelerate your life at that time?**

Well, because we knew it was going to be very hard,

27:00 we had planned the marriage and we guess we didn't know what the future held or even if I would be around in September to get married. So I guess we had a choice, wait and see, or do it then, wait until after, but we were both pretty committed, loved each other and wanted to get married.

**You were studying at TAFE [Technical And Further Education] and there were some other options available to you, can you explain how?**

27:30 Other options in what way?

**You postponed your...?**

Only because I was in my final year. I had a couple of carry-over subjects, I had a deferment but then I got a second later saying the deferment ended at the end of that year and then I would be going in, in February. Yeah, that was a deferment to finish my qualifications.

**Just watch the mike there.**

28:00 **Friends who were also drawn out of the hat?**

I had a fellow I was working with, Phil Luck, I started working the same day as him with the RTA, that was probably my best mate through that period in life, he was one of my better mates. He was called up. And another mate, David Young, who I am still friends with. I am still friends with Phil too, but don't see him. Phil was called up, his father was in the air force and was still in the air force, and he decided to join the air force full time and go into air traffic control rather than do national service.

28:30 It is interesting how it affected Dave. Dave didn't get called up, he has actually said this to me, he went and worked on secondment, I guess, for want of a better term, in New Guinea and he has actually told me that was the reason he did it. Because we got called up and he didn't.

**Was there a certain**

29:00 **sense in your social group that if you didn't get called up, you missed out?**

Probably a sense of "boy, we're lucky that we didn't." I don't think so. Probably you were unlucky if you got called up, I guess. I don't know, I don't remember being that conscious. I had very good support certainly with people I worked with at the time.

**Anybody give you cause**

29:30 **to sow the seeds of doubt, perhaps, or alternative point of view at that time?**

I don't recall that, probably the only time was when that guy conscientiously objected, but I don't think I even thought about that. Wasn't something you did. As I said, I probably would have when I came back, I was much wiser when I came back having seen it first hand and knew what was going on and what was happening, I probably would have had a different point of view. Haven't thought about it.

30:00 **What news of events in America and Europe regarding the war at that time?**

I mean in the media prior to me going? There was always coverage on TV of battles in Vietnam and street to street fighting in the different cities in Vietnam where the war was going on, Saigon and other places.

30:30 **Vietnam was a so-called television war, when did you start to see the early graphic images of the war on the TV screen?**

Prior to going, through the '60s, I can't pinpoint where but we all knew it was on the TV, knew what was happening there. But it was more the Americans, I don't think we saw too many Australia forces on the TV at the time. I don't recall that, I recall it being an Americanisation of it.

31:00 Although I did end up on TV myself while I was there.

**Back in Australia you were seen on TV?**

Yeah.

**We will talk about that when we get to that. I was thinking also particularly with America and in France at the time there was a lot of dissent I guess, not just against the Vietnam War,**

31:30 **but in Paris there was a lot of protests that wasn't against the Vietnam War, there was a sort of...?**

I can't honestly say I was aware of that, I can say I was aware of the French withdrawal and the Americans becoming involved with the support of the South Vietnamese. I recall that prior to my going.

32:00 **When was the first time you heard the name Dien Bien Phu?**

That would have been on the news prior. There was news coverage of that and of the French in the jungle and leading up to that. I think we even had television footage which you often seen in documentaries now of the North Vietnamese, going down the Ho Chi Minh, going down the trail and preparing for battle, they were on TV.

**What did you know of the recent post-colonial history there?**

32:30 Not very much. Only what was on the media that was post-colonial, and when I was over there I became aware that it really was the change from colonialism, driving the French out. It should have been left at that.

**So can you take us**

33:00 **through the medical process and the...?**

What, of going in?

**Yeah.**

Well, you called into an office down in the city, I am not sure where, might have been Macquarie Street actually. You were just called into a normal doctors office, doctors waiting room. There was a couple of other guys there, in fact I met a mate that I went through scouts with there, he was an A-grade basketball player and he got out because he had flat feet, obviously didn't want him.

33:30 But then you got called into the doctors surgery, an elderly surgeon. And I think I filled in a form in there, typical form, any defects, and I used to get really bad cluster migraine headaches, had done since I was 18. They were prescribed as that. And I remember the doctor I was talking about asking me about it,

34:00 and he said, "No, they're not migraine headaches." That was it. But it was a pretty basic medical, turn your head right cough, listen to your heart, test your eyesight, look in your ears, eyes, nose.

**What other things were you asked in the induction process?**

Prior to going in?

34:30 **Yes.**

That was it. You went straight from that you then got a notification that you were going in.

**Registering your religion, political affiliation?**

Oh yeah, it was a standard form

**And were you required to nominate any particular affiliations with political parties anything like that?**

Don't recall. I don't think there were, I don't recall that. No, I would have remembered something like that. Purely

35:00 the basic stuff; age, sex, marital status, religion, nationality, that was it. And then that was all until you were called up. All started once you walked through the gate.

**What other allowances or arrangements did they make for you to arrange your life, I mean your going away?**

35:30 Up to you, there was no advice about what to do, you were just going in the army on this day and you sort yourself out to do that. At that time, there wasn't, it was just turn up on this day to go in the army.

**And can you take us through the allegiances or the pledges that you swore?**

36:00 Didn't swear anything. I found it interesting after I came out of the army and was back in the DMR, the DMR had its own CMF unit, 21 construction squadron, and a couple of the guys that were in it, one of them I still see pretty regularly, he was an officer in it and he was at me all of the time to join. And I finally relented after a couple of years, lasted one camp. But I actually had to sign a pledge of allegiance to go in the CMF and I didn't have to do it in the army

36:30 at any time.

**What was the difference between you joining up as a national serviceman to joining up as regular army?**

At the time I did it.

**What were you aware of?**

The only difference would have been the period of time you signed up for. We did recruit training with regular army recruits. Did corps training, everything else was the same. It was purely the amount of time you were signed up for and the fact that

37:00 you had been compulsory, made do it. I think national service changed the army. If you looked at my unit in Vietnam, out of the 60-odd people who were in the field troop there was probably only half a dozen regular soldiers, and you had this high percentage of qualified ordinary soldiers. I won't say officers, but certainly senior NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers] that didn't have the same educational background or intellect, that's probably a bad word,

37:30 I hope you understand what I am saying. Had these people at this level that just questioned everything that was done because that wasn't their educational level. I think it changed the army.

**What was your impressions of, how did you react to the first encounter with army discipline?**

I think army discipline

38:00 is about teaching yourself discipline, that's the way I viewed it. Go with the flow and resist it when you can. I think that's what it was about. Some people crack under it, but it is how you discipline yourself I think. Even today they don't, the discipline, training or discipline that they did doesn't happen today. It would be in the newspapers if they did.

38:30 Wasn't bastardry or anything like that, it was just harder. It was a bit of a shock to the system, the first two weeks. But we're pretty adaptable in the human race, within two weeks in the army it was six o'clock out of bed lights out at 10 o'clock, with the huge number of things you were doing you were just exhausted. But after the first two weeks you find you have spare time

**How did you like your uniform, for instance?**

39:00 Can't say I thought of it in terms of 'like' or 'dislike'. I didn't mind the uniform. The fact that you had to get it clean and starched and ironed every day when we were doing recruit training, climbing through mud all of the time was a bit of a hassle. I liked the battle dress, I thought the battle dress was really good.

**Might just stop there.**

## Tape 3

00:30 **That's alright, give me your for a second. Right. Tell us about the set up at Puckapunyal when you went in there at the start of '68.**

Maybe I will start back in Sydney it is easier. We went by bus from Central Station to Marrickville and went through all of the induction stuff.

01:00 That included lots of blood tests and faecal and needles and a few other thing. Then back on the bus in the afternoon, overnight to Puckapunyal in Victoria and arrived at Puckapunyal just on daylight and a total new world. Pulled up near the main parade ground, bus stopped. We piled off the bus to all of these sergeants typical of what you see on TV. Yelling, telling you what you can do and you're life is about to start, all of

01:30 the really good stuff. It reminded me very much of a, the buildings, a lot of them were portable weatherboard buildings, and they were more like demountable school buildings, that's what it looked like. But the feeling was just going into an unknown world. And we were taken to our lines which were I think four huts of 16.

02:00 The end had had the platoon officer where the instructors, in other words, one four-part cubicle had been walled off and it was the platoon officers' so it was only 12 in that building. And then we were allocated a bed, told, "You 16 will be in this hut. Go and find yourself a bed." And that's what you did. You walked in and they were long huts, cubicles of four, two each side of the centre corridor, all open.

02:30 Two each side and you had a bed, personal table and a locker. And from that point on you just, I can't remember the order of things, it is not different to the things you see on TV, you go in one door and walk out the other end with all of your army greens and boots and kit and gear,

03:00 that goes on for a number of days including getting inoculations and needles for all sorts of things. Smallpox, TB [tuberculosis] and all of that sort of stuff. I had a haircut just before I went into the army and had two within two days of getting in the army because, I think it was the first day we were all fronted into the barber and then told the next day, "No, your isn't short enough." So we went back down again.

03:30 I think my mate and I pretty much got all of our hair cut off the second time. And yeah, I started a whole new round of big ear jokes then you see.

**Sorry, beer...?**

I have big ears you see? And certainly when I have a haircut, have very big ears that stick out. So I had grown with them through school and been bagged and toughened up to all of that and I had a good sense of humour about it. I heard some good ones down there.

04:00 **What did you pack to go on this trip?**

I think there was an advice about what to bring, I think it was things like, I don't even think underwear because you got army underwear, I think I only took things like toiletries, underwear, I didn't take very much. Had it all in a tiny little kit bag. I don't recall exactly what I took, probably toiletries, that sort of stuff.

**And what were you issued with when you arrived?**

04:30 All gear: boots, socks, shoes, belt, webbing, backpack, hat, great coat, army green gear; we were issued

with polyester dress uniform, which is a summer dress uniform. And battle dress, which is a winter uniform.

### **What was the atmosphere with the**

#### **05:00 16 that you went into lines with?**

This will sound clichéd, typical Aussie camaraderie, "We're all in this together." Without focussing on individuals, I will go back to what I said to Brad in the phone interview, I look back on it and it is fate that you end up with these 16 people because we became, I guess, stirrers [jokers] is the

05:30 right term for the 16 I was in the hut with. I guess that camaraderie, and I knew people in other huts that found it difficult a lot of the time, you could tell by their demeanour. But we treated it as a big game. And I think that was a group thing as much as an individual thing. Once, it takes you about a fortnight to settle into the routine of getting everything done. You might have been crawling through the mud and your boots are filthy and you have got to have

06:00 them spit polished by the following morning, iron your greens and all of the other stuff. And you just wonder how you are ever going to get it done in the time you have available, because you have got to have meals and all of the rest. But within a fortnight you have got it systematised, all of that, and you can get it done quickly. So you are always open to suggestions of doing things that might be a little stirring. So I guess that made it easier the group of guys I was in with. We all got on well.

06:30 But it also brings out the basic nature of things too. That's human nature, victimising people that don't sort of cut mustard [aren't good enough] if you like, as well. I guess going back to the stirring things looking back on it. One of the most profound things I remember doing was one night, I am not sure how far into the process it was, but by then we were all pretty organised and

07:00 as I said, treated it as a game. So we attacked what we did with a vengeance if you like. You talked about discipline before, they would do things and somebody would be walking out of step in life and they would say, "Right-o, now you double march." And we would work out earlier to size ourselves up so you didn't trip over the fellow in front of you. And they would do things like hold your rifle out in front of you, and you would have to jog with this rifle that weighs about 10 pounds out in front of you. And there was no way

07:30 you would ever, you would never let your arms drop, never. To the point you would be nearly walking down on your knees. That's camaraderie builds you up but it is personal discipline built within yourself. I think that feeling within that hut was very solid in terms of support. And going back to one of the things I said we did, the lines in Puckapunyal, I think it was four companies, and there was a mess hall that everybody ate in, big hall, and there was a gap at the end of the hall, across a to the next company.

08:00 And there was a parking area if I recall a planted area. And I remember one night after lights out we absolutely planned this, we didn't got to sleep, we all got our grey coats on and slouch hats, pulled our collars up so that no one could see us, and the 16 of us snuck across to the next company, into A company, slowly opened the door to one of the huts, we all got a bed each, of course these guys had all been asleep for an hour and

08:30 on the given word tipped all of these guys out of bed and then bolted for our lives, and then waited for the riot to go on. And we could hear all of this commotion going on and yelling and screaming, bumping and sirens. Found out the next day that three of their guys ended up in the brig because they thought it was next door and went and attacked them. I just think that is fate that you end up with people that think that way. That all made fun of the boredom that was going on. It wasn't boredom, actually, it was pretty busy, but it was good. I remember all of the funny good things now.

#### **09:00 Were there elements of victimisation?**

What, by the NCOs? Or trainer? Or by the people? I would think more by recruits themselves to other recruits. Anyone who didn't toe the line [follow orders] or support the group I guess. Mostly verbal abuse.

09:30 There wasn't that much of it.

#### **When were you first issued with a rifle?**

Then.

#### **With all of your gear that you just described?**

We were issued with an SLR [Self Loading Rifle] yeah.

#### **Can you describe that SLR for us?**

It was 7.62mm rounds. I can't remember the exact firing rate. It came with, it was single shot or semi automatic, big heavy.

10:00 Came with a bayonet, had a flash eliminator on the front end of it. I just remember it being big and heavy and I just remember within two days of getting to Vietnam swapped and got a brand new

Armalite [machine gun] and a box which weighs about a third of the weight. Yeah, what else can you say?

**What experience of rifles had you had previously?**

Some, because as I said my father had come from Tasmania so

10:30 probably still are sort of hunting fishing culture I guess. So I had handled 22 rifles, shooting rabbits kangaroos and stuff in Tasmania on holidays growing up. I wasn't phased by it.

**What rules and etiquette were you informed about at the time about your gun and what you were to do with it?**

In the army? I guess for me, very early time your rifle was all important.

11:00 It had to be cleaned and looked after, your own life depended on that. And had to keep it clean and operating. We had discipline in managing it, understanding it, disassembling it, being able to put it back together again and it was part of you, I guess that would be reasonably right as a culture all of the way through and rightly so.

**11:30 What other things about this environment were different, were things that you hadn't expected?**

I am not sure I had any expectation, it was all into the unknown I guess. I was lucky having been in the scouts, probably the scouts more than anything, it wasn't so new to me being in with a bunch of guys in that camp situation.

12:00 There were certainly people down there who had not experienced, that had had a pretty sheltered life if you like and had not had those experiences. We had a few in our hut, but I guess given the camaraderie in our hut as I said, they were carried along a bit. But no, probably the discipline, just the sheer having to do it without exception, you couldn't say, "No, I am not going to do that, sorry." You just did it whatever.

12:30 It took to it pretty well. That's probably the biggest thing, the discipline and regimentation of it all. That's probably it. Nothing else really strikes me, apart from being fit and going all of the time, from the time you wake up until the time you go to sleep, I was probably the fittest I have ever been, and I played soccer a lot of the time. And I was probably the fittest I ever was in my life when I walked out of Puckapunyal and came home. So much so I couldn't sit still in one place without moving.

**13:00 What trouble did you get into with punishment?**

Not very much because it was handed out to everybody. Blink the wrong way and you had to do push ups, and you banked push ups, which meant at any old-time an NCO could say, "Give me 20." And you would do 20. I can recall I was on regimental guard duty one night and I happened to kick my toe as I went out on parade

13:30 because you would be inspected before you went out on duty and I actually shattered the spit polish on the front of my boot. I was given 20 minutes to fix it before I went out there and stood with my rifle but nothing serious. I was actually charged a week before I got out of the army for being AWOL [Absent Without Leave]. Do you want to hear about that now or later?

**Tell us about I now.**

Well, as I said, when I came back from Vietnam it was all a bit of a joke coming back into the army in Australia as you can imagine.

14:00 And I think I had six or seven weeks leave when I came back. And I was stationed at the 6th Engineering Stores Unit out at Penrith and they had a mix of army and civilian workers out there and during the time I was there, they moved half of the stores there to Wallangarra in Queensland. I did a couple of good jobs out there. It was over the Christmas period and there was a break between

14:30 both Christmas Day and New Years day, and this happened at New Year New Years day was a Thursday and a working day and then Friday. (UNCLEAR). Anyway, this particular day, you can imagine that time of year there is no one much around, and the eight of us, well seven of the eight were all, had received, were all national

15:00 servicemen had received field rank of corporal in Vietnam. And one civilian guy Steve, he was ex-army, and we went straight from the parade ground, got in our cars and went down to the pub at St Mary's and that afternoon they were looking for this Steve, the civilian guy, no, he was regular army. So they were looking for him and they couldn't see him or any of us so they then held a knock off parade, and because they had a knock off parade which

15:30 they never held and we weren't there, we were charged for being AWOL that day and the weekend. And I threw the army a loop because we were getting out the next week and it took them four days and lots of negotiation with Vic barracks to decide whether they would actually charge us and they did because this other guy was a regular and I remember we had to actually go and stand in front of the OC a day before we got out of the army and got fined three day's pay. And we really didn't care too much.

16:00 So in terms of recruit training, nothing really, we should have gotten a lot more for some of the things we did but we didn't.

**How did the NCOs treat you?**

Pretty good. They instilled all of this discipline, that's what their job was. And I think most of them, one guy was a bit of a nark but we sorted him out in one way or another. The other guys were pretty good guys.

16:30 They would have a joke with you in the evening, but they had a job to do and I thought they did it well.

**How did you sort this particular NCO out?**

He was a tankie [tank operator], he was from the armoured corps and he really delighted in, I am not sure what the right word is, being harder than everyone else, let's leave it at that.

17:00 And the last bivouac we did in recruit training, we went out to Puckapunyal, the tank range at Puckapunyal and I remember they did a, one of the exercises they did was in groups of four and about half way up the mountain there was a light and there was all of the NCOs or all of the training people, and the idea was to sneak up as close to this light as you could and we were carrying rifles. And the three guys I was with decided we would run right around the mountain, which was about

17:30 four kilometres and come over the top of the mountain which we did. And we were coming down, I remember it was a really moon lit night but thick bush, as we came down we could see this big guy just outside the perimeter, about two hundred metres, he was walking around and we hid in the shady side of the trees and I remember he walked past me. And one of the other guys I was with actually hit him with his rifle as he went passed. Put him down and we just took off.

18:00 You don't let it get to you, as I say, it is all about personal discipline I think.

**Can you take us through a day of training in that early recruit period?**

Well, let me think. Got up very early,

18:30 I don't think in recruit training we did an exercise pre-breakfast, went to breakfast, had breakfast and then got all your ablutions done I guess. Had to be on parade at whatever time it was. And then you did everything from physical PE [Physical Education] type training to drill training. Stand to attention, at ease, present arms, all of that sort of thing, did a lot of that. Marching

19:00 in formation. Weapons training, how to handle and disassemble weapons. There was map reading, we learnt map reading. Those sorts of things. Did some I guess religious instruction for want of a better term. But I recall that being more philosophical discussions with the padre, I mean, they always had services on Sunday that people could go to but during the week there were periods of that.

19:30 So it was all around sort of training I guess. Yeah, I guess the hardest thing at the early part, it didn't worry me that much but I imagine there were some people that it did. Because it was pretty full on, I mean you were going all of the time. They were sort of typical days. You knocked off for meals and whatever time in the afternoon, five, five-thirty whatever. And then probably half hour until dinner but you had to have all of your gear, kit, everything ready by lights out 10 o'clock.

20:00 Be ready to go at six o'clock the next morning.

**Can you describe some of that physical training in a little bit more detail, how you got covered in mud for example?**

Well just, the physical training, we did a lot of double marching, semi-jogging around the place. I think the mud and dirt on you was just the physical activity, doing some sort of

20:30 drills in the field with rifle or the terrain you went into to do training. We did physical, PE classes of, I am trying to think what we did in that, things like rope climbing. Some sort of obstacles I guess, nothing flash [fancy]. We might have even done some vaulting training, gymnastics training.

21:00 There was all of that sort of stuff, jogging on the spot those sorts of things.

**What happened to the blokes who couldn't cut it as well as you?**

Yeah you have sort of asked the question about victimisation, I think the NCOs really drove them hard to make them do it. And I guess the rest of us encouraged them. "Come on, you can make it to 20." And I think it was structured around that too, and I thought the army did that very well despite the toughness of it.

21:30 Of team getting behind a person and helping them do it. There was a fair bit about that. I mean, people got a bit of tired of it. If a bloke had two left feet and got out of step all of the time, which got the rank out of step, and you all got in the shit and everyone has to do 20 push ups because of it, that wore a bit after a while. We did things like, one guy we painted left and right on his gators [clothes].

22:00 So it is a mix of giving them a hard time and trying to help them do it I guess.

**Do you remember any particular characters who got given a hard time?**

I do. We had one guy in our platoon who wasn't quite as sharp as the rest lets say, but big and strong, he was a big boy.

22:30 We decided one night that we would put him in a cold bath. Ablutions were all showers, but at one end there was a bath so we all decided we would put him in the bath, I don't know who decided but it seemed like a good thing to do at the time. But he got wind of it. And we never got him there he was just too big and powerful. He got a bit of a hard time. There was another guy who I guess in the vernacular was a mummy's boy, he came in, pretty solid, pretty heavy. He got a bit of a hard time.

23:00 But not to the point where was on all of the time. I was talking about New Australians before, and this tended to be the way it was. Might give them a hard time, but then they're mates again after that. It was not continual persecution. That never happened.

**How obvious were the different backgrounds that people had when you went into training?**

I don't think it was that obvious.

23:30 It probably was to the extent of what I was just saying. People who had come from a more sheltered family background or life for that time were probably more obvious. I do recall one guy and it is interesting because my son ran into him in training in one of his jobs, who was a writer. That was his ambition in life. And I am not sure,

24:00 but I remember him being...soft is probably not the right word, but a bit more cultured, if you like, for want of a better term. A bit outside the square sort of person. I don't know I don't recall I don't think it was that obvious, apart from peoples character and how they reacted to things was probably more obvious than why that was so, and where you were coming from with background was some of that. It's a question of nature or nurture but I think

24:30 it was more how they reacted, that was more obvious than their background.

**At any time in your training were you aware of concessions for being national servicemen rather than...?**

Probably the reverse, no, that's wrong too, there were regular guys in our training group and we were all treated exactly the same.

25:00 There might have been some, and I am not sure I ever saw it anyway. It might have been mentioned a few times that we were nashos [national servicemen] as opposed to regular [regular servicemen] but I don't remember different treatment, no, not at all. In fact I would say in Vietnam even the reverse, whether it was the numbers or not, but a lot of national servicemen got promoted over there.

**How was the term 'nasho' used?**

Internally, in the army at that time?

25:30 More amongst national servicemen themselves than anybody else.

**How many instances of discrimination against nashos were there?**

None. From my experience, I can categorically say none. I don't recall any at all. We were all in together.

**26:00 Who was a figure that taught you a lot or you learnt from in the army?**

Who did I learn from in the army? Lots of people, I guess. I couldn't pinpoint anybody through to my time going to Vietnam. I guess when I got to Vietnam,

26:30 being told day one, "Forget everything they taught you over there about explosives and stuff, this is the way we do it here." The first guy that was we came into the troop, there was three of us I think went in at the same one. Day one, the next day this guy, Parmetter I think his name was, he had been in country nine or 10 months because he went home soon after that. But he took us out for a half a day and told us all of the things that we needed to know about how to handle mines and explosives and the sort of things we needed to know over there, which I thought was good.

27:00 And I guess I went out with a guy named Brian Knowles comes from Blacksmiths, he was my first number one when I went out in a mini team in the jungle. Probably him. But I don't think all of the way through the rest of it. I have a few guys I was friendly with, I am not sure. There was a sergeant named Plum who was in Canungra when I went through jungle training, he had been to Vietnam, probably him.

27:30 Because while we were doing the things that were in the program up there he was giving you, I guess, real life relationship to that.

**We will come back to how you re-learnt everything when you got to Vietnam, we will make a note of that process...**

It was a 12-month process.

**And then you would pass it on, I guess.**

We tried to.

**You were selected for officer, or an interview for officer training. Can you tell us about that process from the very first?**

28:00

Well, as I say, we were asked in the first couple of week of recruit training whether we wanted to apply, we applied. We were then told there were a certain number of us we told, "You're going to go through the process of selection." We had to be interviewed by a psyche officer two or three times. Had to do a questionnaire and I guess there was a psyche evaluation and then you had a couple of one on one interviews with the psyche officer.

28:30

And then you went in, I am sure it was 12, that number sticks in my head, there was a group of guys all together and for a day you were to go before the board. Which was this panel of senior officers. And in the morning was field exercises, they would give you challenges out on the field. One that comes to mind was that there was a fence, six foot high

29:00

and a number of lumps of wood and parts of the wood were painted, one side might be painted so that's radioactive, you're not allowed to touch that. There was all of this stuff, and you had to get the whole team to the other side of the fence. We never ever did it, in fact I don't think we completed one of the tasks we were given. I was actually asked that question, one of the questions in the panel interview, and I had a bit of pre-advice that this might be asked,

29:30

"Why didn't you take a more controlling part in the group?" and I said, "Because the whole 12 were trying to lead. There were no followers. Everyone was trying to lead and outdo the next guy and that's why we never achieved anything." So you went through that process all day and you were observed and marked and questioned. Then you had lunch which was quite an elaborate lunch considering you were recruits in recruit training.

30:00

There was an elaborate smorgasbord lunch and you went and had lunch with these officers, and I guess that's was how to see how you handled yourself in that situation. I think it even included a glass of wine from memory. And then after lunch there was this one on one interview. I remember we were all sitting in this bloody, it was a box from memory, little piddly [small] building and then we were called into this other demountable building. Which as I said was a room about twice as big as this whole room with an elevated

30:30

platform where three or four senior officers sitting behind a big table. And you sat on a chair like that with no arms on it in the middle of the room and they just continually fired questions at you. About general things but the events of the day as well. And that was all over that was where the decision was made you were told after that whether you did or didn't make it. And as I said, I knew because they crossed out, I had answered the wrong answer to the crucial question. But I must have impressed

31:00

them because they asked me towards the end of my time whether I wanted to stay in and go to officer training.

**Can you tell us what any of those questions were, roughly?**

Well no, I can't apart that obvious one about the participation in the day's events. About where I saw my future in the army and where I would like to serve. If I remember there were questions about being isolated from your family and people you know.

31:30

Actually they did ask you how would I feel about serving in the Northern Territory for six months without any contact with my family and so on. I don't recall the detail of any of them.

**What was the role of the psyche corps in this process?**

Opinion more than anything, I guess, to find out whether you had the psychological profile to be an officer in the army, if you had what it takes to be an officer in the army, whatever that is.

32:00

Don't think that's any different to being a manager or a leader of anything.

**What was the nature of that interview you had before this process started?**

The psyche interview? Can't remember too long ago. More or less my attitude to different things, living away leading people being in teams that sort of stuff.

**What about personally at this time?**

32:30

**Did you just do this because you were offered this? Or what was your feeling about the army and ambition?**

I guess I thought, "Well, if I am here I may as well get the most out of it I can." That was the drive of it. Had to be there for two years, if I whaled out [failed] as an officer there would be a lot more opportunities in life after. Maybe not so.

**What was you reaction when you didn't get it?**

Oh, get on with what I am doing. I mean, I knew when I walked out of the room I wasn't going to get it.

33:00 No disappointment, just got on with what you were doing. I guess I probably thought I was more attuned to it than other people, that actually got there that I had gotten to know over the previous two or three weeks.

**How far ahead did you look at that time in your life?**

Tomorrow, that was about it, even though I was married. That's probably not true. I had probably looked at having a family and

33:30 doing that sort of stuff. But day-to-day events nothing elaborate. I think it was a time in my life where I was still trying to decide what the future held, apart from being married and family.

**How were you dealing with being away from your new wife?**

Just doing everything that you do every day, I was just so busy I don't think you had time to think. I mean I had been away before as I say doing scouts,

34:00 so you get to know and understand what it is about. It didn't trouble me doing that. I mean I would have rather not do it of course, but I don't think I thought about it in those terms, I was there. You can't dwell on those things otherwise you just go backwards, and I remember the third morning we all got up for breakfast and we used to line up and parade and

34:30 then go down to breakfast and three or four guys were still in bed who were very homesick. And I remember the sergeant we had walking through there and screaming at the top of his lungs, "Get up and get dressed and get down there to breakfast because if you don't eat you will die. If you die, I will have to do a lot of paperwork that I don't want to do, so get out of bed and to breakfast now!" So they weren't very sympathetic.

**What accidents or incidents were there in your time?**

I don't think I recall any actually. Apart

35:00 from the normal blisters and stuff no I can't remember anybody. Just normal scrapes and things, nothing severe.

**Where did you move to after the recruit training?**

That's when we were told what corps we were going to, and I was going to engineers and I went to the school of engineering out at Casula for 10 weeks to do engineering corps training.

35:30 And that covered everything from bridge construction to mine warfare, chemical warfare all of those sorts of things.

**Can you tell us a bit more about the school at Casual and how that was set up?**

Pretty good school, I think. I lived out because I lived in Sydney and I was married then, so I had permission to actually live out of camp on the proviso that I was there next to my own personal table and locker I had in camp

36:00 in inspection condition at eight o'clock when everyone else was inspected. And all of the guys that were there in camp took great sport in upsetting all of my stuff so I had to be there in time to fix it all again. But it was quite well set up, it was well run training and well structured, methodical and you learnt a lot from doing it.

**How much was this training specifically aimed at a war in Vietnam?**

36:30 I guess parts of it were or was. But I think it was just general corps engineer training. Basic boating was one, bridging. I think it was general, I don't think it was, I don't know, but thinking back on what we did, I don't think it was that specific or anything.

37:00 And I did a trade test while I was out there, a bunch of us did a trade test given our background and I actually got paid as a surveyor when I was in the army. Even though I never ever did that, the opportunity came up once when I was in Vietnam but I was out in the bush and my immediate superior the captain of our troop, he was asked, because one of my mates was in headquarters because the surveyor went home and it was a really good job because you had your own land rover and people to protect you and you went out and surveyed all of the civil works.

37:30 And this guy suggested that I would be very good at this job, my troop commander, and I was out with infantry at the time, said, "No, he is too valuable to me. He is not having that job."

**What did you enjoy most about the engineering training?**

Probably I liked working with explosives.

38:00 I liked working with explosives the whole time I was in Vietnam, actually. I guess learning about that and the different type of explosives, plus the bridging was good I guess, we did a lot with bailey bridges

and boats, boating, assault boats. It was all pretty good.

**After you were sent to engineer corps, was it assumed that everyone would be going to Vietnam?**

38:30 No, because you could go to small boats, you could go to RAEME [Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers], you could go to construction squadron. You may or may not go to Vietnam, and if you went to Vietnam with construction squadron it was better. But Reinforcement wing was the one place if you got put to Reinforcement wing you were going to Vietnam. So everyone waited with baited breath at the end of corps training, when they announced the units people went to.

39:00 Because if you got Reinforcement RHU [Reinforcement Holding Unit], then you were going.

**When did it first become clear to you that you were going?**

Then. As soon as we finished corps training. As soon as they announced, "You're going to Reinforcement holding." And then you would get a posting from there to Vietnam to 1 Field Squadron or 21 Construction or something.

**Can you explain how you felt at that moment?**

No, not really. I think you expected a significant number went anyway so I don't think I thought one way or the other. I guess the feeling was, I knew I was going,

39:30 at least it was definite then.

**We'll stop there and change the tape.**

## Tape 4

00:30 **Just to rewind a little bit, you have been handed your SLRs and taken up to the range, what were the targets you were shooting at?**

We were shooting some figure targets.

**What were those figures?**

Some, I think mostly bullseye targets. At that time.

01:00 Figures were just standing frames, half frames of people.

**What was the silhouette you were shooting at?**

Black, person. Black silhouette.

**Little hats?**

No, purely body shape. The only time I ever struck targets of any, were people acting as the enemy when I was in Canungra growing through jungle training in Viet Cong villages.

01:30 **Did the silhouettes...**

No.

**The silhouettes,**

Never.

**wore the little hats?**

Never. Don't recall that at any time in any training I did anywhere.

**Tell us the story of learning about explosives?**

02:00 My very fist, we call a hand grenade an explosive, and that was my first experience with a hand grenade. And I must be a different sort of person, I knew lots of guys were nervous about it, I was never nervous about it. And I remember my first experience with a hand grenade was at a grenade range, which had brick walls and there was like a little brick bunker and you just all waited in there and the instructor was out here and it was like a little turret I guess, brick, this high, you could see over it about that far. And there was a 44 gallon drum about a 50 metres away.

02:30 And there was a door out of this one and another door there, and I guess it was set up so that if anyone dropped one, the instructor could push you and him through the door and try to get out of the road, you hold the lever, and I remember the instructor saying, "Here is a grenade, you have been told all about them, how they work, you pull the pin out and the lever doesn't fly until you actually let it go which arms it. And you have got to get it close to the 44 gallon drum over there."

03:00 They teach you to throw it like a cricket ball. So I pulled the pin out and I was taking my time taking aim. I think he was getting a bit nervous but I was totally didn't care, just threw it like a cricket ball, but the fact that I was pausing and taking aim, I don't know what he thought. But that was my first experience with it.

**Can you just pull up there for a second?**

Are you going? I guess it is like using power tools or anything else that is dangerous. That is what else we were taught in engineer training, chainsaws.

03:30 Whole lot of useful stuff, it is about having respect for it I guess. And I guess that was paramount for me because I was very blasé about it and I had to consciously give it respect all through my career. I was never scared of it or afraid of it. In engineer training it was all about using detonators and detonation cord and acceleration, rates of ignition,

04:00 and how you make it all work. Power explosives and where to put explosives to blow things. I often think about today's world and how many people of my era went through that training could blow just about anything up that they wanted to, and I still could do that today. I could make the bomb that blew Bali up, I was taught how to do that.

**What were these particular bombs?**

04:30 Oh, just plastic explosives, gelignite, that sort of stuff, but we were taught how to build sulphur phosphate, like fertiliser-type bombs with diesel.

**Farmers do that, too?**

They know too. It is simple.

**Scarily simple, yeah.**

Absolutely so. And how to use shape plastic explosives into different shapes to do different things. If you put a plastic explosive in a cone shape and ignite it at the cone end, the force of the explosive is actually that shape going the other way.

05:00 So you have all of his force at one end of the cone going the other direction. I haven't done that. Seeing as we're on film. Thought about it.

**What fun things did you get to blow up?**

I can tell you some fun things in Vietnam. Especially towards the end of my time. One of the really funny things we did, a mate of mine Rick Branch and I, I think we were up out of Phuoc Tuy province

05:30 we had a big contact, come into a big Viet Cong bunker system and the top of the hill and it had been populated by NVA [North Vietnamese Army] regulars. And they had been driven out quite easily actually, which was surprising. But when we went in and started to search the tunnels we found lots of contraband, maps of American bases, lots of good things. But to get back to the story about what we did with the explosive, we went through a period of time over there where the army powers to be, we used to blow bunkers up, enemy bunkers

06:00 so they couldn't be reused and they were visible from the air. But they went through this period where they decided we would blast CS gas [tear gas] into the bunkers. And they came in 44 gallon drums and they came in big solid-type manila cardboard envelopes, it is riot gas powder in essence. And the idea was you would set explosive on these envelopes in the bunkers and it would impregnate all of the walls and make them inhabitable. But they discovered after one season of that during the wet season, it all leached out and it wasn't a problem anyway.

06:30 But this particular, when we first got them the first time we also had to blow the drums, and because it was a big bunker system, I think we got three or four 44 gallon drums full of the stuff and we had to blow the drums so that the Viet Cong couldn't use them to store things in. So we turned one of these things upside down and put two pound of plastic explosives under it like a bungler [firecracker] under a jam tin. And what used to happen, we would walk out one visual distance, the company or the patrol,

07:00 and we would be the last on the line, might put a 30-second or a 45-second fuse on the end of the ring made that set everything off. And I remember that day we went down a bit of a gully and up on a hill the other side, and we used to always sing, "Fire on, look up." People had to look up in case anything came down on them. And I remember this thing went off, this 44 gallon drum was about as big as a thimble in the sky as far as you could see. That was after I had been there a long time and started to get blasé about things.

07:30 **Any accidents or anything you can relate to us during the training period with the engineers?**

No, don't recall any accidents even through Canungra, I hurt my hand pretty badly in Canungra. Jumped on the truck with my ring on which I shouldn't have done. Nothing significant.

**How were you kept informed of events in Vietnam at that time?**

08:00 We weren't, it was just somewhere you were training to go to. In recruit training, and more so in

Canungra, you were trained and told about how thing operated, how Viet Cong operated, what the villages were like in the jungles, where booby traps were and that sort of stuff. Through recruit training, I talked about the religious

08:30 social discussion we used to have with padres and things, we were told all about all of the evils of having sex with prostitutes in Asian countries, in Vietnam.

**The reverends used to discuss these things?**

Oh yeah.

**Can you describe how that would take place?**

We were shown, we did see actual film of places like Vung Tau and bars and so on. And they used to talk about some of the

09:00 social diseases you could, and threatened of some of them if you get them, you'll never come home. Take protection and this sort of stuff. And I think one time we talked about the pros and cons of doing that or being faithful and not faithful and all of that.

**What sort of moral guidance the army chaplains give you?**

09:30 I don't think much actually, it was more about the dangers than anything, looking back on it. They were very good people. My father died when I was in Vietnam, I am Church of England by christening, I wouldn't say I am a religious person, not at all. It was a Catholic padre that came and talked to me, I was flown back from the jungle and there was no one in camp, I was there on my own. But it was a Catholic padre

10:00 that came and spoke to me and I found him very good, I have a lot of respect for him. In terms of what you're talking about, not very much.

**What did you know of the Tet Offensive which occurred in February '68?**

Before going there, only what was on the media. Certainly knew more when I got there because I met guys in my troop when I got there, had been in it.

10:30 In Coral [Coral Battle] and some of those battles. That's about all, about what happened, I was aware of them, I guess it was all from an engineering point of view. I heard stories when I was over there about the Viet Cong taking over part of the fire support base and trying to turn the guns around and them being driven out and being told the engineer side of it.

11:00 And then having to go and search all of the Viet Cong bodies because that's what our job was. I guess from the archive point of view, I can tell you stories of people who I actually knew that knocked gold teeth out of the enemy's mouth to take home and sell on the black market. They were our guys, national servicemen did that, you wonder why they had trouble back in Australia. That's hearsay, I was told that, but I believe it happened.

**Were you told that before you?**

No, that was from people involved.

11:30 **What did you know of the Battle of Long Tan?**

Again only what was in the media at the time here. A bit more about it again over there from people that had been involved near there. I actually went to the site, I was on operation on the site of the Long Tan battle. Towards the end of my time there, we actually got into a contact there as well in the same

12:00 rubber plantation.

**You said you were searching bodies, what training did you have in booby traps or searching bodies back here in Australia?**

Didn't have training in searching bodies per se, like we were taught about booby traps, pansy Pete's trip wires, pressure point that's sort of thing. We were certainly taught a little bit about that in jungle training and a little bit in corps training. And told

12:30 during that process the enemy would often put hand grenades under bodies. But in terms of searching bodies like we did in the Bien Hoa Rubber plantation, for example, we were actually searching the bodies for weapons or anything else. But that was pretty plastic, I had been there a long time when that happened. It is interesting, I often look back and think my impression, you were just doing it with store dummies.

13:00 Some had pretty horrific injuries. I remember taking a, since we're talking about it, I remember taking a Chi Cong [?] pistol of a North Vietnamese officer, still in his hands, he had been shot through the hand in both of those fingers and there was a hole through the butt and I actually took it and I kept it. Took all of the magazines and the bullets that he had and I fixed the pistol and put timber butts on it.

13:30 Had every intention to bring it back to Australia, chickened out in the end.

**What did you know first hand of vets who had been there and came back through your training, any officers who...?**

Oh yeah. As I mentioned before there was a couple of trainers, I can't recall his name, a sergeant out of SME that did some of the explosives training with us, he had been to Vietnam.

14:00 Engineers and in fact the guy that did explosives with us he had been through some pretty bad experiences and even through training if we let explosives off he would hit the ground when they went off even when he knew they were coming, he was pretty bad. So there were a number of people involved in our training. I think our training was pretty good, looking back on it.

14:30 Still surprised me significantly when they opened the main door at Saigon airbase and there was all of these people running around the American base in black pyjamas, because through jungle training every enemy you saw was dressed in black pyjamas and sandals.

**Can you tell us a bit more about the jungle training in Canungra?**

Tough and hard. I was there in winter. I think it was pretty good training, solid.

15:00 All about building your confidence in dealing with the environment. Winter, we would get up at six o'clock in the morning. The fire buckets on the outside of the tents would be frozen solid. And we were just in greens and we would go on a five-mile run and a whole lot of callisthenics including lying on the frosty grass lifting telegraph poles up in teams of eight and all of this stuff. But then it was all about confidence. Weapons handling, certainly working as a team, doing certain obstacles and confidence building as a team.

15:30 An obstacle course which we did three times, once a week for three weeks, and it was all about team things more than anything. Really confidence stuff and observance. I recall we had to walk on the side of the hill and there was a grass slope in front of us with bush around it. And we sort of all walked up and we all went to face up the hill and when we turned

16:00 around there were 20 people hiding in that area which just looked like a paddock. You had to try and find all of the people and keep you eyes out. All of that sort of stuff as being observant, and lots of simulated stuff I guess that could happen to you. You would be patrolling and the enemy would jump up in front of you with rifles and all of this stuff. You were really taught in that training about combat thing, dive

16:30 rolling, it was all reaction stuff. So you actually reacted pretty quick, and in fact I never realised how well it worked and I believe it did really work well. I will relay a story, after I had got out of the army, had been to Vietnam was back and working in Parramatta and there is a building, it was the IC building near the station in Parramatta, and you could take a short cut through there and down to Grace Bros across the station and you would walk through this building, and there was stairs, 10 stairs.

17:00 At the back of it behind the library in Parramatta. And I remember one day I was running late back from lunch and I was running back and I slipped on the top step, put one foot on the middle step half way down, did a forward roll on the footpath and just kept walking across the road.. And there was three guys in business suits and I heard one guy say, "Shit, did you see that?" It was just reactive training. That must have been how good the training was. And I didn't even hurt myself.

**Handy skill.**

Well yeah. I broke two

17:30 ribs earlier this year trying to do the same thing falling down stairs too, its what age does to you I guess. But yeah the Canungra training was really about lifting your expectation of what was going to happen, and your understanding of that. Certainly did a lot of work out in the bush on the range under fire. I can't remember what they called it,

18:00 they had a big rifle range they used. But one of the things we did towards the end, they took us out in trucks and there was a gully and they had a Vickers machine gun mounted on a hill here and there was a cliff face about 500 metres around. And there was a creek. And in teams you had to run down into this creek, around a certain course and they had explosives going off around you and they had this machine gun firing real bullets that were bouncing off the cliff over your head, and the explosives are going off around you. We did all of that sort of stuff.

18:30 I guess it was more a simulation. Pretty good training. Trod on a mine up there actually. They had these mines that just let out smoke. The last three or four days you went up to Levers Plateau to a real jungle operation which was very good and very well done. We came on a Viet Cong village and we got into one of these villages and trod on one of these mines, it was a bit harrowing.

19:00 **What happened?**

Oh, nothing I just went down and it went pop and got engulfed in smoke and the sergeant said, "You're out of the game."

**What sort of mine was it?**

All they were little discs with a smoke grenade thing. They simulated, you, they had actually set the village up with booby traps and mines on the paths on the way in and all of this sort of stuff.

**What fears did you have?**

19:30 Then? Probably not many until I did that. I was a lot more in tune after I did that I tell you. I don't think I had any fears, that's why I think I complement their training, their training was designed to give you confidence. And I think that episode and those sorts of exercises up there also gave you a respect for what was possible. Yeah, I don't ever remember being fearful.

20:00 Except for the time when I walked out of the field, into Saigon and all of these people were running around the air field with black pyjamas and I remember thinking, "Shit, what is going on here."

**Events were moving forward at a relatively fast pace for you now?**

Oh yeah, as I said, once you finished corps training and you went to the Reinforcement holding wing, you were pretty much given a date to go to Canungra, and once you had done Canungra you knew it was only weeks until you went to Vietnam. So once

20:30 you were finished corps training and went there, you knew that it was going to be a couple of weeks, couple of months at the most before you would be in Vietnam.

**How did you feel about that?**

I am not sure how I felt at the time. Probably a bit numb at first with the reality of it, and then just get on with it. I think I probably feared going home and telling people like Di and family where I was going.

21:00 **Can you take us up and tell us the story of your departure and finishing up at Canungra?**

When I finished at Canungra, well Canungra is pretty much finishing anyway, you had to do a whole lot of tests and everything to make sure you got through. And it was interesting, the threat at Canungra wasn't anything to do with Vietnam, the threat at Canungra was that if you didn't get through you had to do it again. And that wasn't a good scenario,

21:30 so you made sure you got through. So I came back from Canungra, and it might have been then that I knew the date I was going. I think it might have been after. You were given a date and posting, you are going to 1 Field Squadron in Vietnam.

**When were you married? Before you went to Canungra?**

Before I went into the army on the 8th of January.

22:00 **Right can you take us up to leaving Canungra and departure?**

Well, really from that point on, from leaving Canungra and going to casual, all of the time I was at casual I lived out with Di, we had a flat and that continued that way until I went. And I think I had to be in camp a couple of nights before that. I guess I went out in an army bus to the airport

22:30 and the family were all out there to see me off.

**Who were you heading off with?**

Lots of different Australians going over there I guess. There was a couple of engineers going over there. I can't remember exactly how many from my group, probably a dozen or more, but the plane was pretty full of Australians from different corps.

**Regular army or nashos?**

23:00 Mixed.

**How could you differentiate?**

I wouldn't have known. I would have known the people around me, I think there was a couple of regulars that went over with me.

**And when you're introducing yourself in the army at that time, say if you meet some new people in a squad or something, where does identification as a national serviceman fall in the string of introduction?**

It doesn't.

23:30 **But at what stage would it arise as a topic of conversation?**

I don't think it did. It may have when I first got there, it may have arisen in a boozier one night in a ribald kind of way. But it never came up in the context in your ability to do something or your skills or appropriateness of being there or part of the team.

24:00 **But yet you constantly identified people as being national servicemen over there?**

You would do, I guess, probably because the national servicemen in my unit outnumbered the regs, but eight to one probably, eight to two. So and I guess the distinction, probably a terrible thing to say, that probably tells was the level of education of the people involved. As I said significant

24:30 number of national servicemen were tertiary qualified, either in trade or degree, fair few people with a degree in my unit.

**Can you describe the departure scene at the airport and how things proceeded?**

Well, we were given a departure time and I was at the departure gate and my family and Di everyone was there to walk me through the gate. I guess for me being honest,

25:00 I guess I was more upset when I actually went to go in the army. When I was departed from Di to go in the army. I had been trained well to go to Vietnam and it was a sense of expectation from my perspective I guess, but the family around me were very upset. Dad was very quiet. I guess Di, my Mum and sister were all in tears looking back on it.

25:30 My brothers were just there, like my Dad I guess, watching it happen. I am certain my Dad was hurting inside. But I just got on the plane, turned around and waved once and that was it, all over.

**Do you recall your parting words to your dad?**

No, I recall them more so when I went home to Australia on R & R [Rest and Recreation] leave, I recall them more

26:00 because I didn't see him again after that.

**What were they?**

It was more what he said to me, it was interesting, he, and I think I probably knew because he had had a heart problem for a long time. Although he was fit and reasonably young in real terms. When I went he waited at the gate with the rest of the family, but about five minutes before I went back on R & R he came up and shook my hand and told me to look after myself and walked away.

26:30 That was pretty hard.

**I can imagine. Walking through the gate, what kit did you have with you when you walked onto that Qantas plane?**

Very little. What we were wearing. Most of what we took with us was in baggage. We took greens and other thing, all our army kit gear was in baggage that we took to Vietnam.

27:00 **Carrying a rifle with you on the flight?**

No, they were in baggage from memory, they weren't in the cabin. No, no we didn't take a rifle I don't think from memory. We were actually issued with a rifle when we got to Vietnam, when I got to 1 Field Squadron I was issued with an SLR.

**What was the atmosphere like flying over on the plane?**

27:30 No different than getting on a bus at Puckapunyal and going to SME in Sydney, it was a bunch of army guys going somewhere in transit. A little bit of expectation I guess. It was pretty quiet. We stopped at Darwin on the way through and Singapore.

**This was the first time you were leaving Australia was it?**

Yeah, other than Tasmania. I remember the impression stopping in Darwin, I had never been further north than Tweed Heads.

28:00 And I remember stopping in Darwin, we had come from September down here and it was stinking hot and humid in Darwin and then when we stopped for an hour and a half in Singapore it was the same, it was just sweltering. I remember that having an impact, thinking, "Wow, it is like being in a sauna." And I guess the perception, I have already told you about the perception stepping out of the plane in Saigon. We then went in C130 [transport aircraft].

28:30 to Nui Dat. That was probably one of the biggest shocks because we landed at Luscombe airfield in Nui Dat and that was all jungle, you couldn't see anything from the air. You could see the rubber plantation and the trees and got glimpses of buildings. But when it actually landed, I can't remember if it was three or four of us dropped off at Nui Dat at that time. And there was nothing. A shed, and there was no one there, we just jumped off and the plane was taking off and it wasn't until it was just about taking off

29:00 that the land rover appeared out of the jungle to pick us up. But it wasn't a couple of hundred meters through the scrub line you could see all of the camps going on all around the place, that was unsettling I guess.

**Who were you with at that time?**

Off the plane? Oh just a couple of diggers like me going over to replace people. A couple of guys went to 21 construction and I think there was two or three of us went to 1 Field Squadron.

29:30 **Were there any people that came through on your whole tour with you that were on that plane?**

On that last leg into Nui Dat. Wayne, I think one of the guys that came with me, he went through with me but I hadn't been in the same sort of section or unit. So I knew his face, but I hadn't formed a relationship with any of them.

30:00 **What do you recall seeing out of the window of the plane as you were coming into land?**

Saigon? I remember flying into Saigon and seeing mortars going off in a paddy field [rice field]. We all saw that and the pilot actually put over that they had to circle once because there were incoming mortars.

**Was this a civilian or military aircraft?**

It was a Qantas plane.

30:30 And couldn't really see out of the C23 because you have got parallel seating down the walls, so you're facing the centre of the plane, in fact I think we were sitting on the floor.

**So who are the passengers flying with you expect for servicemen?**

No one. That's it. They were specially charters Qantas planes to go to Vietnam.

**Journalists? Anyone else?**

There may have been, I don't recall seeing them, it was all servicemen.

31:00 When I came back on R & R they were predominantly all American servicemen.

**And what is the equivalent of immigration procedures for soldiers going to Vietnam?**

Nothing. Get off and get on another aircraft to go to Nui Dat.

**What way is your rifle registered?**

Well, as I said I didn't take one with me, I was

31:30 issued one when I got to Nui Dat.

**Your arrival in Vietnam, how are you counted if you like?**

Well, there are obviously checklists and you are checked in and out of various places. They knew we were coming and where we were going, where we were posted. We were told, "If you are going to 1 Field Squadron Nui Dat over here, 21 construction Vung Tau over there." And then you would be taken from there somewhere else

32:00 and then put on transport to go to Nui Dat, it was as simple as that.

**And when the door opened and you saw this very foreign environment, what were the thoughts...?**

Well, it wasn't foreign in the sense that it was an airport. But what was a significant shock to the perception was as I said, all of the training we had done at Canungra we had got into being prepared to come into this Asian war

32:30 zone was that it was all Viet Cong and enemy in black pyjamas and sandals and typical straw hat. And here are all of these civilians walking around, working on an American air base, Saigon airport dressed the same way. They were civilians. And you think, "Hang on, what is going on here?" And then I think you realise pretty quickly how confused it all is.

**What were you told of the American operations there?**

33:00 Not much, just that we were supporting them and the Australian forces were looking after Phuoc Tuy province.

**What briefings were you given on liaising with American servicemen of any rank?**

None, I don't think we ever were. Met a few a number of times while we were there, don't think we were trained to do that.

33:30 I guess it was expected, their army is the same as our army I guess, we were never trained to do that.

**What was your understanding of your role when you arrived?**

Pretty poor, I think, when I look at what we actually did over there. Our understanding was, yes, we were field engineers and, yes, we would deal with

34:00 explosives and mines. We had been shown that there were tunnels and we knew that sappers crawled

through tunnels and investigated tunnels did all of that. We never actually got to do any of that in practice in Australia, but in terms of relationship, with how you supported infantry. Mostly a company of engineers would go out with a company of infantry

34:30 with a mini team in each platoon. I had no awareness of that before I arrived, none at all. So the first operation I went out on did that, that was new but that's how you operate. And there was no, I am sure we might have been told in Canungra, actually I am not sure. One of the interesting things with Field Engineers which most people don't know, actually

35:00 is that in a combat situation if there is anything to do with mines or explosives of that nature, it might not be today, but it was then, you assumed the highest rank. The highest-ranking engineers is the highest ranking person on site. And I had to do that on occasion a couple of times. I actually told a brigadier to lie flat on his face and not move until I tell him. But that's all new,

35:30 the configuration of how we operated over there, even the mini teams going out supporting, the road runner, supporting the tanks and APC on escort duty. That was something that you didn't know about until you got there and did it for the first time.

**How would you describe your esprit de corps at that time when you arrived?**

In terms of being a part of it and allegiance to it? It was pretty good, I guess.

36:00 It was still a little bit unknown and a bit unexpected, but I think it was reasonably good. And within days of getting there you get to know everybody and the first night you're having a boozier you get to know everybody. And I guess because also there were guys, you asked the question before that were there any guys on the flight with me that had been with me through training? No. But there were a number of people in my troop in Vietnam who had gone over in the weeks prior to me going.

36:30 So they had been through all of the corps training with me particularly, and they had started to depart six weeks before, so there was probably half a dozen people that I knew when I walked through the gate if you like.

**What advice did you get from those people over the bar in those first few days?**

What advice did I get over the bar? "Vung Tau is a great place, you should get don there more often." One guy, he is still a good mate actually, he lives in North Queensland.

37:00 He was lucky enough to get there on a Friday when they were going down to Vung Tau for a two-day sleep over because they had just come out of the bush. So his initial view of it was all a bit distorted. He just went out on a ranty [drinking binge] for two days. Not very much, I come back to the guy that did our basic training over there, half a day on things you need to know. That was more an education in what you needed to know than anything you talked about over the bar.

**37:30 When you first arrived, was there any name they give the green recruits?**

There is in fact and I will recall it but I can't. 'Reo'. They're a reo. I am not sure when you stop being a Reo but you're a reo, which is Reinforcement. Because we replaced one on one. Not sure how long you took before you

38:00 got your stripe. Probably a couple of operations before, probably got to be involved in something before that disappeared. Or enough new ones came in that you were now part of the two-thirds that had been there more that a couple of weeks.

**How did you regard the people that had been there towards the end of their tour?**

What would be a good word.

38:30 It's interesting actually, and I will come back to it because I have had it relayed back to me by people who came as I was about to leave, awe might be a good word, respect, they seemed a lot older even though they might only be a year older or the same age because I had deferred. They seemed older and much more knowledgeable and relaxed in what they did. Guess that would be my perception.

39:00 They just seemed older and more established and experienced. In reality they were, but reality they weren't. But they had seen and done a lot in a year that was interesting. I will come back to the, I met a guy, it might have been last Anzac Day, it was down in Canberra at a memorial. I met a guy down there I didn't even know who he was to tell you the truth, he had come into

39:30 our troop about four weeks before I went home. And he immediately knew who I was and a lot of the things that I had been through and done and it was because of that attitude. That I was there and I was an old hand and done it all, and yet this guy was probably a year younger than me. That covers it I would say. You get a lot of experience in 12 months.

00:34 **Can you tell me when you first arrived in Vietnam how you got your head around what you were there to do?**

I think I got my head around what we were there to do, by doing more so

01:00 as I said before, we had the training, we would be dealing with mines and explosives and booby traps and those sorts of things. But working with infantry and APCs and those sorts of thing, you didn't really get your mind around it until you had done it the first time. I think it was a bit delayed for me because I think the first months I was there

01:30 I went out to a feature called the horseshoe where they were building mess halls and buildings for, it was like a meteor crater, they handed that back to the South Vietnamese army. But I spent a month there building those buildings and mixing concrete and whatever else. The first operation you go out on, that's when you realise what the job is and what you're about to do, you're learning that the whole year. Despite what is said, you might go out on an operation and it is four

02:00 days of bushwalking, really, even though you're attuned and watching because you're trained to do that. But the actual number of contacts, you might find bunkers and those sort of things, but physical contacts, not that frequent.

**Before we get to your first operation then what was the horseshoe project?**

02:30 The horseshoe project was actually building, I think they were mess halls and office buildings, they were actually building the concrete slabs and then a timber mostly pine structured building with an iron roof, doors and windows. And we knocked one of those up pretty quick, three or four days. But I remember they were motorised concrete mixers,

03:00 with a big hopper, and you had to shovel 18 shovel fulls of gravel, 12 shovel fulls of sand and six shovel fulls of cement that was one mix. And if you were on that part of the operation that's what you did. Do it, they would tip it out and you do it again. You got pretty fit doing that. I have got a few photos of me out there I was pretty fit. So that's what we did basically, you would call it a construction crew, there were guys that were carpenters by trade.

03:30 And roofers and odd and ends, so that's what we did.

**What local conditions did you have to get used to?**

Not much different to Nui Dat really, we stayed, the horseshoe had constructed artillery emplacement sites and they had underground bunkers for sleeping in them and they had bunks

04:00 in them. And the bunks were built out of artillery crates and they were just like normal double bunks. Slept on those. We didn't ration it out there, I think we had a mess out there. We had good food out there, so I guess the only difference was being isolated away from Nui Dat.

**You're out shovelling gravel, how obvious is it to you that there is a war going on?**

04:30 Only because you had armoured personnel carriers coming in at different times and we all carried guns at that time. We're in behind barbed wire and if you went outside the wire you certainly had to be on your toes. You certainly had to be in live mode outside the wire put a bullet up the spout of your rifle and put it on safe and all of those things. So it was pretty obvious that the war was going on.

**What were the sounds of the war going on?**

05:00 Not very much actually. A couple of things I did see when I was there, from the Long Hai Mountains which were visible from there. You would actually see that happening. I remember watch a Canberra bomber strike on the top of the Long Hai Mountains actually while we were there, from the top of the horseshoe actually saw a napalm bomb drop on the top of the jungle just 10 or 12 kilometres away. Saw that a few times.

05:30 Nothing like rifle fire every day that just didn't happen.

**Can you describe what one of those napalm attacks looks like?**

Its pretty much what you see on TV, that's the only one I ever saw, that was probably 10 kilometres away, but it really is just that. You see the planes come in, see something drop out of the plane and then just see a huge track of jungle burst into flames, it is exactly what you see. That's my recollection of it.

06:00 And I meant to tell you at the start of this interview, perception is reality, so this is my perception.

**It is very important to us to pick up your perception too, and the idea of you being a young man within that environment is very important to us too, because it is hard to take yourself away.**

People even standing next to me at the same time may have a different perception.

**As much as you can try to take yourself back to what you were feeling. You had just arrived you hadn't had much experience of this before, what did that sight, what did that impress**

**upon you?**

Just how awesome it was. Devastatingly awesome and destructive.

06:30 A bit like watching fire. That's all I remember watching it. "Here goes a napalm strike."

**Can you tell us about your first operation after that had finished?**

Yeah, I mean, that was one thing we were never trained in out here.

07:00 Most operations we were flown out on Iroquois helicopters. I was trying to think this morning what was the name of the first operation I went out on. But the fact that you were put on a helicopter, I think it was seven in a chopper and you just land in this clearing next to the jungle and you have got to dive out and that's when you realise, I do remember perceiving at that time. That first operation when I did that. Because that was totally new you have

07:30 never done that before. And you suddenly arrive and, "Shit, we are really out here on our own." And I had a mate that went over there with the first lot of Australians, never had a base like Nui Dat and they were in the jungle the whole time. But to me, doing that for the first time. And I guess one of the first things I had to learn quickly was to be very quiet, even general talking. Of an evening when it started to get dark, not to say anything.

08:00 I am often accused now of mumbling, even today and I am sure that's where it came from.

**What happened from the beginning, the Iroquois [helicopter] came to pick you up?**

Well, it didn't come we went down to the kangaroo pad [launch pad], and I think there was four choppers [helicopters] and usually a couple of escort choppers and we got loaded on and went out. You went to the, like as I said, we supported infantry. When I was

08:30 there, we supported 1 RAR half of the time and 5 RAR, so you would go and meet with them And you would be allocated a company, well you would actually be told in our lines, which company you would be going with, so you would go and join up with that group and so you would load onto the choppers with them and then just fly you out to wherever you were going, flying over the jungle.

**What tricks were there to flying in a helicopter that you had to learn?**

09:00 None that you didn't teach yourself. My first rule from day one was that I always stood in the doorway, sat on the edge of the seat near the doorway. Feet on the open door rail, looking out because there was no doors, holding on to the top of the open door. I never ever rode in a chopper over there without doing that. Mightn't have done it the first time, wasn't smart enough, but after that I was always in an open doorway.

**Can you describe how you were sitting in a bit more detail? How did that help you out?**

09:30 Well, if you were in the shopper, say this is the chopper the front of the chopper is over there, there was a bench seat, the pilots are sitting there in the front of the chopper. There is a bench seat behind them against the back wall of the chopper like that. And if that's the back wall like that there is a machine gunner either side of that wall, towards the back of the doorways and there is a bench seat across here, four people sat on that and there is usually three on the ground sitting on the floor of the chopper behind the pilot seats. And if I was sitting on that seat that's how I would be sitting today, right on the edge of that bench seat, it was right near the door, the edge of the chopper was here,

10:00 I would have my feet on it holding onto the roof with my pack and rifle and all of that sort of stuff, and that's how I would sit looking out of the door. Can get out of the chopper very fast. Plus you can see where you're going. I just enjoyed doing that.

**What did it feel like to be up in a chopper for the first time?**

It was really good. You can see everything, I think there were some people that didn't like flying in choppers, it was very good.

10:30 **Were there any other tips to getting in and out of them that you learnt very quickly?**

No, there was no real trick to it, just get out of it really quick. I mean, getting out was the issue. You got out and got to the ground because you didn't know what was going to be there, we came into clearing and there was always a chance that there could be V Cong [Viet Cong] or someone in the jungle around you. That never happened to me at any time.

11:00 Had a few hot insurgent where we were shooting, or the chopper gunners were, but we never, the trick was to get out and get away from the chopper in a perimeter. On the ground very fast until you got orders to move out.

**What was your role on that first operation that you went out on?**

I was a number two in an engineer mini team. As I said before, mini teams went with each platoon and you had a number one who was a more experienced person,

- 11:30 so they were a team of two. My job was just to assist that guy. And we did blow a few bunkers on that particular operation, I don't think we did much else. We had a few contacts in the operation but I think the primary thing we did on that op was blow bunkers, so that was primarily our role. When engineers went out in that from we actually were viewed for the most part as part of
- 12:00 the infantry unit. So we did things like gun piquets at night time and the normal things. We were always behind the middle of the platoon. So they were the sort of things we did.

**You mentioned that that was the moment it changed for you, can you talk a bit more about that? How it changed for you and what you got out of doing your first operation?**

- 12:30 Well, I guess it had all been a little bit pedestrian, urbane, it was all pretty manageable before that, you had some structure around you. I am not sure I thought about it this way at the time, but looking back on it I guess you were always in a base somewhere, had barbed wire around you and a establishment around you. And on operation you are really out there with that infantry unit
- 13:00 on your own in the jungle, and you're calling on support from fire support bases and I guess the change was actually being out there in the real world of the war. On patrol in the jungle, well the bush, it wasn't actually jungle most of it was bush like bush out here.

**What happens after the helicopter lands?**

Well, the company commander would have their orders and we would have an area of operation, for example a couple of grid squares on the map. Our area of patrol

- 13:30 and so from that point on the infantry officers in command take control of what's happening and you start patrolling through that area of operations. Objectives of patrolling from point A to point B and I guess they were search and destroy type. That was the term use, so the idea was to find and eliminate or contact or whatever. So that was really in you just patrol from that point on.
- 14:00 You would stop at night time, or at lunchtime and come into a harbour which was a perimeter. Two people to a gun pit, which was the term used, it was just two people as a section, and then a machine gunner section and the machine gun and that could be two or three hundred metres diameter. Headquarters group in the middle. And that's how you harboured up in the jungle to eat or do anything. That's how you operated,
- 14:30 and at night time you did that as well.

**Can you take us through some of the rules and the way in which you behaved when out on patrol?**

Signs, I guess were all of the things, pulling up and enemy or possible enemy. The rules were one visual distance I think. That's where the Australians were so well in front of the Americans, and probably why we didn't have so many casualties.

- 15:00 We used to patrol one visual distance apart. In other words, if you and I were out here in the bush, it would be worth doing it too it is a good example too. The person in front of you, you can just see through the bush and the person behind you can just you through the bush, so you're spread out pretty far. So even with a platoon of 60 people, or 30, whatever it is. Even a company of 60, you were spread out a long way on a trail through the jungle if you can imagine people that far apart, so that was more or less
- 15:30 the basic principle. And then be quiet and be very observant. You're taught, and I taught it to my kids and Di, when you're out in the bush actually look through the bush rather than at the bush and that's a trained thing to do, to actually look through beyond what you're looking at, so you're doing that all of the time. That's a few of the basic rules.

16:00 **What are you looking for?**

Anything that moves or anything that is out of the ordinary. I guess as I was there longer as a sapper I was constantly on the look out for any sign that the Viet Cong had been there, they always put up signs on anything, just like we put up a mine sign. Which is a manufactured thing.

- 16:30 They would always put a sign up. A bunch of rocks or a vine wrapped around a tree or a broken twig that would point somewhere or whatever. The longer I was there and the more I got to know about that I was more looking for that. And I had guys around me, lead scouts and things that I was teaching to look for those things.

**I will come back to those signs in a little while, but what would happen on a patrol if someone thought they saw something, saw movement?**

- 17:00 Give the thumbs down sign and the whole column would stop and the officer in charge would take the charge of whatever that was. Or they would confirm or not confirm that there was a contact. And if they really though there was they had processes for sweeping areas. Like if they had a company or a platoon with sections, and they would get two sections to hold the line that were in and one section to move out at a right angle to

17:30 the line for an example and then sweep through the area and find anything out there. Otherwise they would observe it from the line and we would just keep moving. If you found bunkers or something, either contact or non contact we would go in and search them and destroy them.

**What was your first contact experience?**

I knew you would ask me that question and I have had a

18:00 lot of trouble remembering what my first contact experience was. I think my first contact experience was on an operation that was way out in front of the column somewhere and there was a whole lot of gunfire and by the time we caught up it was all over anyway. No one had been hurt and we just kept moving. The most prominent one that first comes to mind might be during the same operation. We had been walking

18:30 and we had a couple of times through the morning been given the thumbs down. And nothing eventuated and we kept moving and we harboured up for lunch. But one of them they did confirm they had seen some Viet Cong, and we harboured up for lunch, for about 15 minutes and there was a couple of gun shots. And one guy one infantry guy he got shot and actually died on the chopper on the way back in.

19:00 That was my very first one realising how real it was. We never got the enemy we searched and kept moving.

**What was your first alert that this was going on?**

When this fellow was shot? The gunfire? No one knew. They just ambushed, they had followed us. We believe what they had done was follow us and waited until we were comfortable and shot at us.

**Where were you in relation to the man that was hit?**

19:30 We were in a circle and I was probably 40 degrees around the circle, two or three hundred metres away through the bush.

**When that first happens to you what goes through your mind and how does training come into play?**

I think training comes into play pretty well. I mean, as

20:00 soon as the gunfire comes through you're giving the thumbs down, I mean, you immediately go into a response position you hit the ground and observe, you really keep and eye on what is going on. Wait for orders, but you actually go into a defensive position personally I guess.

**How much fear is there?**

It's a personal thing. I often relay

20:30 that I only remember fear twice in my time in Vietnam, conscious fear. Because you don't, I was in one really big contact, I don't remember actually having fear as such. We were in one position on one ambush for three days and we knew that they knew that we were there. We had seen them as we got into position, the lead scout had seen them run off up a track and we weren't allowed to move for three days.

21:00 And I remember being very scared for three days, more so in the night time we were talking before about the difference between the Vietnam War and the Second World War. And I think that is one of the issues for some Vietnam Vets, and I think it impacted all of us in some way, is that that is there all of the time, it is in your subconscious all of the time. It is not conscious, it is subconscious,

21:30 and it makes you more alert. One thing that happened to me during that time is my hearing became very acute. And I am not sure whether that happened to other people, but it certainly happened to me. When my wife and I moved into this house, there were vacant blocks at the other end down here, our bedroom was at the other end of the house and we have got a double garage, and I remember waking up one night and saying to my wife,

22:00 "There is a dog walking around the bottom end of the house." And she couldn't hear it, and I remember tracing this dog all of the way around and I said, "You will hear it in a minute when it walks under our window." And that was purely from, I think it is like anything, you lose one sense and pick up another one.

**Can you describe the physical landscape you were working in, in this patrol?**

I would reckon, and it is

22:30 my perception. I think most of it was not unlike thick Australian bush. Did get into rainforest type jungle, as in the term 'we all see jungle as some of the time'. I went through an area one day that was clear running water swamp, very clear running water, sand bottom, knee deep for four hours, with monkeys in the trees and so on,

23:00 that was one event. We were on another operation one time which was savannah country like in Africa

and there was tiger tracks and we could smell tigers, so it changes. I would suggest predominantly most of the time it was somewhere between our normal sort of bush and rainforest. It was sort of yeah, thick bush.

23:30 **You hearing became very acute, what sort of sounds did that landscape make?**

Mostly animal sounds, things moving, you became very attune to things moving through the undergrowth or the underbrush. One night we were on a, I was actually on gun duty with another guy, pitch black, no moon very thick scrub and we actually stood the whole harbour to, because we heard this noise.

24:00 And it was an animal and I don't know how far we picked it up out but I reckon I could have shot it at any point but I couldn't see it. Lots of animal noises.

**Any recurrent animal noises that you learn to live with in Vietnam?**

Not that stood out no. Sometimes you didn't hear any noise. I don't think so.

24:30 **That was my next question, is there any moment where it is silent, completely silent?**

I think so yeah absolutely. Very silent. Put yourself in the dark in the Australian bush on a very dark night, same thing, just like that. It is not all guns going off, that is only a small part of the time.

25:00 The other sounds you did hear, you could often hear artillery shells going off in the distance and B52 [B52 bomber] gun strikes, most night you would hear that but it wasn't constant.

**How do you keep your own sounds to a minimum on patrol?**

Just by being careful, speak softly. Only speak when you need to speak and just move carefully.

25:30 Pretty much. Most of it is sign anyway.

**You have given us a couple of signs are there any more that stick in your mind?**

Not really, they were the predominant ones, if there was enemy around and to stop. We were taught a lot about how to slow down, I am not sure what they were you never used them really.

26:00 It was more there is a possible contact or those sorts of signs. If something happened you didn't have to be quiet anymore anyway, if you had a contact everybody screamed out and talked about what was going to happen.

**On this early occasion where you were in harbour and somebody got shot, how was that contact resolved?**

A patrol was sent

26:30 out from the harbour to sweep through the area but by then the Viet Cong had taken off. So there was no result from that but at the same time they were taking action to get in a medivac [medical evacuation] helicopter. And once the medivac helicopter came in and took the guy out we packed up and kept moving. Simple as that.

**Was seeing an injured man a big thing for you at the time?**

27:00 I don't think I actually saw him on that occasion. We stayed in our position, we didn't move around, we saw the chopper fly in. I can't remember the first time I saw somebody wounded, probably around Christmas time.

**We will get to a few other patrols, but while we're still on your first, you mentioned some bunkers that you came upon?**

Yeah.

**When was the first time your engineering came to play?**

That was then, well that was using explosives.

27:30 Because we had to get down and search the bunkers, climb down into them. They are like an entry to a tunnel, just a room. I don't know how big. Ten foot by three, or four feet by five foot high, maximum. So engineering then, you actually demolished them, put explosives in the supports in the top and the walls and that was the first time.

28:00 And I am sure on that operation we didn't strike any booby traps or mines or anything. So that was all of the work we did on that trip, which I think was about four weeks.

**When encountering a bunker or something of the like, what are you on the look out for in regards to booby traps?**

Depends I guess. You learn more when you are there. Looking for disturbed earth, looking for anything that is not normal.

28:30 The Viet Cong would often, on footpads or entrances to those things, put a lot of forest refuse so you couldn't see a define entry point, the whole was there and you could see they walked there but you couldn't see what was on. You were looking for anything that looked disturbed. As I say the generally put signs on most things. They could in bunkers booby trap anything that

29:00 was fixed. You wouldn't just pick anything up. You would go into a bunker and there could be utensils or anything lying there and you wouldn't just pick it up. There could be something under it or it could be connected to something. So you were just looking for untoward things or you were just conscious of thing that were generally portable, probably the things that we would look for.

29:30 **You mentioned some people when you arrived in Vietnam who taught you the ropes?**

Who taught me the basics I guess. As I said before, this Brian Knowles I went out with the first time, he sort of taught me the basics of, well I was told when I first got to Nui Dat, for example all through our training at SME to use explosives, and you use a detonator in a block of explosives and you put the det [detonator] cord into that, how to set it all up.

30:00 They said, "No, forget all of that, we don't use detonators. Get the detonation cords and like you whip a piece of rope, get a loop and put the detonation cord and pull it back through and the knot itself will set the explosive off." So we were taught all of that basic stuff in camp when we first got there. Brian sort of told me the mechanics of blowing a bunker properly, blowing the main supports and where to put the explosives. How to set it up.

30:30 A lot of the other stuff you just learn. I mean you are taught all of the basics, you taught what things are. And you learn from experience and hopefully experience doesn't kill you.

**Could you pass on that knowledge to the archive, the basics of blowing up a bunker as you were taught at that time?**

I can do that yes. Basically Viet Cong bunkers were under the ground, the roof of them most times would

31:00 protrude a 150 to 300 mill [millimetres] around the level of the surrounding surface area. Sometimes could be level with it, but mostly they were a little bit in relief of the surrounding surface. And mostly they had two or three main supports, what you would call joists, I guess, and then they had smaller timber members going the other way, and then they would fill over the top of that. Leaf refuse and then there would be maybe a foot, eight inches of soil over the top of that.

31:30 We would then, you would obviously put explosives on those main supports, to break them and blow them. Brian taught me, you would put one in the middle but you would put them at the ends too, because you would them blow the walls out so it was not easy to re-establish the bunker. So there was explosives to blow the main supports and the rest would all be blown out or fall in.

32:00 But as I say, we would also put explosives around the walls where the support hits the walls because that blows the structure of the wall out. And while they were just earth structures dug in the ground they were very sound. I have actually seen a bunker within three of four feet of a B52 bomb crater and there was not a bit of dirt out of place. That was basically it. Pretty simple really.

32:30 **Can you tell us a bit more about the equipment you were using in this role and the tools of your trade?**

From the explosive point of view, we used C4, which was an American plastic explosive, detonation cord, and safety fuses and fuses. That was the primary tool we used in most things we did, whether it was blowing bunkers, we might blow mines rather than lift them out of the ground. Find unexploded ordinands, use that to blow those.

33:00 We would use, I think I used a mine detector once, maybe twice on roads we might have used them, but in the jungle they were useless. There was so much shrapnel around that the mine detector was pretty hopeless. You would use a bayonet for probing for mines sort of thing. That's pretty much the kit we used engineers we all carried a 9mm pistol, we were the only non-commissioned rank to carry

33:30 a pistol and that was so that when we went down tunnels we could use a pistol. That's it. We always carried in our pack, one of the first thing we did when we came in, our pack was always ready to go so that if we were called on we just picked our pack up and go. We basically carried a couple of pounds of C4 and some detonators and det cord and safety fuses, we just carried them in our packs all of the time as engineers.

34:00 Great for boiling tea in a dixie [pot].

**C4? How do you boil tea in a dixie?**

Break a piece off, light it under it, and it is just like a fire starter except it burns about a thousand times the rate and it will boil a dixie full of water in seconds. Used to love doing it in front of infantry guys that had never seen it before.

**Plastic explosive sounds, to someone who doesn't know about it, like something very**

**dangerous. What is the reality of that?**

Well, the reality is that it is not.

34:30 Well it is when you set it off, but the more modern ones like C4, which is a white sort of plastic, as you would understand it now. You could throw it against the wall and nothing would happen. Play with it like plasticine. Its pre-runner [precursor], I think it was called C3, it was a bit more like gellignite, it was orangey colour but it actually used to weep nitro glycerine. Came in pound box, where as C4 came in half-pound box. That was a bit more volatile. Especially if it was a bit old, you couldn't drop it or it would go off.

35:00 But the plastic, like plasticine yeah.

**What rules and safety precautions were there?**

Well, safety rules were in terms of making sure the area was clear if you were firing something. There were safety distances, don't ask me to tell you what they were, safety distances that people had to be away from things that were exploding, or if you were igniting explosives.

35:30 We got to have more of a gut feel of what was safe than what the book said. Obviously, when you were in the jungle you would send people over a bit of a rise behind heavy trees, that would be fine. In fact, that was probably the area we got a bit blasé towards the end of it. We always, when we were firing you always had to judge, we would time fuses. Burn a bit of fuse to work out the time, but you had to time it so that you would be in a safe area by the time it went off.

36:00 But you have to minimise the chance of the Viet Cong, the enemy, taking the fuse out and stealing the explosives, which could happen. I never saw it happen but it could have. Once you did that you always called out, "Fire on!" so that everyone knew it was lit and ready to go. They were pretty fundamental. Fundamental safety things. One of the other things we would always check, we were always in a mini team or more than one person doing it you would make sure that you set up was all right because

36:30 if you have detonation, it is like water down a tube. If you put detonation cord that way, like a 'Y', that's why you would always tape, because it is like a ring, like an electronic main set on off, and it will set a whole lot off. And the charge actually runs down the det cord. And the story I heard, if you set off det cord strung from here to Melbourne and back to Sydney it would reach Sydney in about three seconds on the way back. Because what happens, it runs like water and will run around smooth curves. If you set it off running that way

37:00 and you joint was that way it would just cut it off and it wouldn't run. So we had to check that all of that was right. That sort of stuff.

**What accidents were there during your time over there?**

With explosives? Don't recall any. More accidents with guns, never saw an accidents with explosives, we were pretty good at what we did.

**What about that 9mm pistol? Can you describe that to us?**

37:30 Just a basic 9mm pistol, see them in all of the police movies, slide bolt, that's it.

**It is not a general, as you say, it was very unusual for non-officers to carry them.**

That's true, we carried them because we went down tunnels and they were convenient down tunnels.

**How proficient were you at using them if you needed to?**

Well, usually if you really had to use it was in a space about that big so your target would fill all of that up if you needed to use it.

38:00 The best thing I ever found was that you could put a light around a corner and your pistol around after it and you didn't have to have your body after it. I don't know I never had to shoot it, apart from shooting in a test fire pit. I know the first one I ever used one in training, the lined us all up on a mound, we had 25-metre targets full figure and they said, "We will show you how good these western guys are, we want you to shoot them from the hip." And first shot landed about 30 metres in front of the target, about half way between us and the target, it is not easy.

38:30 But obviously, it is easier that way.

**Was the western thing, did you joke around with these pistols at all?**

No not ever. One incident I recall one incident with a rifle. This particular fellow, he only just got out of the army, he went on to be a senior NCO warrant officer trainer at Duntroon. First came to Vietnam as a nasho, was

39:00 issued with an armalite rifle the second day he was there. And we used to always go on parade when we were in camp at about six o'clock after dinner because the mail would come in. sixty guys standing in this parade ground and he decided he would spin this rifle like a six-gun. But he had it off safety and a round up the barrel and it was on automatic. And it just went bang, bang, bang. Never hit anybody, 60

guys on the parade ground, bullets through tents everywhere.

39:30 True story. (UNCLEAR) rang up from headquarter troop of course and, "No, nothing went off down here."

**We'll stop there and break for lunch.**

## Tape 6

00:30 **About the first time you got scared or afraid or a fright when you were over there?**

I guess the first time I became conscious of being nervous or unsure, I am not sure if afraid is the right term, was that first operation when I first jumped off the helicopter the first time and out in the real jungle. The time that was really afraid,

01:00 we were on an operation and we harboured up as a company for lunch and we had been following a car track through the jungle, and the rest of the company were set that way through the jungle and we went down this track to a junction of tracks. Three-way junction of tracks and a fourth one two or three hundred metres to a lake. And they were very heavy wheeled tracks for a wagon, we knew they had been through. And there was actually

01:30 triangular area between these tracks and the platoon was there to ambush. And that was the position, we settled ourselves into this ambush position and we put out basically forwards scouts on the main corners I guess and the first lookout, we had only been there 10 minutes and he signalled that he thought there was enemy movement. Shortly after that an enemy person took off and ran up the track and we saw him, didn't shoot at him

02:00 but saw him. And swears blind to this day that it was a European person. And well, all surmise it was probably a Russian advisor, we didn't know that it was just what we guessed. They knew where we were and we radioed company headquarters and they told us to hold that ambush position for three days. So for three days we were there and we knew that they knew. And that's the only time in Vietnam that I remember being constantly afraid,

02:30 scared is not the word, but nervous and afraid. You would wake up at a twig breaking at night time, and I still believe my nerves suffer from that today. You just didn't sleep and were on edge the whole time. Listening and watching the whole time. So that was probably the only time. And I was in a couple of contacts, I guess, I don't think afraid is the word.

**How does that affect relationships between you and the men at the time?**

03:00 I think you rely on each other. You're just part of a team, you're all communicating silently or not silently, but I think you're all part of a team and you are aware you have got a job to do. I don't think you talk about being scared or afraid or anything like that, it is just there and you're all aware that you're all thinking and reacting the same way.

03:30 **Afterwards what did people talk about?**

No, you don't because you just. After the third day we were all told to move on to move somewhere else and it is all over because you have started patrolling again. Move onto the next things.

**Why is it do you think that people don't discuss the mutual fear?**

04:00 I don't we discussed the fact that we thought we should move because the platoon commander kept calling the company headquarters and saying we should move. We were all aware that that was happening and we all thought that should happen. But it is not something you talk about. You're all there why talk about it? Not going to change it. In a situation and dealing with it.

**And how are you dealing with the practicalities of watches and staying on ambush?**

04:30 **How does it work?**

Well, basically you have people on gun positions, there are machine gun positions and you have forward lookouts, and they're primarily the people that are in that situation on lookout, but everybody that is, say, facing the track is pretty much alert all of the time. It is the point positions, I guess, that are going to see anybody first. They're the ones, they are moving, people do gun duty, so you do a duty as a lookout on those guns. And that's just the mechanics of it, everybody

05:00 takes a turn. Certainly at night time you take turns on the gun. Thinking back on that operation I don't think we did that because we were all basically looking in the same direction anyway so we were aware. But in normal circumstances in a harbour you all take turns in a machine gun position. Might be an hour or two during the night, the last person wakes you up and you wake the next person up and you spend your two hours being observant sitting on the machine gun.

05:30 **Even though you're an engineer?**

Well, that's what I said before, actually I had quite an interesting experience later in my career over there, for all intents and purposes when we were out patrolling with infantry we were part of the infantry unit, for normal day-to-day contact, but our primary role out there as I said if we had to blow bunkers or mines or search tunnels whatever. We were just a normal part of the unit.

06:00 Although I have talked about the Long Hai Mountains before and I was acting sergeant and my unit was out, my section was out with a company where there was a lot of casualties and I was asked to go out and lecture or to talk to the new infantry guys. And there was a big debate going on because my guys who were out with this infantry team were being forced to do night gun piquets. And as soon as I got off the chopper and I went out to do this, the flew me out to do that, and as soon as I got off the chopper

06:30 they were on to me about not having to do that, because basically every single day they were picking up mines, they were in a mine contact situation and they really needed to be on their toes to do that, you have to be alert otherwise yourself and a lot of other guys are going to get hurt. And the major in charge of Charlie Company [C Company], the first thing he said to me, I went down to his order quip bunker and I had to wait. And he said, "G'day."

07:00 and told me that he had especially asked me to go and do it and he said, "I am having a few problems with your guys." And I said, "Quite rightfully so, they shouldn't be doing what they are doing if you want them to be efficient through the day." We got on famously after that. We had a long talk about it and during the next couple of weeks that happened. But that was a special circumstance because the Viet Cong had actually taken a lot of mines from that minefield you just saw the videos of, that's where a lot of the mines that were used against us in that apart of Vietnam came from, they replanted them in areas where we were.

07:30 **Can you describe, was this the minefield around Nui Dat?**

Around Dat Do, which was towards the ocean from Nui Dat.

**This is quite a well-known minefield wasn't it?**

Yes, it is.

**Can you describe that minefield for us and the purpose of it?**

My understanding of why it was put in, it was put in prior to my being there, and I mentioned the sergeant that was part of my training at SME, he had been part of laying it.

08:00 My understanding why it was there, they laid a five-kilometre mine field, so many hundred metres wide, barbed wire either side and the idea was the create a barrier for Viet Cong movement between Dat Do and the coast, that's my understanding. The horseshoe and the coast it was that wide, it had mines set out in a pattern, which they normally are. And that was the purpose of it. But because it wasn't under surveillance all of the time, it wasn't very effective and in fact the Viet Cong were stealing mines out of it.

08:30 And as I said they were doing it while they were laying it. So when I got involved, I come in from operations on the first sound day we were back the boss called a parade at lunch time and said, "Boy, have I got a job for you." So I ended up being, we then went out to try and clear it, and it was too dangerous just to clear from the maps of the minefield because the Viet Cong had moved the mines around. So they came up with that APC with the axle up the side to clear it. So yeah that was my understanding of why it was put in,

09:00 but it then wasn't manageable so they then had to extract it.

**How long had it been there before you started to de-mine it?**

It was put in, or '66 or '67, I am not exactly sure of the date of it. Couple of years maybe.

**But it was quite well known wasn't it?**

My word, you still hear stories today.

**Why was that?**

Probably because of the problems it caused, I am not sure really. There was a lot of casualties while they were putting it down.

09:30 There has been a lot of debate about it since, I think.

**How feared were mines?**

Pretty bad, they were the worst thing you could come across. Especially when you were in that area, down around the Long Hai Mountains or any of the flat country around there, gully country, you would always find them. you never went to any area where there was evidence of Viet Cong without expecting mines to be in that area, never.

10:00 My closest experience with M16 mines and they were the jumping-jack mines, I don't know if you have ever seen one of them, they are like jam tin with a spike out of the top and three prongs. And if you hit

- any of the prongs they will jump out of the ground about three feet and blow up. And we had gone out with a section, 5 RAR, we went to search up a creek, and with a platoon that was sent up one of the
- 10:30 track we could see going up one of the hills. And one of the infantry guys trod on a mine and blew his foot off and we helicoptered him and we had to go in and search the, and there were bunkers and it was interesting that when I got up to where this mine incident happened because I was down the creek when it happened, I could actually see the sign that marked the mine was there. So had they known a bit more and had their wits about them they probably would have seen it. But what the Viet Cong had done, they had put basic forest mulch all over the tracks so that there were no tracks. I had two incidents happen then that were probably the closest I ever came.
- 11:00 We had mine detectors, but there was too much shrapnel we couldn't do anything. And I was actually clearing a track into the bunkers with my hands, and a I had the 2IC [Second In Charge], Jimmy Shug behind me and I was clearing like that and a sergeant came up behind me and this guy got my meals ready for five days after that. And I was kneeling down, there was a tree there and some infantry guys were about 60 metres away across through the jungle.
- 11:30 And instead of going on the track I cleared, he went to step over me and walk through the jungle and I saw his foot coming down and as his foot came there I saw the prongs under his foot and pushed his foot out of the road. That's a true story. Shortly after that, I lifted that mine, and shortly after that, about another 10 metres further on, I was clearing that way and I went like that and cut my hand on the prongs of a mine, true story.
- 12:00 So I figured I was, and I will tell you how people were afraid of mines. I lifted both of those mines, put them on the ground and once you put a safety pin in the top they are just like a grenade pin, you could actually screw the stem out, which was the fuse. And I had screwed the stem out of both and we took them back to company headquarters and the company commander just went berserk that I had them with me and made us take them out of the position and blow them up. And they were as safe as a bank. People really were scared, they did a lot of damage.
- 12:30 **What happened to that bloke that hit the mine?**
- He got flown out. I actually remember his name, his name was Zeke Mundine, I am not sure if he was related to the current Mundine clan, I guess he was he was part aboriginal, and he lost his leg, well lost his foot anyway. He was lucky actually, when he stood on it they tell me he turned around and kept all of his weight on it so it stayed in the ground.
- 13:00 **How was that, sorry?**
- Well normally if you stand on them and keep going, there is a delayed fuse and it goes bang and pops up out of the ground and then the main charge goes off and spreads shrapnel everywhere. Well, he had actually stood on it and kept his weight on it because he stood and turned to speak to people behind him. And because he stood it didn't pop up out of the ground. It went off, but stayed in the ground, so he wore most of it, nobody else got hurt.
- How aware are you that if you do hit a mine if you lift your foot it might go off? Is that,**
- 13:30 **or are they like that?**
- No, that would be one in a million chance and he didn't deliberately keep his foot on it, it just happened to be what he was doing at the time. No, you walk along hit it and keep walking, and as you take your foot off it you just keep moving. I am not sure, no, once you tread on a spike it is on its way.
- 14:00 **These mines from the Dat Do minefield, what sort were they?**
- They were the jumping mines that I just described.
- Who were making these mines, who owned these?**
- Americans. Yeah, they are American manufactured mines.
- And how was it that you were hitting these mines or running into them?**
- Well as I said we put this big minefield in, and they reckon the majority of the mines the Viet Cong used in that area they extracted from the field that we laid.
- 14:30 They would go in and dig them up, put safety pins in them and reuse them against us. Happened all over. Very dangerous place to be. So that was probably one of the good reasons they were trying to take the field out I guess.
- What were your instructions in reference to the Dat Do minefield?**
- Well, I was basically that APC you saw on there with the axle on the side to go in and clear the minefield. And we were the first in there,
- 15:00 into the minefield. We took the APC in, myself and the driver. Closed all of the hatches. Went in through the wire at one spot and our first strategy was that we didn't have the axle on it we just had the APC with the governor off and we flat out for a kilometre along the edge of the fence, came out. Went back

and did it again, with the belief that if we did that, we were going so fast they would go off behind us.  
And

15:30 then, once we had cleared that we then put the axle on, we had cleared that and we stayed on that track but we put the axle out to the right of us and went along and it would clear the next strip and we would do a couple of runs over that and mines would go off behind the APC. You saw all of the shrapnel holes in the steel on the back of the APC. And then we would move over into that cleared track and do it again. That's how we cleared the minefield.

**Hazardous work, wow.**

Interesting. I am going to write a book, I said, "Right, I am going to write about all of the funny things that happened." And one of the funny things

16:00 that happened, was the very first run we did when we put the axle on, the helmets in the APC, the commanders helmet and the drivers helmet, you could actually click the speakers and you wore headphones in the helmet. It had a switch, internal APC, external the rest of the radio net. And of course like any two-way radio you cut anyone else off. Well, I had been speaking to them out at the minefield and I had switched it back and hadn't relicked it forward. So we took off up this run.

16:30 And no one could talk to us and no one could talk on the I Field Squadron radio net in our immediate vicinity. And the first mine we hit, of course you can imagine it has gone off about two metres behind the vehicle. And I think both the driver and I both said an 'F' word or "Shit!" in very loud language, which went over all of 1 Field Squadron Radio net. And it wasn't until we had actually done three or four runs. And I can't even remember why,

17:00 I think I wanted to speak to the driver but it was a good 10 or 15 minutes later I realised that I had this radio turned on.

**Was this a procedure that was in the manual?**

What radio procedure?

**No the clearing procedure?**

No, that was just a scheme that somebody thought of as a good way to clear a minefield. Well it worked, as I said somebody got killed a week after I was doing it.

**How was he killed?**

Well, my last day there

17:30 and it was the last day because we had actually damaged the vehicle, we were actually going along and we had moved over and about half-way up our run, the Viet Cong used to get along after they had moved the mine field and cluster mines together, so more than one would go off together. And we actually ran over one of those in the APC, and it blew the front guardrail and the track off the vehicle. And we were inside it, in the middle of the minefield.

18:00 And what we did then, because no one would talk about what you would do when that happened either. So we got on the radio and they decided that we had to stay inside the vehicle with all of the hatches closed in case there were any slow fuses that were still going. And then we got out and had a look at the damage, we didn't get off the vehicle, and then we got back inside, closed all of the hatches and they brought another APC in and came right to the back of us and we hooked chains up so they could tow us out. Well the person who was killed the week after me, and the driver was injured. They did exactly that same procedure

18:30 But when they actually got out and stood on the APC and inspected the damage, a mine went off and jumped up in the air and went off. So yeah, interesting time.

**Can you describe mine and anti-mine warfare from both side? What other cunning tricks did the Viet Cong play with their mines?**

19:00 None other than use those mines on tracks and where we were likely to be. Their most feared mine, and everybody would have a different perception of this I guess, was their Chi Com [Chinese Communist] claymore mines. If you have ever seen a claymore mine, it is about that big and you face them and they have got explosives with ball bearings in front. And the Chi Com or Chinese claymore mines are like a garbage tin lid.

19:30 but they have piece of dowel, steel dowel in a pattern right around the edge of the cone if you like, they were pretty feared. They were pretty ordinary; they did a lot of damage. But no other than just setting mines and booby traps and things.

**Going back a bit for the archive, without having access to that video, can you describe?**

Well, I will get those slides as I said and pass them onto you.

**But for the record, if you like can you give us a**

20:00 **description of the Dat Do minefield and your understanding of it?**

Well, my recollection of it, it went past Dat Do, it was probably, and I am guessing now, because it was a long time ago. I guess there would be records of how wide it was, it would have been two or three hundred metres wide, I don't know. It

20:30 was just a normal, it had probably been cleared but there was scrub and bushland, but it was pretty flat open country. There was a few small shrubs around was my recollection of the part we were working on, I guess. So it was just this long tract of land between two barbed wire fences with a mine pattern laid over a couple of kilometres.

21:00 **And what equipment did you have at your disposal that was dedicated to mine clearance?**

Only that APC, what we had with us, we never had to use it while we were there. I had my whole engineer section with me out there while I was doing there, they reason they were doing that was in case as we got trapped in the minefield and they had to come and get us out. Now they had mine detectors and they would have used all of their skills of observation using bayonets to probe and doing that sort of stuff.

21:30 But we didn't have to use the mine detector and I don't think we would have been able to anyway because with all of the mines we were setting off there would have been shrapnel all around the place. So that was at our disposal.

**And within that minefield how many different types of mine were there?**

As far as I know there were only M16 jumping ones. I am not sure, I am pretty sure that was all there were and they were laid in patterns.

**What civilian casualties were caused by the Dat Do minefield?**

22:00 No idea. I have read that there have been but I don't know. No idea. I doubt there was at that time because it was pretty well fenced off at the time and the locals would have known it was there.

**How were the mines being stolen?**

Well I guess they just came in at night time, I guess when they were laying it, from stories I heard, I don't know any of this first hand, but they were probably watching where they were laid in the day time, plotting it

22:30 and they could go in at night and dig them up again. I am not sure but I am reasonably sure once that started happening our guys started booby-trapping the mines themselves by putting hand grenades with the pins out of them under them. I am not sure but I am pretty sure they started doing stuff like that to stop the Viet Cong trying to take them out at night time. My job was basically commanding the APC going into the minefield. We didn't know what to expect when we went in there, we just

23:00 got in there and did it.

**How much of the Dat Do minefield was cleared?**

I couldn't answer that I don't know how long it went on after, I think they cleared most of it at the end of the day. I went on doing other things and other operations, as I said I was only out there five or six days. Maybe five days. We were the guinea pigs to make it work. That was when I got in the news in Australia actually.

23:30 **How was that?**

Well, we went out to trial it somewhere, didn't actually run into a minefield, went out in the bush and trialled it and I think the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] were there, took a couple of shots of us and interviewed a couple of officers, and I got my mug [face] on TV. And a few people called Di and said, "Jim had just been on TV." And they had to ring up the ABC and get them to replay it so they could see it. I have never seen the footage, must be in an archive somewhere.

24:00 **What other incident with mines did you come across while you were over there?**

They were the primary ones, the ones I said where I stopped that guy treading on it and the one where I cut my hand on a mine, they were the two biggest ones. I did have a couple of others where we actually found them and extracted them out of the ground. Found a few others that we didn't dig them up, we just put a half a pound of explosives on them and blew them up in sight, which was a better way to do it anyway. They were the primary ones.

24:30 Occasionally you would find something booby-trapped in a bunker but not usually.

**What use did the Australians make of claymore mines?**

We used claymore mines in ambush positions and sometimes I guess just in harbour position we used claymore mines.

**Can you describe an incident where you set up and used a claymore mine?**

We didn't actually set them up the infantry guys used to do that themselves.

- 25:00 They would just be put up somewhere out in front of your position somewhere. And if there was anything coming toward you could set them off and spray them with ball bearings. I probably did see them setting them up but probably didn't take much notice at the time. Just something we did. Where the Viet Cong I think more so because they had permanent fixtures like bunker systems and more permanent positions they had them set up a fair bit of the time. So if they were in a bunker system, occupying it,
- 25:30 you could be pretty sure that there was a claymore mine around. The worst incident I was in which was that Christmas Eve I was talking about, my friend Rick Branch who is in one of those photos here. He and I had decided to help some engineers, we had all be flow out Christmas Eve and we decided that I would go and help, I was sending a platoon out, one of the platoons had found some bunkers, one of the platoons had come into company harbour,
- 26:00 battalion harbour and the engineers were being flown out. But they had found a bunker system so it was decided that one of the platoons would go out with some engineers and blow it. And the guys that were attached to that group I said, "We'll come out with you, my engineers will come out with you to help you get it done faster and we will all get out." But the platoon commander took a wrong turn and we ended up in a live bunker system. As soon as we got the thumbs down sign, actually
- 26:30 walking into it, you could actually see sandal marks on this track and I remember saying to Rick, they were really new tracks, "They have just been here." Anyway, it was minutes later we had turned off into the jungle because someone had seen a bunker and we moved in and somebody put the thumbs down and as soon as the thumbs down everything went off. And there was the lead scout the machine gunner the section commander, myself, Rick and four engineers behind me. The lead scout was shot between the eyes.
- 27:00 Machine gunner, section commander, all badly wounded, and four of the engineers behind Rick and I were all badly wounded, all went back to Australia. Rick and I were carrying about 50 pound of plastic explosives, a roll of det cord and a detonator each. And we never got one scratch, we never got a mark on any of our equipment, we just got engulfed with black smoke. That was probably the worst incident I was ever in.

- 27:30 But I can tell you we unloaded all of that garbage pretty quick, it went on the ground pretty quick. That was pretty much at point-blank range. And as soon as that happened, of course gunfire was going off all over the place. I guess that's why I am pretty adjusted about Vietnam, see, I can talk about stuff like that, I know guys that wouldn't talk about that. But that was pretty horrific actually.

**Can you take us into that action step-by-step up until the point where you are getting the thumbs down in some detail?**

Well, we were walking along this track and

- 28:00 I remember it was in the foothills of the mountains and there was a gully in front of us, it was very steep actually, and we had gone off the side into a track. And because we had started to go into the jungle, along the edge of this bunker system, we had started to really bunch up which wasn't the Australian way, but we were really bunched up. And one of the sections had gone ahead and we had turned. And that's when they set the claymore mine off at us and started shooting at us. But it was virtually instantaneous from the time the signal came from the lead scout,
- 28:30 he must have seen movement until actually everything went off and then we were engulfed in smoke. And then we were in a fire fight the whole time. In fact I have got an idea that the lieutenant that was in charge of that platoon for calling in the artillery right nearly on top of us to clear it out. But we, it's where in my life I decided 'hero' is all about timing.
- 29:00 I think you have got about a quarter of a second between being a hero and not being a hero. You either react without thinking, and if you have got more than a quarter of a second to think about it you often don't do it. because what happened after that, there was people lying around wounded and I remember Rick and I hit the deck and there was three or four infantry guys to the left of me behind a log, and I realised I was on the wrong side of the log and so was Rick.
- 29:30 There was bullets whizzing over our heads, so we quickly rolled over this log and got on the other side of the log. And I was there and Rick was lying next to me and we could see them flashed in front of us. The infantry sergeant was about 30 metres from us across a bit of a clearing and he was pretty badly wounded and Rick and I decided we would go and help him and Rick took off and as Rick raced across this clearing. I could see the bullets chasing him across the
- 30:00 thing so he said, "You can come now." And I said, "No, I can't." And I didn't until they moved, there was no way, I mean I figured they would zeroed on Rick the whole time. If I had have got up and ran with Rick, I think we both would have got there. Interestingly enough, the guy that was lying right next to me got shot in the heel while we were lying there so it was an interesting time.

**What kind of assistance was he able to give to the...?**

- 30:30 Not very much, just comforted him because we were still pinned down for five or ten minutes and by then we were only five or ten minutes from where the company harbour was so a whole lot of reinforcements came then, we started to get assistance and the medics were able to do their thing and

help them out. American medivac choppers came in and they weren't able to land, so they hovered over a bomb crater and were winching the wounded up

31:00 and the whole time they were under fire. Yeah. But we had, we could only just help get the medical and so on.

**Who was the forward scout?**

Don't even know, couldn't tell you his name. I wasn't with that platoon, we were just going out to help them do something. So I hadn't been associating with that platoon the whole time.

**What was the sound of the claymore mine like?**

It was just a loud "bang."

31:30 "Bang" and then covered in smoke. A scarier sound, and we are talking about scary things. There is nothing scarier than the sound of an AK 47 [machine gun] pointed at you going off. It is a very awful sound, very loud crack. You know when they are firing AK 47s at you it is a very loud sound, awful sound. The claymore mine was just a loud bang and we got engulfed in smoke.

**How do you know it was a claymore mine?**

32:00 Well, we know after because of the way it went off and the damage people had, fingers severed and chunks of flesh taken out of them. It was where all of these pieces of shrapnel, carved up dowel took pieces out of you. That why Rick and I, to this day, we were so lucky, we were just in the right place where people were in front of us.

**What were the injuries?**

They were pretty bad. As I said the front guy was killed. This guy that Rick went back to help and I ended up going back, we carried him to the chopper. He had a couple of fingers missing of each hand, a big chunk out of his leg and pieces out of his arm.

32:30 Snowy Gilmore and Peter Clayton they got flow home, they have been to this house for the reunion, they came out here, which was very good for them actually because they had been flown out of there and came home, they didn't have a clue about what happened so we filled in a lot of holes for them out here. They were both pretty badly wounded, stomach wounds and this sort of thing, pretty horrific.

33:00 But we discovered that it had been a medical compound, they actually had an operating theatre that they had been using because a bit later on, about an hour or so later we heard gunshots further down the gully, another Australian company had sprung an ambush and I think three or four or five enemy they killed, one was a doctor carrying a wounded guy on a stretcher. We found an operating table and

33:30 Stanley hooks with the blood plasma on it, we found hide with piles of blood plasma, we found a big bunker full of medical equipment. And Rick and I were the engineers left there and we had to demolish it and we just absolutely flattened it. You could say we got emotionally involved in that.

**While you were involved in that what opportunity, were you able to return fire or use your weapons at any stage?**

34:00 Oh yeah, and everybody was. We could see where they were, it was pretty thick bush actually. There was a fire fight going on.

**What were you doing?**

The things I was trained to do. I don't think I fired in that situation because you were taught you had to identify a target to shoot at and I couldn't actually see anyone to fire at. You saw flashes a few times of rifles

34:30 going off, I couldn't actually see figures, there were guys to the left of us firing who said they could. But we were just looking over the log and trying to direct fire to where we could see the fire coming from because we could see flashes. We were screaming out where we thought they were. But it seemed like forever, it was probably only a few minutes. Can't remember.

**35:00 Anything else that comes back to mind?**

No, only that then, I think that's where we found the North Vietnamese flag I was talking about. I think we got that out one of them bunkers. When that ambushed started, we were also there on top of them pretty quickly so we found a lot of gear, as I said we found a bunker full of all sorts of medical equipment. And Rick and I blew every bunker and it was on the top

35:30 of a hill and it was like a football field when we finished. We also used to blow trees down so that the place would be exposed from the air. We just didn't blow one tree down. They would never have used that again, pretty much cleared, environmentally friendly clearing I guess. That was the start of a pretty harrowing experience. We didn't go back into camp then Rick and I and didn't go back in then until New Years Eve. But from then until New Years day that all we did all day blow bunkers, just kept coming across more and more and more and more.

36:00 **It was Christmas Eve, what did you do on Christmas Day?**

We harboured up Christmas night. I remember on Christmas Day I had had the same pair of army greens on for six weeks, I had one sleeve left in my short, Rick had none. And I remember on Christmas Day they flew us out a hotbox meal in a Chinook helicopter for the whole company or battalion harboured

36:30 out in the bush and actually gave us all new greens to wear. That's my recollection of Christmas Day that year.

**Was it a day off?**

No, I don't think we moved Christmas Day actually, you're probably right. I think we stayed there two nights. We harboured up the night before Christmas and we stayed there two nights. We moved again Boxing Day.

**When were you doing the blowing up of the bunker systems?**

Every day, daylight until dark.

**On Christmas Day?**

No.

37:00 We didn't do it Christmas Day. From memory I think we might have stayed in the one position on Christmas Day. Actually from memory we might have moved out on dusk, changed position on Christmas Day because I think we actually had a contact when we first got harboured Christmas night from memory. And then we moved on, and the company, we took the rear platoon position and as they were having contacts in bunkers which was pretty constant we were coming in behind them and searching and blowing the bunker systems.

37:30 So Rick and I did that basically daylight until dark, for five or six days or something. To the point where the infantry guys were making coffee and our meals. Talk about another funny incident, one of those days Rick and I had been doing that all day and it was really thick jungle and it was right on dark. And this infantry guy said, "We have cleared a spot here for you to sleep. You are not on the outside perimeter." And it was a vine like morning dew, you know that

38:00 the vine we get here that's leafy and thick, right up in the canopy and they had cut this hole in it about two people wide. And of course after dark you can't speak. You have to be very quiet. And I remember we put a ground sheet down Rick and I and his pack was this end and my pack was that end and we're lying on these packs you see, sort of asleep, and next thing Rick's feet are here and he kicks me in the shoulder. And I whispered, "What's wrong?" he said, "There is a snake crawling under my neck." There was actually a snake crawling between his neck and the pack.

38:30 And then my biggest problem were that my feet were down there. I said, "Well, we have got a problem, my feet are down with your head." Nothing happened, just moved on. That's true, isn't it amazing. I remember saying, "Don't move, it will bite you." I would say that was without doubt that was the worst contact I was ever in and I never ever wanted to go back to that place.

39:00 The day before I was coming home I was flown out there again, the Australians went out there again and I was in camp ready to come home and the boss came and found me in my tent and said, "The company has found a whole heap of bunkers and they need help to blow them. We're being flown out, pick up all of the guys you can get you're going up there." And I said, "I am not going out, I am going home the day after tomorrow." I was going home. He said, "Yes you are, you have got to go out there." And I had to go back there and actually

39:30 as we were going in there the commander of the company I was going into help, knew him very well actually, he was the one that had told me my father had died. And the B company was actually in a contact in the next valley, we actually saw the choppers coming in and the things going off. And my proviso [stipulation] was that I would get flown out in the afternoon after we did it and I very nearly didn't.

40:00 We came down into a they had cleared a bad for the chopper to land in the bamboo and as he came down his rotor started to hit the bamboo and he said, "It is not big enough, you're going to have to jump out." So we had to jump out about six foot off the ground, through all of this explosives and stuff out with us. And first thing I did, I told all of my guys to sit on the boxes and I said, "Don't go anywhere." And the RSM [Regimental Sergeant Major] came up and said me, "Come with me Corporal Castles and all of your stuff and all of your men." And I said, "No I am not going anywhere. I want to see Major Sutton." Anyway I saw Major Sutton and I said, "Can you have one of your groups clearing that landing pad another 10 feet so the choppers can

40:30 get down and get me out this afternoon?" And he did it. he actually got some guys clearing it out. That afternoon we set the whole thing up, took all day and it was just before dark and a chopper hadn't arrived and we were loaded up with our packs ready to go and I said to this major, "I am staying here. Leave me a machine gun. I will stay with my blokes and wait for the chopper." And he said, "No, you can't do that, you have got to come with us." So I was that close to not coming home. That was pretty ordinary yeah.

41:00 But that was a pretty terrible place to go you knew every time you went there you were going to get in trouble.

**We'll have to stop there and change the tape.**

## Tape 7

00:30 **What did you do immediately after you came back from a patrol?**

First thing we did was repack our pack again so it was ready to go. Have a shower. Made our bed, because most times we would leave our mattress up, that's about it. cleaned our weapon, all of the basic stuff.

01:00 **Was there any kind of celebration or relaxation time after you came back?**

Usually the day you came back you didn't do anything else. Got things in order and did those things. Usually, as I said, we usually had a barbecue, if the whole troop came back into camp the next Saturday or Sunday the next Saturday or Sunday we would have a barbecue. Sometimes we would actually have an overnigher [overnight stay] down in the R & C [Rest and Convalescence] centre down in Vung Tau. Not every time.

01:30 **What went on at those barbecues?**

Oh nothing, just like a barbecue here, ate lots of steak and salad and drank lots of beer, unwound I guess.

**How important was drinking?**

Pretty important. That's what I said before, I think a lot of vets [veterans] from Vietnam, I am not sure how it compares with other wars,

02:00 but I think a lot of vets from Vietnam developed an alcohol problem over there. I always consider myself pretty lucky that I was out in the bush a lot of the time so I didn't have access. I know guys that were in base unit all of the time they had a lot of trouble. Because you could drink limitless, as long as you could stand up vertical at eight o'clock and do what you were supposed to do, you were left to your own device. And at 15 cents a can Australian [Australian dollars] over there at the time, it was pretty accessible,

02:30 and in fact they used to have five-cents nights over there if I remember correctly.

**Where was the main venue for drinking back in camp?**

In the boozier. You weren't supposed to have drinks back in lines, but we did. Mostly it was in the ORs [Other Ranks] mess or back in the lines after lights out. There are always ways and means. You couldn't buy spirits in the Australian ORs' [other ranks] mess, you could buy spirits in the American PX [American canteen unit] if you were in Vung

03:00 Tau so you could get access to the hard liquor, not that I ever did, but people did.

**Can you describe the scene in the ORs' mess?**

Pub, I guess, had a bar at one end and beer on tap or canned beer, and tables and chairs. And the outside area that was in that video, was just like a beer garden I guess, without the plants. Pretty simple,

03:30 that's all it was tables, chairs, yeah.

**What games or drinking culture did you get up to in Vietnam?**

Boat races was the only one that really comes to mind, I can't think of any others. Boat races were the ones as I said you sat one behind the other, it was like a relay race, drink the can, tip it upside down on your head and when your team had finished, the first team finished wins and the winning team stays there until they get beat. A

04:00 quick way to a hangover.

**Who competed against one another in those competition?**

Who? Everybody. I don't think anybody ever didn't do that.

**While we're on the subject. can you tell us about Vung Tau about the recreation and what went on down there?**

Well, just like on that video you saw...

04:30 **Just be aware that the archive may not have access to it, try to describe things without the**

**video.**

Might not have seen it. The Peter Badcoe Club, which was the Australian built recreation centre, they had a full size Olympic swimming pool there, access to the beach. You could actually take out of the store there surf boards or I think they were VJ [Vaucluse Junior] sailing type boats. You could swim on the beach or in the pool. But you also could go into Vung Tau township itself,

05:00 and there was always access going into town, you could go into bars and socialise. I guess you would liken it to going to Kings Cross would be the closest comparison here I guess. We made use of those things. I remember my mate and I, Rick, we got a sailing boat out and sailed out off the beach and couldn't turn it around and ended up where the beach was just this little line on the horizon. We thought, "Gee, we had better get out and swim and turn the boat around." Jumped out to swim and the water was up to our waist.

05:30 That sort of thing.

**Who did you mix with when you were on R & R?**

R & R I was back in Australia (UNCLEAR).

**(UNCLEAR) what was it called in Vung Tau?**

R & C I think, I can't remember what that stood for, rest and recuperation.

06:00 Yeah, just the guys that were in the unit. You might meet some Yanks [Americans] or some New Zealanders or whoever else might be around. I guess it is just like sitting in a bar or a pub I guess, having a drink with people, that's basically all it was. I remember being in one of the two-storey bars in Vung Tau and I actually had a meal there and it was very nice. We got friendly

06:30 with a bar girl who was pregnant actually, and she had been abused by one of the Vietnamese waiters and we sort of protected her, I guess a bunch of us. And we were in one of the places that was cleared for Australians to eat in, and we ordered lobster and it was the most horrible mush you had ever seen. And this girl walked up behind us and chatted away in Vietnamese and they came back with brand new fresh half lobsters each, it was really good. Yeah, generally that's all it was.

07:00 Vung Tau was like a township and the Peter Badcoe club was just like any hotel complex I guess on a beach somewhere.

**How much trouble did the various different forces get into down in Vung Tau?**

In terms of fire fights, that sort of stuff?

**In terms of drinking too much and being a nuisance?**

07:30 Oh, I guess there were incidents of it all of the time I would imagine. Any bunch of guys give them too much to drink they are going to cause trouble I guess. But it was pretty well patrolled, between the South Vietnamese military police, and the American and Australian military police, they were pretty strict. They had a curfew and they would bring a wagon out on curfew and you would either get a lift back or they would carry you back. And when trouble broke out, it was broken up pretty quick.

**08:00 What other things were there for you to do there apart from drink?**

Not much, apart from what I said. Swim or get the sailing boats out. I mean, two days goes pretty fast, you drive down there get there before lunch and disappear before lunch the next day, so it is all over and done with pretty fast.

**Were there baths or massages?**

There was, there were baths and massages and all sorts of prostitutes around the place if you wanted to indulge. But I never did, I was married and I pride myself on the fact that I never did that.

08:30 Went into a steam room once for a massage with my mate Wayne, I will never forget the incident because they took us into this steam room and it had a door about a foot and a half thick, and this Vietnamese girl shut the door behind us and we thought, "Oh, this is good." And all of the steam started to pour out everywhere, we were a bit nervous then but we were all right.

**How did you get there from Nui Dat?**

On the truck, troop carriers.

**09:00 Would you take stops on the way down?**

We would stop in Ba Ria, one of the local towns, on the way through and have a look at the shops there. Buy trinkets or things, whatever.

**What contact would you have with the local Vietnamese?**

In that situation, obviously, when you went into town you were in contact with the local Vietnamese in the bars and shops and

09:30 street vendors that were around. Stop in Ba Ria on the way back we did. We had some contact with villagers, we would do village searches, that was another area I didn't mention, we actually, we would do village searches, so we had contact with them then. Travelling on an APC, if you were near a village anywhere you would stop and the kids would come out and talk to you. Wanting cigarettes and food and asking did you want to have sex with their sister for a price.

10:00 Those things happened I guess. I mean they are the sorts of life experiences that I think if you look at national service, well some reg guys were that young, they were very young people, that people out here in the normal Australian community would not understand what those guys have seen. Even in terms of that sort of thing, in one year of their life have seen a whole lot of diverse things, seedier side of life too I guess.

10:30 As well as the war type.

**What did the local kids call the Australians?**

'Uc da loi' was the Vietnamese word for Australians. I don't think I ever heard them call us anything else.

**How was that term used?**

When they were asking us for things, well begging I guess is the right word for

11:00 cigarettes or sweets or whatever. Call us things which everyone has heard of, 'Cheap Charlie' they would abuse us and call us that if we wouldn't give it to them. Some interesting experiences over there I mean, entrepreneurial I guess the local kids. In Ba Ria, the town just outside of Nui Dat where the Australians used to go to fill sandbags, all of our positions were sandbagged, and there was a sand pit there. And the local kids would come out, it was interesting over the time that you were there

11:30 it was the American influence, kids would come out on push bikes with foam [Styrofoam] eskies on the back of their push bikes with coke and ice, because we were working they would see us coke and ice. And you would see the same kids three or four months later driving a Lambretta motor scooter, Honda motor bike with and ice box on the back. It was interesting.

**Apart from the pregnant bar girl that you helped out,**

12:00 **what other friends or relationships?**

I think I said earlier in the interview that some of the work that we did was civil defence type work. We would work on culverts and villages, built a windmills somewhere, and we would have contact with the villagers when we were doing that sort of thing. Like we put three culverts in, but the locals were travelling on the roads between the rice paddies the whole time. So you do talk to them and interact with the kids. And we did work on the

12:30 orphanage at Ba Ria. An American truck had knocked down the fence around the corner and we went out and repaired the fence, that was run by Catholic nuns and that was quite an interesting experience. We were there for a couple of days actually, and the second day we took a whole lot of rationed food out to the orphanage, which we felt really good about. And it was really good too because the day we had finished doing the work the nuns and some of the kids came out and brought us some of the type of

13:00 rolls you buy in Vietnamese bread shops today, the French bread rolls with salad on them and gave us a salad roll each, they were very nice, they are very nice people the Vietnamese. I know guys that were in Vietnam have got a strong grudge against Vietnamese people, I haven't I think they are very nice people.

**What other civil defence work did you do?**

Well, I didn't do much because I spent most of my time out in the bush. There were the two big projects I worked on. I was in charge of putting

13:30 three armco culverts with head walls, it was in the dry season, on one of the roads. And I worked on the preliminary work putting a windmill up in one of these other villages. The time when I was in the fire support base, out near Long Hai we had some people out doing some work near Dat Do, building some roads and that sort of thing, but I wasn't actually involved in that. I used to take meals out to them occasionally. I think they did all sorts of things in

14:00 terms of building constructions, roads, water supply. Australians did quite a bit of that, I think.

**How did the Australian army engineers feel about doing this kind of work?**

I don't know how the others felt, I always thought it was pretty good doing it. But that was their job and they had to do it, I guess. I mean that's the Australian way, I think Australians felt pretty good about doing that sort of stuff.

14:30 **What about village searches, can you tell us a bit about an experience you had with that?**

I was involved in a few village searches, the biggest one I was in was on the road to Saigon. That again was an experience in itself. I think fire support was out that way there, I am not sure. But there was

these three villages, don't ask me the name of them. If I had a map, I actually had them circled, but they were a fair bit apart down the road.

15:00 And what would happen in the early hours of the morning, engineers would turn up in APCs and tanks and infantry and surround the village, build a barbed-wire compound quickly, heard all of the villagers out, they would have choppers with speakers talking to the villagers. Get all of the villagers out of the villages into the compound. We would then go in,

15:30 engineers would go in with infantry and infantry would take the village and we would search it, engineers would do a search of the houses and surrounds of the houses while another group of people were in the wire compound with the people checking all of the identities and to do with them. That was the South Vietnamese army people with them. That was over three or four days, and it was a pretty harrowing three or four days because by the time we

16:00 got to the last one we were all pretty tired, you start at daylight and go through to dusk sort of thing. I think the second one we actually walked all night to get to the second village through the jungle. I think I recall going to sleep standing up. So we did that on three occasions and I look back on that sometimes, and I say to Di, "That was another dangerous time," because by the time we got to the third village we were all very tired, and being tired you become reckless. And things you should be careful turning over we were just picking up.

16:30 We just lost the caution I guess. So that happens. Yeah.

**Can you take us through the finer details of that search, what you were looking for and how you would search through?**

Well, we were looking for I guess explosives or weapons or caches of food that were particular to the village, they could be used by the Viet Cong. And it was a pretty thorough search.

17:00 You would be looking for hives or bunkers or tunnels under the houses, pretty impersonal I guess when you look back on it, you would look through their trunks, any cabinets they might have. I remember thinking at the time it was pretty ordinary, most of the places we searched were just dirt floor and they were just village shacks really. One of those villages we actually went into a house and there was a woman with a little girl. I guess it would

17:30 have been a daughter or granddaughter, she had just had a baby. Brand new newborn baby just been born, still had blood on it, she obviously hadn't been able to leave the village, but that's what we did, we just searched the grounds and gardens and be careful.

**What did you do when you found this woman with the baby?**

I was with another guy,

18:00 I remember us discussing it and think well she could be deliberately hiding something under the bed, so we looked, searched around her but we were discreet about doing it. We weren't the horrible Australian, if you like, we were pretty careful about how we treated her and what we did. We respected her, gave her respect, but we had a job to do.

**Was that respect you talk of universal amongst the searchers?**

18:30 That's a good question. I am not sure I am in a position to answer that. The short answer would be 'no'. I did see guys in village searches that didn't respect the property of the people, and I think we had a duty to do that if we were searching their property, a responsibility to look after it, do the right thing by it. but I saw guys that left houses with things strewn everywhere. But I didn't do that I left everything as I found it.

19:00 **What about mistreatment of people in occasions like that? What did you see of...?**

I didn't see it. I don't think that happened, that was always going on in the wire compound where they had the villagers, and once we had finished searching the village they always let them back in the village anyway, so it was separate from us.

**What were your major finds during these searches?**

I don't think I ever found anything.

19:30 I don't know of people during those times that did find weapons of sorts, but we very rarely found anything. They were smart enough, they knew we were there even if they only had 10 minutes warning, they were smart they could get rid of stuff. And I think most of the villagers were victims as much as anything from both sides. That's my perception of the whole thing over there.

20:00 **Doing work like this, searching villages, destroying bunkers, often in the Viet Cong were there they could come back after you had gone,**

Oh villages obviously certainly would. Bunkers they wouldn't so much, we never left a bunker system that they could use again, or a system that was useable.

**But you always found more?**

Oh, they would just build them. And they were very clever in the way they would build the, the period I was talking about where we were blowing bunkers all of the time, we had a contact one night, I think I mentioned it was Christmas night and we moved and had a contact,

20:30 and we didn't get anyone, but one of the outposts saw a Vietnamese girl with a straw basket flat. And when she went out to investigate where she had been, they had started to build another bunker and what they used to do was dig it and spread the spoil over a really big area so that there was no obvious area where you had disturbed the place. And the timbers that they used, that's another thing you become aware of after a long time in the place,

21:00 if you were walking in the jungle and you saw trees about that round chopped off you knew you were getting near a bunker system, because they wouldn't take them all in one place, they would take one here and there all throughout the place.

**How did that make you feel doing that work, was there a sense of futility about it?**

No, I don't think it was a sense of futility, I think we had a sense at the time that we were depriving them of their resources, we were making it difficult for them. Putting aside

21:30 any politics at the time, we were there to make it difficult for them and we did that.

**Putting aside the politics of the situation, how effective do you think your job was?**

I think the Australians were very effective. I think if the Yanks had been able to operate as the Australians did, it could have been a different situation.

**But in a larger sense, were you changing anything?**

Oh, in the whole of South Vietnam?

22:00 I don't think we were, I think we changed it in Phuoc Tuy. It has been in documentaries since where Australians have gone back, Australian servicemen have gone back and actually been interviewed and talked to Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers who actually said they respected the Australians. And I think the activity in Phuoc Tuy province was far less than some of the American controlled provinces. So I think we were effective where we operated for the most part.

**22:30 Did you feel like you were winning the war? How did you feel?**

After being there for three months I didn't ever think we would win the war. I didn't think that could happen. They knew the terrain, the land and the jungle and they constantly just hit and ran. I think it was a very effective training, and if this country was ever overrun, that's the tactic I would take.

23:00 As I say I think, we won the province, I don't think we won the war, I couldn't see us winning the war. My view over there was that they should have nuked North Vietnam if they really wanted to win it. Sounds gruesome, but that was my view at the time and probably still is, if they were really fair dinkum [serious] about cutting it off at the head, that's what they would have done. But it never happened.

**23:30 We will pick up on some of those issues in a moment, we have got a lot of things to talk about so we had better move on. You did some work with supporting APCs, can you talk a bit about that?**

As I said armoured personnel carriers were used, one of their roles they escorted with tank escorted convoys, vehicles with the supplies I guess from Vung Tau

24:00 heading north and they would escort them through Phuoc Tuy province to the border of the next province. And whenever armoured personnel carriers or tanks went out, they always had an engineer mini team with them. In case they themselves hit mines or anything like that. So we were always with them and that was basically the job. They actually had one operation for a short time where they actually thought it was a good idea to take tanks into the jungle. Some bright person decided that was a good idea.

24:30 So we were actually doing that but they didn't do that for more than a day because it just didn't work. But it was quite interesting because they put the tanks in low range, low gear, you couldn't hear the motors running, all you could hear was the trees cracking as they ran over them. That was fundamentally our role. They also used APCs obviously with tanks to take troops out into the jungle, fire trials and cleared areas and things like that. Again they would have engineers supporting them when they did that.

25:00 I was on an APC right behind a tank that lost its front drive wheels driving over a mine. I mean, in that situation we had to get down as engineers and make sure everything else was clear around the other vehicles so that everyone else could get off and move around and the front of that other vehicle. That was our job if something like that happened, or if someone thought something looked suspicious we would check it out.

**Can you take us through that incident, where you were and what happened?**

Yes, it was in the same mountains that I was talking about before that were pretty dangerous.

25:30 We had come in off the main road and down what you would liken to in Australian terms a fire trail. And in retrospect, we should have suspected something and prevented it from happening. We had come through a cleared area and it petered down to a very narrow track into the jungle. And we sort of come around a bit of a curve in the track and when the tank got to his narrowing,

26:00 right where it got to be narrow, that's when it hit the mine. And my mate and I were sitting on the open top doorway of the APC, and I think whoever was with me actually fell off when it went off. The tank actually jumped in the air about six foot. So I guess everyone's first thought was to check that the tank commander and driver were okay, which they were, they were a bit shaken up but they were okay. I think it hit the track on the other side to the driver.

26:30 And then we got off and cleared, some infantry got off and took the position and basically the cleaned up afterward, got the tank towed out.

**What did you have to do immediately after that happened?**

When it happened? We had to make sure everything was safe to make sure that it was safe for people to move around. It is quite conceivable on a mine like that, even though it was a vehicle mine on the track that there could have been anti-personnel mines around so that when people jumped off the vehicle,

27:00 they would stand on mines. Our role was to try and make sure that that wasn't the case. And it is hard to do, you don't do a real detailed search, you look for signs, disturbed ground or places that they might be. And that's what we did. Actually apart from the vehicle in that mine field, I was actually in a truck once that had the front wheel blown off.

27:30 Same thing there, I was on the back of it with infantry and it was actually an American troop carrier. And the driver was hurt, had his legs hurt. Again we had to actually get off and clear, and we had to actually clear for a chopper to land on the side of the road. And what we all thought was pretty comical was that there was a bit of a clearing and we had actually cleared it, some guys and myself cleared it to make sure there was no mines there and this American medivac chopper arrives and lands somewhere else, pretty impressive.

28:00 **What did you think of the Americans at the time?**

I thought the, I had a couple of experiences with Americans, apart from meeting the occasional one in Vung Tau and those sorts of places. Our commander, the first troop commander we had had a very good relationship with someone in the American army and we got a lot of materials to build a rec [recreation] hall and a headquarters in our troop which we did, and so we had a couple of those turn up to deliver stuff and trucks and stay

28:30 overnight. So we got to know them. as a person, individuals, they were regular just like us. I don't think they were much different. I had experience with them, on the last operation I had before I came home I was out with an American land clearing team. We had a land clearing team, but it was three or four dozers and some recovery vehicles. One company of an American clearing team was something like 30 dozers [bulldozers] I think from memory, big bulldozers, and they would clear

29:00 two hundred acres of jungle a day, flattened to the ground, and they would do that so that they could do night reconnaissance through the jungle. Same thing, they were nice guys and I was out on APCs then, we were part of the perimeter protecting them. But I came to the view that as a nation they think they are better than everyone else.

29:30 And I made the comment out here that they are probably the last people I would like to occupy this country. I had a very strong view when I came home that this country should have nuclear-armed itself, I still believe that.

**Apart from that bulldozer squadron, what other contact with Americans during your time in Vietnam?**

That was probably the biggest one, not very much, marginal. I was out, on that operation where I was on the truck that hit a mine, we were out

30:00 there supporting APCs and my initial job was out there was in a fire support base supporting APCs going in and out. That was out from airbase, I think it was an operation called 'ring of steel'. To stop the next year after the Tet, and because we didn't all go out every day on APC our boss decided that we were all being resupplied by truck, I think it was 50 or 60kms into Bien Hoa airbase which I think had 100,000

30:30 American permanent residents, like a small town. We were allowed to go in three at a time overnight. I had a bit to do with them then. In fact, it is interesting you ask that question, more things are coming to mind as you ask them. I remember we went into there and we got to our rear echelon about three o'clock, went to the American PX and then went to the American ORs' boozier, which is different to ours, you could buy all sorts of

31:00 spirits. It was the first time I ever tried pizza that day, they actually made and sold pizza in this place.

They had a band playing, Vietnamese rock band none the less but they were there. And I remember Wayne and I walked in, we walked in and we happened to walk in on the Negro side of the club, and there was a very distinct line that went from coloured to white. And of course with all bravado, we got a beer and sat down with the Negroes didn't we? And it was quite interesting because they were taken aback,

31:30 you could tell by their body language, they were chatting to us. After about 10 minutes I think they said, "We're really sorry diggers, but we really think you ought to move to the other side of the room. We're really happy to have you here talking to us, but it will cause trouble." So we got up and moved, after some resistance we got up and sat with the guys on the other side of the room. They were a great bunch of people.

32:00 They were my two biggest experiences with Americans I guess. I sat with two Americans coming home for R & R to Australia, they were both from Texas I think. That might have been after that incident, no it was before that. Because all of that racial thing was going on in American, and I remember asking how they felt about the colour situation in America and they said, "It is not a problem, we are not prejudiced, we don't care." And this went on and I said, "Well, how would you feel if your sister married one?"

32:30 It was a pretty provocative question, and they both reneged on that. "No, wouldn't let that happen." Pretty sad.

#### **What experience did you have using American equipment or their supplies?**

Oh, all of the time. Our resupply, generally when we were out in the bush we got resupplied every third day and we would get one day Australia ration, two day America rations.

33:00 Two days American rations was three times the amount of stuff that was in one day Australia ration, but it was rubbish. Hershey Bars and smokes and chewing gum and that sort of stuff, but it was a good balance, I carried an American pack the whole time I was there. They were a bit like our A-frame metal frame backpack. In fact, I do a bit of bush walking now and wish that I still had it. Interesting, we got

33:30 them from an American tip [rubbish tip], some guys went up to an American base to get something in the truck and as they were coming out they drove past an American tip, and one guy happened to see these boxes on the tip and one was busted open, they were brand new packs. So they loaded them up and we used them, they were better than the Australian packs. That was about the only American equipment we used, apart from M16 rifles.

#### **Tell us a bit about the M16 that you used?**

A good weapon. I got mine two or three days after I got to Vietnam,

34:00 a new supply came and I just happened to be one of the lucky ones that was pointed to and said, "You can get one." The one I got was still in the packing grease, in the crate wrapped with packing grease around it and I had that the whole time I was in Vietnam and when I left and I gave it to somebody else. Light, easy to use, I disagreed with any of the stories that came out that they malfunctioned and didn't aim properly because if you kept them clean, cleaned them every day they were a top weapon.

34:30 I reckon I could have hit a match box at 60 metres, very good weapon, light.

#### **How many contact situations were there in Vietnam where you actually fired that weapon?**

Not many that I actually fired my weapon, very few. I probably fired my rifle in anger half a dozen times.

35:00 Usually those things that happened at the front of the column if you happened to be there, half a dozen times probably.

#### **What about seeing your enemy?**

Yeah, probably in real terms the same amount of times I would think.

35:30 Often you would see sign of them being there, and certainly after the event, certainly if you did see them they were just flashes anyway, they were in the jungle. Not that much.

#### **Were there any other particular instances of contact that stand out in your mind that you haven't talked about?**

Let me think. I talked about the truck one. I guess for the Archive it is a good one to talk about.

36:00 The Bien Hoa rubber plantation, when the North Vietnamese were in that, that was a pretty significant contact for Vietnam. We were, it happened around lunch time and we were flown in at lunch time. It was only five or six kilometres whatever it was from Nui Dat. And we were flown in to the rubber plantation right next to it, harboured up and went in to do a village search the next day.

#### **I will just stop you there for a second, what time are we on tape?**

## Tape 8

00:30 **All right take us back to the beginning of this story and how your involvement in Bien Hoa began?**

We were in Nui Dat and we got word that there had been a pretty solid contact with a number of NVA, I think there was a number mentioned at the time, and that we were to get all of our gear we were being flown out. And we had no idea what to expect, we got out there right on dusk, the NVA had moved by then. And the Australians had sort of taken the perimeter of the village at least.

01:00 And the next morning our role was, they had a battalion plus tank, and APCs and it was an old French rubber plantation so the village was quite regimented fundamentally two-room-type brick or stone houses with slate roofs, in quite a rectangular formation, village square, the whole bit. And we just lined up at one end of the

01:30 village and swept through a row of houses at a time. And we would go one row of houses and brass up this next row of houses, and then engineers we would move forward, search the houses and any bodies we found. And the rest would move up with us. And then we would go to the next row of houses and we went right through the village that way. A few interesting things happened. Apart from, I can't remember how many bodies, there were lots of bodies we found.

02:00 But I remember at one point we were on one of the roads in the village and as we stopped and were looking at the village in front and checking it out. They might have sent some infantry forward before we did to actually take it. But we could see this thing moving, there was a lean-to, it was some kind of community hall, and there was some movement in this lean-to. And of course they opened up on it with a machine gun,

02:30 and when we eventually moved forward it was just a big pig that was pretty perforated when we got there. That was one of the places we found booby traps. Trip wires going into hives under houses, they obviously moved out and booby-trapped a number of things. During that day I don't recall any casualties on the Australian side. But at the very last row of houses, we had gone right through to the road, and

03:00 one of my guys, we stopped and one of the houses, you could see it had a bunker at the end, and I had actually searched that house, we hadn't gone down into it, but there was a hole in the concrete floor of the house, and it went down into a tunnel. Somebody said, "Oh no, we have already thrown a grenades down there." But when we stopped later in the afternoon, one of my guys decided he would uncover this bunker, you could see this mound at the end of the house. So he did that, got all of the fill off on one end and

03:30 there was a piece of iron and he pulled it off and he said, "I am going to go down and have a search in here." And I said, "Hang on." So we got some people to ready position and myself and another guy were standing and he went down this hole and next thing he came careering back as fast as he could and he said, "There is a guy down there looking at me." So he was pretty lucky really. And we then,

04:00 a comedy of errors actually, we decided we would throw a grenade down which we did, but it had insulation tape around the lever and it didn't go off. So we threw another one down after it and the guy had actually gone back in the tunnel under the house, so we actually uncovered the whole thing and he was shot at the end of the day.

**How did he emerge from the tunnel?**

He didn't until the next morning.

04:30 He was in there and we could see his feet. And I had actually, we were standing at the end where we had uncovered it, you could see down under the house, and I had two of my guys reach down there and pull him out. No I was doing that with somebody else, I was directing what was going on, and I had one of my guys standing covering the whole thing. And he just started to fire, so

05:00 I stepped next to him and started to fire too because he said, "He has got a rifle, he has got a gun!" And that was it. walked away and we got the body out the next morning. That's how it happens, that quick.

**Did you see your results of the firing at that time?**

Of course.

**And what did you see?**

Just saw the bullets hit him and it was all over. It was

05:30 that quick. Interesting feeling, it has disturbed me ever since. Not that I did it, but the feeling you get when you're doing it. It made me realise what humans are capable of.

**I know it is difficult to put into words...**

It is.

**Is that a feeling of power, what is the base of that experience?**

06:00 Don't know. Exhilaration I guess would come closest to it. Sounds awful but it is a fact. That's not to say that you haven't got compassion or a whole lot of other things, but it disturbed me that that is a human trait that you can feel. I am not sure whether everyone is the same or it is a personal thing. But it made me believe that every human being is capable of killing another human being. Despite the fact that we talk about pacifists and a lot of other things. That's a load of rubbish, put in the situation you will do it.

06:30 But it was over quick and we went and did something else. You don't get time to worry about it or think about it. I have thought about it since, and I probably thought about it a few days after, but you don't dwell on it, just move on. It's a job, you're there.

**07:00 At what times in Vietnam did you get time to reflect on instances like that?**

I don't think we did. No I don't, you have plenty of time because there was always something happening, the next day was a new day with new challenges and new things happening. You just moved onto the next thing that was happening and had to be done. Even my father, I was told late in the afternoon that my father had died.

07:30 And we were in ambush position and I was pretty upset as you can imagine, I was close to him. An hour and a half later they sprung the ambush and we were in pretty heavy contact. And I really didn't think, well, I did the next day, two days later I was flown into camp on my own and I thought about my father dying then. But it switches off, you just think about something else.

08:00 I don't know if it is good or bad for you, but it happens. It is just the natural events, we're humans, we just do it.

**We will come back to the instance of your father dying in a moment, but we will just do a bit more on Bien Hoa. The houses that you searched, you mentioned booby traps? Can you tell us a little bit about what you found?**

Well, the guys I was with we actually found two. They were pretty obvious ones, they had obviously been done in haste.

08:30 In the situation I was talking about with this bunker under the house, we found a number of entrances to hides under houses, dug underground. And on a couple of occasions we could actually see the tripwires before we went into them. They were just connected to hand grenades or something, but we were able to see them they were pretty obvious. I am not sure (UNCLEAR) give thought to too many people in other parts of the village at the time, but they obviously did that and they did it pretty quickly before they left.

**09:00 How do you delouse a booby trap like that?**

Well you have got to be careful because if it is a tight trip wire, it can be that it will go off when you release the tension or when the foot tension is on it. They were the most dangerous kind, you really had to trace where the wire is going to it and where they were going. Ones that are just slack, they are obviously a trip over,

09:30 they haven't got a lot of tension on them. those particular ones we didn't delouse them we just blew them up. Put explosives near them and blew them to pieces. That's the preferred option, that was always my preferred option with anything like that, it is less risk.

**How did that action resolve itself?**

That was pretty much it once we searched the village, the

10:00 North Vietnamese had gone off somewhere else. They let the villagers all come back to the village and life went on. I think the Australians went out there with a civil defence force and rebuilt some of the houses that had been pretty badly damaged and repaired them. Yeah, again we just moved on, we were taken out that afternoon and two days later I was on an operation somewhere else.

**How did you find the constant tension build up and how did you deal with it?**

10:30 I wasn't conscious of it. Apart from those three days that I talked about earlier, you're not conscious of it. it is not on the surface in normal day to day, even walking through the jungle it is not there as a conscious thing. Alertness is a better word, you're generally alert all of the time. It is not a, well it wasn't for me,

11:00 a sense of being stressed or concerned about it all of the time it was more about being alert. And I guess most guys would be like that because that's the way you were trained to be.

**We'll stop for a sec [second], we'll talk about...Just to clear up, in clearing the Dat Do minefield you had set up an APC specially for it, something the Australians built.**

The Australians set up, yes.

**You haven't described that one camera.**

Oh okay - what the vehicle was?

11:30 **Yeah.**

It was just a normal armoured personnel carrier. It had additional armour plate behind the steel door at the back, I think it was double-mile steel plate. And I am not sure what gauge it was, probably quarter inch or something. It had then attached to the back of it a long axle which came out to the side of the APC, about the width of the APC. And on that were tyres, truck tyres with steel bands on them. Wrapped around them.

12:00 And the idea was that you drove the APC on a cleared track and the axle which was at the back of the APC went over a non-cleared area, and being jumping jack M16 mines they would jump up behind the APC hence the extra armour plate on the back. It was interesting after the four days that I was on it, I can't remember whether it was four or five days, the fist sheet of, on the back of the APC actually had a hole, about a foot in diameter had been blown out.

12:30 So that's basically what it was. They had two of them, Flint and Steel they were called

**How dangerous was it operating that APC?**

I guess it was dangerous but again I don't think I even thought too much about it. Got a bit of a shock when we exploded the first mine behind us because the whole APC filled with dust and we heard the bang, but they were pretty constant after that. We just popped.

13:00 You would know when a couple had been put together or it was a bigger mine because it was a louder noise and pretty heavy vibration. It was more dangerous, I guess as I said we had a track blown off while we were inside it, because as you cleared a track, you would maybe do two or three runs to let all of the mines off, you would then move your APC onto that track and let the APC run in an (UNCLEAR)ed area. The danger was always that there were mines that hadn't gone off, or a cluster of mines or you got off

13:30 track a little bit. And as I said we did that, we blew a wheel, front drive wheel. And that was pretty dangerous when you actually got out. I don't know whether I have spoken about that on camera.

**Tell us about that.**

It was learn as you go, we did that and we knew the track was off, and we decided, talking to the people outside the minefield, that we would stay in the track for maybe five, 10 minutes to make sure that there was no delayed fuses or anything like that. We then opened the hatches and got out.

14:00 Stayed on top of the APC but then had a look around, confirmed that yes we had blown a track off. We then got back inside the APC and closed all of the hatches and they sent a recovery vehicle in or another APC through one of the opening in the area we had cleared right up behind the APC and we passed chains over, hooked it up and then towed it back out of the minefield. I am sure it was the week after because I wasn't on it, they were sort of out of action then obviously, so I went on to do something else

14:30 A week later there was an officer lieutenant I think put in charge of it after me as a commander and I am not sure if it was the next week, but very soon after he was killed when they went through that procedure, so I guess from that point of view it was dangerous. Again when I was doing it was just a job you were doing. Even after the first one shocked us a little bit, and I told you about the radio being on and cutting off the squadron net,

15:00 and everyone being able to hear us swearing after we went past the first couple. Even after the first couple you got a bit blasé about them, you knew they were going off behind you, and it seemed to be going nicely.

**You mentioned the term 'brassed up' or 'brassing up', can you describe what that means?**

That just means weapons on automatic and you hold your fingers on the trigger and shoot, like you see in any gangster movie or whatever, you just shoot.

15:30 **What order is actually given to do that?**

Well, the time I was involved in it there was no order it was just a reactive thing. I mean the unwritten law is that you identify your target and that had already been done anyway. That's law on engagement I guess that we're taught from recruit training, you have to identify your target before you shoot.

**Bien Hoa, there were civilian casualties, can you just discuss that?**

16:00 I am not, because we came in the day after the main contact, when the North Vietnamese were moved out of the main village, that happened the day prior, that was the main contact that was probably when the civilians were killed, I don't know anything about that. I would surmise that's when that happened, because the villagers were in the village when the Australians were in contact with the North Vietnamese that had taken the village or were holed up in the village.

16:30 **You were searching the bodies there, what were you finding?**

Mostly munitions, we were searching for papers or maps or anything that might give us information. But we were actually clearing out all of the weaponry they might have had and we got everything from pistols and small arms ammunition to rifles and mortars and hand grenades and all of that sort of stuff.

17:00 Some paperwork and identification. All of that sort of stuff.

**Personal effects?**

Sounds hard. You ask the question, 'Did it affect me'? Yeah, obviously searching through personal wallets or whatever of that nature and you obviously see family photographs and wives, children. Horrors of war I guess.

17:30 To be fair, and I have always been pretty open minded about Vietnamese people, I said before I think they are nice people. But I think if anything that brought home to me that they really are just people, and the futility of war and what we do. Here is this guy with a family, he is dead and that could have just as easily been me with my family back here.

18:00 I guess there are positives out of the whole experience of Vietnam thing, you learn that it is a pretty futile effort at the end of the day. Ground warfare and killing people is just nonsense. As we talked about earlier, and you look at in the context of: we put a man on the moon in that same year. You can't equate the two things, it is just nonsensical.

18:30 So I would want to be very convinced of the cause to be involved in a conflict or have my children involved in a conflict. Or this country for that matter. But I am not here to give opinions about what is going on in the world today.

**When you were there in Bien Hoa, were you also searching civilian bodies?**

No, I don't think we saw a civilian body. They were mostly North Vietnamese bodies we searched. I don't think there was a Viet Cong even, they were all uniformed soldiers.

19:00 **How could you tell the difference?**

The uniforms. The North Vietnamese had khaki uniforms with patches on the shoulder, the whole bit. I don't recall, there may have been but I don't recall the typical Viet Cong had black pyjamas, the typical Vietnamese civilian dress. But they were mostly...

19:30 **Down in those tunnels, they were quite a famous defensive thing of the war and quite distinct, can you describe?**

I can describe what I, I never ever went down any really big tunnel systems, like I said, guys that were there when I was there did go into three-storey tunnel systems underground, bunker systems under the ground. I did go into two or three, and quite elaborate actually. One of the operations we went on I got into a bunker, it was

20:00 the operation I talked about earlier with Rick lying on a snake. We went down into a bunker and found a trapdoor in the bunker, which we knew then went into a tunnel. And it went down along, went vertically up again so it was U-shaped and then went to the left and there was a really long tunnel,

20:30 maybe a couple of hundred metres, and that would have been two and a half, three metres under the ground I guess. I could crawl in it. I wouldn't have been able to stand up in it. It was quite elaborate, it was probably 700 millimetres wide I guess, vertical walls with a curved roof for strength.

21:00 And a very interesting engineeringly correct thing, it had bamboo stick going along intermittently along it going to the surface for air to come in. and went outside the perimeter of the bunker system into the middle of a crop of bamboo as an escape hatch. Went a long way. That was probably the scariest one I ever went into. I went into a few smaller ones, but the fact that that one turned a few times was pretty scary. You really don't know what is in front of you. That's when the pistol and the torch comes in handy because you put the pistol and the torch around

21:30 before you put the rest of your body around. Hope that nobody shoots at you. But you have no choice.

**I have been down the Cu Chi tunnels on a tourist trip and I was terrified.**

Really?

**I can't imagine what it must be like down there. Can you describe what's in your mind?**

Claustrophobic. I remember Rick and I drew straws on that one to

22:00 decide who would actually go down and I got the short one. I guess it is just claustrophobic and it is going through your mind all of the time what you will do. If you did have a contact what you would do. Thankfully I was never in a situation where I could do anything apart from search. I guess you would start shooting, there is not a big area in front of you so you just start shooting.

**What was the name for the people that went down the tunnels?**

22:30 Tunnel rats. The Viet Cong or us? Tunnel rats, sappers were called tunnel rats, and if you see the banner at Anzac Day each year, that's what it has got on it, tunnel rats.

**Who how were you ordered down those things?**

You weren't ordered, that was your job. That was my job as an engineer as a sapper.

23:00 If we came into bunker systems and there were tunnels, then that was your job. I mean if we are talking about very large bunker systems, the one I am talking about that I wasn't involved with but the guys I know were, I guess there would have been some more structured strategy to search them, because I understand they were two or three levels and they had rooms like hotel rooms if you like under the ground. I guess the ones I am talking about, Rick or I would have let someone know on the surface what we were doing,

23:30 and that's what we found. So everyone was aware and pretty much standing to if anything happened. There was not much you could do, that was our job. As I said once we hit those sort of things we were pretty much in charge of what happened anyway.

**What were the casualty rates like when you were out amongst the people you knew as friends?**

In my year in Vietnam, I think there was only about 300-plus engineers, killed in Vietnam?

24:00 I saw a number of infantry guys, that big contact I was in where I said there was seven or something pretty badly hurt. I had a couple of guys, there was a number of engineers I knew then that were pretty badly hurt. I had two of my guys when I was acting sergeant in the Long Hai Mountains at fire support base, in a big mine incident, pretty badly hurt.

24:30 Flown home, same mine incident. Shrapnel went everywhere.

**Can you describe what happened, was it the Long Hai fire support base?**

Oh, it wasn't in the fire support base, they were out with an infantry group protecting a land-clearing team. And from reports I think somebody just stood on a mine. And once people then started to move around after that happened,

25:00 they stood on more, so there was more than one. Had pretty horrific casualties, I think there was something like 19. And it is interesting because Di sent me the piece out of the newspaper and it was reported as six, it was interesting. There was a lot of Australians killed over there in that period, over a matter of weeks a lot of Australians badly wounded and moved out. I had a very interesting, I keep going back to these things I am going to write stories about. One of the guys I was with over there in fire support base, I asked

25:30 our then captain, I didn't have an RV [Recreational Vehicle] licence then and neither did the guy that went with me, and we were out at this fire support base and it is probably 10/15 kilometres to the main road from Vung Tau going north. And I said I wanted to go in and see this Robert Earl, he was one of my guys, and I knew he was in the American Hospital in Vung Tau. So he said, "Yeah, you can go, but I didn't tell you, you can go."

26:00 So my mate and I got in this land rover took off on our own through the jungle along this track, got to the main road and went into the American hospital and saw him and came back out again.

**What were his injuries?**

Pretty bad. He had shrapnel up the back of his legs. It was one of my regrets that I, I tried, but I never ever fully tracked him down when I came back and I haven't seen him since. I feel pretty bad about that, I should have actually done that.

26:30 But he had pretty bad injuries, shrapnel up all the backs of his legs and his buttocks as far as I know. When we saw him he actually had cuts in the muscles in his legs with gauze in it and that's how they used to actually get it out, it would weep into the gauze and they would pull the gauze out every day to pull the shrapnel out. And I think he was flown home two or three days after we saw him, but I did try to track him down at hospital here in Holsworthy when I got home. Di and I were going on a holiday and he had been moved out to North Queensland somewhere for recuperation.

**27:00 How was your wife coping with...?**

I don't know, you should ask her.

**Well, I would rather, what was your perception with how she was coping at home?**

I guess the not knowing would have been the hardest thing. Because I was in non-communicé for weeks at a time even though I was trying to get mail out in resupplies and so forth.

**How much did you not tell her?**

27:30 Most of it. I would usually say what we were doing, where we were going. I would say we found some bunkers or whatever. I don't think I told her about the big contact at Christmas until I came home. It was just saying that we were all okay. It was more or less in general terms I think I used to write.

## **What did you know of the public perception of the war in Australia?**

28:00 I guess not a lot, I was aware when I came home obviously of the protests against it. No I don't think I was that aware, we didn't get newspapers over there that often unless they were sent over, probably because we were out in the bush a fair bit, probably didn't take the time to read them too much when we came back either. We had access to TV, and being TV, that was pretty much I guess censored, it was American army

28:30 television station so I guess we didn't get too much.

## **But you did come back on R & R?**

Didn't experience it. I find it strange actually that I didn't experience it, it was so prolific but I never experienced it when I was on R & R. I was only here for five days, maybe I was too involved with family and what I was doing at the time.

## **How beneficial was that leave to you?**

29:00 In retrospect, probably very beneficial because it was the last time I saw my father, but in other ways probably hard. And I had I known I only got one R & R I probably would have gone somewhere else, because we had a choice to go to Singapore or Hong Kong or other places. But due to some glitch in the system, 1 Field Squadron people were getting two R & Rs and that time, I decided I would go to Australia for my first one and Hong Kong for my second one.

29:30 We were the only ones doing that because somebody in our headquarters area found a glitch in the system. But between me having my first one and being due to have the second one some Australian at Tan Son Nhut airport happened to let slip that he was having his second R & R and they put a kibosh [stop] on it all and nobody else got two. But I think in some ways it was hard going back for the second time.

## **30:00 Your father passed away while you were over there...**

Yeah, after I went on R & R.

## **I know you told us a little bit about that, but can you take us through what happened?**

I can actually, I remember we were on this patrol and we were actually moving to an ambush position on a hill feature between rice paddies on the way out to the South China Sea.

30:30 Towards, not far from the beach and there was a road running parallel to the beach. And I remember this Major Sutton who was in charge of 5 RAR C Company, he came walking through the jungle. I had a fellow, Jimmy Shug, who had just come into country as my number two. I was section commander then so I was with company headquarters. And he walked over to me then and called me over. Told me that they had got the radio message that my father had passed away.

31:00 And I remember him asking me, "Had he been sick?" or, "Had I been expecting it?" And I told him, "Yes, he had a bad heart but I wasn't expecting it to happen." And I remember I walked back and leant against the tree that I had been sitting near and put my head between my legs and was crying. And this poor Jimmy Shug, he didn't have a clue what was going on. So that really did affect me a fair bit then. But we did move on, as I said, shortly after into this ambush position. A few hours later we were in contact and a few pretty gruesome things happened so

31:30 my mind was taken off it pretty quick. And the thing they did wrong, they didn't let me come back to Australia, and I knew they wouldn't because I had a mate whose father had died in Queensland and he had siblings younger than my siblings and he wasn't allowed to come home. The mistake they made having done that, they flew me back into Nui Dat to an empty line, there was nobody there.

32:00 And I got back to this Catholic padre, I can't remember his name. But I did all of the mechanical things, I came camp, went back to lines, repacked my pack, did all of the things I had to do. Had a shower. And I remember sitting at my personnel table the only one in the tent, and cleaned my armalite rifle, I put the magazine on it and, I remember doing this, I had put it onto automatic and I was about to shoot the shit out of the locker in front of me when a voice at the doorway of the tent spoke

32:30 and it was this Catholic padre. And he came in and sat down and talked to me for a while. He said, "They want to see you at headquarters." So I walked up there with him and that's when they told me that I could go home. And I was probably a bit lucky because all of the troop were in the next day, the company were back in. Would have been an interesting exercise had he not walked up at that time because I don't know what I would have done.

## **33:00 You were involved in this ambush. How heavy was that contact when you were?**

Oh, it was pretty heavy. I remember running down hill, as I said section headquarters was just over the prowl of this hill, it wasn't very far. Fifty metres. And this company RSM grabbed myself and this infantry section commander and said, "Follow me." And we went over the hill and as we got half way, oh probably 20 feet from where this

33:30 track that ran along this rice paddies, two Viet Cong heads appeared over the top of the rice paddies

and this RSM shot them both in the head. And that's one of the things that stayed with me forever from Vietnam. I cannot stand the sight of brains in the butcher shop, because one of these heads that he shot came off just as if he had cut it with a cleaver. And his face was down in the dirt and it looked like a coupe bowl with brains in it. That sounds pretty horrific and it was. And it was probably the most horrific thing I saw there.

34:00 Lots of holes and bits out of it. And that stuck with me. I really cannot handle seeing brains anywhere, it really is a no-no. So you can imagine the emotion of being told two hours before that my father had died, you just switch off, it just gets blown into oblivion. But until they flew me back, which they shouldn't have done knowing I wasn't going home,

34:30 when I had time to actually go back and reflect about it, and I was on my own reflecting about it which was pretty ordinary.

**Very lonely time, huh?**

As I said, it didn't last long, the guys came in the next day.

**Did you fire your weapon in that engagement?**

Not in that engagement, no.

35:00 **Was there an element, when you had flown back...**

At that time?

**How stressed were you?**

Well, I don't think, I was, I was running on automatic I think. I came back and did all of the automatic things and it was without thinking. Just mechanical actions, it wasn't until I had had a shower and was cleaned up, sitting there cleaning my rifle that I started to think about it all. And I can't even remember what I was thinking.

35:30 I just know I was on the verge of shooting this locker when the padre spoke to me. I was all right over that, as I said the guys came back the next day. Wayne, my mate from Queensland who I am still friends with, went away and had a few beers and spoke about it all. I actually remember saying, because my grandmother was very elderly pioneering stock in Tasmania, I remember saying to Wayne, "I will find out my grandmother has died

36:00 because she used to stay alive to see my father come home." And she did, she died about two months later. About two weeks after they told her Dad was dead. True story, that happened.

**Were you still over there?**

I was still over there, yes.

36:30 **Something else we talked about was choppers. You mentioned operations on choppers, but by the end, as an old hand, how were you affected by choppers while you were there?**

Oh, they were your life blood I guess. They were, you went everywhere on operations in choppers most time. Eighty, ninety percent of the time you went out on choppers and came back on choppers.

37:00 And if you were on operation and you knew you were coming back in, I guess you waited for the sound. That's why the sound is so significant now. Once you heard the chopper was coming, you knew you were out of there, you were going home back to Nui Dat. So I guess thinking about it that is probably why it is such a significant sound.

**Yet at the same time they took you into danger, how is that resolved?**

Oh well, different feelings at different ends of the same equation I guess.

37:30 After being out there a long while and you had enough you are ready to come back in. When you're going out there it is just another operation and away you go. So you don't think about it in the same terms. And I guess you're thinking you're a bit vulnerable too while you're sitting there waiting for the chopper to come. Even thought you're probably set up in a defensive position. I don't know, I just recall thinking, when you heard the choppers that it was a good sound.

**Can you still hear them now in your head?**

38:00 Absolutely. As I said I can hear Iroquois here coming from ten kilometres away. They have a very distinctive sound.

**Might just stop.**

00:30 **Yeah, you mentioned a story of engine failure in a helicopter. Can you tell us about that?**

As I said we were being flown out of an operation. They brought a stick of choppers in, four choppers in and there was a space in the escort and we piled into the choppers and I had my typical doorway position looking out of the chopper and I remember we had taken off and we were really

01:00 close to the tree canopy, and probably a kilometre or so from the clearing we had taken off from and the pilot turned around to the sergeant, his name was Bob Downs I think. Because Bob looked around and tapped me and there was a light flashing on the dashboard of the chopper. And the pilot had turned around and said, "Tell everyone to hang on," and the thing was screaming, we were trying to get back to this clearing and it was absolutely screaming.

01:30 Normally when they go into land they just go in like that, came in like that. Tipped up at about 30 degrees and by the time it hit the ground I was already out of it. They had put the wrong fuel in it apparently. And they brought the spare chopper in, and we were on that so we got into this spare chopper but the rest of the guys on the ground, they had to wait there another two or three days because they had to bring out, I don't know what they did, took it out or fixed it or whatever they did.

02:00 But on the way back, you could have picked the leaves off the trees on the way in, our motor was screaming trying to keep it out of the trees.

**What were you doing in the back?**

Hoping that he made it to the clearing because there was no jumping out of it, we just had to hang on.

**What was the problem, was it fuel?**

Well, we were told later that it was, there was some problem with the fuel, they had the wrong fuel in it or something of that sort.

02:30 Why it was only one I don't know that either. That's what happened. I remember we got in the spare chopper and because the rest had gone off with the escorts they just took this chopper up really, really high to the point of being cold, I guess, to get out of the fire range and we waited until the next stick came to get a group of people and they escorted us back in.

**You did one run into a hot LZ [a landing zone under enemy fire]?**

03:00 Yeah that was pretty interesting. I talked about being in before, a position like savannah country, some of the country was like African savannah country and we actually found tiger tracks and you could smell it and all of that. That particular time we had an O group [observation group] and there was a hill feature, I don't know how far away from our position it was, seven, eight, 10 kilometres or whatever, and they said they were going to hit it with a B52 bomb strike because they think there is an NVA position up there.

03:30 "And then you guys are having a hot insertion tomorrow to clear the feature." And we heard the bomb strike, it was actually so close that it shook the ground where we were. And then we piled on these choppers and the hill feature really was just that, it was like Ayers Rock sitting in the middle of a plain. And as we flew in we could see all of these bomb craters exactly the same shape as the mountain but about a kilometre to one side, so they had missed it by about a kilometre. So here we are thinking, "Gee they were supposed to soften all of this up before we went in and they have missed it." And we were just about at the ground level,

04:00 and all of the side gunners in the forward choppers and the two escort choppers started to blast the place up, and then that set, that was done without warning. All we were told was a 'hot insertion'. And we had never experienced that so we didn't know what that was. So we didn't know whether the fire was coming in or out, all we knew was that our guys were all firing. So we just got out and hit the ground very quickly and then they flew away and we went right across this whole feature and found one dirty old bunker that hadn't been used in 100 years I reckon. All of the intelligence must have been good.

04:30 **Were there any occasions where the side gunners opened up when you were flying along in, did you have**

No, that was the only time I ever saw the side gunners fire any guns.

**free-fire zones in the Australian sector?**

Not while I was on, they may have done but I never experienced it. the Yanks used to free fire, the last op [operation] I was on before I came home,

05:00 as I said before, I was with an American land-clearing team. And all of the dozers would come back into, they had a rear support, a rear echelon sort of place in the jungle with big floodlights and mechanics and they would do work on the dozers every night. And there was a full Australian battalion, a section of tanks and a section of APC, and that's what we were doing we were supporting them, fully surrounding this position. And when the Australians cleared on dusk, any position in the jungle or any position out on operations they would send clearing patrols out. They would send a section out one visual distance apart, sweep

05:30 and sweep around the perimeter and come back in again. The Yanks didn't do that. Everybody with a rifle stood on the perimeter when it was dusk, just about dark, fired off a magazine of rounds. That was like Guy Fawkes night, I had never experienced that. We had got flown out to take over for somebody else one this operation, and at dusk this track commander we were with said, "Get your weapons, get the guys you're with to get your weapons." And I said, "Why?" and he said, "Oh you'll see. Just stand up here next to the track pointing out. When I say fire just let off a magazine of rounds."

06:00 Everything, tanks, the works, fired for about five minutes. It was amazing, that happened every single night for five nights before I was due to come home. It was just an amazing waste of armaments, that's what they did. That was free-fire clearing.

**To the Australians, how important was body count?**

06:30 It probably was, I guess the only time I ever experienced it was that exercise at Bien Hoa I was talking about. We made sure that body count got onto engineers rather than infantry. That was the only time we ever experienced it and that was more for the hierarchy than us.

07:00 I am not sure. I don't think I, whether the infantry thought about it differently.

**How were kills credited?**

I think they were just recorded. I don't know. they would have recorded how many. But I wasn't privy to how that happened.

**Towards the end of your tour, was there any instances where there was a differentiation between national servicemen and...?**

No. Not in my time there.

07:30 I think the only time it was ever mentioned in my time was when I left, because I was asked who should take my job out of the guys that were in my section. And it was a marginal call, and I actually recommended a guy that was a regular and had five years to go in the army and I told the boss that's why I made that decision. There were two or three probably could have done it, but given that he was a career soldier, it would be better to give it to him.

08:00 **Why?**

Because he was going to be there longer and continue in the army after he came back to Australia. So from the army's point of view, I thought it was better, it was just a management decision. I make the same sorts of decisions in my management position today.

**Your views on whether you should have been there formed up fairly early on. How were your views on conscription from your time there?**

08:30 I guess the same. I guess I have got mixed views, they would probably be different now. I think we elect governments to make decisions for us as a country and we're in a democracy and once that decisions made we have got the responsibility to support those decision because we vote for those, that is our system of government. Having said that,

09:00 I am not sure I would accept conscription for the purposes it was used for in Vietnam, today I would want to be convinced of the cause and I wouldn't accept, my same philosophical view wouldn't hold up probably personally today. I still feel pretty strongly that direction, we vote governments in and we should support what their decisions are, but somewhere along the line, when it comes to war and conflict, there are some more moral things you should think about it.

09:30 **There is one event that captivated minds while you were there, the landing on the moon, how did that affect not only yourself but everybody there?**

I remember seeing it on TV. I came into the camp about three days after, we all did and we actually saw it on TV, but vague now but my

10:00 personal view was how futile the whole thing was. We're, they were both vastly different ends of the spectrum. Here we are spending all of these billions of dollars on this really positive exploration of universe, if you like, and spending probably more dollars shooting people on the ground. That was my belief and I think other people thought, "Well so what? Why are we here?" I can't speak for other people, but that would be my perception of what people were thinking.

10:30 It was certainly the way I felt.

**Towards the end of your operation, what did you call your last operation, was there a particular slang term for it as you were getting to your 365th day or...?**

No. No. I guess the only thing in terms of coming home that sticks in my mind was that we all had some form of calendar with days on it that you crossed off. And they were everything from sketches of a naked woman with little squares all over her that you crossed off until you got to her toes or

11:00 whatever else, or a kangaroo or whatever else, you counted down days, not up days. And it was always 'so many days and a greasy egg' before you went home. And the greasy egg was the breakfast before

you went. Or 'so many and a wakey' was the other term they used, that was your final wake up before you went home.

**You had a bit of an adventurous 'wakey' didn't you though?**

11:30 I can't remember. Did I tell Brad [Archive researcher] something like that, did I?

**You mentioned before that you were due to be flown out and...?**

Oh yeah, a couple of day before I was due to be flown, I was flown out into an operation to blow bunkers as I mentioned and had I not been flown in that afternoon. I would have still been there probably a month later. Because they were pretty heavy contact in the same area, I had been in the contact the Christmas prior. And I was actually making moves towards the company commander,

12:00 I think I said before, I wanted to stay there with a machine gun and some smoke grenades so when the chopper came we could get on it. And obviously that wasn't going to happen and I knew that. And we were actually saddled up with our packs on ready to go out and help B company when the chopper appeared.

**How superstitious do you get towards the end of the tour?**

Well I did then, that really didn't impress me much having to do that sort of thing. Don't think I ever did. I was flown out unexpectedly actually.

12:30 People were always brought in a week or two before they came home, and I was in this American land clearing and an Australian re-supply chopper came in and my boss happened to be on it and he said, "You're coming back with me. Who are you leaving in charge?" I was disappointed in a way because I had made friends with a couple of Americans, and I was in charge of our resupply and I was swapping some army greens and socks and things for an M1 rifle and a really good American

13:00 fleecy lined jacket and some other gear. And the guy that was getting for me had gone back into the American base on leave and was bringing it back out for me so that we could make the swap. I got flown out the day before he arrived back. I am not sure whether other people did, I guess I was pretty nervous, suspicion is not the right word for those couple of days before when I was flown out to do something. You start to think, "Is this fate? Why am I being sent back out there?"

13:30 Other than that, no.

**How were your nerves at this time?**

I thought my nerves were reasonable good. Although I did baulk a few times at bangs and things when I came back, but not over the top. I think my nerves overall are bad if you ask Di, I used to have nightmares for a long time when I came home, for a few years. There were always people chasing me and shooting me and interestingly

14:00 it was always in a building. Like a block of units or something, it was never in a war situation, I don't know if the two things are related I have got no idea.

**Do you still get those dreams?**

No. As I said I had pretty good friends that I was able to assimilate back into society pretty well. And as I said, that because of that I have always been able to talk about it and look at the positive things, there were many positive things for me. I think I grew up a lot, I think I learnt what made people

14:30 tick a bit, which has helped me in management and help me do what I do.

**There is one other pick up question that I wanted to do, that was on signs.**

Yep.

**Can you quickly run through the signs for me?**

I think it was a personal thing. I know if you run through a whole lot of engineers that were doing my job they may have different perceptions and a different level of knowledge, I just know personally what I was able to pick up what was around.

15:00 It was often things like marks on a tree, or a broken sapling pointed in a certain direction. A group of rocks in a certain place, or a vine twisted around the base of a tree. Something a bit out of the ordinary. Whether I was lucky or different I don't know. I have never really talked to many guys too much about that. Even when I was over there I didn't. Apart from when I was asked to have a talk to these infantry people and people I was working with directly, I would talk to about and say be aware of, I became attuned to it

15:30 I guess.

**Was there much chance of learning as a group from these experiences from one another as you went through?**

It was more or less one-on-one, word of mouth, learn as you go. We had a, that's probably a bit unfair,

in terms of those things, in 1 Field Squadron we had a museum,

16:00 I guess, for want of a better terms. We had a hut built with examples of all different sorts of mines and booby traps and ordnands that the Viet Cong used, and that was open for us to have a look at any time. So we would go up there and take guys up there and have a look. But nothing was stereotype and so you had to be a bit flexible.

**Back to your departure, can you take us through that final trip out?**

16:30 Yeah, breakfast, get in the land rover. Over to Luscombe airfield, plane to Saigon. Stay in an American camp over night. American breakfast, come on a jet and come back to Australia. I guess a more significant time was three or four weeks earlier when two or three guys that I had been close to came home. Basically went on a binge for three days from the Sunday to the Wednesday when they came home. It was pretty much as simple as that really,

17:00 the actual day of leaving. It was, "See you later." By the time I left they were out in the bush or working. Already said good bye to a couple of the guys you were close to and probably a lot of the guys I was close to had come home before me anyway. As I said because, you're are one-on-one re-enforced, you get close to half a dozen, probably 12 guys you get close to. The rest become acquaintances, that's basically it. They had actually had a parade the lunch time before I went. That was interesting in itself.

17:30 They called a lunch time parade which they never normally did, I remember being in my tent and I wasn't even going to bother going. Next thing Bob walks up to my tent and says, "Captain would like you on the parade ground. Are you coming?" And I went down and they had called the parade especially to say good bye to me and hand the piece of paper over and thank me for my efforts, it was quite good. But the next day was all pretty matter of fact.

18:00 **I will stop you there. On this parade you were given a piece of paper, you showed us that before, can you tell us what it was?**

It was just a comic farewell document I guess. Pretty valid, what was written on it, I couldn't quote it, it was a 'thank you' and just a bit of a comment about me, bit nonsensical, but that was all right. It was good that they did it.

18:30 **Can you tell us about arriving back in Australia?**

Di could probably talk more about that. The people here were more aware of the fact that we were flown in at night, they had started to do that to avoid the publicity. I was not aware of that, even for years after that I did not take much notice of that. I guess apart from Di being here and I hadn't seen her for a long time, the

19:00 biggest thing for me was my father wasn't here. Because he had gone, I really noticed that when I came home. When I got off the plane I guess because I hadn't had closure, I was expecting him to be there. And it was al la bit surreal. Because I had been out on the operation basically 36 hours before and flown out to do that, it was a bit surreal to come back into a society that was if nothing was happening. I guess if anything I probably kept it to myself,

19:30 I was a little resentful of that. But there wasn't an appreciation of what was going over there and what people over there were dealing with on a day to day basis. And as I say, I consider myself very lucky that I was married to Di and I had very good friends, it took me about a year and a half to settle down to being reasonably back in tune with society. But it don't know what it would have been like if I hadn't have had those friends. So I can understand

20:00 how some guys never got back on the rails.

**What was your reunion with Di and your family like?**

Pretty good yeah. It was great to be home. Bit of sadness as I said because Dad wasn't home. I was glad to be home and they were glad to have me back I guess. I guess there would have been a lot of worry taken off my parents and off Di the fact that I was home.

20:30 **How were you different from the man who had left to go to Vietnam when you came back?**

I think I was still a boy, very immature when I went. What is maturity I don't know, I certainly had a different set of values. I think I said before I had no interest for a while in trivia. I found it very difficult to

21:00 get interested in things like football and that because I felt that that wasn't important in the world. I guess that was related to seeing people die and all of that sort of stuff. And while I probably never consciously thought of that, that's the way I was acting. I guess the biggest thing for me, a couple of things, some came out later than then. I think the biggest thing it did for me, and I have often said it at work, and I have said to the managers I deal with now, that in much of my time since then

21:30 I have had the feeling of being on the outside looking in, so you can deal with issues in a very impartial way. You don't get connected up in the emotion of what is going on. You step outside of what is going on and you can see generally. And I think Vietnam did that for me, it could be argued that that is just part

of my make up I don't know but I think Vietnam did that. That's probably the single biggest change for me.

22:00 As I said when I first came back I was probably very selfish. I give Di a lot of due for staying with me at that time. That's my biggest I did have a problem, I probably still do. Periodically I get very moody, it only lasts a few days. Used to be pretty much like clockwork, you could set your clock by it, used to happen every three months. I am not sure it happens that often now.

**How difficult is it being on the outside looking in though by the same token?**

22:30 I don't think it is that difficult, sometimes you feel a bit removed from things, but it think it is a positive rather than a negative.

**You mentioned it took you about a year and a half to settle down, what did you do during that year and a half?**

I was very unfair to Di, I drank too much, smashed our brand new car up within eight weeks of owning it when I first came back.

23:00 That was the biggest thing. Didn't consider what I was doing was affecting other people I guess. Selfish is the right word. As I said, drinking too much.

**Who were you drinking with?**

Oh, just mates around the place. Work people, whatever, not on my own. Probably a pretty laissez-faire approach to life would be another good way to put it.

23:30 **You said you had a dislike of trivia. Was there any anger?**

No, I don't think there was anger I have never had anger about it, I can say that categorically. Which is interesting and where I probably still place myself different even to Vietnam vets, I know they probably still hold a grudge about it, if that's the right word.

24:00 I can philosophise it, "Maybe it shouldn't have happened, it shouldn't have been." But as I said, you can't dwell on things forever, and you try and take the positive out of what happened. Going back to what else is different, you had to learn to rely on people, and I was put in a management position over there and I was doing things myself and asking people to do things that could kill them.

24:30 In real terms, I could ask them to do things that could kill them if they did it wrong. I guess one thing I have missed, my real, one of the real issues for me since I have come back is my judgement of management, everyone who is in a management position that I am dealing with, either my manager or above, I judge them very harshly. And I could count on one

25:00 hand the number of people in my working career, the number of good managers, people. I learnt that people make things happen. Forget all of the rest of the theories, if you haven't got people on your side it, won't happen. And I guess that Vietnam taught me that. And that's been a positive that has come probably come more to light as I have gotten older and gotten into a management job.

**What problems arose from leaving behind the close camaraderie of the army at war**

25:30 **compared to civilian life, where the stakes were a lot lower?**

What were the negatives did you say? I don't think there are real negatives. I think the guys that I was close to I am still close to. There are a lot of guys around Australia that I was very close to in Vietnam that I don't see maybe for 10 years apart, but when I do see them it is like we are brothers. They know they can knock on my front door and live here for a week and vice versa, just like we saw

26:00 them yesterday. I don't think there is a negative from it. Positive if anything that that sort of team approach is a positive thing. If it is directed the right way.

**Is there something special to this day to the bond you formed in that circumstance all of those years ago?**

I am sure there is, I mean it is no different to people in bush fires or in natural disasters that occur. You just from

26:30 a bond and it is a strong bond due to having to depend on each other so heavily with your life depending on it. And it think that's the same in any conflict and in any natural disaster situation.

**You mention that after you did settle down and got it back together there was another period of difficulty a few years down the track? What was that about?**

27:00 I think about six or seven years after I came back, I think I went through a period where I was very illogical about relationships. Whether it was to do with trivia and everyday things or whatever, I became very unreasonable with people. Maybe it wasn't a result of Vietnam I don't know, maybe it was part of me growing up in life or

27:30 whatever. But part of me felt that it could be a result of that, and it could have been deferred because as

I said I had good relationships when I came back and probably buried things that came to the surface and interesting behaviour, but I got through that.

**How did you find you got through that?**

Good.

**By what methods did you get through?**

I just grew out of it, I don't think it was anything special. I just moved on from it.

28:00 I think I realised that I was hurting people, lost a couple of friendships. I mean that's why, that's why I am a little critical of Vietnam vets. I mean I guess, you can hold onto things and say yes, you blame Vietnam for all of the woes of the world today. I mean, I have learnt that we all look for things to blame or people to blame for things that are going wrong or aren't working the way we want. And generally 99 percent of the time it is your own problem.

28:30 You have to deal with it that way.

**With that in mind how do you feel about the current reputation of Vietnam vets?**

What reputation are you referring to?

**Well, perhaps not the current reputation, but the idea that Vietnam ruined peoples lives for example?**

What I said, I think there are some quite legitimate cases of Vietnam vets

29:00 that have severe problems that have never been sorted out, emotional or whatever else. And I think that is a personal thing depending on peoples make-up and personal nature. And that would be the same in anything, any sort of stress situation. I also believe due to the focus on, and it's a personal thing, other people would disagree with me and probably will, but I think due to the focus that has been put on Vietnam vets and their lot in the world it would be very

29:30 easy to use it as a crutch. I think some people have done that. That's probably not unique to Vietnam as well. I was surprised actually, I have had that theory for a long time, but I was surprised when the numbers came out about suicide of Vietnam vets was higher than any other conflict.

**What personal experience did you have with suicide of the blokes you went to Vietnam with?**

30:00 Only the one, one guy we went away with was the life of the party committed suicide, but then again he had a couple of marriage break-ups, too, so the real cause you don't really know. Whether it is one thing or they just build on one another, I am not there to say. I just know that he did that.

**What about post-traumatic stress, is that something you have seen in friends of yours or others that have come back?**

Yeah absolutely. I have

30:30 a friend, acquaintance, I haven't seen him for a long time now, certainly has got that. Likes to live out in the bush by himself and do all of that sort of stuff. I don't think he ever got over it. And I know there are probably other guys around. It is a personal thing, I think.

**How much have you talked about the war in the period since you came back?**

31:00 As I said I will talk about it, I have got no problem. I coached junior cricket for about 15 years and I am back doing it now. And the boys would all ask me and I was happy to talk about it to them. I will talk about it to anybody, I think you have got to do that it is good therapy. Why hide it? I have never understood that, Second World War, First World War vets saying, "Its too horrific to talk about." That's nonsense, that's my belief.

31:30 If you talk about it you will get over it, if you think about it, it will grow if you don't let it out.

**How much does the horror come out thought in those?**

Well I have talked to you about it today. Only if people ask me directly, I don't talk about it because I want to talk about it, but if people ask me I will tell them.

**What about your own children, what have you told them about the war?**

They pretty much know most of the things I have talked to you about.

32:00 **When do you think about the war?**

I don't think about it very much, I really don't. Not that I black it out, I just don't think about it. I mean Christ, thirty-plus years have gone since then, I have got a lot of water under the bridge since then there are better things to think about. It was one year out of fifty-seven years I just don't dwell on it.

**How do you feel in hindsight about the situation in Vietnam?**

32:30 I have already said I don't think we should have been there, I think it is like most wars, they are driven by economic reasons, including the current conflict. Vietnam is probably one of the early starts of all of that. I think that's really what it was about.

**How do you feel about war in general today?**

33:00 As I said I think they're futile. Sometimes necessary, it is a difficult situation we are living in today with terrorism and the rest of the things going on. Obviously we have to take action to try and stop that from a world point of view, but if the world community decides to do it, it is a different story.

33:30 I would always be cynical about the reasons and testing them all of the time. I mean, I am not a cynical person but in terms of wars you have got to ask all of the hard questions. Even Palestinians, they are called terrorists, but are they really only trying to protect their own lands?

**We are in many ways living in difficult times today. How do you feel about the future?**

34:00 How do I feel about the future? Population worries me more than anything about the future, I think. I don't believe the western capitalist society can survive. Capitalism relies on expanding markets and the world can't keep supplying or maintaining an expanding population, either we move to another planet,

34:30 go somewhere else or we manage some other way. I guess that's my biggest worry about the future.

**In one hundred years time, hopefully this archive will still be around,**

Yeah?

**That's the purpose of it to put away for posterity, if someone is watching this in a hundred years time or sometime in the future, is there anything you have gathered from your own life experience on this planet and the years that you have lived that we have talked about today, is**

35:00 **there anything you can offer them in way of a message?**

Wow, I would have liked some warning about that question.

**I can give you a couple of minutes to think about it if you like, spring it on you at the end of the interview. We have asked this of all of the people we have interviewed.**

I think it is a very good question actually. If I had a message my life has taught me right through, I think the

35:30 leaders of the world communities should take a far more distant view of the future than they do. They think short-term span of government, three to five years. This world won't survive unless governments politicians and leaders of the world think well beyond that into the long term.

36:00 The world will survive, but whether we're a part of it will depend on how that's done. I am increasingly thinking that we have got to get away from short-term thinking to long-term thinking, that is my best message. Think what things will be in fifty or a hundred years, and how can you influence fifty to hundred years time. Not, how can you influence next year or the year after because it is meaningless. A hundred years is a small speck in the ocean of time.

36:30 **Well, I hope in some small way we have helped to do that with this project, thank you very much for taking part.**

I, thank you for inviting me, I think it is a very worthy project.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**