Australians at War Film Archive

Michael McDermott (Mike) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:43 Good morning.

I was wondering if you could start for us with a bit of an introduction to yourself?

Yes. My name is Michael McDermott, Michael Keith McDermott. I was the son of an army officer, whose name was Keith Victor Patrick McDermott, and Mum,

01:00 Marie Lampril, and I was born here in Sydney out at Randwick in 1946 in December. So I was one of those babies, about nine months after the end of the war. All the men came home and the first thing they thought about was let's have a baby. I'm one of those. I left Randwick shortly after I was born and moved to Toongabbie in western Sydney and grew up around there. Toongabbie, Pendle Hill and Wentworthville and they now have a name for those people, they call them 'Westies'. So they've now got a geographical name.

01:30 I went to school there at Toongabbie and then Blacktown and I went to Parramatta which is probably where I see myself. That's my centre of my life, Parramatta, and from Parramatta I got a scholarship to the Royal Military College, Duntroon, and went to the Royal Military College, Duntroon in 1965 and I came from, I say to people I came from an extraordinary class of young men at my

02:00 school at Marist Brothers, Parramatta. I wasn't one of the extraordinary ones but they were extraordinary in academic ability and sporting ability. In my class what you'd call now the High School Certificate, first, fourth and seventh came out of my class of thirty. So one went on to Sydney Uni and he topped the university and after he was doing engineering he went on to do medicine and he went away and worked in India and places like that and he came back to Sydney. He taught applied mathematics, he was an extraordinary person,

02:30 and along the way to doing this he also broke all John Devitt's records in swimming, and John Devitt was the Olympic captain, and this bloke was sixteen. So I had these sort of people around me. From my class I think there were about eleven people who ended up in the army, but that was a strange situation at that time. The political situation in the mid '60s was quite different to now and Vietnam loomed on the horizon for everybody, and suddenly conscription was coming in

03:00 so everyone's horizon started to change. At one stage they said what will they do. Well, when I leave school I'll go to university and I'll go and work overseas. I'll get a job as a ski instructor. These things started to change. Nobody could do that because somewhere out of their life they'd have two years in the army. It was a change in their planning and their aspirations had to change. So I had from my class, I think four of us went to Duntroon on scholarships, the Royal Military College on scholarship.

03:30 A number were conscripted, others joined voluntarily and a number joined the army reserve and then went into the army that way. So we had a lot of people in the army from a small group. A lot went and did law and I think that was because we came from the lower middle class. But I said that once at a reunion with some of my friends and I was very quickly corrected. So the lower middle class, they corrected me and said, "We weren't lower middle class." I thought, yes, we were lower middle class. What's wrong with that? They said, "We were working class." So obviously in Australia

04:00 working class has higher status than lower middle class, because I was corrected and they were a bit indignant that I would actually say we were lower middle class, but it was OK to say we were working class. I think we were from that group of people that our fathers had no opportunity. Our father were born in the mid, about 1915. They left school fifteen years later, about 1930 when the Depression was on, so they went right through the Depression and had no chance to go to university. And after, they just got a bit of a chance probably in the late '30s to

04:30 do something, the war came along. So they went to war. If they had any ability and talent it was all sucked up by the Depression and the war, and after the war they came home, had children and they were determined their children would do something, and we came from that group of people. So everybody had at school had a reason to work hard at school. Jo was the same, she had parents about the same age. You had reason to work hard because your parents, to put you through school it was an

opportunity, it was

05:00 a privilege that you went to school and sometimes in the family you were the first one to go to university out of a family for generations. These days in families, many people, it might be four or five generations are at university over a few years. In those days you might've said, "I'm the first person to go to university or have tertiary study." So it was a change from now. So I went off to the Royal Military College from '65 to '68, and the Royal Military College, it

05:30 was in those days, it was I'd say at the height of bastardisation, or bastardisation was a process there which was part of the induction process into the army. It's been given a lot of bad publicity on TV and recently there was a process where hazing and harassment has been in the regular army, but bastardisation was cadet onto cadet. Not, the staff didn't bastardise cadets. It was cadet onto cadet, and it had a number of aims

06:00 to it. One of them was to flatten everybody out to one level because you could have a couple of cadets alongside each other, one cadet came from a background where his father, he was being sent $500 a week and came from a family like that. Another cadet's father could have been a taxi driver from southern Sydney where a dollar a week was, you know, so you had these different social classes but everybody was bastardised. That was one of them, a flattening of all the cadets. Nobody got any better than the other next to him

06:30 and you were all in it together. And then Duntroon was a monastery. You got no leave, no pay, you weren't allowed to drink and you weren't allowed to own a car for four years, and you worked six days a week. You were allowed off for one hour on Friday from 5.00 until 6.00, you were given a bus into town and back like school children, and then on Saturday, I think at 5.00 o'clock after playing sport on Saturday, working in the morning and then playing sport, you were allowed off from 5.00

07:00 until 11.30, and you could go and see girls and look at girls. "Oh, they're girls? They're the ones with the different shape?" That was it. So you roamed around Canberra looking at all the girls and then drinking to excess I think, and probably much more immaturely than they do today. Young people today are more mature drinkers because they've had the ability to have a drink if they felt like it, whereas we were closeted and when we got to drink we drank as much as we could in the shortest possible time, and that was the way. And

07:30 then we had cars. We were eventually allowed cars in our first class. So after four years you were allowed to buy a car and after nine months you had to pass a test which was about twenty pages long which was all about the army. Everything you could imagine about the army, where every unit was, every commandant of Duntroon, his name, his initials and his post nominal and every cadet's name. So there were say 400 cadets,

08:00 and you'd have to know the name and initial of every cadet, and I still know them. I could go through the book there, I could go through every cadet. I had a look last night at the R&C report. I still know every cadet's name and initials, and you had to learn that off before you were allowed to go on leave, and you had to learn ridiculous things like the height of the flagpole at Duntroon off by heart, seventy-six foot, five and a half inches, allowing half an inch for atmospheric pressure and bird manure. Those sorts of things you had to learn off, and then everybody

08:30 name, every academic's name. Academics could have post-nominals like BA [Bachelor of Arts], LLB [Bachelor of Laws], MA [Master of Arts], you know, Bachelor of Engineering, Bachelor of Science and have all these post-nominals and you have to get it all right or you weren't allowed to go on leave, and you sat a test to this every, on a Thursday night, and if you passed the test you got an hour off on Friday, and if you passed the test after nine months you could go on leave home back to where you came from, along as you paid.

09:00 So after nine months I could come up to Sydney, and I wasn't allowed to leave the Australian Capital Territory until that time. The course was structured to provide an academic education along with a professional education. The academic education was in arts, science and engineering, and the professional education covered a broad range of military subjects so you were equipped as a young leader in the army to lead a small unit of about thirty people,

09:30 and an infantry platoon of thirty was used as the model for training. So you were trained to be an infantry platoon commander for four years. So I'd had this academic side balances against a military education. That was the balance at Duntroon. So the academic side was a structure, an academic structure from the University of New South Wales, Sydney, and you did your course, did your exams like you do at university.

10:00 Alongside that there were all these artillery, signals, armour, army health, communication, leadership and management. What else was there? Infantry minor tactics, and all these other subject which went alongside it, drill, battle PT [Physical Training]. So each day you'd get out of bed and you'd live a life of up at 6.00, outside your room and your bed had to, you had to have all the blankets off your bed so you couldn't sleep in and you stood out there for about

10:30 two minutes and went back into your room and then you went to breakfast every morning. In breakfast everybody went to breakfast and then in the fourth class you were there, which is the bottom class, you had to, the bastardisation was you had to do every chore. Polish all the floors, clean the toilets, clean the urinals, clean the baths, clean all the basins, clean all the mirrors, all the showers, and you did it for

one year and for the next three years the fourth class that was coming in did it for you. That was the system. So

11:00 you did it for one year. There was a good aim there. It taught people who would be officers eventually what soldiers have to do. Soldiers have to do those things all their lives, clean toilets and scrub floors. So it taught officers what soldiers have to do. You don't just go float through life having thought somebody else does it for me. You actually had to do it at Duntroon, go around and clean and empty garbage bins and do that for a year. That was life,

11:30 and then you went to parades and lectures and PT everyday and sports training, and at night at 7.00 o'clock you were locked in your room and you studied until 10.00 where you came out again and you came out for about half an hour. Then you were locked back in your room at 10.30 and you went through until the morning again. So that was the day, almost like a monastery. If you said that to some of the staff they'd laugh and fall on the ground holding their sides. The cadets used to get up to all sorts of hijinks

12:00 with drinking and parties and driving, and there was a lot of socialising too at Duntroon. But from the inside that's the way I saw it and it was quite strange at that age from say, I left, I was about sixteen when I went there or seventeen, and for the next four years I was taken away from society where my friends who went through society were doing different things. They were playing sport and chasing girls and getting drunk and having great parties.

12:30 It was just a difference. You were cut off from that part of society where people do different things about that age, at university of if they were going to get their first job, and that was Duntroon.

Why did you want to go to Duntroon given how hard it was?

I would say it's the longest and one of the hardest courses in the world. It's long. I think West Point in America has as long a course and probably just as hard, but the other places in the world that train officers don't train them,

13:00 they don't have as long a course and it's not as hard. To me it was, my father wanted me to be a school teacher because he was always away. Being in the army he was away at war and he was away preparing to go to war and he could see people who were school teachers getting home at about 4.30 or 5.00 at night and he missed his family. He had a very disrupted family life when he was young. His father died in 1916 just about six weeks after he was born and there

13:30 was no widow's pensions in those days so he just ricocheted around from aunties. He had thirteen aunties and so he went from place to place living with his mother, and he was brought up that way. So he loved family life and he said, "Look, be a school teacher and you'll get the best of family life, plus a profession." That's what he wanted me to be and I thought, and he said, "Don't join the army." I looked at this and I thought no, I could do that. I saw this scholarship in the paper and I thought that would be good.

14:00 So I said, "I'll apply for that," and he said, "You won't get in. It's very hard. It's very hard to get in." He said, "About 6,000 apply," and he knew about it. He was working here at Sydney. He said, "It's very hard to get in and it's very competitive." I said, "I'll give it a go," because I think it was 1962, everything for me went up. I fell in with a few very good people who motivated me. A girlfriend, who was Marlene Murray, I got divorced from her about twelve years ago, but she came along and we formed a

14:30 very strong bond from the age of, she was fourteen and I was sixteen, and we saw each other every day of our lives from that time on, and she was studying hard and I studied. So my school marks went up, so that helped the scholarship, and my athletics, one of my friends at school named Philip Stone encouraged me. He said, "Righto, you train and you'll be good." So I became a school athletics champion from being just a person who resented training. I thought training, what rubbish. Why should I do that? I'll just go along on the day and have a good time.

15:00 He said, "Come on, come on. Why don't you train? You can do this." So suddenly I went up in the athletics and everything went up. I got my scholarship and it gave a little bit of money to my parents to help though school. And the bloke next to me got one too, sitting next to me in the class, John Wilson, or Charlie Eiler it was at that stage. Charlie got one, he was a son of migrants. So my school class room in those days was full of boys from southern Europe or central

15:30 Europe. It was a quite a mix. A lot of Maltese in the early days and I think there were sixty-six in my class in third class, and I went out and had a look at the classroom and the classroom is not much bigger than this. I went out about two years ago and I thought I'll go and have a look how big that classroom is, and I went and had a look at it and it was very small, sixty-six students in one class. I think twenty of them were Maltese and didn't speak much English, so I probably did well in English competitively, and then

16:00 as I grew up all my classes were full of fellows who came from all over Europe. They had no network here, they didn't have grannies and they didn't have uncles. They came here and all they had was the house they owned and their brother and sister and Mum and Dad, and this was their opportunity so they worked very hard. Charlie worked very hard and he went to Duntroon with me and after Duntroon I got married and went to Malaysia and then to Vietnam and Charlie went to the Special Air Service regiment. He jumped out of

16:30 a plane, bang, dead, 10,000 foot. He got killed in August of ’69. A wonderful fellow, had he stayed in it he would’ve changed the balance in the world. He had such an outgoing humour and good, outgoing personality and good sense of humour. Had he been around amongst our friends he would have changed the dynamics between people. He was just that sort of person, but he’s out at Rookwood now. I haven’t been to see him in the last few years

17:00 either out there. He got killed, and the other one was John Wilson who was a commander of the UN [United Nations] forces in Bosnia. So I grew up in that sort of environment in Parramatta, then off to Duntroon and after Duntroon because my girlfriend, we got very close over those four years and as soon as I left Duntroon we said, “We’ll get married,” and when we decided to get married the army said, “Yes, well you’re going to Malaya.” So we went off to Malaysia

17:30 and we lived on the west coast of Malaysia, her and I, and we had a forty square two storey house with five bedrooms and three bathrooms, and we came from western Sydney, and servants. And Marlene, we didn’t know what to do with servants, we didn’t know how to tell them what to do. What do you do with servants? And the servants used to come in and make the bed, iron everything and wash everything. And in the morning she was embarrassed, we were just married and we didn’t wear pyjamas,

18:00 she would jump up before the servants came in and scrunch up the pyjamas as if we wore them and put them under the pillow on the bed and the servant would come in and get them and take them away and wash them each day. But Marlene was embarrassed so she would scrunch up the pyjamas so the servant would thing, yeah, had those on. We were just babes in the woods really. We were in Malaysia and during that time in Malaysia there was an emergency where there were a lot of racial riots and they were killing each other and the cultural

18:30 mix, we had no idea about living as a sort of, over in, as a colonial master as the British people tended to know how to live in that environment because they’d done it for years and generations. We got there and we were just in this house, a beautiful house. It was on the Malacca Straits and looked out towards Indonesia, and we had some interesting people with us. Peter Cosgrove was my friend from Duntroon and we went to Malaysia together

19:00 to the same battalion, the 1st Battalion. We were partners in crime at Duntroon people would say. We tended to get involved in the same sorts of things, just fun things, parties, whatever was going on. So we became, we liked laughing and enjoying things and probably had a healthy disrespect for the pomposity of the army. So maybe both our fathers were army officers, so we’d seen the army from the inside, so when people were taking things seriously

19:30 we tended to make light of them, so we got along. He was posted to the same battalion. We saw each other a lot in Malaysia and then one day we said, “We’ve got to go to Vietnam. Come on.” We were breaking our necks to get to Vietnam because everybody else had been in that battalion except for he and I, and we were breaking our necks to get there, and said, “We must get to Vietnam.” I asked the army, “What’s happening to me?” And they said, “You’re going to stay here for three years in Malaysia and then you’re going back to Australia,

20:00 and you’ll stay there for a while, and then you’ll go off to Vietnam for a year.” I said, “Good.” My wife was pregnant and I bought myself a little MG TD sports [car], green it was, and I bought myself a little cap and the gloves because makes the car go faster, and I had the driving gloves and a little hat, and the next day I got a call saying, “You’re going to Vietnam.” As soon as I had it all set up in Malaysia, I thought this will be good, three years here just driving around in my MG and my wife was pregnant and she could have the baby in Malaysia.

20:30 And they said, “Look, you’re going to Vietnam, you’ll have to send your wife home. Pack her up.” So I rang her father and said, “Could you look after your daughter for a few more years?” And he said, “What’s happened?” I said, “Nothing, I’m off to Vietnam.” So we went to Singapore and she went off to, we went to a hotel overnight, we stayed there and the next day I flew off to Vietnam and I put her on a plane to Australia. I don’t know what age she was then. She must’ve been about twenty

21:00 and pregnant and she headed off for Australia. I can remember her going through the gates out into the thing and I thought, jeez, you’re bloody young. And she went off to Australia and I headed off to Vietnam, just flew over to Vietnam. That was in mid ’69. So that started my first tour in Vietnam when I went to a battalion. I went to the 5th Battalion as a platoon commander in ’69 and ’70, over ’69, ’70.

21:30 That’s an Australian platoon, and I came home with that battalion which came home here to Sydney and then I was in Australia, I was in a battalion out at Holsworthy doing garrison duties, things that the army does in peace time, and I thought gee, I’m a professional soldier, what am I doing here? I should be at war. And I thought if I went back to war, whatever I learnt there and whatever experience and whatever I did would make me a better soldier. So I went and applied for

22:00 the Australian Army Training Team [AATTV – Australian Army Training Team Vietnam]. But you didn’t just apply and get sent, you had to do a selection course of about five weeks I think. That was up at Canungra at the back of the Gold Coast. So I went to that selection course. I think there were about thirty-five on the course and it was difficult, a difficult course in Canungra. It was always raining and hot and every morning at ten past 5.00 we had this large fellow,

22:30 they called him, I think he came from Russia, his name was Stanislaus Krasnov, and he would come and

kick all the beds, say, “Righto knuckle heads, get out of bed.” PT, ten past 5.00, a big bloke, and when you get someone who is six feet five kicking your bed you don’t say anything, you just get out of bed. We’d all get up and do PT and never did he miss. He never sort of missed a day. He didn’t say, “Righto, all sleep in today, it’s raining.” Everyday at ten past 5.00, and then you did a lot of courses and it was a lot of stress on the course and people

23:00 were meant to be subjected to stress to see if they could take it, and some broke down. One of them, we were sort of pushed and pushed and pushed and we had to run a long way back to the camp and they came back and they said, “Look, you can have some leave this weekend and go down the Gold Coast. Now there’s a hot shower there for you, get into some clean clothes, and there’s a hot brew there of tea. Have a hot brew and some biscuits and then we’ve got to go out in the field. You can’t

23:30 go down the Gold Coast.” And then this fellow was getting all upset and then he heard, he was a senior officer, probably a major at this stage, and somebody went into the showers and the showers were cold, and somebody had a drink of tea and the tea was cold, and this bloke went berserk and he got his rifle and smashed it on the ground, smashed it to pieces, and went and got over to the senior officer who was running it and he started to abuse him, saying, “You couldn’t run anything,” you know, so he disappeared. So people just disappeared off the course. They were there one day and you’d

24:00 see something like this and off they’d go, go back to where they came from. Eventually there were a group of people passed and were sent to Vietnam, passed the course and were sent off to the Training Teams into various jobs, and I went to the Training Team and I got a job up in ICOR [Infantry Combat Regiment], which was the northern part of Vietnam, the very northern part of South Vietnam between North Vietnam and about half way down. I thought that was the crème de la crème. That was the place to go to, that’s where the war was and I got a job as battalion

24:30 senior adviser, all the things I wanted to do when I was on the course and I heard about of course. And I got sent to a place called Da Nang which is now romantically referred to in every movie I hear Da Nang. I hear it but it was a town up there, a large military town, massive population of soldiers and military equipment. I think it had probably one two three, four or five divisions,

25:00 each of about 15,000 around it. So as you flew in all you saw was military vehicles and jets, helicopters and soldiers everywhere carrying weapons, quite strange. It was quite strange to fall into a place like that, land in an aircraft and there they all were. Then I got into a little silver aircraft, it was run by Lear America, a little airline run by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and I was going south towards a place called Quang Ngai and the

25:30 pilot, we took off, there were eight of us on board and he said to us, he was giving us a talk on the way down, he said, “That’s battle ships out there firing,” and then on the right hand side I could see all these armoured vehicles in a place called Que Song Valley going around. Then we got to the next valley where he said, “Now that’s called Death Valley. Don’t go up there,” and then I landed.

26:00 Naturally about four months later, where do they post me? Death Valley, straight up to Death Valley just by chance. He said to me, “Don’t go up there, that’s called Death Valley.” Jo’s been there. I took her there. “Don’t go up there, that’s Death Valley,” he said. I’ve got a book here called Death Valley, haven’t I Jo, somewhere? And it’s about this valley, the Americans call it Death Valley, not us. So I went down and I got posted to the 5th ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] Regiment. So I

26:30 served in 1971 with South Vietnamese troops and we had a battalion and my job was to, they called me an adviser, but in effect my job was to provide a connection between the South Vietnamese and all the fire support, the jets with their bombs, helicopter gun ships, the artillery and all the things the Americans provided. I was the connection and I had to go out. The other thing,

27:00 at the end about this time the North Vietnamese could lure a helicopter in which was coming to collect casualties, in to land and shoot it up. So the American pilots said they would not land in a South Vietnamese landing zone unless there was an adviser on board who would get off and I’d walk over and say to, “Yeah, you’re a friendly South Vietnamese.” I’d look at them, “Yeah yeah, he’s a friendly one.” I’d race back and tell the pilot, “Yeah, we’re right,” and then they’d bring out the casualties, the dead and wounded and put them on and we’d fly off.

27:30 That happened, that could happen any night but it might happen two nights a week. So we’d get a call and they’d say, “Righto,” and I’d race down and get on the helicopter, fly out and we’d find the Vietnamese on the ground, go in and pick up the dead and wounded and take them to hospital and the American advisers were with me too. I joined a group of Americans, I think there were ten of us, so it was rotational. It wasn’t all me all the time.

28:00 I didn’t like that very much because you could be in a helicopter at night and you’d be flying, had a red light, and the whole floor of the helicopter would be covered in blood, and then as the helicopter banked to the left all the blood would go over with rice floating in it, and then as it banked the other way it would go across the other side. Now this was what it was like ever night, or you’d be holding somebody’s tongue because their mouth had been shout out or their legs had been shot off.

28:30 You’d have to make sure the legs were taken to hospital with them. All sorts of things like that, and that was at night. That was my night job. During the day it was walking around the bush with the Vietnamese. I had a few interesting times with the Americans. When I arrived at a place called Siberia which was way out in the, it wasn’t Siberia because it was a long way out. It was Siberia because it was

named after something the Americans were involved in at the end of the

29:00 First World War in Siberia, and I went there and I found the Americans just as different to us as the Vietnamese. I went in and sat down and here are the Americans eating. I sat down with them and had some food out of a tin and I started to talk to them and I thought, yeah, you're different. One fellow there, one soldier had a large Afro hairdo and a beard. Now we don't have soldiers in the Australian Army like that. His name was Walker. He had a big Afro hairdo and he had a pair of shorts on,

29:30 this is at war. No rifle, and a pair of Ho Chi Minh sandals, which were made out of car tyres. He said, "I'm pretty cool." I said, "Where's your equipment?" I said, "How come you've got a beard? Don't you shave every day?" He said, "I've got a certificate to say I don't have to shave." Negroid people sometimes get infected hairs because their hair is very strong. So he had a certificate not to shave and so he had this beard. But sometimes later on, about two days later I got up and walked

30:00 to the edge of the fire support base which was barbed wire and looked down at a river and old Walker had just gone down to the river and had a swim, just gone outside, walked out to have a swim. He was a funny fellow. And I told him, I told them next day I wanted everybody to have a weapon, everybody to have fatigues on and everybody to have their equipment, and they looked at me as if, "Who do you think you are, young man?" And they all, they did it. Later on I found out that Walker was going to frag me, which was a

30:30 way that, a warning to officers who were trying to exert their command, they used to throw a grenade in and blow them up and kill them. It happened a lot, it happened once a week. Or they'd threaten him by leaving a grenade pin on his pillow, things like that. And I heard that Walker was going to do that, and he was serious about killing people. He went into a base one time to listen to his stereo and somebody knocked over his stereo

31:00 so he flicked out a knife and stabbed the bloke five times through the lungs for knocking over his stereo. He got out of it. He was charged but he got out of it because he was provoked because the bloke had knocked his stereo over, but Walker was serious about these things, and later we became good friends. But at the start of it he was very cranky with me for forcing him to be a soldier. I had quite different, and then I think from Siberia I went south. I went into a prisoner of war camp

31:30 and I'm not sure of this, but I believe I was sent to look for a fellow names Private Robert Garwood who was an American. This is a little known fact, but he'd gone over to work for the North Vietnamese. Nowadays with these people in Guantanamo Bay, Garwood in the Vietnam War had left, he was captured by the North Vietnamese in Da Nang on the 18th of September 1965 and he was a private

32:00 in the Marine Corps, and he was put into a prisoner of war camp and he defected to the North Vietnamese. He took a North Vietnamese name and he went out on patrol against the Americans, Robert, RJ Garwood. You can look him up on the net. You'll see pages and pages about Garwood on the net. I think he came back about 1993, he came back to the American side, but he was living in the highlands of Vietnam and living with the North Vietnamese. Now I think, I'm not sure, but I

32:30 went into the prisoner of war camp which was nothing like the prisoner of war camp that I saw on Hogan's Heroes [television series]. It was just a little, a few thatched huts. We went in there and all we found were four Vietnamese prisoners, South Vietnamese who'd been captured by the North Vietnamese, and they were skinny and had malaria. and we took them back, and when we got back to the Fire Support Base, it was called Mary Ann, I'm actually writing and I'm calling all these anecdotes My Affair With Mary Ann, and when I got back there I was just coming down the hill

33:00 and a Chinook took off which is a big multi-rotored helicopter. It took off and it had fifty on it. Took off and went whack in the ground and thirty of the blokes burned to death, and that was pretty horrific and I got down, I ran down to the helicopter and I thought what can I do? I've got to do something here. So I ran into the helicopter and I looked around and all these fellows were sitting there, and it was on fire and they were on fire. So I just ran straight out the other side. McDermott the

33:30 Brave, whoosh, straight out. I walked around, I found the American crew. There was one with a broken leg down the back and I think three of them up here and I said to them, they said, "Who are you? Where did you come from?" And I said, "I'm Captain M.K. McDermott." They said, "But where do you come from?" I had a different uniform and badges on. I said, "I'm from the Australian Army." The bloke said to me, "God, I didn't know you blokes were over here, Austria?" I said, "Australian Army." "Austria, Austrian Army? I didn't know Austrians were over here.

34:00 I've been in Germany, I've been to Austria, lovely place," he said. "Austria, you Austrians over here? Gee, I didn't know you Austrians were over here." I said, "The Australian Army." "Yeah, I heard you. Yeah, Austria hey?" I then went up and then that night all the fellows, he got them up and they were all burnt black, all their faces and all their skin was all burnt black. It was all peeling off and they were dying and my rank in Vietnam is Daiuy, and they were just sitting outside

34:30 where I was sleeping yelling out all night, "Help me Daiuy. Daiuy, help me." And the ones they could help, the South Vietnamese medics were pumping them full of morphine until they died, if they had a vascular system left. They just put morphine into and then they'd die, so that was good. I'd had a little burn when I was about thirteen or fourteen, a very small burn I remember. My father wrapped it up and put me into bed and I thought all night it was bloody bad. All these blokes were burnt

35:00 100 per cent all over their face, and I thought gee, that's on the internet too. There are photos of that, aren't there, on the internet, these Vietnamese? So they all died during the night and the next day we just went down and wrapped them up in bits of plastic and lined them up and put them on a landing zone and a helicopter came in and we sent them all away. They went back to their relatives. They were from the 77th Range Battalion at Tien Phuoc

35:30 and they lost thirty-three there I think it was, yeah. That was pretty horrific stuff that day. I slept there the next night, and the next night what happened was the Americans were fearful of this bloke, Garwood, who they heard of this white man working with the Vietnamese. This is what I believe, and I had an American sergeant with me. I won't say his name but he was with me. He said, "Look, there's an American down there. He's coming back to beat me up.

36:00 He's just down there about twenty metres in this little bunker." He said, "I've heard him saying he's coming to get me," he said. I said, "I think you're wrong. There's only you and I here plus all the South Vietnamese." He said, "No, he's just down there in that bunker." Down in the bunker I could hear people talking. I said, "Look, I'll go down there and check it out. You try and get some sleep." He kept on waking up all night. I went down there and checked and there were two Vietnamese blokes sitting there making themselves a cup of tea, and on the way back he tried to shoot me,

36:30 this American, bang bang bang. He tried to shoot me. I ducked on the ground and I eventually found him and I sat with him all night with a light on. I got a little light and I sat there so he could see me and I could see him. The next day I had to get rid of him. We called in a helicopter to get rid of him. He raced down and tried to pull the helicopter down, so the pilot said, "I won't take him unless he's tied up." So we tied him up and put him on the helicopter. They charged him with attempted murder, but I agreed to testify on his

37:00 behalf because he was, all the stress had built up in him. He had so much stress, all the fellows who were dead, and I think that's what built up in him and I think this was just the breaking point. So I said, "Look, I think that's what happened. He's a good fellow, just this sort of breaking point. He was subjected to last night all this stress and all these people dying around the place," and I said, and Mary Ann was an almost mystical place to Americans. You'll find that on the

37:30 net too, Mary Ann it's called. Just before that a North Vietnamese commando battalion overran Mary Ann and killed them all, and the divisional commander was sacked. They went around and killed everybody in all the bunkers, shot all the Americans, and so the Americans feared this place called Mary Ann. It was in March of '71, overran them, and so that put him on edge.

38:00 It didn't mean anything to me. It could have been the moon to me, it didn't matter. There's an outline of what happened, it's called Sixty Minutes of Terror at Mary Ann, isn't it? That's on the net. It just talks about all these commandos, North Vietnamese commandos going around throwing charges in all the bunkers and things and killing everybody. And so I think he was continually under stress from when we landed. We landed there together, this American and I. We got out and set up where we were going to live and sleep

38:30 and eat, and from that time on, even going out to the prisoner of war camp and back and after the crash, he was on edge the whole time, and he made this up in his mind that there was this American there, and the American wasn't there. I'm sure of that. And I've got a CIA report which says Garwood was just near there a few weeks before. It says he was there in March or April of '71,

39:00 just near Mary Ann or about twelve K east. There's a report where some agent saw Garwood sitting on the side of the road with five Vietnamese, so Garwood was there and he is an interesting character. There's a book called Survivors and it's all about Garwood. I think there's a copy of it there. That's an Australian one. It's a book called Survivor. That's the one. That's written about Garwood and the other people who knew

39:30 him in the prisoner of war camp. So they're just little anecdotes about Mary Ann. I'm just going to call the book I write My Affair With Mary Ann. It was an interesting time for me. I thought God, what's going on here? A young boy from the Western Suburbs, what am I doing here? All these people? This is real bloody serious around here. And so I went around, that was my tour. That was early '71

40:00 and then in late '71 I was out in the field and my battalion ran into a North Vietnamese Regiment of about 2,300 and we were, I think we were about 268, so we were outnumbered about ten to one, and they had a lot of heavy weapons, like heavy machine guns with them. So I was put in, it was a knoll which I call Bloody Knoll,

40:30 and I went in there when another Australian adviser got very sick. He'd been out in the sun all the time and I think he was suffering sun stroke or heat stroke. He was vomiting, and he got taken out and I came in and as he was taken out they shot up the helicopter and I'm not sure if they shot him just in the side, he got grazed, and then the heavy machine gun was just, we couldn't move because the heavy machine gun, it was 12.7 Soviet heavy machine gun and it was able to keep us

41:00 pinned the whole time. We couldn't move anywhere because it could have killed us all. So I got on the radio, it's amazing how small the world is, and I said, "Hello, I need help, Hitch Victor." Hitch Victor my call sign was, and sure, who comes over? "Hello, this Helix Zero One," an Australian named Col

Ackland.

41:30 He's in this book. And he came over and he's up there in the sky, like that, two Australians at one point on the whole world at the same time.

Tape 2

00:32 OK, when I was at Mary Ann when the Chinook went down I called for assistance very quickly, "Help help help," and overcame Helix Zero Three, and he happened to be Australian too. I said, "I think we come from the same place," and he said, "Yes," and while I was there I said, "Don't leave me." He said, "I'll fly top cover for you." His name was Bruce Wood, I think he's Air Commodore Bruce Wood now, is he? He's huge, a senior officer in the airforce.

01:00 He's out at, where did he used to live? OPCOM [Operational Command] at Lapstone just west of Sydney, and he came over the top and he said, "No, I won't leave you." So he went back and refuelled and stayed overhead with his aircraft. It made me feel good because here I was down there, a nobody way out on the Laotian border. I think about fifteen kilometres from Laos. There was nobody between me and the deep blue sea.

01:30 He stayed overhead and made me feel a lot better. One, that he was Australian, there was this friendly Australian voice there, and secondly, he was up there and he could see everything that was going on. And the next time I got in trouble, sure enough who do I call up? Helix Zero One comes on, and his name is Col Ackland, another Australian, and we talked, you know, we recognised each other's accent. He said, "Yeah, OK," he said, "Yes, I'm here to help you," and he came in. I said, "We're in a bit

02:00 of trouble here." He said, "Yeah, I've heard that." He got briefed, he got told about it on his way there over the radio. He said, "But I can fix that up for you." He came in and he was under a lot of anti-aircraft fire and he brought in jets with 500 pound bombs. That sorted out the enemy. But because I wanted to bring them in within 100 metres, he said I had to be on the front line, so he made me go down and

02:30 join the front line of the troops and he then brought in the next flight with the 500 pound bombs, but he certainly saw them out. The enemy were rushing up and getting up about fifty metres from my troops because they knew if they were fifty metres away, we wouldn't drop any bombs on them because it was too close, but we did. And Col, he got decorated with a Distinguished Flying Cross for doing that, Col Ackland. Yes, he's been down. I've met him and I've been up to

03:00 his place and he came and stayed with me since, and his wife, yes. So he's another Australian I ran into, and after that I came home. That was on the 30th of August 1971, and the North Vietnamese were coming down to attack the South Vietnamese because the South Vietnamese were trying to hold an election,

03:30 and so I thought it was a seminal battle of the war because the reason we were there was to allow the South Vietnamese to live by a democratic process and to stop the North Vietnamese interfering with them, and the 2nd North Vietnamese Division was coming down to attack the South Vietnamese provincial capitals and their district capitals when the election was going on. So we were put in place to stop that occurring. So really we were doing the job that the whole force was sent there for.

04:00 There was another, at that battle there was another fellow came over. These are short anecdotes. His name was Al Harris, Captain Al Harris, an American. He was laying in his tent down near the seaside and he heard this fellow in trouble, big trouble out there, and he was about to get up and pack his bag to go to Hawaii to meet his wife for seven days off. Instead he came out to help me. It's like the cavalry

04:30 over the hill in a helicopter gun ship. You've probably seen it on TV, bup bup bup bup, and he came over and I said, "Look, this is a pretty bad area. We've got heavy machine guns." He said, "Don't worry." I gave him the target and we threw some smoke so he knew where we were and he went and attacked the target. He was fearless, and he pulled out to the north east and as he pulled out they attacked him with anti-aircraft fire and they had to wash him out of the helicopter he was shot up so badly.

05:00 He was shot to pieces, and he died. He never got to see his wife and she was pregnant, so he never got to see his son either. Captain Al Harris his name was. That was on the 28th of August 1971. Shark Zero Three was his call sign. I found him on the internet and I found a photograph of his helicopter and things like that, haven't we? So I've put a lot on there for his family saying what a good,

05:30 how brave he was and put a lot of things on the internet for him and saying that he contributed to the war, rather than just, otherwise people think he went to Vietnam, he's dead, that's it. It loses all personality once people go to war and they're dead. We've got 60,000 dead people in France, relatives of everybody in Australia. There's 60,000, but who are they, what were they like? What would they have been like if they lived? What contribution would they have made to a family and

06:00 to Australia? You never know because they're just, they made a contribution to France and the freedom of France and Britain and they're treated fairly well by France. If you go back there they love

Australians. There are schools up in northern France that raise the Australian flag each day and all stand out and sing. They realise it, that we have a whole generation, 60,000 dead. That's a lot of people, a lot of young people. It just takes, crunch, they've taken a large number of people. You work it

06:30 out. How many people in society at that time and half of them would've been women so they didn't go to war. Then you work out how many young men there were in those age groups and they all, so what percentage went to war and what percentage died. I think we lost, I think we were the second highest number who lost. New Zealand was the highest. We were the second highest. So you know, blokes like Al Harris and his family, to me it means something because if he didn't do that I wouldn't be here.

07:00 I could be dead. These people actually saved me. That was a very critical situation, and so I'm alive and he's dead. I'm alive because he's dead, or he's dead because I'm alive. There's a relationship between them. That was with the Training Team up in ICOR. With the Australian platoon, are you going to ask me questions about that? OK, I might deal with those things when you have your questions with the Australian platoon.

07:30 That's really my career up until then, and then I came home. Towards the end of my tour I went up to Da Nang and there was a lot of administrative people up there. I didn't get along very well with them, and then I came home to Australia as an adjutant to a unit, which is a normal process as a captain, and was an instructor in tactics

08:00 and then I was a company commander which has about 100 men, and then I went to staff college in Victoria, and then after staff college as a major I went and lived in, I had a job in Queensland in Brisbane and then I went back to the Royal Military College which I enjoyed because I was feeding back into young cadets who were just forming. I enjoyed that at the Royal Military College, and then my next job was at

08:30 a training group in Melbourne as a lieutenant colonel. I just proceeded on, captain, major, lieutenant colonel, and then came to a staff job in headquarters training command. That's how I got to Mosman because training command is just over here in Mosman. I bought a house here and then I thought, you know, my life in the army would be in Canberra after a certain age. For the rest of my life I would be in Canberra just ricocheting around, so I said, "I'll get out of the

09:00 army and ricochet around here in Sydney," and so I decided to stay here. At stage though I knew I wasn't going to be Field Marshal McDermott. Something told me you're not going to be, you'll be in Canberra at this rank, a colonel, and that's it. So I wasn't going to be Field Marshal McDermott or anything like that or General McDermott. I was going to be a colonel in Canberra doing staff work probably. So I decided to get out.

09:30 I've got two sons, Sean and Murray. Murray got married just recently and Sean's not married. He lives over in town in a unit in town, and then I was divorced in about the late '80s, and Jo who is here now, I've know Jo since she was sixteen. Is that right? Sixteen, was it? I went out with her to a dinner in Canberra

10:00 with my girlfriend and she was the girlfriend of a fellow in my class named Peter Cosgrove, and Karen Crompton and two other fellows from my class. So we went out and we pretended we were playing sophisticated. We went out in ball gowns and blues drinking wine. We didn't have a clue, but we knew what red and white was. Red is that one and that's the white one, and, see we only got $6 a week

10:30 so we just sat down at the table. All the girls were there and we knew which knife and fork to eat with and we had those things. I remember one girl who had travelled a bit more than us, she had escargot farcee which is snails in the shell. My eyes nearly popped. I thought, "God, bloody snails!" Could've got a lot of those at Toongabbie and I was looking at them. They were all done in garlic and I was looking at this girl with these tongs. She looked like they brought them out of a surgical

11:00 kit to eat them. Then we had, then we went off to balls. We did that a few times, didn't we? So I've known Jo for that length of time. We got married in what year? '94 in India. I went to India when Peter Cosgrove was there, the Chief of the Defence Force. We stayed with him and then we travelled around northern India and western India and then we got married in New Delhi on Anzac Day in

11:30 1994, in New Delhi. Did all sorts of funny things like walking, we went up to the foothills of the Himalayas, stayed up there for a few days, and then we went down to Jodhpur and went and had a look at the fort and then we went out in the desert and went to Jaisalmer and got on some camels and road around and then came back in there. Had a look at some of the interesting places around Jaisalmer

12:00 which is in western India, and then we got married there, didn't we? What year was it we went back to Vietnam? '98, and we went out to, we rode out on bikes and we went out to the battle ground where I said the Bloody Knoll, went out and had a look around and I found the compass that I left there in '71. In '71 we got pushed off. The enemy came out of a little creek

12:30 line early in the morning, and they came up and they got up very close to us. I was decorated by the Vietnamese for staying there because of the fight. At that stage I could, truthfully, I could see the enemy coming and I thought, I got my map and I thought I'm gonna go back to Australia. See you later, I'm off, bye bye. Mike, it's half time for Mike. I was going to go down, I memorised the map. I was going down onto a

13:00 ridge. I could go over the ridge to a town and I could walk back to into town and try and get back into safety. That's the truth. I could make it and say I fought to the death and there I was bayoneting and thrusting and wrestling people. That's not true. That is not the truth. The truth is when I came up there was about forty enemy and I was thinking gee, they're going to overrun us, and the Vietnamese used to have a joke with me. They knew I was scared of being captured because when we went into the prisoner of war

13:30 camp they locked my feet into a brace and walked off into the jungle and left me there and said, "Mike, don't worry. Soon you go Hanoi," and they were just joking. I was trying to pull my feet out and they knew that that worried me, so when we were being attacked and my American senior adviser thought I was going to be captured and the Vietnamese say, "Don't worry Daiuy, don't worry captain. Soon you go Hanoi." I thought jeez, they're serious because I could see the North Vietnamese

14:00 coming. I thought God, and I had some points I looked at. They got to there, OK, I'll stay. If they get to there I'll go. And they got to there and I didn't go. And I thought if they get to that point I'm off. They were coming from the west. I was going to go east and go down and up over a hill and down into a valley called Tien Phuoc, and then I could walk back along the road from Tien Phuoc. Well I took Jo out and I went up and I found my pit. I had a pit in the ground there

14:30 and I dug a big, some little shells out. I left my compass there, and when I left there on that afternoon I left my good Australian compass there, so I went out and found it again, 1971. But I must say that the Vietnamese had cleared the whole hill of every other bit of brass. Now, I think when a gun ship fires it fires 5,000 rounds every ten seconds.

15:00 When a helicopter gun ship fires it's got rotating barrels and it sound just like rooor, and all these empty shells just go out, they just spew out all over the ground. Now I could not find one shell, so somebody had been there and collected every shell off the hill, as brass they tell me. I asked the Vietnamese and they used to sell them by weight and they sell them for profit. Couldn't find one, and there was my compass sitting there, a brass compass. Do you want to get it out Jo? I'll show you the

15:30 brass compass. It's here, isn't it? Yeah, so we got that and then we rode back and Jo is fitter than me. We got back to the main highway and I was suffering heat exhaustion. I could see double vision. I was very sick, so I got back there. I had $30, I always kept $30 on me, a greenback, American. I walked over to a bus driver and I said, "How much do you make in a day?" He said, "$1." I said, "I'll give you $30

16:00 to take just the two of us back up the road." So he put our bikes on in the back and the bus only had every second board in the floor. So we're going along the road in the night and it's late, about 6.00 o'clock, and he had a little bit of wire, and he'd go beep beep, beep beep, and I thought what's he doing? And what had happened, semi trailers were going past and other buses going whoosh,

16:30 and what happened, I said, "What are you doing that for?" He said, "I've only got," he only had a day licence, didn't he? So he didn't need lights. He had no lights. We were driving along in the dark along a main highway, straight into the path of incoming traffic, and they were going past him. Every time he'd see one he'd go beep beep. Naturally they couldn't hear it. He was just going beep beep, and Jo and I are sitting there in this bus, weren't we? And he took us back and then when we got back he didn't have a licence for the town we were

17:00 going to so we got kicked out beforehand. We had to walk back, didn't we? He said, "No no, I haven't got a licence for there." Under the communist system, the way they make money is they charge you a licence to go in this town, a licence to travel on the highway at certain times, that's the police. So he didn't have the licences so he just dumped us off and we walked in. We've been back there twice. I enjoy it. It's a lovely place. Good for Australians. No recreational

17:30 murder. So if you're there they don't sort of go past and go bang bang, shoot people. If they shoot people they shoot them because they're family or they owe them money or there's something bad. So there's a relationship between the shooter and the shootee. In other countries of the world a person mightn't know you, just walk along the street and pull out a gun and go bang. In Vietnam it's very law abiding and all young people from all over the world playing pool everywhere and sitting down and eating at cafes, Vietnamese and French cafes, right through

18:00 Hoi An. Hoi An's had the Japanese there, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the Vietnamese and who else? The French, yes. They've all been in that town, so you can see different influences. So we go there and there's a big old hotel there which was the Marine Corps Division Headquarters, but it's got a beautiful swimming pool out the back and we go there and it costs us $30 American a night for a three bedroom suite and a meal

18:30 and breakfast, and it had everything. So that's what Vietnam is like now. People live in poverty. I got to know a lot of people there. They're very poor, and after the war they were eating rats and rodents and things like that. They had nothing, rice and rats and a bit of grass, sea grass, it would grow in the paddy. They'd grow that and that's all they had. So a lot of them died in probably the

19:00 '70s and early '80s. This Anzac Day I marched with the South Vietnamese. I just turned up there in my Vietnamese gear and said, "Hello, how are you?" And they made us so welcome, because I had all the badges on my uniform from the South Vietnamese Army, which they weren't allowed to keep because if they got caught with a badge from the South Vietnamese Army they got put into prison camp. So I walked up and had my Vietnamese beret on and just turned up and since

19:30 then they've been in touch and they want me to go out to dinners and things like that, and I'm going to join the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, Vietnam Veterans' Association here in Sydney because they're very good people. Jo, when I left Vietnam in '94, '98 was it? '94 when we first went? 97. The fellow who used to take us around, he was crying and gripping my arm, and Jo said,

20:00 I said, "They really appreciate you." She said, "It's not they appreciate you so much, you pay them double." They were all soldiers and couldn't get a job, South Vietnamese soldiers, and all they could do was get a job with cyclo. And so I'd line them up, when I got out of a morning I'd make them salute me and then I'd say, "Which one is the VC [Viet Cong]?" They'd say, "He's VC." I'd shoot the VC. "Are you VC?" "Yes," shoot, just mucking around with them. And when I came back they'd say,

20:30 I'd say, "How much?" And they'd say, you barter, and they'd say, "$3," and I'm supposed to say two. I'd say "Four." "You dinky dow, mad." So anything they said I'd up them rather than go down and give them money, because the only contribution I could make to their life was give them a bit of money, a bit of extra money because their life was so sad and poor. I enjoy it, I enjoy going there. It's

21:00 sophisticated, like it has lovely restaurants and things like that around the place, and there are beautiful things to see. Just went of Hoi An which is my favourite town, there are ruins at a place called Mee Song, and the ruins are there from the 9th century AD, yeah, and they are almost like Hindu, aren't they? They're from the Cham Dynasty or the Cham society which

21:30 was a society that came over from Pakistan, India and took over Vietnam, and so we went out there and looked around. They've still got all the old temples there. It's like, Cambodian, Angkor Wat, about the same age I think. There are a lot of interesting things to see in that area of Vietnam, so I find it interesting. I like going back there, I like the people and they like me. As soon as I tell them who I

22:00 fought with you get along well with them and you start swapping stories. When, what did you father do, etcetera, where were you, who do you know and what part of Vietnam? You just swap stories with them. Australia has been very good to the Vietnamese. Like you travel on their railway and find it's a Queensland railway car. Not too bloody good, Queensland railway cars for the tropics either. Windows are all sealed, there's no air-conditioning. And then we went, at Hoi An

22:30 there was a shrimp farm. That was Australian. Australia had been there and developed this shrimp farm for them, prawns, and then all across if you look down from where we went out in the bush and looked down, it could be western Sydney, just all gum trees for maybe sixty kilometres, Australian gum trees, maybe sixty K [kilometres] right along throughout Vietnam, everywhere. We went back in,

23:00 because I think after Agent Orange took out a lot of the foliage gum trees grow. So we went there and gave them all the seedlings, our Forestry Department. So Vietnam is now forested with Aussie gum trees from fifty or sixty K. I think they went in about from '75 to '82, that's seven years. They just took a shipload of seedlings over there and put them all in. There's plenty of people

23:30 who've done a lot with the Vietnamese. There's a bloke here named Greg Lockhart, he wrote this book, Nation In Arms, which is about Vietnam, and Greg, he was on the Training Team and he married a Vietnamese girl, Monique, and he actually went and studied at Hanoi University. He was in my class at Duntroon. He studied at Hanoi University. He met General Giap and then he went to the Sorbonne in France and looked at the archives and the libraries there and was able to get all that information about the colonial

24:00 times and get all the North Vietnamese information out of their libraries put together in a book. I'll give you an anecdote, about four minutes it will take, but it's the best story of the war, by far the best story of the war, and if you want to follow it up I'll give you the name and address of the fellow. This is the very best story of the war, Vietnam

24:30 War, and cannot be beaten anywhere. It's about an Australian and his name is Barry Peterson. He was a member of the Australian Army Training Team. He went to Vietnam as a young man in 1964 and he had some knowledge of the language of the Austral Malays who were the indigenous tribes of Borneo and Malaya and also of Vietnam. So he knew a little bit of their language and he knew a little bit of their culture.

25:00 So what he did, when he came to Vietnam they sent him up in the hills to rally the Montagnards who are the aboriginal tribes of Vietnam, and he rallied them so well that he made an army for himself. This is a young Australian, he'd only be at that stage about twenty-five. And the Montagnards made him a chieftain of the tribe. He wore all the regalia of a chief and he then,

25:30 the CIA came in and they saw how powerful he was. When the Montagnards revolted they said, "We won't negotiate with anybody except Barry Peterson." They thought this man is too powerful, he could cause a problem in the country, so they kicked him out. He was interviewed by the Vice President of Vietnam on his way out and the Americans told the Australian Government that, "Peterson is not allowed back in Vietnam. If he comes back we won't let him passed this point down in the south because he's too powerful

26:00 and has too much influence." Now Peterson did that and he just went up there and he had his own army.

They were all dressed, he's got a book about it, Tiger Man, it's a pretty thin little book about tiger men. They all had tiger suits on. But when he writes his story that will be the story of Vietnam. When somebody writes it for him I think. The book is no good, but the story of Vietnam is so good. He was dealing with French secret service and all sorts of people there because he was

26:30 up there on his own in the highlands and walking around as a chieftain and they sent in people to talk him. What was it, Path At Lau or Marxist battalions were coming to try and join him to fight against the South Vietnamese. He had all these peculiar things happen to him that nobody, there is in Apocalypse Now, but that's not about Peterson. A lot of people say that to you, Apocalypse Now is about an Australian. It's not.

27:00 It sounds similar. It's not about him. Apocalypse Now is about a fellow, it's about, it parallels a book called Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. But Peterson's story is true. He's been here, he's an Australian Army officer. He was decorated when he came back. He stayed in the army until about 1979 and then he left. He lives in, I saw him

27:30 in Bangkok and talked to him because I'm going to write, and I just wanted to check a few things out with him. He lives in Bangkok and if you want his address you've got my phone number, and his phone number and e-mail. I've got all that here. But that's obviously the best story, a man being able to do that. It's got all the ingredients of a best novel, CIA, Aboriginals, heroin, because they accused the

28:00 CIA of using blokes like Peterson and people who are advisers to go and get the South Vietnamese to grow heroin to finance the CIA's war. So there's that, the CIA, Aboriginals, the lone individual like the Lawrence of Arabia type living on his own up in the mountains and a chieftain of the tribe wearing all the regalia, the long skirt, beaded skirts he wore, quite peculiar gear. Then sitting out there amongst the chiefs having a chiefs' council and drinking big rice wine out of big

28:30 straws and doing all these things. Absolutely, you know, all the ingredients of an excellent novel. I've told Bryce Courteney about it but he hasn't shown as much interest as I wanted, so I've dropped him. There's a bloke named Patrick Lindsay too, also interested in it. But if you want that I can put you in touch with Peterson. That's the best story of the war. And he tells me the Training Team, when they were first trained, because he was on the first Training Team,

29:00 where he did his course was here in Mosman. They did them in the dungeons and all the fortifications over here on Middle Head. Over Middle Head there's all these big tunnels through the sandstone and they had them in there and did the course there. They made it hard, but that's where they did it, at Middle Head. They had them, they treated them like prisoners because the Training Teams were the ones most likely to be taken as prisoners. They locked them up as prisoners of war and

29:30 they were interrogated, kept up all night and locked in these dungeons. That's what they did. It's called a Code of Conduct Course. It teaches the code of conduct, how you should behave if you're made a prisoner and because you're out on your own all the time, and Colonel Moore who was my American Senior Adviser, he thought I was going to be captured. He said that to me and I thought you don't know me. I'm the sort of, Marist Brothers, Parramatta, mile champion, and I'd be off.

30:00 Off like the bloody start at Randwick, I'd be away. He said, "I was very worried about you." I'm in touch with him. I'm in touch with a few Americans. I'm in touch with a few Americans. I put a few, one thing on the net and I've had things flood in, not flood in, from Americans. Jimmy wasn't it, the other day? He supported me in the battle at Bloody Knoll and I'll get in touch with him, Jimmy Harden. He came in and he supported me.

30:30 His call sign was Sabre One One. I refer to all these people at Shark Zero Three or Sabre One One or Hitch Victor, Helix Zero One. That's how I know them. I don't know them really, they're just a connection at the other end of the radio. That's all I know them as, their name. Mine was pretty unromantic. Mine was Hitch Victor. I would rather be something like Sabre One One, wouldn't you? You know, when you played cowboys and Indians you didn't say, "What do you want to be?"

31:00 "I want to be the bloke that looks after the horses." You wanted to be, "I want to be the chief, Running Cloud." These blokes had Running Cloud or Shark Zero Three and I was Hitch Victor. Pretty bloody plain, and they had all these names they came in. Dolphins, sharks and dolphins I think they were. I think I saw the map. It had sharks and dolphins on it. That was their call sign. The dolphins were

31:30 the ones that just carried you along, were friendly, and the sharks were the unfriendly ones. They were the ones with all the guns on them. So that was it, American. And after the Training Team I came back here and go into a normal career pattern in the Australian Army and I stayed there up until I said, the late '80s. And then I went to the Police. I worked for the Police Board doing research and I went from there and I got involved with their executive development

32:00 program to develop police officers. And then I went to the Railways to do the same sort of thing, and then I went to Sydney University. I had a contract with the Railways and Sydney University was lecturing for the Railways and I went across and I kept on saying, "You blokes are a bit late. I'm supposed to be paying you and you're not there. Get in there." They said, "Would you like a job?" They heard me give a couple of lectures, and I said, "Yeah, I'll have the job." They said, "Could you do it?" I said, "Yeah, I can do anything except brain surgery." They said, "Why is that?"

32:30 I said, “Didn’t bring the book today.” They said, “Right, would you like to do this job?” So I got a lecturer’s job there and it expanded because I was working from sort of, from getting up at 6.00 in the morning and we were going to sleep at 3.00 am after I finished my preparation, and then Jo was up there with me typing and doing the overhead projection slides. She’d sit there and do them all so she was up too, and then we’d go to bed, get up early and I’d go off to

33:00 lectures and I’d lecture until about quarter past 10.00 at night and then bang, had a stroke. Moral of the story, don’t work, retire as soon as you can. They can do all the things you want to do. There’s no life in the bank. Sometimes you say, “I’ll do that when.” There is no when. “I’ll do that when I retire. I’ll do that after I’ve got the house paid for. I’ll do that after so and so.” Don’t run around and do everything stupidly now, but just pull it all back and say, “Right, I’m this age. I want to go and live in Spain,”

33:30 because I think if I was fit that’s what Jo and I would do. I’d rent out a room in Spain and just live there and drink red wine and eat bread and we’d live there and look out at the sunshine. That would be now, but I should have said that before. I wouldn’t have done it, but I was enjoying lecturing and the students were good, UTS [University of Technology Sydney], they’re nice people and they enjoyed being lectured to and they enjoyed sort of the practical experience of me being able

34:00 to pull things from Malaysia, or culture, talking about culture from Malaysia or from Vietnam or Asian society, and then India. When they say, “Do you know something about India?” I say, “I married in India.” “Oh.” It becomes, you’re suddenly accepted by them. “Do you know anything about Malaysia?” “Yeah, I lived there for a year.” “Vietnam?” “Yeah, I lived there for two years.” So you’ve got all this connection with the Westies plus the Asian people and all

34:30 the Indians and Pakistanis in the class, so I enjoyed it. I enjoyed UTS, but I won’t be doing that again. I hope in a few years I’ll be able to walk.

That’s great Michael. What we’ll do now, that was a really really wonderful overview. What we’ll do is go back to the beginning and I’d just like to ask you a little bit about I guess what you knew about your father’s service in World War II and what you knew about soldiering

35:00 **from him?**

My father? I knew very little about him from World War II. I knew that he fell over a cliff once and hurt his knee and the soldiers all laughed at him. That was about, I think that was the only thing I knew. He went to Korea too, so I stayed in Sydney while he was in Korea in the Korean War. The only thing I knew about that it was so cold they used to send his batman, or the fellow who helped him,

35:30 to go out to the toilet first so the seat would be warm. They were the only two things I knew I think about the war. He was decorated in Korea, my father, he got an MBE [Member of the British Empire]. Did well there, but that’s as much as I knew, those two things about the war. He told me other little things, but very minor. He probably didn’t tell me until I came back from Vietnam the second time. We had more of an understanding and bond. He knew that I

36:00 understood. That’s all during the time I grew up, but there were a number of things I would say. One is that everybody he related was related to who they served with in the war. Our neighbours. Archie’s a good bloke. You know the bloke with the hearing aid, two hearing aids? He’s a good bloke. He was in such and such a battalion. Vin, Vince so and so, he’s a good bloke, he was in the 2/3rd Battalion, and that was, so people were related to my father under which battalion they went to, and if it was a good battalion

36:30 and saw a lot of action or if it wasn’t, and he’d relate them. He didn’t even serve. So my father had this hierarchy of who people were related to their war service. I remember that, remember the people and who was good and who was bad based on what battalion they went to or where they served in the Second World War. That was my Dad. My father and all my uncles all served in the war. One was in Darwin. Uncle Jack was in Darwin and he was in anti-aircraft. Although it sounds, he was only

37:00 in Darwin, my father said that was probably one of the most stressful things to do, be in anti-aircraft with the bombs coming and you can’t do anything, just sit there. I had an uncle in the garrison battalion who was at the Cowra Breakout. The garrison battalion took people who stayed around Sydney all around. They’d guard things like power stations. Then I had another uncle who was in the artillery in New Guinea. Where else? I had another one who was in the airforce

37:30 but he wasn’t a pilot. He was in Bougainville in the islands, that was Uncle Tibby, and Bill, Charlie, Tibby. That’s about all. They were all my uncles. They were all doing something at war. I never spoke to them much. I think my Uncle Charlie told me once that the worst thing he ever had was when an aircraft came down and strafed him. He felt so helpless. He was the only bloke who, he said that to

38:00 me, he just related that before I went off to join the army, but I didn’t hear much from the rest of them. Just those two incidents. My father told that a number of times, about falling over the cliff. He’d say, “It’s going to rain today. I can feel my knee is playing up.” That was his little story, and I’d say, “What happened to your knee?” He’d say, “I was walking along one night and I fell over a cliff.” I’d say, “How come?” He said, “I was leading.” I said, “What did you soldiers do?” He said, “They just stood there and laughed.” “Oh, OK.”

38:30 That's what happened to his knee. It was always sore. He'd hurt it, yeah. So that was about all. He really wanted me to be a school teacher. This is it, this is the career. "I've looked at every one now," he said, "I've done thirty-five years. Be a school teacher. You can enjoy it, you can do what you like. You can get involved with sports training. You can get involved in all other sorts of teaching and training young people and you've got this time where you can spend with your family." I thought OK.

39:00 I decided not to do that. That's about all with my family, yes.

How hard was it, you mentioned that your father was away a fair bit. How hard was it growing up with your dad away in service?

Well I was, I did things like I mowed the lawn, those sorts of things every Saturday because he was away. We just had Mum there, and when he was away the postman meant Santa Clause, presents.

39:30 When the postman came there'd be a package and it would be to me. I'd open it up and it would be something from Japan, a little plane or something. When the postman came we'd think presents from Dad, and my mother got cigarettes actually, naughty lady. She had tins of cigarettes because you couldn't buy them in Australia but you could buy them in Japan or in Korea. So he'd send her home tins of cigarettes. So the postman meant presents, all sorts of presents we got. Dresses for my mother and sister

40:00 and some sort of toys for me, planes or jackets, little silk jackets they made in Korea. That was my father being away. I think the things, some of the things I had to do which were different was to cut the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s head off. You know, feed the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s up and become friends with the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s, that one, that one and that one, and my mother would say, "Righto, go and, tonight we're going to have a WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK . Cut the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK 's head off." Bang, and then you'd have to

40:30 pluck it and clean it and get it ready for cooking. I think also one of the things I had to do was shoot a dog, which I loved the dog, and I remember going there, somebody gave me, the dog ran under a house. I had to crawl up under the house with a 22, little gun. I had to look at the dog, I loved the dog, and I had to look at it and say, "You've got to die," because it was just mangled from being run over. I had to go one two three bang. He died, yeah.

41:00 They were the sorts of things you had to do, which normally that's left to fathers. Father's stuff, they go and do that. But I can remember that, and then not having, working bees at school. I went to a Catholic school and they would ask fathers to come to working bees. "Could your father come down and do some work?" No, I never had a father. He wasn't there for doing work. I remember the day he died. He was coming back from Korea

41:30 and they said to my mother, "You won't be able to see him because we're going to send him to Brisbane for two months, and you won't be able to see him and you can't go to Brisbane. They'll be in Brisbane for two months and they'll come home to Sydney." So Mum said, "Bugger that," so she packed up my sister and my brother, or my brother and her and went off to Brisbane to see my father, and I was packed off to school at Coogee. And I went to school one day. They rang the bell and I stood there and some teachers,

42:00 a couple of ladies came up…

Tape 3

00:31 It was the day my father died, for just one day. I was lined up at school and a woman said behind me, "What's the priest doing out there?" They said, "They always got the priest when somebody's father died at war," and the other woman said, "Look, it couldn't be anybody's father died at war. The war's been over." They said, "There's some kid here from Toongabbie whose father is at war over in Korea, and his father must've died,"

01:00 and the teacher got up and said, "Oh, no." They said, "We're here, Michael McDermott's father has been given an MBE by the Queen for service in Korea. Would you all like to put your hands together." So everybody clapped. I went into the class and that worked out for me. I thought yes, my father's died and they've given him a medal. That all computed for me. My father's dead and they're giving him a medal. That all worked out because I knew that if you died they give you medals, so I went all through, I remember sitting

01:30 at school all day thinking my father's dead. I wonder what it will be like, I wonder where we're going to live. I thought I must be going to be left at my grandparents, that's where I am now. My mother's going to go off on her own with my brother. I'm going to be left down here on my own. And so for all that day I was thinking, gee, that will be different. Where's Dad? I wonder what dying, he's dead and they'll bring him home. I remember thinking about it all day and then I walked home from school and I walked home with a kid in the class

02:00 and I went into a shop and his mother owned the shop and she said, and he said, "This bloke's father

died today." Her name was Mrs De Luca, and she said, "Have an apple young man." I thought right, you're father dies, you get an apple. So I went home, but yeah, she owned the fruit shop, and I thought, all during the day I thought what do you do when your father's dead, what happens, how does your life run. And I got home and I went in and I lay down on a couch

02:30 and my grandparents asked me what happened, what's up and I said, "Dad died." They said, "No, he didn't. Where did you get that story from?" They said, "No, he didn't. He's just up in Brisbane." I said, "Am I staying here?" They said, "No no. When he comes home you're going back to live at your place." I said, "OK, good," so I was happy then. But just for one day I just sat there all during the school day thinking my father's dead because he's at war and people get killed at war and now they've announced that

03:00 he's dead and the teacher said he got a medal for being dead. So I thought OK, he's dead. I thought righto, who'll do all these jobs at home and where will we live and how will we live without a father, and I thought just for one day that he was dead, but he didn't die. He lived on until only a few years ago, '98, yeah, into his eighties. Yeah, that was my Dad, yeah.

03:30 **Well I'm just wondering given that you've had such a family history of involvement in war, why then you as a young boy made a decision of your own to enlist?**

I just thought that's a career. It's a very good career.

04:00 Some people would say, I was in school cadets, I was the senior cadet under officer in the school but that had no influence on it. That was a career, a good career. I felt that I was a leader. I'd been given leadership opportunities and I thought I'm a leader. I can do this and it's good. It suits me. Being in the army would suit me, or my make up, physically and emotionally, so

04:30 I'll apply for this, and then I didn't know much about Duntroon. Some people had told me about Duntroon and how hard it was and they said, "It's not easy, you know," and I thought oh yeah, I'm pretty good, as people tend to think at age fifteen, and I thought oh yeah, it doesn't matter how hard it is. I'm pretty good, so off I went. And I think with my family, my family is sort of involved with the service, it's probably only my father,

05:00 and we weren't disrupted by that. My father made a decision to stay here. I didn't move around. I think my boys moved twenty-two times. But we never moved. We stayed in Sydney and he passed up opportunities. He said, "No, I won't go. I won't be promoted." I only did that once. But he was going to Malaysia to get a very nice posting in Malaysia with my mother. He would've loved it. It would've been the crown of his career. They would've enjoyed it, my mother would have lived like a queen with

05:30 servants in a beautiful house, and he said, "No, I won't go," because my sister was doing her school certificate, so we were not disrupted by his career. Our life was in Sydney like a normal kid, going up, walking to the station, catching the train to school, coming home and Mum was home every afternoon, just that my Dad was away on exercise. He might go away for three to four weeks at a time rather than away at war for a long time. I was born in '46 and the war was over.

06:00 I only saw him away in Korea, which was I think two years in Korea they spent. So I didn't see him away at war, or anybody coming and going. There'd be other people my age who would, or they'd have to be older than me to do that because they would've been born in '41 I suppose.

Well you just told us a really interesting story about spending your day thinking that your father was dead,

06:30 **so I'm wondering for you how much was war about killing and the possibility of dying?**

Nothing. I was immortal. I've always thought of myself as immortal, stronger than everybody else, and I can run faster, further, harder. People say, "How hard do you think that is?" I say, "No, easy." I'm still doing it in this exercise program, but I never thought, I think all young men think they're immortal.

07:00 The fact that there's a bit of death, war is a bit involved, a bit of death in war, they don't think of that. They just go to war. People have waged war for hundreds and thousands of years but they don't think of the death part of it. They think of the other part. They probably think they have to kill, which is the hard part, but they don't think that they'll be killed in war because a lot of people come back from war. They've seen their father come back, everybody comes back, uncles that they know.

07:30 I think after the First World War it would be a bit different, but I didn't think that I'd be killed. I didn't think much about the horror of war either. When I think about it now it's horrific. It's only been in the last six months or so when I started to think what could I write about that was interesting. Nothing I could write about is interesting, it's just horror. I've got a cousin who is a publisher and I said to her, "Look, I couldn't write a book because it's just horror and horror and horror and horror," and

08:00 she said, "Yeah, but it's the way you write about it." I said, "I haven't got a story that doesn't involve horror or things which are unpalatable to civilised society." I thought to have all those ingredients, there was an intellectual part of war, there's an emotional part, which the intellectual and emotional is the leadership part about influencing people and being a leader. And then there's a physical part. That suited me also at the

08:30 time when I applied for a scholarship. That would be my, the decision for me to join was the point I joined, I just decided for the scholarship. Not when I joined the army which was ’65. I think it was ’62. The Australians had just gone to Vietnam. I went out to see the first unit off with my Dad. We went out to Mascot Airport as it was then, and we went out. We drove out in our little car and all these people were in civilian clothes

09:00 because they weren’t allowed to fly there in military clothes, and they all had white shirt and grey trousers, so they were in a uniform. Or if they were in uniform they had to go into a toilet on the way over and change into the white shirt and grey trousers on the way over because they weren’t allowed to land in uniform. I saw them all off in ’62 and then all the other things started to happen to me. I met my wife, I started to do well at school, and on the way home, it was funny, I said, “Vietnam,

09:30 where’s Vietnam?” I remember saying to Mum and Dad. My mother who probably did things like read current affairs bulletins and keep up current affairs said, “Vietnam, that’s part of France. It’s in Indo-China.” She was calling them Vietmanese, which is quite funny. She’d worked it out Siamese, Vietmanese, and she said, “Yeah, the Vietmanese,

10:00 they’re up there, they’re part of France.” So that’s what we knew. That’s what the population knew about Indo-China and Vietnam at the time. The Vietmanese, and they’ve go civil disruption like in Bougainville. Who are the sides in Bougainville now? What’s the queries there? We don’t know very much about that. We know probably as much about Bougainville as we knew about Vietnam in 1954 when the French were being ousted by the Vietmanese, yes. So I came

10:30 home and Vietnam for the next ten years probably was part of my life, ’62 to ’72. There was something going on. And my mother, when I was going back again I had two children under two and I went to stay at my parents’ place and my mother who wasn’t allowed to smoke in the house said, “Come out and we’ll go for a walk.” I went out with her and she said, “Why do you have to go back to war?” She said, “I’ve spoken to people and they’ve said you don’t’ have to go.” I

11:00 said, “I’m a professional soldier, Mum. You pay for me to go over there and do that job, and you’ve paid me in the peace so that I’ll go, so I think I have to go, but I’m also going for the experience I’ll gain as a professional soldier.” She said, “I’m getting a bit sick of it, you know,” she said, “This is the fourth decade where I’ve been waiting for that knock at the door.” She said, “In the ‘40s I was waiting for it, in the ‘50s I was waiting for your father. In the ‘60s you were overseas and now in the ‘70s you’re going again.” She said, “It’s always that knock

11:30 on the door.” My father lived inside Victoria Barracks here and when somebody was killed they’d come down and knock on his door, in Vietnam, knock knock knock, and my mother and father used to lie there every night, because I was a bit of a tearaway, would you say Jo? Jo’s known me since I was young. Tearaway, would that be a positive description? And they always thought I would be killed, and so they were waiting for that knock on the door, knock knock knock, and they’d open up and say, “Excuse me, Mr and Mrs McDermott, we’re

12:00 sorry to advise you your son has been killed,” and that’s what they thought. So she used to lay there every night she reckoned and wait for that knock. She’d hear people on the gravel outside, boots, boots of the duty officer, army boots. She’d think here they come, and they’d lay there every night, and she said, “It upset your father too. He gets cranky next day and he treats them very badly.” He used to throw the door open and say, “What do you want?” And the poor little lieutenant would be there, “Nothing sir, I just brought,

12:30 I want to know so an so,” and he’d shut the door. “I don’t want, this is 3.00 o’clock in the morning, what are you coming to my place for?” The poor bloody lieutenant would race off, but really it was the lieutenant’s job. They’d come over the signals, teletype or the old e-mail, and he’d find out where the person lived and have to go out and tell them and knock on their door. So my parents weren’t that pleased. But I don’t think, there was nobody who influenced me. Knowing enough about the army I decided myself,

13:00 and Duntroon was the place to go. It was sort of the institution which produced officers, so I said, “That’s where I’ll go.” Very difficult to get into in those days, still is. But I thought I’ll go and get in there. I don’t think I would’ve got in on my school results initially, but I settled down in 1962 and other people influenced me to settle down and I then got a scholarship which then set my life pattern from then on.

I understand that

13:30 **you father was on staff at the RMC [Royal Military College]?**

Yeah, he was, yes.

How was that, having a family member or your dad so close?

It was interesting. I couldn’t say, you might say it was bad or good, but I think the other staff members expected a lot of me because that was my father. At times I found that. At other times it was good to have him there, maybe at the football watching me, and I didn’t go and see them

14:00 very much. I wouldn’t have gone, I wouldn’t have seen them at all. I never spent a holiday with them. I

would always go up and stay with my girlfriend in Sydney. I never spent one holiday with my parents, whereas had I been, had my parents been in Canberra or up in Sydney I'd spend every holiday with them. So I never saw them very much. I didn't see them on any holiday from Duntroon because I came to Sydney for every holiday. But at Duntroon I can remember finishing events there

14:30 and running and my father was there and he was very sensitive to the fact that he was going there. He said, "How would you feel?" He flew down from Sydney and said, "How would you feel if I was posted to the Royal Military College?" And I didn't know what he meant. He said, "It could be difficult for you having a father who is a member of the staff." I understood what he meant. He said, "I've been asked by the commandant to come down here, General Finlay, and do a job." I said, "That's OK by me. You do what you have to do."

15:00 The staff were understanding of my position and some, they used to make jokes. They'd expect, "What would your father think of that, McDermott?" That sort of thing, but I expected that. I worked it out beforehand, when they said it I expected it. "God McDermott, look at your boots, what would your father think of those? They're not too bloody good," or something like that, but they did it in a comical manner so it didn't matter. That's what I'd say about it. That was some part of it. The other side was that I had a house there

15:30 and my girlfriend could come down and stay there, and other people's girlfriends stayed with my parents too at Duntroon. They'd come down for balls or tennis parties. What do they call those things, company parties, and stay at my place. So it was good, became quite convenient for people to come down. That was the positive side of it too.

I'm just wondering if you, like perhaps other boys at school whose dad is school principal,

16:00 **whether you got some kind of ribbing from other soldiers?**

The staff would say it occasionally. They'd have a go at me, "What would your father think of that, McDermott?" Initially somebody rang up and they were ribbing him. When I first went there there was a thing called novice boxing and everybody had to box, and when I got in I was, I'd never boxed that much before. I'd had a few fights but they were sort of little skirmishes

16:30 at school or on the way home. I got into boxing and I was very successful, and somebody rang up and said, "Where did this bloke grow up, in the bloody wharves of Sydney?" Because I was quite vicious and people were injured badly, and so they'd rib him as much as they'd rib me. Or I'd play football and I'd have a large tear in my shorts and someone on the staff would go to him and say, "Jesus, you can't get your, your boy can't afford

17:00 another pair of shorts," because he was in charge of all the clothing, my father, issue of the clothing too. They'd say, "Jeez, you're a bit poor, can't afford another pair of shorts." My father, he could've suffered embarrassment also. But there was a bit of ribbing that went two ways, to my father and also to me, but it was good humoured and good natured, nothing malicious. Like at school I think if anything happened that was advantage to a young boy they'd think he only got it because of his father, but Duntroon was such a level playing field.

17:30 It was competitive all the way, everything was competitive. Nobody could ever get an advantage. Everything was level playing field. Everybody had to do everything. If you missed out you had to do it years later. You had to run a mile in six minutes and if you didn't do it you went down every day until you did it. You had to swim in your clothes and if you couldn't do that, you had to go down and swim and be taught. You'd arrive every morning at 6.00 o'clock until you could do it. So nobody could avoid the tests at Duntroon. Nobody could avoid say

18:00 walking fourteen kilometres in your gear and all your equipment because you lined up and they ticked if off. So the headmaster's son didn't get any advantage.

How difficult is it to really push yourself beyond your normal boundaries?

I think the basis of it is the background of the person, family background. There might be a degree of physical

18:30 competency too, to be able to push because that just raises the bar. Your physical competency is better, your cardiovascular system is better, but when you get to that boundary you can see people just start to go down. They don't start to fall apart physically, emotionally they can't push themselves on. It's that ability to keep your self going emotionally, and that's what they taught at Duntroon because the officer has to get to a stage when everything else is crummy

19:00 he's still as much in control of the situation as he can be. Just before in September of '69, just after I got to Vietnam I was going to a place called Dat Do, and Dat Do was a boogie man place for the company I was in because it was known as a lot of people had been killed there, and we were sent inside the town at night to be raiders and go between the houses and up and down the lanes and lay ambushes

19:30 for the enemy. And the soldiers didn't like that and the reason why, just before I got there a platoon had been there and disappeared like that. Five killed and twenty-three wounded, one second of time, bang. Bit of people everywhere, and all they were was prodding around in the dark finding people, see. When that occurs a leader has to be calm and emotionally stable to be able to take control of the situation and

make sure everybody has to do their job. Now the person at that time was a bloke

20:00 called Murray Blake, Major Murray Blake. He was the commander at the time and stay stable. Do all the practical things that had to be done plus all the leadership things. So people looked to him and said, “Oh look, everything’s going well. That’s the boss.” I think that’s what is taught. It comes from inside you. Duntroon teaches it to you. It exposes you to a lot of situations and so does the training on courses, like situations. You can never replicate that sort of thing.

20:30 It exposes you to little situations so you say, “Oh well, I know what I am. I know how I’m going to react.” That’s the way I think it is with pushing yourself. On the physical side I think when you get to a stage, I can remember times when I’d think jeez. There was an 8,000 foot mountain in Vietnam and I was climbing up it with my pack on and I thought, jeez. I just saw

21:00 the top and every time we got over the top there was another knoll, false knolls, and I thought then I wasn’t going to collapse emotionally, but physically. I was a big bronzed Australian, a little Vietnamese going past, straight past me. But I think some people break. I’ve seen soldiers just collapse or they can’t, they get frozen, can’t shoot. Australians unable to shoot their rifle because they’re emotionally, it’s like hitting your camera with

21:30 something or a computer. Their emotional system has broken down and they can’t shoot. There’s somebody there, there’s an enemy there and they can’t shoot at the enemy, and I can remember the soldier and when it occurred and who it was, and I said, “Shoot,” and he wouldn’t shoot. Had his rifle, he’d been taught to shoot and the enemy was there on the ground and he just stopped firing. He just froze. Nothing I could do I’m sure would’ve got him to fire his rifle. Emotionally he’d got to the stage

22:00 where he didn’t want to fire. Or he thought about it beforehand and decided, “I can’t shoot another person,” which is reasonable. It’s very social actually. I’m glad those people are around in society. I don’t like people who like to shoot other people because what we’ve done to soldiers is take them from our lovely society in Australia where we’ve got this wonderful culture of fairness to each other and we treat each other fairly well, and we went them to go over there and kill people and we want them to come back to Australia and say, “Right,” get back and play footy and be nice to each other again. Have a few

22:30 beers at the pub and be nice and barrack for your footy team. So we want them to change that quickly from one place to another and I think it is very hard. I had only one circumstance where that occurred to me, November of ’69. I had a North Vietnamese prisoner given to me. His name was Captain Ky, K Y. Daiuy, captain D-A-I-U-Y is captain

23:00 and Ky, K-Y, was his name. He came from the Dong Nai regiment, D-O-N-G N-A-I, which is north of Saigon and he’d an affair with the regimental commander’s girlfriend so they sent him down, they kicked him out of the regiment, and he came down and I was given him, and he showed me back to this place where I was supposed to find these Vietnamese. When we got back there I went out on a track and along the track was coming a man and a woman. So they came along and they bumped us and we fired. We didn’t kill them.

23:30 They went around and they hit 11 Platoon where they were killed, boom, shot, ripped apart, and then I had to go back and get the company out by helicopter, and here they were. The bloke was laying their dead and the woman was laying there and she had no clothes on. Her trousers were blown up here and this leg was blown out and she was naked. I said, “Right, get her buried, get him buried,” and they started to bury

24:00 her, and then from there I was lifted out by helicopter and I came back to Australia and within twelve hours I went out to Corwood International Hotel in Coogee Bay Road, Sydney and there was my pregnant wife laying on the bed, and she was not the pregnant girl I saw at the swimming, she didn’t have the stomach I saw at the swimming baths in 1962. She, you know, was

24:30 eight months pregnant and we were doing all these couple like things. “Feel this, look, feel this,” you know, all those sorts of things, and she was laying there and I thought that’s life, and this was the other woman just ripped apart by death. Her whole flesh was just ripped apart, so I had to think of this. That was my wife who was about to bring life, and here was the baby, this enormous thing inside her, and her. I can remember her stomach being

25:00 white with all blue little bits in it. She wouldn’t like to hear this, would she? We saw her last week, and she had all this bug tummy and she was lying on the bed and the last woman I’d seen only a few hours before was lying ripped apart by bullets and blown to pieces. The same, two women, but twelve hours apart; one lying, thinking about having a child and bringing a life into the world; the other had just

25:30 been taken out in a very vicious way. It wasn’t vicious, it was just war. That’s the way it goes. So was the bloke she was with too, and Ky knew them, the prisoner knew them. I said, “Do you know these two?” He said, “Yeah, she’s a nurse,” and I don’t know what he did, the bloke did. Ky started crying. I gave an interview about this to Stuart Rentaur. He wrote Ashes of Vietnam, this book here back in about, I think it was

26:00 the early ‘80s. I gave him an interview about it. But really, Ky just came to look at these two people and here he was standing there crying, this Vietnamese tough war hardened captain. He just had tears flowing down his face. Of course he wasn’t a bad man. They weren’t bad. We killed them because of

policies. Our two governments had sent these young people to kill each other. So that was, not a dilemma there, but you had a

26:30 juxtaposition between a woman here and a woman there. Two women, and I thought, the movement from one place to another was so quick. See, you're there in Vietnam, six hours later you're in Sydney. You touchdown and you see these people at Mascot walking around, having cigarettes, sitting down, having cappuccinos, and you leave a place where nobody is having cappuccinos and people are running around looking for each other to kill each other. Then you're back in civilised society, and the

27:00 movement is quick. Before they used to have a big ship ride home, two months or three months. So on that they readjust their thinking. They sleep. By the time they get home they say, "OK, this is home and that's there." So yeah, that was another thing that occurred to me. That happened to me in November of '69.

Well that's quite a surreal kind of picture that you've just painted there, and the speed of travel

27:30 **is really contributing to that feeling. I'm wondering how do you react, what do you do with those images and pictures? Where do you put them?**

At the time I sort of just talked. I had my wife there so I talked through it with her. We went for a walk down to Coogee Beach and we sat there and talked. I didn't tell

28:00 her the details, but we talked about the future. You just take yourself out and you cut off from that and you talk. You have to talk about, the only positive things are the future. The past has a lot of things. You can go back in the past. All you're doing is churning over old things, so we had to stop and say, "The future is this, and then I'm coming home and then we'll do this and then we'll do that and then we'll do that and then we'll have babies and then we'll do that and how many babies will we have?" So we talked about the future, all the aspirations of a couple rather than talk about the past and the all the bad things that happened. I don't think she

28:30 knows about it yet. She might have read that book. That would be the only way she'd find out about it, that I even thought those thoughts I think. Yeah, that would be the only way.

Going back to training at the RMC, you've mentioned I guess in a way soldiering was a great leveller and there was a process of bastardisation?

Yes.

You hear

29:00 **stories now of trainers or soldiers in training cracking under pressure even in training, I'm wondering how or whether you encountered that at all?**

No, not in training. I had some people at RMC who found they didn't like the army. Yes, at RMC about fifty per cent of people left or were discharged. Some people found it unsuitable for themselves,

29:30 but it wasn't bastardisation that forced them out. It was nominally a failure at some, academically or in military subjects, or they found they got into the army and they said, "Oh, this is what the army is like. I don't want to be in the army so I'll go and do something else." I think that's the way they left RMC. I don't think anybody left because of bastardisation. One of the things about bastardisation is it took a lot of time, a lot of your time learning things, learning off all the prime ministers of Australia because every morning

30:00 at breakfast you had to learn the whole news and recite the news at breakfast. You had to learn the news off by heart and sit at the table and recite the news, to attention and you sat up straight and you recited the news every morning as a junior class. So a lot of your time was taken, so you were always running to get things done. Polish your floor, polish your boots, clean your rifle, wash your clothes. It was just a time taking exercise to make you be

30:30 better organised. Some people didn't like that so they left. But the ones in the army, where soldiers get harassed and become emotionally disturbed are normally excess. They're not bastardisation as I see it. They're an excess by some NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers] and I think sometimes you'll always have those people in organisations who are put in positions of authority and they exceed that authority.

31:00 Or there was a recent one at Singleton where a soldier hung himself. Last Wednesday, wasn't it? In that case there were some soldiers who were not performing well so they gathered them altogether and they were picked on emotionally by everybody. Like they were all spastics, you know, all the spastics. We had the spastics at RMC but it was a joke thing. Every Friday afternoon those people who couldn't do PT, physical training, were sent to do PT and they were

31:30 called the spastic squad. Now because I've got this thing on when I go to my reunion in December, the blokes have been ringing me and saying I'll be able to join the spastic squad. But at RMC it was accepted, if you couldn't do something like some physical training thing like a vault or an upward circle or something, you had to go up on Friday afternoons until you could do it, every Friday. That took more time, extra training. It just continued. Whereas the fellows up there in

32:00 Singleton were people who'd injured themselves running and were put into a platoon because they couldn't complete their training and they were called the spastic platoon or something like that. And then so they got, their esteem went down. Their self-esteem went down. They just couldn't get ahead of it. That wasn't the case at Duntroon. I think everybody at Duntroon's esteem was up here. They all came from parts of schools where they were the best athlete or the best this or the best that, the best footballer.

32:30 Their esteem was up. Probably then needed to be pushed down a bit, you know, I think and levelled out. They all thought they were good. Everybody thought they were good, or knew they were good because in school at secondary school they'd done well and that's why they got to Duntroon. So when they got there they were sort of levelled out. Everybody was bastardised. There was no distinction between people. Like if you were in fourth class you got the same as every other fourth class. There were sixty of you and every person had to do it.

33:00 If just looked at a line, right, bathrooms, corridors, and you had to polish the corridor, or at the table you're asked questions. "Name all the mountain ranges in the world. What are all the oceans?" "I don't know them." "Find it out by tea time." So you had to go away and learn and tell all the oceans of the world by tea time. "Tell me five electorates in Queensland. What's your electorate, Mr McDermott?" "I don't know."

33:30 "Righto, you find out your electorate and five electorates in New South Wales." It would be me. People don't know their electorate. "Who is your member of parliament?" "I don't know." "Why do we have a senate?" "I don't know." " Find it out," and I had to go away and read up and find out why we have a senate. "What is on the coat of arms of Australia and what does it mean?" Because people don't know these things. "What is on the flag of Australia?" "The Queen's

34:00 Union Jack," "Honi soit qui mal y pense" I think, and "Dieu et mon droit," "God in my right hand," and "Honi soit qui mal y pense" is on our coat of arms, Australia, and that is "Evil to him who evil thinks". So those sort of things you had to learn so when you left, you got out of Duntroon when you were a junior cadet and you weren't ignorant of the army. What are the ranks of the army? You go off to a social occasion. Somebody says, "You're the bloke from the army, hey?

34:30 What's an admiral the same as?" "I don't know." So you don't know anything, so they made you learn about the army. So where are all the army units in Australia? Find out. You had to find out all these things. That was bastardisation having to find out all these things. Righto, who were the five chemistry professors, and you had to go and read them all up.

Well you hear stories about seamen don't cry, I'm wondering if the same rule applied to soldiers?

35:00 **I don't think they do, but they do. There was a thing in here, at night while I was in Vietnam during the day if somebody killed somebody, at night what I used to do was I'd get my pack and I'd throw it down against a tree and I'd sit in the middle of a circle. All my platoon were around me, about six to eight metres away and they were facing out, so I had a very protected spot and I'd sit in the middle and I'd sit against my pack,**

35:30 **and I knew who killed somebody during the day or who'd been in contact with the enemy and I'd sit there and I'd wait until I heard them all get ready for bed. They'd get their pack, get their bedding out and they'd unroll it and you'd hear them clink and they'd put their cup together, and I think OK, that's what they've done because I knew all the sound. I'd hear them change sentry and then everybody would go to sleep after about two hours and I'd just there and then sometimes I'd hear people crying,**

36:00 **soldiers who'd killed people. They'd just whimper and I'd think, I knew where everybody was. I'd say, "That's where Hobbsy is." He's in there. I think he talks about himself crying after he killed someone. "He's just sleeping there. That's who that is." I'd hear a bit of noise over here, somebody else being upset and I'd think who's that? That's so and so. So I'd listen to them and then they'd stop and then they'd go to sleep. That was initially, sometime, and then later on after**

36:30 **somebody, I'd go around and I'd have a cup of tea with them, the bloke who killed somebody that day, and I'd sit down and talk to him, find out if he was OK and eat some his food. They all talk about me stealing their food. They think I'm a thief, a food thief, don't they? Say, "Yeah, can't trust him. Wouldn't carry his own food. He'd come and steal ours." They tell these stories about me, but I just used it as a way to go around. I actually took up smoking for the same reason. I'd go around and sit down and say, "Got a cigarette?" And they'd say, "Have you got a cigarette?" So I'd give them a cigarette and we'd sit there and I'd say, "How are**

37:00 **you, how do you feel?" Just talk about how they felt about what they'd done, and eventually because there was nobody else they could talk to, there's no distraction, it comes out. They say, "Yeah, I don't feel very good about that. I never thought I'd have to do that in my life." I'd talk to them about it or, "How do we kill civilians?" I'd say, "Well, that's my responsibility. I take responsibility for all that. You don't worry about it. If you see somebody you kill them. If we kill somebody who's not an enemy soldier**

37:30 **we won't murder them," because there were a lot of stories in Vietnam about people shooting**

people who were civilians and saying they were just the enemy. They'd get a grenade and they'd put the grenade on the person and they'd say, "Look, he's carrying a grenade. He must be the enemy." They'd count him as enemy. I said, "We won't do that, we're Australians. What we'll do, or I will do if somebody kills and it's a civilian and we kill them or wound them we'll put them on a helicopter and take them back the same way we do our soldiers," and I said, "I'll be responsible. Now I'm telling you you just shoot them. Now if you shoot

38:00 **them I'm responsible for you shooting them." So that made it easier for them they said, because we'd been in a place called Civilian Access Areas where civilians were and we were too, so civilians were allowed to come in there and you'd run into them and you might shoot them by mistake, and I said, "That's my business, my problem. Don't you worry about it." We did shoot one I remember, down on the beach. We did kill him. But I said, "That's my problem because I've told you to do it. I live with that and all you have to do is do what I tell you,"**

38:30 **and they said, "OK, good, that's easy." It's easier then for them to do it rather than some fellow from Armidale just coming along and joins the army, got to be told to go and shoot civilians. His father didn't have to do that.**

Well I'm wondering then for you, how do you deal with it? I mean you're making it easier for your platoon, but what made it OK for you?

Well that was the requirement

39:00 of a leader I think. What you have to do, you get certain rights as a leader but with those rights you have to have responsibility too, and we weren't really going against our values. Our values were that we knew that shooting civilians was wrong. In the values of our culture that's wrong, but because of the vagueness of the war, the vagaries, this is the way war happened, like the killing

39:30 of the people of Hiroshima or the bombing of Dresden in Germany. They didn't bomb Dresden to kill all the civilians. They bombed Dresden to bomb all the factories, but people were being killed. It happens in every war. It's just vague. The war is a vague thing. You can't put a line down it and say, "They're all civilians and they're the army." There's a vagary there in every war. Like in Darwin, or here in Sydney when the Japanese subs came in. They shot, just down here they killed

40:00 those sailors down at the Opera House. Then the mother sub shot some rounds that landed on Scotch College Oval, fired them over Bondi and civilians are all in the path of these things. You could get real estate very cheap around the eastern suburbs at that time. It's gone up. It's pretty dear now but around after the sub fired those few rounds over it got dear up in the mountains and over that area. There was a change in the demographics of Sydney.

40:30 So when you look at it you say, "I can't help it. I'm going into this. This population needs our help. We're going in there to give them our help and in this they may be killed. We're not going to purposely kill them but if it occurs by chance we just accept that."

Well going back to Duntroon, you spent four years training?

Yes.

I'm wondering how prepared

41:00 **did you feel as a soldier?**

I think I was very well prepared. I went straight from Duntroon to Malaysia and that was a culture shift where I went from Australian culture into an Asian culture. I lived there for a year and then I went from an Asian culture to an Asian culture, so I didn't get the large cultural shock when I went to Vietnam, but I was well prepared militarily for Vietnam. I knew what I was going to do

41:30 all the time. There was no situation that was too great for me, even on the Training Team where the size of things was great. As a platoon commander after Duntroon I was extremely well prepared. Bloody expensive for you tax payers too, it is, I think Duntroon. But I was very well prepared with the amount of training, special training we had, and the amount of investment the Australian people put in to training officers at Duntroon, I felt very well prepared professionally. I'd been there for

42:00 four years.

Tape 4

00:35 It was designed after review of a number of other officer training structures around the world, so it had a design based on success with its curriculum and structure by administration and training, and the officers they sent there to the Royal Military College are selected and they become models for cadets.

01:00 So cadets look to them, "He's a model, he's a good officer," and when I was there a lot of the officers were very good models. Some had been to Vietnam, some had been twice in the '60s. Some had been

with the US [United States] Marines and come back and been back with the Australians. Here they were running around training with us and they were good models, and one of the things in teaching leadership I believe is having good models to say, “Right, that’s how to behave. I’m going to be one of

01:30 those. That’s how they behave. I should behave that way,” and being an officer requires you to always behave in a way which is acceptable to your soldiers so they can say, “That’s an officer.” So your behaviour is always there, it’s always under scrutiny, and that’s would you had at Duntroon. You had officers there who were chosen because they could be, their behaviour could be scrutinised at any time and would be acceptable. The best of the best when I was there I think, were the officers and the

02:00 instructors. And so you had that and then the course was good and the academics were very well chosen too. Some of the academics were Second World War soldiers. One of the academics wrote a wonderful book on Vietnam and history, the German army history, and what he did to teach us about Vietnam he just sat down over the week and wrote a book on Vietnam and got it printed and gave us all a copy.

02:30 So that was our text. He was able to sit down and write a whole book on Vietnam. He was a Rhodes Scholar. He was an RMC graduate and he was a Rhodes Scholar, Robert O’Neill, so he wrote a book and gave us this small book on Vietnam which we were able to refer to it. It was a very good reference guide for what we had to learn. So you had this very good training system and then a lot of the system had been proved because they’d had graduates since 1912.

03:00 So you had what, fifty years of graduates who’d gone and performed and then they got feedback how good were they. Good at this, not good at that. We’ll put more of that in the course, less of that. So the course had been modified over the years. So I think they’d been fairly well tried and tested.

And do you recall the day you graduated?

Yes. I’ve got a photo here somewhere. I can recall the day I graduated.

03:30 We’d go on a parade so that sticks in your mind. I’m going back to one in December. I’m going back to have a reunion. We’re going to sit as guests on a parade and watch the next graduating class on the second Tuesday in December it is. Duntroon always graduates on the second Tuesday in December and you get invites and caps and blue trousers with red stripes. They normally have the General, the Chief of the Defence Force, comes to Duntroon and presents

04:00 you with your diploma, says, “Congratulations, good, see you later, all the best.” On mine was John Wilton, General John Wilton came the day I was there, and I remember the day. We went on parade and marched around and then I left the parade and I rang my parents who were watching and my fiancee at that stage, and we got our photo taken by the Canberra Times all

04:30 smiling, looking like a geek in my uniform, short hair and that was in December ’68, and then the rest of the day just sort of a bit of blur then. A lot of social functions, you have to go here and there, to the sergeants’ mess, and then end up at a ball that night. The next day I remember all the bad people, including Jo, ended up out at Cotter Dam drinking in the ball dresses. Bad girls,

05:00 smoking cigarettes and drinking. We went out and we went to the Cotter Dam which is, how far outside Canberra, about thirty or forty kilometres? We all sat around and had a fire and took alcohol and wine and things out there and told jokes and smoked cigarettes, sitting there in our ball gear. All the girls sitting around in their ball gears trying to keep warm, and that was after the ball had finished. I then went home I think. I was

05:30 exhausted for the rest of the day. I think I still had to do things during the day, other social activities you had to do. That was the day I graduated, yes.

Well, I’m wondering, conscription was introduced into Australia in 1964 and the Vietnam was well underway by the time you graduated, so I’m wondering, well first of all what did you feel about the Vietnam War throughout your training?

Well

06:00 Vietnam from ’62 to ’72, the Vietnam filled my life. See, from ’62 I saw the first unit leave and at Duntroon they’d bring you little excerpts from the news. I remember one the brought in was Khe Sanh, the siege at Khe Sanh and it was narrated and one of the officers talked about it because he’d been with the US Marines and it was at Khe Sanh was a big siege. They used B52 bombs and the North Vietnamese had captured this, or surrounded this base and then

06:30 the Americans, the President authorised them to use massive amounts of fire power to make sure the Americans were not killed like the French were overrun at Dien Bien Phu. So that was one I can remember. They’d bring things in about the Vietnam War and they’d give you examples and then the Vietnam War was there and if we did an exercise it was based on what you were going to do in Vietnam and I thought that was very good. I would do more of it. I would’ve brought young lieutenants back from Vietnam to talk to the cadets

07:00 because I met one just after I graduated, he lives around here now somewhere, and I got more out of him in about two hours than I got in the last couple of years. I asked him all about Vietnam, because I

wasn't going anywhere. I wasn't going to a unit in Australia to train. I was going to Vietnam. There was no chance that I was not going to Vietnam. And training is different to playing the game, and I talked to him about what's this and what's that. They tried to

07:30 have mock ups at Duntroon, a bunker system, enemy bunker system but it's not the same as the real stuff. So I talked to this lieutenant, and forever I would bring them back from the real war and talk because they've got credibility because they were only there with the cadets a year before and everyone played football with them, and here he is. He's back and he's saying things and you say, "What happened when?" And he'll tell you first hand. I think that's what I would do now.

08:00 The Vietnam did fill everything because we'd hear, yeah, who was the first one? "So and so." "He's dead. So and so is dead." "What is that funeral going on down the chapel?" "That's so and so that got killed," and it changed the end of our life. Now at this end of my life normally it's hearing a few of your mates dropping off the perch dying,

08:30 but we were doing that in our twenties. So that part of our life going to funerals was down here. Charlie's funeral was the first one you went to. He was the bloke who sat next to me in school and got killed in SAS [Special Air Service]. Was he the first one you went to? And then we went to funerals and you met everybody at funerals. "How are you going mate?" Like baptisms or weddings, how you meet the family and you don't see them for months or years. Well, it was funerals. Between about '68 and '73 I

09:00 went to a lot of funerals where friends or people from Duntroon were killed and they asked me to carry the coffin or I went to the funeral out of respect. So it was a different part of life was brought in in your twenties. It's not usual for young to be at funerals. It's normally old people with things like cancer and strokes, and those sort of things knock people off. Well this was young people being killed and being brought back to Australia. Or then mutilation too. There were blokes being, no legs.

09:30 They lost three without legs. We lost, people getting their chins blown off and being brought into hospital. We had a doctor at Duntroon that had his legs blown off in Korea but he stayed and fought with no legs and he got a Military Cross for it, and he came back and did medicine and came back to Duntroon, walked around with no legs, went out in the field. I can remember seeing him in the field in the shower all naked and he was jumping around on this tin leg into the

10:00 shower. He had one leg, jumped over in the shower out in the bush. We were out on a field exercise. A fellow from my class went over, he was a very physical fellow, tough, went over to Vietnam, standing there with another bloke, boom, no legs. Two of them, Pat Cameron, and this bloke's name was Billy Rolfe, and he came back to Australia and I just came back from Vietnam I think and I went to stay at his place. I went in to have a shave and he

10:30 came in. He was only this tall. He got up on a little box to shave. I thought, you know, it gave me a shock. "Where have you gone?" He was on his knees, he walked in. And he went off and they took his legs off and they gave him a set of tin legs and he got up out of bed and walked on them straight away, said, "OK, good, I'm ready to go home." Off he went. He didn't go off, they kept him their longer, but he then, he went back to university. He wouldn't say he was an academically inclined cadet

11:00 either. He was a rugby inclined cadet and he liked a beer. He went to university and did law. He did very well at law and while he was there he coached the ANU [Australian National University] rugby union team to a grand final and he then went off. He had two children or his wife did, or they did, had two children and then he went off to the, he stayed in the army with no legs. He went off to the Judge Advocate General School in the United States. He got a Churchill Scholarship to study law

11:30 in England. He stayed in and wandered around in his uniform with, you could hardly tell, could you? You'd just hear him click occasionally when he was walking around. He's done things like parachuting with no legs and scuba diving and he became a brigadier general with no legs, and the fellow who went and became a doctor, he became a major general as a surgeon general of the army. He lost both legs. His name was 'Digger' Jones. These

12:00 people, we know, do you know Douglas Bader? Ever heard of him? Never heard of Billy Rolfe and he's an Australian. We don't seem to write, so what you're doing is a wonderful thing. What I'll do is transfer knowledge about people who were Australian to Australians, Australians At War, the Australians At War series. Now that Rolfie, he just did that. He's back here. He's a real hero. He's in the community living. He's got two kids. While I was in Townsville

12:30 I would sleep in on Saturday, Rolfie would come up the front stairs, clump clump clump clump, wake me up with his tin legs, say, "Get out of bed McDermott, you lazy B... How about a cup of coffee?" I said, "What have you been doing this morning, Rolfie?" He said, "I've mowed a couple of lawns for the Legacy ladies," the widows from the Second World War. He'd be off mowing their lawns, right, and here I was laying in bed sleeping.

It's interesting, stories of adaption.

Yes.

I'd like to now go back to

13:00 **Duntroon and sort of that period, ’62 to ’64 when conscription was introduced. I’m wondering if you can tell me a bit about first of all, how you felt about conscription at that time and what the atmosphere was like between the regular army and the conscription?**

Well the first time I ran into it, I ran into it when I was sent down to

13:30 Puckapunyal in Victoria, and there were conscripted officers there and they’d been brought into the army and we were living in the mess together and they were conscripts and they’d done a training course. We sat down and I started to talk to them about their life. So they were saying what it meant to them. “I was working on a farm, I had to do this for Dad and now I’m here for two years.” So conscription meant to them a tremendous, somebody has decided

14:00 without them being allowed to even consider, they weren’t even asked, “We’re taking two years of your time. What were you going to do?” “I was going to become a journalist.” “Bad luck. You’re not going to become a journalist any more.” “Look, I wanted to travel to Tibet because I want to find my spiritual heart.” “No you’re not. You’re not doing that because you’re in Australia at this time. We’re taking your time. You’re going off to kill people or get killed,” and that’s what I found from them, that it was quite an imposition on them,

14:30 but when I saw them alongside I could see they were just as bright, just as good, and when I got to Vietnam I saw some were better, better than us. Better, just as brave, just as good leaders. There’s one bloke, I had two in my, in a company there are only three lieutenants. The other two were National Servicemen. One of them named Baby John Russell, he was a little fellow.

15:00 He only weighed seventy kilos. How much, about seventy kilos, right. So that would be John, only a very little person. Baby John they used to call him, or we called him. Little, very small, came from Western Australia, and he was a National Serviceman. Everybody thought bloody National Serviceman, he’s OK, getting by, but he’s a National Serviceman. Well what he did, there was a battle called the Battle of Binh Ba, John Russell identified

15:30 the enemy’s battalion headquarters. If you look at it in relation to Saddam Hussein, what’s going on there, he identified which was the battalion headquarters. He saw all these wires coming out of it, out of a building. He crept up under machine gun fire, got inside the room where they fired at him and he got knocked to the ground. Then they blew him up with a grenade, and he crept, he got outside and he cut all the wires that were going, which were all to the platoons to tell them what to do, and he cut that, so he

16:00 isolated the battalion headquarters. Then he got outside and he got his platoon. He didn’t sort of say, “Right, that’s enough for me.” He got his platoon and he continued to fight through, but as he was fighting through he fell over a few times and he didn’t know what was happening, so he looked at his leg and he’d been wounded through the knee and through the chest. He didn’t feel it. They dusted him off and evacuated him to a hospital and then they said, “Right, you’re going home to Australia.” He said, “No, I’m not. I’m going to stay and fight with my platoon in the jungle for the rest of the year,” and he stayed in Vietnam.

16:30 A National Serviceman, right, he did that. He got wounded twice, didn’t feel it. He performed under battle conditions and he didn’t get decorated. I’ve just written to the Prime Minister. I’m going to say, “Look, this bloke should be decorated.” I don’t care how they do it. They’ll probably say, “Look, it’s too late.” But I’ll say, “Little John Howard, how about Baby John Russell.” This fellow should be decorated. He was a National Serviceman, two years out of his life. Somebody just said, “Go and off and do this,” and

17:00 he performed to a superior level. I think he was studying sociology at Western Australia University, used to write a bit of poetry at times. Sit in his tent and write little poems and laugh and drink and laugh at me, whatever I was doing, “What are you doing now mate?” He was in the next tent. We had these tents. I took Jo back to show her where my tent was. If I was doing something

17:30 funny he’d laugh about it. If I was getting into trouble for something I might say, “No, I’m not going to do that,” to one of the captains and they’d be berserk and shouting at me and he’d say, “I love that, I love watching you do that.” But see, I just thought I could. I was a regular soldier and they’d say, “Hey right, you do this,” and I’d say, “No, I’m not doing that.” He felt, he told me later on he felt he could never say no to them because they were captains. Because I was a lieutenant in the regular army I’d say, “No, no, we’re not doing that. We’ll do it

18:00 when we want to, when I decide to.” They said, “You do it now.” Captain, you know, two years older than me. I saw a different perspective from a National Serviceman. He’d look up at senior officers. They were very important to him. Having been part of the army as I grew up and these people were only a couple of years older than me and I’d be there eventually I’d just say no. John Russell thought that was very funny, he told me, he’d laugh. He’d egg me on, “Go on, you tell them Mick. Go on, tell them,

18:30 tell them to stuff off,” or something like this. He was a good soldier, excellent soldier. That was one, but the other bloke, they’re all like that. I’m sure there are many other stories about. That’s the officers, but then the soldiers were the same. After about three months you couldn’t differentiate between a National Serviceman and a regular soldier. They came through the same training system, they had the same cultural values which are part of Australia. They came from the same culture,

19:00 what I understand by culture, and I wrote down what I understand by culture. I believe it's the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate their social behaviour. This knowledge forms values, creates attitudes and influences behaviour so they have the same values, which values, things which are right and wrong, what is good and bad, what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and what has priority and what has a low priority. So, good and bad and

19:30 what is appropriate behaviour, and I think the National Servicemen probably had a lot of the influence of the Australian Second World War on them, because they have to act appropriately. As a regular soldier I've chosen to be here, I'll act the way I want to. A National Serviceman has some pressure upon him because he has to act like grandpa or granddad or Dad, I've got to go through this. Whereas I would say, "No, sorry, I've had enough." I remember

20:00 them talking about Simon Townsend. One of my mates from Duntroon in my class, it's his executive producer. But I remember the soldiers talking about him and saying, "Well, he's showing guts. At least he's not just sitting at home sort of smoking weed. He's still in gaol." And the soldiers said, "Well, he stood up for what he believed in." They didn't mind that, as long as he stood up. If he just said, "I'm not going to do it," they wouldn't have liked him. But he stood up and he took his punishment which was to go to gaol. I think he went to a military gaol. I don't think he went to

20:30 a civil prison, he went to a military gaol out at Holsworthy. But the soldiers thought he was good.

You've just raised something interesting, if the Nationals are fighting for their fathers and their fathers before them, who are you fighting for?

I was a regular soldier. This was my job. I was trained to do this, and you know, it was my job. I'm military, I'm an extension of the foreign policy of Australia.

21:00 Bougainville is not hurting Australia now, but we've got all these soldiers there. We're an extension of foreign policy, you see, and some old man says, "Righto you young men, go over and do this, and get killed." That's the way life is. That's the way life is everywhere in the world. The young cadets I had at Duntroon were in Afghanistan, fighting in Afghanistan. They've written back to me. They were young cadets and they were sent to Afghanistan. I don't know why Afghanistan has any relation to Australia.

21:30 That's just the way, you join the army and you join it as a professional and you say, "Right, I'm going to make myself so good that I'm immortal. I won't be killed and I'll do the job." But the cultural influence is probably not as strong on me as it is on National Serviceman, who had to, because their knowledge, acquired knowledge, how do you acquire knowledge?

22:00 Knowledge comes from all those things. It may be inter-generational. Your mother says to you, "Sit up straight, sit up straight. Close your mouth when you eat. Don't wear so much make-up. Don't sit like that, it's unladylike." That's what your mother does at the table, doesn't she? "Eat with your knife and fork. Don't do that, put your knife down this way." That's your acquired knowledge. You don't get it out of a book, do you? Your parents teach you.

22:30 My father, I remember I got stung on the lip when I was seven and it was a wasp and I started to cry, and my father said, "Big boys don't cry." So I haven't cried since. I just don't cry. In a cultural thing there's acquired knowledge lets me interpret experience and it generates my social behaviour and forms my values, what's right and wrong, good and bad, what's appropriate behaviour, what's inappropriate behaviour, the values that I acquire. Trans-generational, you can

23:00 get it from your peers. Peers can say, "This is OK," and, "This is right," or "Why don't you do this? Come on, come and have a beer." "No no." "It's OK." As soon as you accept that, it's come across like that, people have taught you appropriate behaviour. Value, you might say, "I don't drink." They say, "Come on, have a drink." So you have a drink, so that's you then. You acquire, part of your culture is you have a drink, a drink of alcohol, but it's been, you've acquired it from across this way or it comes downwards

23:30 through people, and that's a value then. You then start to develop those values.

I'm just wondering how much duty to Australia you felt as a soldier and protecting Australia?

I didn't think it was any protection of Australia, us being in Vietnam. I thought it was, what our job was at that time we were taught from RMC right through and all the soldiers were taught

24:00 the domino theory of the screaming hordes of communists coming down. And the domino theory could be easily, it wasn't true, but it could be demonstrated to somebody. They could say, "Look, Thailand. They're communists in Thailand. Malaya, communist terrorists from Malaya. Indonesia, up till '65 they were under Suharto. We knew that. Vietnam. So we've got these communist in Korea. Communists were coming down there. So all the dominos

24:30 were falling and they'd be on our doorstep in no time. So that's what they were taught when a soldier came to join the army. At recruit training he was taught why are we in Vietnam or South East Asia? Because of the domino theory. Why are we in Borneo? Because the Indonesians are going to try and take over Borneo and Malaysia. Why are we in Malaya? Because the communist terrorists were there, and they were there. They were there and they wanted to take over Malaysia. But that's what we were taught. We were taught it at school and it was on the news and it was in

25:00 probably in current affairs bulletins and newspapers that the domino theory, that all these little states

would just keep falling and then the communists would be here taking over Australia. So we were there to stabilise. The Vietnamese asked us to be there. Some people say history, Lockie would say in his book, would say prove it to me. Lockhart, wouldn't he? You prove it to me the Vietnamese actually asked us. Where did they write it? It was after the Gulf of Tonkin incident

25:30 with the Americans which could have been fabricated to get America to go to war, and there was no proof that the Vietnamese asked us. That was what we were taught, go there because these people need our protection. Go to Malaysia because the Malaysians are being taken over by communist. So a soldier did it. They went to Malaya, they went to Borneo and then they went to Vietnam. Some soldiers went to all three. That's what I saw, these people, they need our

26:00 protection from Australia, these Vietnamese, so I went there.

And what did you learn I guess throughout your schooling about the new enemy?

The enemy was the North Vietnamese who were an aggressive communist force. They had promised to hold elections in South Vietnam soon after the partition and then they didn't do it, and now

26:30 they were taking over by force. That's what we taught and we were taught that was everywhere, we were taught that. We were taught it at Duntroon and then soldiers were taught it when they came in the army so you made sure they understood. So they thought you go to Vietnam and protect the Vietnamese people. We don't know if the Vietnamese people wanted to be protected and who did they want to be protected from, and when I went there and worked with them and lived with them, they wanted to be protected from the North Vietnamese. They didn't

27:00 like communism because it took a lot of their rice away. They wanted to fight communism, they didn't want to be part of North Vietnam, but I don't know if they wanted us to be there to do it. I'm not sure they wanted to do it that way because, they've got a new term now, collateral damage was too great. The fact that the Americans would upset their economy, many more people were being killed in little villages and things occasionally. They thought no, too much. Their country

27:30 was being eroded by having a war fought there. The truth between North and South, an aggressor which was supported by China, it was initially supported by Russia, North Vietnam, but then it was supported by China with arms and logistics and ammunition. It couldn't have waged a war on its own, it wasn't strong enough. The Chinese communists came in and just had ships come around and then they were allowed to fight the war.

28:00 The North Vietnamese just couldn't have fought the war, they had to rely upon China, and that was why Americans were so upset about the Chinese being in it, because if they couldn't bomb the ships, the Chinese ships, because China would come into Vietnam. So it was a limited war. There are very few wars these days, they're all limited, fighting with one hand behind your back. You're not allowed to go into Laos, you're not allowed to go into Cambodia, or you're not allowed to use these weapons, not allowed to use those weapons.

28:30 Now if you're going to go out and kill people why don't you just go and kill the bloody, kill them, kill 'em all. Why worry about only using these weapons or that weapon, but that's the way it's been. There are very few total wars now. Saddam Hussein of course used gas which is pretty bad stuff and killed all the civilians, and that's what happened to our soldiers in the First World War, all gas casualties. They used to cough all the time because they got gassed. It's always limited, and the Vietnam War was limited. You're not

29:00 allowed to use these weapons, you can't go into North Vietnam. If you thought about it American could have invaded North Vietnam and it would all be over in a couple of weeks. Just invaded the place and taken over and the war would've been different, but the limitation was you're not allowed to go into North Vietnam because the Chinese would come in then and there'd be a war between China and America. And then they weren't allowed to use certain weapons. They weren't allowed to mine the harbours, Haiphong, the harbours there weren't allowed to be mined.

29:30 Why not? If you're going to war and people and killing each other surely you should do your utmost to either stop those people killing you or kill them if you've decided that's what has to be done. That war is very limited in scope and we weren't allowed to fly out to, we were only allowed to go to, these blokes in, these Australian pilots weren't allowed to go to Laos. They were operating right out to Laos, they weren't allowed to cross the border, and I operated near the Laotian border a couple of

30:00 times but you weren't allowed to go across the Laotian border. The enemy was. It makes it one sided, doesn't it? You fight the enemy and the enemy runs into his, "I'm taking my bat and ball and going home," and after they've tried to shoot you the run across a little border, a line on the ground, and they say, "Can't get me, ha ha." That's the way it was. See, it's limited, you're limiting yourself. Of course you couldn't chase them and chase them up into their camps and base areas. You had to only go up

30:30 to the border and stop and that was one of the problems of the war. It was a limited war.

I guess much has been talked about in hindsight with many years of reflection, but I'm wondering if at the time you felt it was really Australia's war or whether the intent

31:00 **was to support America?**

At the time when I was fighting with the Australians I thought it was Australia's war. I thought we were there to help the Vietnamese people survive because they were under threat. That was when I was with the Australians. Later on when I was with the Vietnamese I thought the Australians were there just as another vote in the United Nations beside America, and New Zealand was there for the same reason. They were just

31:30 there because America supported us with all logistics and we just said, "Yeah, we'll," what happened prior to that, Britain, who was our ally historically had withdrawn west of Suez, Suez Canal. All British forces had been withdrawn from Malaysia, Singapore and had gone west of Suez and they were stationed in Malta and places like that. So we lost our historical ally, and so, and then we

32:00 had America come to save us so there was a sort of a, they came to the Coral Sea when the Japanese were coming down and so people could say, "Look, they helped us," and point out how they helped us. So we wanted to be their ally in the Pacific Rim. I think political history will show you that. We wanted to be the ally of America on the Pacific Rim, same with New Zealand.

32:30 They've fallen out over nuclear weapons now, but everybody, we're all on the same side, we're all the same culture, have the same values, so we'll help America. And why do they want Australia and New Zealand? Australia had one battalion there and America had thirty-seven, so we had a very small contribution to the war. But they just want us to be there so they can put their hand up the United Nations, "It's not only us being the baddie. They are too, see Australia, over there in the As, New Zealand down here. Philippines."

33:00 I'll tell you some others you don't know were there. The Spanish were there in Vietnam. Spanish, Philippines, Koreans, Thais, New Zealanders, Americans, Australians. I think that's about all that I can remember. A ship from Germany called the Helgalan which used to help both sides, that was a hospital ship and it was in Da Nang Harbour. Red Cross on it, a big white ship

33:30 and nurses would come in and pick up Viet Cong and take them out there and treat them and pick up South Vietnamese and treat them on this ship. I went out there one night just for drinks, standing around, I walked through the wards and there were Viet Cong lying there. It's a strange experience, you're walking along and these blokes you're going to kill the next day, here they all are lying along. They were having their meal when I went passed, all lying along this ward on board a ship, the Helgalan. It came from

34:00 Germany. So a lot of countries were involved in Vietnam. We ask ourselves or we brow beat and say, "Why were we there?" And all these other countries were there as well, and we're very prone to over analyse ourselves in Australia, and until we get ourselves to the stage where we're convinced we were right, rather than say, "Yeah, these people needed help. Go and help them." We did and it turned

34:30 out when the communists came down they were very bad and they really killed people and the put people into prisoner of war camps and into re-education camps, and hundreds and thousands died. That's what the Vietnamese tell me. So they knew what was best for them. They understood their brothers, the Vietnamese. They didn't want them up there coming down here. It would be like we don't want the Queenslanders coming down here, the cane toads. Really, they didn't want the North Vietnamese to be down in the South

35:00 because they didn't want communism. Communism they thought would interfere with Buddhism which was their religious value. They didn't want it to interfere with their free enterprise. The South Vietnamese are very enterprising. They like business, the like making money, they like setting up business for themselves, as we've seen in here in Australia. Every fresh bread shop is, you know, they've got business here everywhere. They love enterprise and they're very hard working and they knew that that

35:30 would be stopped under, or had been stopped under communism, so they wanted to preserve their society and as it was in South Vietnam. They didn't want communist society so they were saying to us, "Come and give a hand," and we went and gave a hand and they're very grateful for that. They say thanks. Now they are, very grateful that Australia gave a hand and they can't ever show gratitude, but they're grateful.

Well, I'm just wondering, given that in World

36:00 **War II the kind of battle that was being waged was a clear front line, what did you expect with this new type of warfare where the front line was not so clearly delineated?**

Well, by the time I got through Duntroon I knew exactly what to expect. That's the first thing. My four years of training had prepared me. I'd had lectures, I'd had people who'd been there tell me and I'd gone through four years of training preparing myself for counter revolutionary

36:30 warfare where the lines were blurred and the enemy would mix in amongst the people so you couldn't find them. So when I went there the first operation I had was to go in amongst the people and kill the enemy in Dat Do in the lanes up through the houses and put ambushes around. The first night I went in and I went in as a Trojan Horse. We went in the back of trucks with a bit of canvas over us and then got out and walked into the, had an ambush, and then walked into

37:00 another area. One of my own blokes got up and shot two of my own blokes, bang bang, one through the chest and one through the kidneys and upper thigh. It was about 3.00 o'clock in the morning and it was raining. So I went out and I spoke to one. I walked out and I had a torch and I shone the torch down in the front of his shirt and I could see this big hole under his heart about that big. You could put a fist in it. Rivulets of blood coming down over his white skin and coming down and

37:30 going around his back. His name was Mortimer, and I sat down. He was still trying to protect me. He was a scout whose job is to protect you. Even while he was wounded he was saying, "Get down, get down, they're just up there. They'll shoot you." He could see two enemy he reckoned. "Sit down, sit down skipper, sit down." Even while he was wounded. I thought jeez, you know, just kept on going, that drive to do his job properly. It was in his mind although he had, Jo has seen his wound. One time we were in a pub and he said, "Do you want to see?" He pulled his shirt up. It's about that round.

38:00 It's about that deep the scar is. I've never seen it until, I've seen it when it was raw. It was about that deep and around under his heart. He survived, and then the other bloke was shot and they opened up his leg, Aspinal, and then we had to sort of tie them all. We had to tie everybody together. I had a bit of rope tied on my shirt and I tied them altogether and then they had to hang onto the rope and we wound like a snake back because nobody knew the way. It was black, you couldn't see anything. So we wound our way

38:30 back and they got taken out and they got repaired. And now they're so well repaired they do camp draft together out at Moree and Dubbo and Dunedoo and places like that, these two blokes who were shot up badly. They're riding horses and jumping on cows and all sorts of things. The meet each other, Aspinal and Mortimer. Mortimer has just had a bit of an operation. His stitches have come unstuck so they've gone in and

39:00 they re-stitched him up with some nice sail stitch he reckons, so it won't break again. He's quite well. I've tried to arrange him a girl. We knew a girl. We had a girl stay, a short girl, pretty, and Mortimer is short, so I we tried to do that for him. We see him all the time. He rings up, doesn't he? He's as well as anything now and here he was with this massive wound. That was on the first night.

39:30 So here we had two houses, just like a couple of houses here and out there is lying twenty blokes with guns and rockets and mines and machine guns amongst these houses. On the way back Mortimer said to me, "There's an enemy just in the front of this house." So I stopped everybody and I went into the house and the house was big slabs of wood, and I went up to the house and I could see a yellow kerosene lamp. I looked in through the slot in the

40:00 wall. I looked in there. What was in there was a Vietnamese family all sitting around having soup and bread. I bet you if they opened the door, if they heard something outside and opened the door and all these blokes with black faces and machine guns with knives and guns and grenades, they would have died. They would have been traumatised for life, all these little kids and Mum and Dad, I could see in there, a boy and a girl about eighteen or twenty, and then there were these two little kids about probably eleven or nine or

40:30 ten sitting around at the big long table just drinking their soup. A little sneak, because I could hear them talking and it was just like Vietnamese talking at the table. "What did you do today at school?" You know, that sort of stuff. "What did you do today at school? Where's the dog, who fed the dog tonight?" They were all talking to each other so I went and had a look in and that's what was going on. So we were operating in that environment walking amongst them. With the Vietnamese,

41:00 when I was working with the South Vietnamese, the same. You were operating amongst that environment most of the time, but it was much more, I think it was more clear cut because the enemy was so large, 1,000 enemy. They were there and we were here and they had a lot of force and they had a lot of force. We had planes and they had a lot of rockets and machine guns, so it was sort of back at each other, more like what people perceive in their mind as traditional war.

Tape 5

00:32 **Michael, before we stopped for lunch you were talking a little bit about the threat of communism coming to Australia and I just wondered what was communism, what did you understand about what would happen if communists did come to Australia?**

Well, it was the negative side of communism that we were taught based on the examples they

01:00 presented. Stalinist communism, Mao's form of communism which was very dictatorial and removed individual rights. They were the ones which exposed themselves since 1914 in Russia and China, which were a dictatorial for of communism which wiped out the rights of the individual, which communism doesn't have to do, but did in those two cases. So it came to us as a nasty thing. If it came to Australia,

01:30 in the mid say between about 1910 and 1920 people thought Australia was a very socialist state. There are reports that the British were sending out secret agents to Australia to check on Australia because they thought it was very socialist and was heading towards Russia. That's Australia. And then in response to that what grew up in Australia were all these very right wing armies, secret armies around

Sydney.

02:00 The New Guard, have you heard of the New Guard? They had squadrons and horses and ranks. They gave themselves ranks. They were major, “Hello major, hello captain, hello colonel.” They used to ride around, have secret meetings at night on their horses with guns. They were riding around in the suburbs and they were a secret army to stop Australia going over to the communists. Of course Jack Lang, the Premier of New South Wales, refused to honour debts and that’s why when he was about to open the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Captain de Groot

02:30 of the New Guard went across and cut it with his sword. De Groot was an Irishman actually. He died in Ireland too, but he was a member of the New Guard and very right wing. They thought Australia was going the way of communism and socialism so they were checking on it. There’s also a story about DH Lawrence, you know, Sons and Lovers, that he came out here as a British agent to check on what was going on in Australia, the level of political, the depth of

03:00 socialism in Australia’s political system. He wrote a book called Kangaroo. He wrote it down at Thirroul just north of Wollongong and Kangaroo was they think one of the General’s of the Australian Army, Brudenell White, who had a humpback so he looked like a kangaroo, and he was the figurehead and sponsor of one of these right wing organisations. So Australia has had its little bit of tinges of these things and any brand of communism would’ve been our own,

03:30 or socialism, and we are very much a socialist country anyway. We have an individual form of culture. We see ourselves as individuals, but individuals as part of a greater whole. That’s why we have things in Australia like social services and free travel, and we help people with jobs, and if you’re a cripple you get some money, and all these nets. We’re socialist in that way.

04:00 If something happens you get compensation. They’re trying to stop people just falling into the abyss. There’s a lot of socialism in Australia, a socialist democracy. I’ll say it is a democracy that has all this socialism where if people are out of work the state gives them money to get them through while they’re down there, and all those things occur in Australian society. So if we were to become more socialist it would be our brand of it and would probably be at a cost to a central government

04:30 which would be paying for other people who are in distress perhaps. They’re only economic views. But the ones that we saw were the ones that were aggressive and part of their charter was to knock off a country and knock over democracies, as Stalin had shown with millions of people killed, and Mao had shown his form of socialism in

05:00 China and the fact that he didn’t want to have any, he wanted no rivals. And then we could see it coming. When Korea, helped the North Koreans to take over the South by force and then we saw the Chinese socialism come down into Vietnam and then communist terrorists supported by China in Malaya with Chin Pang. He had an MBE from the Queen and he was the leader of the communist terrorists, and he was decorated by the Queen.

05:30 So you had all these people and these states and it was perhaps, not a justification, but it was used as a trick to fool people like me who were young, “Here are the dominos. One will fall and they’ll all fall.” It looked like that was the way it was going too. I think we had troops in Thailand at one stage trying to stop the Thai Government from falling. We had troops in Malaya and Borneo at various stages to prop up regimes which were under threat from communism. That’s what I thought,

06:00 that’s what we were, if you read the papers of the time, that’s what we thought of communism and that’s where our views came from. They came from that nasty threat, look, there’s proof. Look at Stalin, look what he did. So it’s very hard to argue with. Look there it is, this is what they did. They’re communists and that is what they did, therefore that is what communists are like. Not necessarily so, but that’s what we were told, without any further level of knowledge or education, was accepted by me that

06:30 communism is the reverse of capitalism. We just had somebody trying to say recently, he’s being held up to ridicule, that there are communism and democracy, free enterprise and communism, and communism collapsed. So that was the economic side of things collapsed. Socialism

07:00 and individualism, and socialism has collapsed. So all the forms of political structures, democracy and socialism, socialism has collapsed and democracy has won through. So the only thing left they believe is on the religious side now, Islam versus Christianity. It’s a theory by a bloke named Huntington and he believes that will be the next big struggle in the world. It had all the other struggles and somebody has come out ahead, but now there’s

07:30 Islam versus Christianity and that’s what we’re going to face in the future. Now his saying that is being questioned very greatly. I reckon in the next few weeks you’ll see it in the papers because somebody said it, some person has said it in the paper. Therefore it will pull everybody out and now go and do research. But everything, economic, political, social, all those things have had their wars which one

08:00 survived, but we haven’t had one on religion between the two major religions of the world. But it’s happening. There’s a renaissance. What’s happening, they’ve made a change going on inside the religions and then they’ll face each other off as they have in the past. But I think the Islamic people, their big, what they want, they want to get rid of the Jews mainly from Israel, Islamic people. They don’t

care too much

08:30 about Christianity. They just see us as a good opposition and America presents them with a nice thing to throw rocks at. It interferes in covert and overt ways, so they can always say, “Look what America did,” point the finger, but they don’t care much about Christianity. They do hate the Jews. I’m not sure why that is. There hasn’t been any great conflict. The Jews haven’t tried to interfere in those countries, but they hate the Jews because the Jews are affecting the

09:00 lifestyle of the Palestinian people. I’ve had them in my class at UTS. I said, “Righto, you explain to me,” and they were Islamic fundamentalists and even terrorists, in my class. You see them on TV, I saw them last night. And I said, “What are the issues?” He said, “Well, the Jews should be kicked out of Israel and the Palestinians should take over that country.

09:30 The Americans should get out of Saudi Arabia and not be on Mecca because they’re a stain on Allah because they’re on the land of Islam, so Americans have got to leave that because they’re actually, we have infidels there.” What else? He had about four things which have to be fixed. They have a definite agenda what they want to happen. One of them which is scary with Jemaah Islamiah is that

10:00 Bashir who is about to be sent to gaol, he said, “Leave it a hundred years and Australia will become part of a greater Islamic state incorporating Indonesia.” He says, “Australia has the resources. Indonesia has the resource called population.” They’ve got 200 million people. He says, “We see a big Islamic state including Australia,” because Australia has got oil, diamonds, land and natural gas and those sorts of things that you need or a state.

10:30 So we’ve got all that and up above us is this human resource called people, 200 million of them. He sees this as a gradual taking over Australia. So we’re looking at communism, that’s what Bashir said and he’s up before the court now and he’s willing to go to war as he’s shown in the Marriott [Hotel bomb blast October 2002], Bali. He’s shown they’ll do all sorts of things. He’s just blown up a mosque. We don’t know if he was involved in that, but Jemaah Islamiah is here

11:00 in Australia. They’re training, we know that. We know they’ve got people here and they’ve got a spiritual leader, or a leader, who said that Australia is part of his empire in the future. He’s stated these things. It’s not as if we’re surmising or making it up like we did with communism. They’re nasty people because they’re all red.

I was just going to ask, you said you’d been tricked into believing that sort of communist peril. When did you come to realise that maybe that wasn’t the case?

11:30 I think in my twenties, early twenties, studying history, having Robert O’Neill as a lecturer, Dr Robert O’Neill at RMC. He was even handed in his approach to things, and he said, “These are people and they’re fighting the French to throw out colonialism, and then the British came into Vietnam and they couldn’t get control of Vietnam because the Vietnamese were waring, so the British brought back the Japanese

12:00 and armed them and gave the Japanese Vietnam.” It’s not well known but the Brits couldn’t keep control of all the Vietnamese going around shooting everybody, so they got the Japanese and they said, “Righto, you can have it back.” So the Japanese went around and smashed people, very brutal, and some of the Vietnamese said, “Yeah, we understand this.” Very similar to Asian culture with the Vietnamese and the Republic of Korean soldiers, Korean soldiers were very brutal in

12:30 a physical way. They’d have a shooting war but they’d have a cane and they’d go into a village and say, “Righto, everybody over fifteen get out here,” and if they wouldn’t they’d go through the houses then. If they met a bloke who was over fifteen they’d whack him with this bit of cane to make him get out, bang bang bang, and they knew, “Here come the Korean soldiers, we’re getting out. Whatever they say goes.” Whereas I’ve been out to Cabramatta out here in Sydney and I’ve spoken to the Vietnamese people out there when I was with the police. They said, “Here police

13:00 no good. Our boys get in trouble the police take them away and they come back that night. We tell the police the boys are very bad, drugs and all that, and then the police come and take them away to gaol and they pay bail and they come home that night and belt me up for telling the police on them. Why don’t the police hit them like they do in Vietnam?” They said, “The police are no good, very weak here in Australia.” Because in Vietnam the police would take them in by the scruff of the neck and they’d get a bit of cane and belt them, the same way

13:30 as you must remember when the American boy broke the aerial off a Mercedes in Singapore. A young American boy, he was mucking around one night. He was drunk and he went and broke all the aerials off a Mercedes. They went to court and they sentenced him to forty-three hits with a rattan cane. He had to bend over and there was a big uproar about it because it was corporal, physical punishment, but I bet you he won’t do it again. The Asians

14:00 see that. They say, “That’s OK. He did that and he’s got to pay and this is what you pay. You do that and that’s the punishment for that crime,” and that’s why that’s the way it is in Singapore. They don’t get their aerials broken off. You go around in Sydney and you see all the aerials broken off and the kids get away with it. But it’s just an attitude of mind, so we were taught, I was taught to understand that. I think firstly by Robert O’Neill but then on the Training Team course. I think when we went to

14:30 Vietnam we were in a better position than the Americans because we were taught about the cultural mix. Now I could, if you think I can talk, once you got me on to culture and values and different values I could go for about two days because I teach it. But when I got to Vietnam I walked in with the Vietnamese and I knew what they were looking for, so I had photos of my wife and two sons. The sons were more important than daughters. They said, “How old are you?” So I said,

15:00 “Ba mooi loom,” which is thirty-five. I said I was thirty-five. I was only twenty-three I think, but thirty-five is the year of the goat, ’35. It’s good for virility. So if I said that to a woman she’d go, “Oh,” and laugh and get embarrassed. She’d say, “How old are you Daiuy?” I’d say, “Ba mooi loom,” and she’d laugh and run away. And I learnt all these little things which just allowed me to

15:30 communicate on a humorous level socially with anybody in Vietnam, just say funny things. Even taking Jo there, Jo and I would be walking, going along the road and two pretty girls would pull up on a motorbike beside me and say, “You come with us. Come on, you come with us tonight,” and I’d say, “No, mama-san. She my mama-san. She kakado me.” “Kakado, ha ha,” they know that I knew something so they’d go off on their motorbike laughing, laughing their head off. Just enough to be rude

16:00 and a larrikin, and I ate with chopsticks. I always ate with the Vietnamese and I knew how to eat properly. There are certain things you do which are part of their eating habits. One is to eat out of the centre of the table, you always eat out of the centre of the table and you touch your bowl every time. Just little things that you learn to do while you’re eating. I never told them I got a lot of money because you seemed to be riding it over them all the time, whereas the

16:30 Americans were very free with their money and they always seemed to have a lot. So I said, “No, we don’t get paid a lot. More even, Vietnamese, we’re more even.” So they accepted me very quickly and I got along well with them. Part of it was fake, but I saw it as necessary to start the communication system because I was going to live with them, sleep with them, eat with them and cook with them for the next couple of years. So

17:00 I think we were ahead of them there, that some in Australia had thought all that through, somebody in the military system. What do we tell these people before they go so they can be better advisers and get on with the Vietnamese better. That was my job, but there were people doing much more dangerous and isolated jobs than me. Some of them were working with the Montagnards out in the border areas, the Ra, all the aboriginal tribes. Some of the

17:30 Training Team was working out there in special forces camps and they lived with them very closely. I lived in a base on top of a hill and there’d be on there probably I suppose about 150 to 200 Vietnamese and me and probably from time to time fifty Americans would come in, and they’d fly in in their helicopters and live there for a couple of days and off they’d go. I think the courses and the training I got beforehand, I did a lot of reading myself

18:00 about their history and it was portrayed to me in our history lectures at Duntroon, here was Vietnam and a colonial power which had taken them over and they ejected the colonial power. Then another power had come in which was America, which they didn’t want either. So here we were. They didn’t want America. They didn’t want North Vietnam but they didn’t want America either. So that was told to me so I had that approach. I knew what they wanted. When I was talking to them they’d

18:30 say, I understood that they were happy to win the war. When they won the war they wanted to live their own life, get to a stage where Vietnam for the Vietnamese, or they’d come to Australia. The Australian Army is so small we used to say RTA [Road Transport Authority], you had a return to Australia day, your RTA date and one day the Americans thought, they said, “Gee, you’re out here on your own for a long time. When does somebody come and visit you?

19:00 Don’t they like you in Australia?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “You’ve had no senior officer coming to visit you.” I said, “I don’t know.” He said, “There must be some in Vietnam?” I said, “There are,” and then about a week later the Chief of the General Staff came. He was General Brogan. He said, “How big is your army?” I said, “Not very big,” because I knew a few people that came through. “Yeah, I know him, I know him, I know him.” He said, “Do you know everybody in the army?” I said, “No,” and then General Brogan came and he came to

19:30 Fire Support Base West and he landed on our helicopter. He got out, he was all spick and span with his greens and his hat on, and he walked out of the helicopter and said, “G’day Mike.” He knew straight away who I was. The Americans, this is the chief of the army. In America the chief of the army wouldn’t know anyone. “G’day Mike,” he said, “I saw your mother yesterday and she sends her regards,” and the Americans naturally thought that the chief of the army goes around seeing everybody’s Mum before he comes away, before he comes overseas. Goes and sees everybody’s Mum because it was such a small army.

20:00 But my mother just happened to live next door to him in Victoria Barracks. “I saw your Mum yesterday. She said to keep well,” and then his aid who was named Colin Kahn who was my CO [Commanding Officer] on the first tour of Vietnam, he was a very charismatic figure and he walked over to me, “G’day Mike, how are you going?” He knew my first name you see, and this was strange to Americans because they call each other by their second name. Like they’d call me McDermott and you just call them, everybody call’s each other by his surname. Colin Kahn was a charismatic leader in the Australian

20:30 Army. He'd been to Korea and he got shot five times through the lung. He stayed and fought with his platoon and then he got out, got them all evacuated and he stayed, and then he came back to Australia and he won a decathlon championship even with one lung, and he played football with one lung. Then they made him the commanding officer of a battalion and it was the Tiger Battalion. I think Kahn means tiger. So he led this battalion back to Vietnam, but he's another charismatic leader that we've got, military leader

21:00 in Australia who is not, you hear of them overseas. We've got them but I don't think we sort of promote them. He's an extremely gentle man but I suppose he'd be about six foot three. His family was probably Pakistani I suppose or Afghanistani. He's very dark. When you're that big you don't have to ask people to do things, they just do things automatically. "Hello Mike, would you do that?" "Sir, straight away," and he was, but very

21:30 pleasant and very softly spoken and he was a CO, but soldiers just loved him. At the end of an operation out in the field he would get 600 soldiers and sit them down in a square and talk to them all. As an Australian commanding officer he'd talk to 600 soldiers and he'd talk to them. He'd talk about what went right and what went wrong on the operation, who got killed and he'd say, "Yeah, old Bluey, he got killed. He was a good soldier. I remember Bluey this," and he'd talk about him

22:00 and the soldiers were just in awe of him, you see. He'd stand there, this massive figure with this background, and the soldiers were in awe of this fellow, and he spoke and I thought OK, that's OK. Now show me, do something, walk on water. I want you to do something. Walk on water. I came back to Australia and we had a dinner out at Holsworthy where we had a sit down dinner

22:30 for 600 fellows who'd all be in their forties. Well, what happened, they invited him to get up and speak and he spoke with such a balance being able to draw out their emotions and also compliment them on the things they'd done as National Servicemen, as regular soldiers and those sorts of things. But at the end of his speech there were 600 of these fellows standing on their chairs stamping, and on the table, just screaming and clapping. I thought he has something there

23:00 that he's able to just grab them in. I thought yeah, there is charisma there. It's in his person plus his ability to speak and what he does. He's an interesting character, Colin Nada Khan.

I wonder Mike, we've mentioned a little bit about, a lot about Vietnam, but I was wondering if you could tell me I guess when you first got there, your first impressions of Vietnam when you arrived on that

23:30 **first tour?**

Yes. I remember flying in. I came over from Malaysia so I flew across the bottom of Vietnam, the bottom part, it's called the Delta of the Mekong River. I remember flying across there and I was looking out the window of the plane all excited. This is war, I'm going to war. I was looking down and I could see these, I'd flown across Australia a lot of times through northern Queensland and I could see all these holes in the ground. They looked like dams,

24:00 the Australian dams you see on properties. They weren't dams, they were 500 pound bomb holes. I thought they were dams, but I knew they were bomb holes because they were so even. I flew into the airport called Tan Son Nhut, the busiest airport in the world, and then as I flew in I was looking out the place and here I was flying in on Qantas or something or Malaysian Airlines, and along the airstrip were fighter bombers with big bombs under their wings and I thought (UNCLEAR), or with camouflage, and got off the plane. Then

24:30 there was a swarm of American soldiers, probably thousands of them all around this Tan Son Nhut airbase, marching around and getting on planes and getting off. Everybody carried a gun. This was the war. There was no enemy around but the soldiers were there. The whole place had been taken over, the whole country had been taken over by the army, and I walked around and I found a ride and got around to, I could see an RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force] shed over the other side of the airbase

25:00 and I went over there and I said, "Look, I'm Lieutenant McDermott from Malaysia." "Never heard of you, Sir. Where do you want to go?" I said, "I want to go down to Nui Dat I think." He said, "You think, Sir?" I said, "Yeah, I haven't been told." He said, "OK, Nui Dat. We've got a plane leaving at 4.30 this arvo. If you come here we'll put you on that." "OK, good." I went up and there were big piles of pallets all there and down behind a pile of pallets was a soldier crying with his head almost on the ground, American soldier, and I thought what's

25:30 up with him, and I went and asked the sergeant and he said, "I don't know. He's been there for about an hour and a half." So I sat down, I watched him for a while and he was crying. I said, "Come over here, have a cigarette. What are you doing mate?" He said, "Sir, what are you?" I said, "I'm an Australian." He said, "You look like a British officer." I said, "I've just come from a British unit in Malaya." He said, "OK." He said, "I'm at ICOR, it's really hot up there." He said, "I'm the last survivor of

26:00 three platoons. I was in one platoon, everyone got killed. They put me in another platoon and everybody got killed. They put me in a third platoon and everybody got killed and I'm it. Now they're sending me back up there." He said, "I don't want to go. I just don't want to go, Sir." I said, "I can't do anything about that. You've got to go back to your unit." He said, "Sir, I don't want to go. I've had some friends and I've lost two lots of friends. First twenty were killed and then another twenty were killed and I'm

the only bloke left. What chance do you think I've got?" I said, "I don't know," and he was fairly, he was

26:30 crying and praying. He was praying on the ground, saying prayers. So he went off to, I don't know. He stayed there and I flew off to the Australian base at Nui Dat. I suppose he just went up the top. I don't know who he was but I know he was down between the pallets, kneeling, he had his boots on and his greens and he was praying with almost his head on the ground when I first saw him. That's what attracted my attention, and then later on he was praying with his hands in a praying position, but he was crying. He

27:00 just didn't want to go back up and they were about to send him back up to ICOR.

It's a pretty confronting first image?

Yeah. I thought, gee, poor bloke. We sat there and had a talk, yeah, infantry bloke. I said, "I'm just arriving." "You're a newby are you?" I said, "What's that?" I then realised I had to learn a lot of language. Americans called me when I got down there Captain Newby. I said, "McDermott," and it's new boy, Captain New Boy they called me. He said, "350 and

27:30 a wakie." That means you had 355 days plus one wake-up to go. So they had, they counted down the days to go. I didn't and a lot of Australians didn't, but they had how many days to go. They'd say, "How short are you?" "I'm 250 and a wakie," because you'd stay for 250 days and your wakie is your last day and you're not in Vietnam on that day because you're going home. So he asked me how many days I,

28:00 and we had a joke about him going in a few weeks I think. I thought oh well, that's what the war is like. You hear about this, you see it, you read about it and this is a young fellow who'd obviously had enough. There was no channel for him to go anywhere. Probably could medically be sent out of the war. With the American system they'd probably say he's had an emotional breakdown and send him home. I don't know if we had the same system. Yes, we did. We had the same system.

28:30 If somebody broke down emotionally they'd say, "Thanks for coming." They'd send him home as a casualty and he'd then go for counselling and then go back into society.

I wonder Mike, what sense was there? A lot of reading that you do about Vietnam and the Vietnam War says that after 1968 and the Tet Offensive that there was this sense that the war was unwinnable. I just wonder what sense

29:00 **you had that the war was able to be won by?**

Our side? With Tet in '68, see, they lost, the North Vietnamese lost Tet very badly. They were just shattered after Tet. Their whole system was broken apart. They thought they'd win, and they couldn't win a battle and they couldn't win a campaign at Tet. They just got smashed by both the South Vietnamese Army and the Americans,

29:30 and the Americans could demonstrate that to you. I went straight into an American system and one of the things they showed me, Tet '68, "Look at this, this is what happened." Not one place in Vietnam were they able to go and get enough support to win, and the Americans were still sure they'd win. And the South Vietnamese thought that seeing the North Vietnamese couldn't win, that they would win after Tet '68. They thought that was their final push and they'd exhausted themselves. The South Vietnamese thought they'd be able to win then. Eventually

30:00 the South Vietnamese went into Laos. They thought they could win and they went into Laos on Operation Lam Son 719 and they got knocked about by the North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese were waiting for them and just killed them, thousands. I think the war was still winnable. Very hard to fight because of the limitations on the war. You weren't allowed to do this and you weren't allowed to do that. You weren't allowed to go

30:30 into North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese were allowed to come down to the south but you weren't allowed to go north or bomb it or do anything like that. They bombed it eventually but all their logistics systems weren't allowed to be bombed, and because you might bomb a Chinese ship that would bring the Chinese into the war, or could. So that's what made it unwinnable, and you weren't allowed to go into Laos but they were using, the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran through Laos and they were using that. So limitations

31:00 made it very hard for the Americans or the South Vietnamese to win. The Americans knew if they gave the South Vietnamese Phantom jets the South Vietnamese would attack straight into North Vietnam. They didn't want that to happen. The Americans kept the South Vietnamese down in the south because they didn't want the war to escalate and the south said, "Bugger this, we'll just go straight across the border and up into North Vietnam." They didn't care about what the Americans wanted to

31:30 keep China out. They fought a war against China after the war, about 1983 I think it was, and beat the Chinese. They defeated the Chinese for about three years in battle, but the Vietnamese army by that stage had fought for seventeen years straight, so they were a very experienced army and the Chinese hadn't had a war since '51. So when you look at the balance, the Chinese came over the border into North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese or the Vietnamese army went up and

32:00 just defeated the Chinese. So the Vietnamese were not scared. They hate the Chinese, it's just a

traditional hatred. Vietnamese people are OK, Cambodians, Laos, Koreans, they just hate Chinese, some sort of traditional hatred. Like Queenslanders I suppose.

I wonder what had you been told given the different groups operating in Vietnam with the civilians and the South Vietnamese and the

32:30 **North Vietnamese, what had you been told about how to identify army from civilian populations?**

They had very strict rules of engagement which you could carry in your pocket on a bit of card. If a person didn't have a weapon you weren't allowed to shoot him. Now you did, because they just pop up and get shot by mistake, but the rules

33:00 were if the person didn't have a weapon you weren't allowed to shoot them, or if they weren't shooting at you or threatening you, you didn't shoot them. So you could've got into a situation where a fellow is about to shoot you and you're not allowed him because he's not hostile towards you. So the rules of engagement were laid down and then you had to use your judgment and say, "Well, that's unworkable." If there are civilians walking around who are armed and can shoot you you've got to be able to defend yourself quickly, or if they can pop up anywhere

33:30 where they're not supposed to be and shoot you you've got to take action to stop that happening. We were told what a civilian looked like and what an enemy soldier looked like, and what a Viet Cong looked like. I don't think I ever saw a Viet Cong. I saw only North Vietnamese Army. No, I remember one one day. He was a courier and he carried some certificates, propaganda certificates against Australians.

34:00 It said, "Australian soldiers, do not go to war, do not be puppets of the US Government," or something like that. Yeah, killed him and he got knocked over by Hobbs.

What did you think of the propaganda certificates he had?

I thought, yeah, very poorly written actually. A lot of it was mistakes, but he was called the Ba Ria Liberation Army. I've got one here. I've given one to the War Memorial, one there. It's the first one they got in their propaganda

34:30 certificate file. I've got one here. He just had piles of them in his pack, and he just came around the corner at the wrong time. Poor fellow, bang, he was over, and we saw this pack and I wondered what it was and opened it up. Had piles of these propaganda certificates to give to Australians. "Australian servicemen, we are the friends of Australian servicemen.

35:00 We are the Ba Ria Liberation front. Do not be puppets of the American Government. Do not go to war." Those sorts of things, which are fairly traditional Chinese communist propaganda, 'puppets', the word puppets, the word puppet, and 'we are your friend'. That's it, that's the way they, and in prison camps it's the same sort of thing. We are your friends together. What they used to do is identify some weakness and then try and, like if they got Negro

35:30 soldiers they'd say, "You Negroes are treated so badly by the American white people, why not come over to our side and help us?" They'd look for that all the time.

Did anyone I wonder at any time, did you feel like an American puppet?

No. No, I just thought they had the might and I wanted to use that to help the South Vietnamese and I had the radio communication to do it.

36:00 I saw My Lai, I went in and had a look at My Lai, not when the dead people were there. I went in and had a look at the town. They were sort of sneering at me. I knew they weren't happy. I just drove in and drove out again. It was just up near where I was working. So I was driving along the road one day and the driver said, "That's where My Lai is." I said, "Let's go in there and have a look." So we drove down a road, I suppose about four kilometres, and it just had a lot of thatched huts

36:30 in a little, some trees. So I got out and walked around a bit and got back in the vehicle and drove away. That was My Lai.

What had you heard about the massacre that had happened?

I knew it had happened because I was at that stage working in divisional headquarters about ten kilometres south of there at Quan Ngai and all the investigations were being done through that headquarters. It was a South Vietnamese 2nd Division headquarters and they done the investigation and found out what had occurred, so all the other officers could tell me what had happened

37:00 at My Lai, and I heard what had happened. The soldiers had just been pushed to their breaking point. They were being shot at and killed by Viet Cong hiding in the villages. Suddenly bang, off goes your mate's head, and they just got to the stage where they were so frustrated they were easily motivated to kill the people, and it was murder. I met Calley's company. I walked around and spoke

37:30 to them about the next year. This was in early '71 I went to My Lai. But it was just frustration so they were willing to do anything. So many of them were killed and blown up and wounded and mutilated by the VC that as soon as the fellow said, Medina and Calley said, "Shoot these people," the soldiers shot

them all. I think it was from what I could make out the level of frustration. They weren't

38:00 allowed to wage the war properly, so they'd walk along and get shot from a village. They weren't allowed to go in and seek the enemy. The enemy was in their hiding amongst the people. Good idea for the enemy. The principle of guerrilla warfare according to Mao Tse Tung is to swim like the fish in the ocean amongst the people. So you stay amongst the people and then you're immune from fire, enemy fire. This one, he talks about that too, this Col Ackland, the Australian

38:30 in this. He says the Vietnamese kept on trying to get amongst the forward troops so they wouldn't be bombed and then he had to eventually bring the bombs in very close and he got awarded a decoration for it. So that's what they do. Eventually the Americans just broke, those soldiers. Under better leadership it would never happen to Australians. Australians would never do that. Our leadership was stronger at every level. We have, an interesting thing we have in the

39:00 Australian Army is a thing called, what I call the responsibility of senior NCOs. It's a term which comes from chivalry and knighthood. It's called the noble obligation, where I come into a platoon and I'm twenty-two and my platoon sergeant is thirty-one. His responsibility is to train me and stop me getting into trouble. He's junior to me in rank. He's a sergeant and I'm the officer, but he has a

39:30 responsibility to tell me what to do to guide me, counsel me, train me and do all those things although he's longer in the army but junior in rank. So he takes this on as a noble obligation to keep me alive. At twenty-one you're likely to do stupid things, so the platoon sergeants do this for you. Now I've had only the best platoon sergeants in the army. I thought maybe they think I'm really bad, that's why they give me the best ones. In Malaya I had the best platoon sergeant, his name was

40:00 Smith, and in Vietnam I had by far the best platoon sergeant. His name was Brian London. He got a DCM [Distinguished Conduct Medal] and an AM [Order of Australia] back here in Australia. He got a DCM as a platoon sergeant when an incident occurred, got decorated, and he was excellent. But he would say to me in a very polite way when he thought I was doing something that could endanger my life. "It's interesting you're going to do that, Sir. If you live they'll probably give you a decoration." Yeah, but he had

40:30 a nice way of saying it. He died recently down in Bateman's Bay. But Brian, I'm not sure if the company commander, he was feeding back things to the company commander, but the company commander held me on a tight rein too. He said to me a few years ago, "You don't like me, do you Mike?" I said, "No, I don't mind." He said, "Because I kept you under control in Vietnam." I said, "No, it's not that." He said, "What is it then?" I said, "No." He said, "I had to keep you under control."

41:00 I chased somebody one day, one of the enemy. He said, "Yeah, I heard about that." So I was trying to work out who told him. It could only have been my platoon sergeant I think because nobody else there would have dared. I think the platoon sergeant could have told another person who told the company commander. I had the best company commander too.

Tape 6

00:33 **Mike, you were just about to tell us about this new kind of guerrilla warfare that you were involved in. Can you tell us or describe the sights and sounds?**

I think one of the things about guerrilla warfare is it's waged amongst the people, so if you're moving along the road

01:00 all the people are just there doing things, having their meals, and they're cooking fish, or they're harvesting rice and suddenly in a moment it can change. You can be shooting and planes can be bombing, all in one moment in the same location. A domestic scene can suddenly erupt into a battle scene. A domestic scene where you see people sitting around and you say, "Yeah, there's that fellow with the conical hat. He

01:30 ran into that there, he just fired from over there." So suddenly you say, "Shoot him," because he fired at you, and he was just a farmer wandering along and he was over there. I let a few go, which I almost let a few enemy go. I went out, I had to look at a landing zone one time and I found a little thong, a little cup of tea and a little thong under a tree. The thong was about that long and I thought, about three inches long,

02:00 and I thought OK, there's a kid here with a man. I could see on the grass the man having a cup of tea and there's been a kid here. When I came back in the afternoon we were about to take off in helicopters and under the grass, a soldier said, "Hey Sir, there's a bloke over here." I went over and I kicked, kicked this bloke and he jumped. He got up and he stood up and I kicked him in the teeth, he was bleeding, and we searched around and we found his pack and I said, "We have to let him

02:30 go, the poor old bugger. He's the bloke who must've been here with his kid," and Brian London, my platoon sergeant said, "No, he's one of them. He's an enemy soldier." I said, "No, I just kicked a poor old farmer in the teeth. We can't do that, we've got take him in and get his, you know, we've got to let him go." He said, "No, don't let him go. We've got to take him in," and so we looked around and we

found his pack and we put him on the helicopter and they took him back.

03:00 He was a soldier. He was a sergeant in a unit which came from that area. I also found one morning, I caught a woman and she came out of the jungle. She came across towards me and myself and another soldier were in the grass, and she came up onto the road. She was up higher than us, and I said, “Stop. Dong lai,” and she stopped and she looked down and then we both stood up out of the grass, came out of the grass. Gee, did she get a shock. The fellow with

03:30 me had a machine gun, he had a big machine gun. Screaming, “Ah,” and I walked up to her and said, “Who are you?” And she was definitely out with the enemy. We could’ve shot her. I had a look at her ID card which I couldn’t read and I said, “What are you doing out here?” She pointed over there. I don’t know what she was doing. Might have been visiting her husband or her son or her brother or something, but she was in the jungle where the enemy were. I could see, she’d walked about 500 metres and I said, “OK, here.

04:00 Go home.” Now she could have been the enemy. You just let them go. What can you do? You can’t do much else. You just let them go. So you’re mixed, there are all those decisions to be continually made and I’m sure sometimes people made the wrong one and just went bang. But she came out of the jungle. We could have shot her as soon as she came out and she would’ve been the enemy. She could have been in there resupplying them with rice or their medical equipment or anything from her home and she was part of the enemy war system therefore.

04:30 But this day she was just lucky that I was in a good mood and we didn’t do those sorts of things, Australians. I said, “OK, see you later. Shook hands.” I said, “Give me a kiss, izol,” and she kissed me, and all red betel juice, you know betel juice, all went down here. I had this big red stain on my face. Couldn’t get the stain off for about four or five months because she just spat betel juice on me, just all ran down here. I said, “On your way, go home.” I don’t know where she lived,

05:00 so off she walked along the road. You know, you’re walking this line between they’re the civilians or are they the enemy, all the time. There are a lot of judgements have to be made and you’re asking soldiers to make those judgements and you’re asking young leaders to make the judgements, but I think we did very well, Australians. Because we’ve got the values, our values of what is right or wrong, good and bad, are very strongly inside our society. So you don’t have to teach anybody anything to be a soldier. He knows. If I did that that would be wrong.

I’m wondering at the

05:30 **time, given that this was perhaps the first time that you had encountered women as a potential enemy to fire upon, how did you react to that?**

Had I not, had they walked up me I would have killed them, you know. The one who I did kill in November, had she walked up to me, she had her weapon across her front. I just would have shot her, as a soldier and said, “Bad luck. Bad luck for you.” I did meet two others.

06:00 I think it’s documented somewhere, two others, young girls, who were caught. They were going down to somewhere like, it would be like travelling from here to Cronulla with your parents on a Sunday in a drive and the VC stopped them and took the two girls and made them come out in the bush and they indoctrinated them. They made them mine clearers, and what these two girls had to do was go into the mine field at night and walk around with their toes and find the prongs of the mine with their toes,

06:30 and when they felt the prongs of the mine then they had to dig around and lift the mines out. I said to them, I had an interpreter there, Sergeant Carne. I said, “Ask them where do they hide the mines.” I thought they’d hide them somewhere in the village you see, and we could go and get them all and blow them up. He said, “They hid them in the mine field,” but we’d never look for them. Pretty smart I thought. They put them in the mine field and cover them over with trees and bushes and we’d never look for mines in a mine field,

07:00 would you? The only ones you look for in there are the ones in the ground, but they’d go around at night. At night they’d do this, and they’d walk over and feel for the mine and they’d put a bit of an elastic band around the mine and we put an anti-lift device under the mine, so when somebody tried to lift it out of the ground it would blow up. But they put the elastic band around the anti-lift device and the mine and lift the whole lot out. I thought smart little buggers. All the time they continually amazed you with their ingenuity, the things

07:30 they did to overcome adversity. There was one bloke, he was shot in the head and they made a cement cast for his head out of cement to keep his skull together, a bit of cement with a band around it. You know, a band which they (UNCLEAR) wire. So you know how you see people with a cast on their head made out of plaster of paris, they made one out of cement in a hospital, an NVA [North Vietnamese Army] hospital. Here was this bloke walking around with a cement cast on his head just because

08:00 of the requirements of ingenuity. They had nothing else, so that’s what they had to do in the war.

And who did you consider to be your enemy? Who was your enemy?

Any North Vietnamese, I never saw, I don’t think I ever saw a Viet Cong. They weren’t down in Phuoc Tuy Province. They were all North Vietnamese Army who’d invaded from the north. I might have seen

one or two Viet Cong in the whole time I was there. The rest, they'd invaded, come down from the north and I ran into them.

08:30 I thought the North Vietnamese were the enemy. The Viet Cong were just those people who were helping the North Vietnamese and acting as guides or supplying them with food or helping them. I don't think anybody saw many Viet Cong army units. They weren't that well organised, the Viet Cong. They were South Vietnamese who were trying to organise themselves into guerrilla

09:00 warfare units. They didn't succeed with that very much. The North Vietnamese Army used the Viet Cong and took them in to carry things or to guide them because the VC knew where to go because they came from that area, but I think the major units were the North Vietnamese Army and they were the ones who I mostly met. I know the names of the divisions. There were people there who had been in Vietnam for five years

09:30 who knew the voices of the North Vietnamese Army and knew who they were on the other, who commanded each unit and they could say who was speaking at the other end of the radio, American. My senior adviser, Colonel Moore, he'd done seven tours of Vietnam and his daughters were born there in Vietnam. He had an American wife but he took his wife to war and she was born in Vietnam, his two daughters were born in Vietnam. So we look at Vietnam from different perspectives, you

10:00 see. That's an American perspective. Now we did that in Malaya. We used to take our wives to Malaya like I took my wife, and they'd go out on an operation in the jungle and come back to a nice garrison area where wives had been there, and they'd play cricket and tennis and do those sorts of things and in parts of Vietnam that's the way the Americans lived back in the fifties. So he took his wife to Vietnam and he had two daughters in Vietnam so they're Vietnamese citizens because they were born there. And then I had another fellow,

10:30 Sergeant Logan, been shot through the chin in Korea, and he came back. He was in his fifth tour of Vietnam in the same spot, so we didn't have many from Australia but the Americans sort of kept going back and they saw it as just part of their cycle as I might have moved from here to Holsworthy, they go from America to Vietnam and then back to Holsworthy, then back to Vietnam and up to Brisbane and back to Vietnam and down to Sydney. That was just part of their postings in their army. They just

11:00 kept on going back. They had these people and you'd look at them and say, "How many times have you been here?"

Given the chaos and the blurred lines between civilians and enemy, I'm wondering when you were in Dat Do can you describe perhaps a typical patrol?

You decide that what you had to, say the nights when I went in to Dat Do as a raider where we went in

11:30 in the dark which I thought was very hazardous, the soldiers were bloody scarred because they knew about this mine and we were going back to a place near where the mine blew up and killed the twenty-eight of them, killed and wounded twenty-eight. We were walking amongst the houses and they could hear people talking around them all the time and they were not very happy. That was what it was like, and then we got in there, but when I laid out the ambush I said, "OK, there's civilians over there, that's a civilian house. Put a Claymore [mine], it faces that way. Make sure

12:00 you don't shoot that way. Now, you group, you'll shoot this way. You'll only shoot across there because there's a house. See over in the background, you don't want to shoot there." So we had our rounds going onto the road where the enemy would walk and we made sure we didn't go into that house. We could fire that way because the house down there was made of brick, and when the civilians heard the rounds go off they went into their, they had little bunkers they'd go and sit in and have a cup of tea, and they'd sit in those little bunkers and they'd hear bup, bup, bup, bup, and they'd go and sit in the bunker

12:30 and as soon as the firing stopped they came out. So that became part of their life. They'd have a little bunker in the house maybe made out of brick and concrete, or the other thing it was made out of was sand bags which they covered with concrete so it wouldn't rot. They had those inside their house. Sometimes they'd dig right down and have a tunnel. That was if they though aerial bombing was coming because that would protect them from aerial bombing. I thought, we made allowances everywhere we went so that we didn't kill civilians,

13:00 but if the enemy was there or somebody was moving at a certain time because there was a curfew and you weren't allowed to move out of curfew so if you were moving out of curfew you were an enemy and got killed. There were civilian access areas. I had a map. I was going to show you how it was marked. At 1900 which is 7.00

13:30 o'clock at night they'd fire out of the artillery, they'd fire a flare and that would tell all the civilians, a big flare would go off and they'd say, "It's 7.00 o'clock, I have to get out of here." They knew they had to get out of there. See, that would be issued. That's civilian access where those lines are and they would be issued to all the civilians around the area and they knew they weren't supposed to go in that area from those dates. We had that happen here in Sydney out around Holsworthy when they're firing artillery.

14:00 It's called a NOTAM, Notice to Airmen and Mariners. Say when they're firing out to see from Nowra, in the paper you'll see one of those notices, the same as they issued to Vietnamese. It would be probably

Notice to Civilians, do not go into this area during these dates during that time. That would be in their paper and people would read about it. It would be up on the noticeboard in the village, and we do the same thing in Australia now. They used to fire from North Head out to sea

14:30 over there when they had the artillery school there. They used to have a firing range and they'd fire out to sea and in the paper, the Sydney papers, would be issued a NOTAM, a Notice to Airmen and Mariners. One, airmen going over from that area so they wouldn't be hit when they're flying through it, and then some fisherman going past and suddenly artillery shells start landing there. So he'd know, it was in the paper, and that would be in the Sydney Morning Herald. The same sort of thing in Vietnam, civilian access,

15:00 so you protect them that way. Protect them by time and you protect them by location. Now if they start, and they know, and they start to do stupid things like they start running around outside the access time, they know the risks and if they know you're there, it's obvious you're there because they can hear you and they see you. So they start to take risks and you say, "Well, you know." Like anybody I think

15:30 journalists, I would give them a briefing. The journalists who went to Indonesia, they were running around and they had shirts on like yours with little lapels on them. They had military shirts on and they were shot and killed. Remember the ones that were killed in that house, they were all dressed in military uniforms. Now the Indonesians, they don't have our values, and they just came and shot them. Now I'm not sure if they

16:00 shot them by mistake or they found out they were journalists and they purposely shot them. Now, that would be a war crime to shoot somebody purposefully, on purpose, anybody. That's, murder's murder. But if they go around and you're almost dressed the same as the enemy, you're shot. You can't say the soldiers, because it's such a critical situation in war. It's, my life is about to be taken or do I shoot you. And the soldier first off says, "I'll risk

16:30 my life to preserve yours," but after he's seen his friends with their heads shot off a couple of times, people next to him, boomf boomf, then it's hard. That's where the leadership comes in. Leadership is the hardest thing we know. After soldiers have seen their friends mutilated and killed, up until then they have a belief that they're immortal and they won't get killed, but as soon as they start to realise that it's not fun, we're not on the footy field here, this is real stuff, then you've got to lead them and they have to have a lot

17:00 of respect for you and you have to have a lot of influence over them because you're asking them to do things which will risk their lives, and you have to say, "OK, I want you to go over there," and they know when they go over there all those little enemy over there are going to start shooting at them, but they have to go over there because you want to do something else. Now there has to be respect and they have to do things willingly. I think the basis of leadership as against management is you are able to have people do things, influence people, influence, not direct them

17:30 to do things willingly to meet an objective. Whereas management, you say, "Do this or else we're going to have a sanction on it." Whereas soldiers, you just say, "Right, you five blokes, over there," and they just get up and they go. Not like little robots but they go, "OK, yeah, we'll do that," and they go and do it. And then once they start to see their friends all shot they start saying, "No, I can't take this risk." Bang, and shoot the civilians.

Well, I'm wondering in your capacity as leader

18:00 **whether there were any difficult decisions that you had to make?**

Not with civilians I don't think. All my decisions, I told you about the woman, I just let her go. I let the old bloke, I took the old bloke in and put him on a helicopter and I put a bag over his head like you do with prisoners, I put him on the helicopter and he held onto the pilot's seat.

18:30 He was holding onto that seat and his knuckles were white. Now the reason he was so scared, he'd never been in a helicopter before. He was just a, you know, and we took off and he could see through his bag we're leaving the ground, and there were anecdotes that people used to take people up in aircraft and chuck them out. He was holding onto this pilot's seat. I was sitting behind him and he held onto that seat and he thought God, what's going to happen here. We got up and we landed and the

19:00 rotor of the helicopter keeps going for a while as it winds down. I was trying to get him and he wouldn't bloody, I couldn't get his hands off. So I eventually got him out and he got taken away and they interrogated him and they found out he was a North Vietnamese soldier. I almost let him go. I made a judgement but it was the wrong one. My judgement was let him go, then I thought, people influenced me, and I said, "OK, take him back and we'll see what happens." He went off as a prisoner and he'd be a prisoner for

19:30 probably a year and then they'd let him go. The South Vietnamese just let the prisoners go. But in shooting people I don't think we ever had one that we had to. I had decisions where I had to use napalm. I thought this is going to be a bit nasty, and not on civilians, just on the enemy. I didn't think that was all that -

And when did you need to use napalm?

Up in the north of South Vietnam when we were outnumbered. We were just

20:00 being overrun and all killed. So I thought, they used to call it nape and snake. Snake was when they used cannon or machine guns out of the aircraft and go, and they just foompa with napalm [Nape and Snake in USAF/FAC Vietnam combat parlance refers to napalm (Nape) and 500/1000 pound low drag HE bombs (Snakeye bombs)] I thought oh well. But the North Vietnamese had used it also so they say.

I'm wondering if perhaps you could talk a bit more about the technology and the new kind of

20:30 **means of war at your disposal?**

I tell you one of the things that's interesting, when you get around to friend and foe, there's no such thing as friendly fire. You hear this, friendly fire. There's been a film made called Friendly Fire. There's no fire that's friendly. Every bit of fire is unfriendly. If it's not unfriendly enough what we do is introduce more technology to make it unfriendly. Say if a round hits people like the two blokes who were shot in my platoon and we weren't

21:00 killing the enemy well enough, we'd go back and re-engineer the round so it kills them better. Say if a mine is going off and it only blows, they used to have a little mine called a foot-popper, a little plastic mine. People would tread on it and it would just blow their foot off. It wasn't doing enough damage so we went back and re-engineered it and we had these mines that jumped up to hit people in the softest part of their body and blow all their intestines and buttocks, and it hits the soft part, the heart and all this part, the soft part of the body. It blows up to the right height and then goes boom.

21:30 So you make things worse. So two things, there's no such thing as friendly fire. It is all unfriendly. The other thing is the most accurate fire is friendly fire. So if you fire a round at the enemy you'll miss him, but if you fire at your own blokes you'll always hit them somehow, it seems to me. Now, we've been in ambushes and fired 1600 rounds and the enemy has walked through and walked away.

22:00 But if one of your own people gets in the road they get hit. It's just a thing, it seems to be very bad luck that if you've got people, your own people around and you shoot at them by mistake they get hit, but if the enemy comes in and you shoot at them, a lot of times you miss them even though you're aiming. There is a lot of technology. I had a bloke up in the north, he was with me at Duntroon and he was up there with a sensor program. That was high technology. What they dropped

22:30 was a large, it was like a cylinder with a point on it and they dropped it out of a helicopter and it went into the ground and had four aerials out of it, and it could pick up sound or vibration and they put it along a track and then the vibration would, they'd pick up the vibration and four seconds after it they'd fire artillery rounds about a hundred yards up the track. So they'd have all these sensors along the track and the enemy would pass this one and they'd get a reading. OK,

23:00 the enemy is there. Get another reading here and say, "Right, fire artillery there," hoping the enemy would go past them all and walk into the artillery. That was the sensor program. They had a lot of this, a lot of, what else did they have up there? They had radio intercept where they could intercept the enemy's radios. They had a lot of that, where they'd listen in to find out where they were. What else did they have in technology? I don't think, Australians had radio intercept but not, we didn't have things to the same extent

23:30 as the Americans. We had lovely little radios, we had. That was as good as the American equipment, everything down to the basic level. The sensor program was pretty good. I don't know, I can't remember us ever having it. It could pick up conversations with the enemy too. If the enemy sat down around those sensors people could listen to them making their plans while they sat around, and they could listen. A funny incident occurred in 1972

24:00 on Fire Support Base West where I did a lot of my living. The enemy, who I thought I defeated forever and a day, came back and overran the fire support base and there were two knolls on it and Colonel Lue who was my South Vietnamese commander when faced with this enemy, withdrew to the second knoll, and we used to have a bloke there on the fire support base who I used to call Superman. He lived in a little phone box and in there, I'd go in there occasionally and he'd have a comic

24:30 and have these North Vietnamese radios and he'd listen to North Vietnamese and he had a little phone box, and I'd say, "How are you going Superman?" And I'd give him a cup of coffee occasionally. He was a South Vietnamese bloke who spoke North Vietnamese. He'd listen to their radio transmissions of all their commanders and then when they withdrew and the North Vietnamese ran into their headquarters they forgot about him and they all left, and they left him to the North Vietnamese. So he sat there and he turned his radio onto the South Vietnamese

25:00 frequency and he was listening to the North Vietnamese plan their attack and he was sending it through to the South Vietnamese. So he was in the same room about two foot away from the North Vietnamese who were talking about their plan and he was sending it through to the South Vietnamese. I got this from Colonel Moore who was the American I was with. I wasn't there. It was (UNCLEAR). It was the Easter Offensive in '72 and it was another big push like Tet [Offensive], and he told me this funny story. I thought yeah,

25:30 old Superman, yeah.

You hear stories, or I've heard stories about World War II soldiers having to use guns from

World War I, I'm wondering what your weaponry was like?

We had modern excellent weapons. Some of the things people complained about were boots. We had leather boots when we first went there in '65 which rotted off soldiers'

26:00 feet. They had leather boots, but then they developed a new Australian boot, Dunlop. Dunlops and some other one. There were two types of boots but they were both very, good leather and a good bottom. Americans loved them. They had a bit of steel in the bottom so if you trod on something it wouldn't hurt your foot, and they came up to above your ankles so we had excellent equipment in that way, good radios.

26:30 I don't think anybody would have complained about the equipment. You might get somebody in the technical course, like artillery, they had 155 guns which were old World War II guns. They were the artillery pieces. The Americans had those and the South Vietnamese too. They all had this 155 gun which was an old artillery piece. To me, as an infantry soldier, we had the latest technology and the latest

27:00 weapons in every way. Rifles, I used to carry a sub machine gun. I was like a cowboy. It was a small weapon that had a folding butt and had a big magazine like a banana and it fired thirty rounds, automatic.

27:30 I carried it around and I used to have ten magazines. I thought I was a cowboy. I used to walk around with this. I'd go down the village, I'd wander down there with grenades on and my sub machine gun and go and sit down there. There was a woman down there who had a little hut and she gave me crab soup. I'd sit in there and eat crab soup for breakfast with a nice Vietnamese bread, and then I might have tea, little sweet cakes and then

28:00 swagger back through the village, talk to the Vietnamese kids and give them a chocolate and go back to where I lived. Yeah, I thought I was king, king of the bloody heap. Yeah, I could go down and walk around the place. I did. Now I look back I was like a bloody cowboy, but I would make it my point to go down and eat with the Vietnamese

28:30 and I'd take all, the Vietnamese, I might six soldiers and take them out to breakfast and we'd have this crab and corn soup she always had on. I'd say, "What's the soup today?" It was always crab and corn. Beautiful, nice soup, very light but it would have crab in it and have bits of corn, and then she'd have, you know those little spring rolls? Well, she'd have all vegetarian spring rolls. Not the ones with meat in them. So we'd have that and have that for breakfast about 10.00 o'clock, and bits of bread and you could dip that in the soup.

29:00 It was good, yeah.

You hear a lot about World War II soldiers being larrikins, I'm wondering in that shift from larrikin to cowboy, can you describe what being a cowboy meant to you?

Well, I think wandering around with my guns on, those sorts of things. I'd carry my weapons everywhere. If we went to Da Nang which was supposed to be a free city

29:30 and nobody carried their weapon, I carried my sub machine gun and all my magazines. Even if somebody would say, "Look, I'm going to take you out to a restaurant," I'd take the whole lot and just walk in. I just thought we were very good, and I was very good with the Vietnamese. I knew we got along, I knew we were fighting real battles and it was real war and I knew I got along well with the Vietnamese. That's what I was there to do and they'd take me out to dinner.

30:00 I made a few mistakes. I went one time and they said, "Australians eat beef, don't they?" I said, "bist bist, titbol," it's called titbol, and I said, "Yeah." He said, "I'll buy you a steak." He bought me this steak. It must've been the most horrible food I've ever eaten in my life. It was raw buffalo meat, ugh. It hadn't been cooked and it was buffalo meat. I could hardly cut it with a knife. I used to have a big knife too and I

30:30 wandered around. It was a bit cowboyish but the soldiers were not like that. When they went on leave they went to a place called Vung Tau and they went down there and they reckon things like, one of my soldiers I came across him one day, I came around the corner, ran into him, he got himself made a scarlet suit in a day. You know, one of those suits, "I'll make it for you in six hours." Six hours, he went in, got measured up and they had a suit made for him. He had a red suit, scarlet, top to bottom, and a red

31:00 hat, a scarlet hat. He got it all made by a tailor. He had enough money so he paid him whatever it was. Here he was walking around in a bloody scarlet suit, "Hello," you know, being a hero, a funny bloke. They did some funny things to me. One day they called me over and said, "Skipper, we want to have a talk to you," and that was suspect. Why would they want to have a talk to me out there. They're having me on here. So I went over and it was two larrikins,

31:30 Partridge and Gould, and I sat down and they had a log set up and they had cups on the log and water bottles and packs and there was one spot to sit and I thought that's where I, so I sat on the log like this. I sat there and I said, "How are you going you two? What's up?" They said, "Oh nothing." I said, "What's wrong, what's going on here?" I looked down, they're down here with an eighteen foot python under my

feet, and they'd sat me right on top of it. So I got

32:00 a bit of stick and I pulled its head out because it had its head twisted in, and it just got up and went over and got up on top of a heap of bamboo and then rolled up. Some of them have got photos of it, a beautiful big snake. It rolled up and they sat me right on top of it and they thought it would be a big joke. Soldiers are like that all the time. You've got to be ready for them. You know it's going to happen to you. They're like that. They're excellent. Australian soldiers are just excellent soldiers, excellent people. They're just, we had

32:30 one there with Hobbs. Hobbs had long hair, very long hair and he used to comb it every morning at his little mirror. He came and stayed at my place when I had some soldiers here once and they all found him in the shower with a hair net on, and they were all, you know, a plastic hair thing, and in Vietnam he used to do his hair. He was extremely well groomed, and one night there were seven in a section and they said, "Right, two over there, two over there, two over there, and Hobbs

33:00 you go over there," and he was on his own and nobody was ever on their own in the bush, and Hobbs said to Dave Partridge, Dave Partridge was a National Serviceman who I just promoted in the field straight to NCO as a leader. He just impressed me as a leader type. He said, this is this joke on Hobbs, he said, "You go over there on your own Hobbs." Hobbs said, "Why?" He said, "Well we saw those photos of you today and some of the blokes thought you might be homosexual and they don't want to sleep with you," and Hobbs, he went

33:30 off his brain. "I want out of this war now." Straight away he came screaming through the bush at me, "Sir, my blokes think I'm a homosexual and they don't want anything to do with me and I want to get out. I've done everything I can. I'll fight, I'll do anything. I want to get out. I want to be sent back to Australia straight away." He didn't want to muck around. "Sir, this is no good. I demand it." He wanted to go home. Hobbs, so I had to get Partridge over and say, "Righto Dave, don't

34:00 pull any of these tricks any more." They do that to each other but they weren't malicious. They'd do things to me to, not malicious, but they would pull tricks on me. That's just the way they are. You have to accept all these other qualities they have. You have to accept that, because with that goes all the other qualities, a sense of humour goes steadfastness, a sense of humour goes their ability to accept all the bad things that happen too, and they change it. A bloke was wounded one day

34:30 and he had a round through his back and along his shoulder blades and instead of walking up and sympathising with him they'd taken his boots off. They said, "But what size boots have you got," and they were pulling his boots off and going through his pack and stealing his rations. He was about to be lifted out through the jungle. So they just think that's funny. It would seem an imposition and quite disrespectful, a bloke has been wounded and you're starting to steal all his food, but that's

35:00 the way. They've just got this humour which is quirky but you have to be, it's just part of the whole. So accept that because it complements some other part of their personality which is positive, I think. All those other things that go with, their values, the way they support each other, the way they're responsible and they'll stay awake all night in the jungle and never go to sleep and let your mates down. If you go to sleep when you're on sentry your

35:30 mates can never go to sleep again. They think, maybe we're lying here and the enemy is going to come and get me. At night when you're in the jungle you can hear the enemy all night. You can hear it. They're not there but you can hear it. If you look you can see them too. Just keep looking, you say, "There's one," or you say to a bloke, "Is that one?" They'll say, "Yeah. Did you see that move?" "Yeah, it moved." You can convince people it moved. People will see it just because they're staring so long they want to see it move. They say, "Yeah, I saw it move. Did you

36:00 hear that?" "Yeah, I heard it." So the bloke will not, the others won't sleep because the sentries are supposed to protect them, and so the others will just stay awake all night because they don't feel secure. So the fellows have got, you know, it's all this sense of responsibility, and I think it's the greatest event in their life, the greatest event and the most extraordinary event in their life, so they're bound to that afterwards. They're bound to their experience together. Now they say they had a different experience from the

36:30 Second World War, it had the same effect. I was the president of Legacy and I used to go and have Christmas lunches with the Legacy widows and we'd have our monthly luncheon somewhere around this area at one of the clubs, and we'd sit down and have a talk. Well, they told me after the Second World War the men had just as many problems, but if you understand, if you listen to the poetry you can hear it, and our poetry is a lot in our songs.

37:00 Our poetry is not in written poetry in books, but in the songs that come out of things. There's a country and western song called Every Boy Needs A Shed, and after the Second World War men had sheds down the back and when they were suffering an anxiety or some form of post-traumatic stress syndrome they'd go down and fix the toaster or take the toaster apart or something like that and take it in the shed and go down there and sit there for three hours and sit there and ruminate and think and put the toaster back

37:30 together, and get the jug and take that apart and do these sorts of things which gave them that time out from life. They went down there and they sat in the shed. Nobody interfered with them. "Where's Dad?"

"He's down the shed." "What's he doing down there?" "Fixing the toaster again." So Dad sat down in the shed, and then he got over all the anxiety. Probably now the anxiety comes out in the family because the family is around the table. I've talked to a lot of Veterans and a lot of them want to eat around the table, family table and talk to the kids and ask the

38:00 kids, "What have you done today? How has this been, how has that been," so that they try and develop the family and they just want to sit at the table because they see that as something they've always wanted and they missed out on it. They sit around the table and because you communicate a lot conflict arises. I think if you don't communicate and you don't like a person you can't, it's very hard to have a conflict with somebody you don't like, isn't it? If somebody says something to you or about you who you don't respect, it doesn't mean anything, does it?

38:30 So there's got to be a like there or a love before you can start to get into a conflict. You get into an argument over an issue, but to get into conflict if the person has a different argument to you and you don't respect them, you say, "So what." But if you respect them you keep arguing, you keep saying, "But have you thought of this?" So they come home, they have a wife, they get into conflict with here. The conflict goes up and then alcohol is brought into it and then maybe from that gets

39:00 violence, and the things just run on. They say, "How come only the Vietnam Veterans have it?" I don't think it's only Vietnam Veterans. I think it's been there forever.

Well I'd like to talk more about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but before we do I'm just wondering earlier on you were mentioning that some of the visual sights and sounds were just so shocking for you,

39:30 **can you maybe describe the worst?**

Well, it hits every sense, every sense. The things you see, suddenly you see these things. If there are wounded around you're suddenly seeing all these people who are in extraordinary positions who are dismembered, beheaded, blown apart, I think that's the worst when they're soft tissue is blown apart, and then they're

40:00 bleeding, they're screaming, but the sounds of the battle and the ammunition if it's machine guns firing, you can't hear anything else. You can't hear their screams. There's no scream coming out of them at all. Have you ever seen that, who painted the painting, Scream? You can't hear anything, it's just a mouth open and he can see something there and he's screaming but he can't hear anything. So you've got the sounds and the sights and the sound is just so overwhelming that you can't hear anything. You can't hear anything, you can't hear yourself

40:30 speak. So that blocks all that out and eventually as you're starting to clean up there's the smell of blood and person. Suddenly that's all there as you're trying to stop bleeding or push stomach back into the socket and you put a large shell dressing on them and push that back in. I had a sergeant with what they call a string of sausages where his intestines had fallen out.

41:00 He was sitting there against a tree and I thought one day, I actually thought I might get killed and I thought I don't want to get killed like that sergeant. He sat there for most of the day, mid-morning till mid-afternoon with his intestines, string of sausages just hanging out of his body. And those sorts of things, there's a lot of smell comes out of bodies too, and you think there's a smell there which you don't forget. Not the rotten part, rotting part of bodies which people say, but the smell of the body when it's

41:30 still warm and it's been knocked around, and then there's a sound that people make when they're first hit and later on when they die. They're screaming because they're so much in pain and they scream, and then there's the Vietnamese who don't scream. They just sit there and tighten themselves up in a ball and not make any noise, and people who scream out, and that fades away

42:00 and then you've got to touch the body.

Tape 7

00:30 That was the first tour, second tour of 5RAR [Royal Australian Regiment]. I wasn't at Binh Ba. I hadn't got there until after June because the platoon, in my platoon, there were a lot of platoon commanders coming or going that were killed or wounded. That's why I was in Malaya and I went over to replace one who'd been told, "Look, thanks for coming. You're going back to Australia." We had about five

01:00 officers killed or wounded in the company out of five. Officers, you know, it wasn't, you know, the same in the First World War, the length of life of a lieutenant in infantry was only about eight days in action. In our company we had Brian Walker was killed in my platoon. Harry Moore was wounded in 11 Platoon. There were only three platoons. Terry Stanis was wounded, in my platoon, and then Major Blake was wounded. He was the company commander,

01:30 that's four. John Russell was wounded, that's five, and there were only five officers in the company. We

had all these people killed or wounded and that's just the way it goes. Minor wounds a lot of them. Not enough even to send them home, but they're wounds.

Can you tell me Mike what you saw of the Battle at Binh Ba?

I've been to Binh Ba, but really I've only,

02:00 I've talked it through a number of times with people, but I've been to Binh Ba and saw where the battle happened. I know what happened right through the battle. There are photos in there of it. They went out there initially because they heard there was a platoon, which is about twenty enemy around the school house. They got out there and they found there was about 120. So they went in with tanks and then they were repelled by the enemy, and they went back in with

02:30 infantry and they started to do their advance in with infantry, and bang, a bloke from my platoon named Wayne Teeling was shot dead. Just got out of the APC [Armoured Personnel Carrier], his first day. They named a road after him up in Darwin in the barracks, and his son, I keep in touch with his son and wife, they're down in Wollongong. His son is Wayne Teeling too, and I gave them sort of a pile of books and photographs and got them flown up when they named the road.

03:00 I got them flown to Darwin by the RAAF. Yeah, they went in and they went through Binh Ba. I don't think they killed civilians at Binh Ba. Brian London said he killed one by mistake. He said there was a bloke crawling through the corn field and Brian shot him and he walked over and here was a bloke there and he didn't have any legs. Brian thought he'd get up and run, but he couldn't get up and run because he had no legs. He'd been

03:30 hurt somewhere else. They went right through and they came back. I think there was one civilian killed in the whole battle, and about 187 enemy killed, yes. They had tanks there, fifty ton tanks, and they were knocked around by this enemy with RPGs [Rocket Propelled Grenades], the things you saw in Black Hawk Down. They put a whole in the tank,

04:00 they knocked them around, yeah. But that was about what happened at Binh Ba and the villagers stayed there and the Australian soldiers fought through and passed them, and didn't wound any or blow any up. They blew a few of the houses up though when the civilians were out of them. I know that some of the houses were knocked down and the locals weren't happy about that. They hit them with tank fire and boom, knocked the back wall out. There was that happen, which doesn't win

04:30 their hearts and minds when they get their house knocked down.

How often in the fighting that you were involved in in both tours was the fighting within villages or in the jungle where there wasn't any civilian population?

Mainly in the jungle with me. There were incidents where they were in the village, but the only village I was in was a little straw village. It was made out of thatch and straw. I wasn't in sort of

05:00 main villages with tiled rooves or anything like that. It was mainly straw villages where they had villages and a central square and tunnels and pits and those sorts of things, and pigs and WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s and manioc fields. So that was OK. I think we burnt it afterwards, one of the villages. They were just out in the bush, just a little village somewhere. The enemy ran into their village and we thought OK, we've got to

05:30 go through slowly now. We went through slowly and there were only about five enemy. We got them. The South Vietnamese got them. The South Vietnamese were better than the Australians because they could walk in and ask questions, "Where's your brother? Where did they go?" We could get in, we just had to look around. If we couldn't see them we couldn't find them. We couldn't question the people because we didn't have the language skills, but the South Vietnamese would go in and they would get a kid that looked about twelve and they'd cut down a bit of bamboo and get him to say,

06:00 "How old, have you got any brothers?" "No." Whack. "Have you got any brothers?" "Yeah, two brothers." "Where are they?" "They've gone to VC." "OK, are they back home now? They are, aren't they? Where do you live?" "I live up the next village." Whack, they hit him again. "I live in there." "Where's your, your father in there?" "Yes, he's in there." So they go in and say, "Hello, where's your son." They do that, but they hit the little kid until he tells them. That doesn't worry Vietnamese because they're a much more brutal

06:30 society. We'd actually be upset about that in Australia. If the police did that to one of our kids we'd be very upset. That's in peace time where the police have got the right to sort of grab little kids by the ear. They've got the right to stop, search and detain people.

Did that sort of thing worry you when you were in Vietnam?

No. I sort of looked at it and I said, "That's the Vietnamese. They're doing that to each other," and the boy thinks, I could see that the young kid thought it was OK.

07:00 His parents got out and said, "You tell the man." I could see them, so it was acceptable across their society, that these were soldiers and they needed to know, so you tell them what they want to know. I suppose it had been going on for years too. I didn't see the Vietnamese commit any atrocities. I don't know what happened to a bloke once. He seemed to disappear. He was wounded and he was Viet Cong.

I don’t know what happened to him. He just

07:30 disappeared somewhere. We were walking along and when we got to where we were going I said, “Where is he?” But he was there when we left, had a wound through his arm. They were treating the wound in his arm. When we got to the end I always wondered did they push him in the creek or what happened to him. He wasn’t there at the end. I didn’t see any… I was actually going to fire a rocket at some North Vietnamese who were escaping, but they were wounded, one

08:00 time. There were about ten enemy with weapons and about six wounded and they were running and I could see them and I was on a hill and I had these rockets and I thought I’ll fire at them. He’s not going to get away. I was going to fire at them and I thought, yeah, and then the battalion commander got up and said, “No no, don’t fire. They’re wounded.” The Vietnamese were very good to other North Vietnamese. They’d take them in, look after them, they’d ask them their name. They’d give them cigarettes and a cup of coffee.

08:30 They’d sit down and ask them their rank. They’d have a little talk as if they were talking about the races. They’d treat them very well and then take them back. I don’t know what they did when they got into a prisoner of war camp, but the soldiers in the field would treat the other soldiers very well, “Don’t hurt him.” I remember one time 5RAR had a group of VC cornered, and they had the battalion around an area

09:00 and the VC were on the hill, and then they heard women’s voices and kids and rattles like saucepans and things coming down the side of the mountain. And they would’ve had to run straight into the platoon, they would’ve been killed, the lot of them, and Colonel Kahn said, “Don’t fire.” Nobody was allowed to fire, so these people came down at night between the platoons and got away. We just let them get away. They were enemy.

09:30 They came down and because they heard the kids crying and that was reported back to him he said, “No firing. Let them go. Nobody is to fire.” They came down, they went, the platoons were a little way apart and they got between them and off they went. We don’t know where they went, probably went off into the local towns. He just decided not to fire at all and not to have any contact with them. We used to have cease fires on their holy days too. When it was a holy day you weren’t allowed to fire at the enemy. You just sat there

10:00 and if you saw the enemy you just let them go. Like the Queen’s birthday or something like that. No shooting any enemy on, Buddha’s birthday was one, Vietnam National Day I think was another one. No shooting at the enemy on those days. Funny war, isn’t it? They say, “Look, Buddha’s birthday, no shooting today.” Put the flag up, “Sorry, it’s Queen’s birthday weekend.” Put the thing up. That’s the way the war was. I sat there and

10:30 I can remember looking across the fields and thinking. One day I was in Dat Do and it was a Sunday and it was a no fire. We went in there to look for somebody. Didn’t find anybody. I was sitting in a graveyard and I was watching all these girls go to church. They had white áo dàis on and black trousers. Ever seen a Vietnamese girl? Very slim, quite elegant, long black hair.

11:00 I thought they’re going about on bikes they were, just floating almost through the bamboo laneway. I thought they’re going about normal things. They chatter, you know, kids on bikes, and off they went. I could hear them coming and going away as they went into the distance, the crik crik crik of the bike. I thought they doing normal things. They could’ve been going to school. I asked my mate Lockhart who knew more about Vietnam. He said they could have been going to school. It could have been a Saturday and I got the days

11:30 wrong because they go to school on Saturday over there. He said it would be more likely they were going to school on Saturday than church. I just watched them and I thought, they all they got off and they had little flasks of tea. They had little cups and they took off the top and they’d sit down in the bamboo thicket as girls do, sit around in a circle and talk about, “What did she have on? Oh did she? Is she still going with him?” You know, chatter, chatter, chatter, and they all got on their bikes and off they went

12:00 off into the distance, just like normal girls, and I thought, yeah, and I’m sitting here and I’m going to kill their brothers. I thought look, there they go in the distance. Jo and I have been back and you see them in their black and white going to school every morning or white and white. Sometimes they have white and white. Sometimes they have white bottoms and white tops and they head off to school on their bikes, right from Saigon up. It’s just a normal part of life while you’re doing a most

12:30 anti-social and abnormal thing and they’re doing an extremely normal thing and they’re bonding and communicating and forming their relationships for the rest of their life.

What could you do in Vietnam, I guess, to relax or feel normal again?

I started smoking cigars which I don’t smoke any more. Probably that’s what gave me the stroke. I started smoking cigars. I’d sit on

13:00 the side of a bunker and just look off into the sunset and smoke these bloody beautiful cigars the Americans had. There was no alcohol, you see, in the field. The drug of choice was nicotine. To feel

normal, there was nothing I could do to feel normal because everyone around me was Vietnamese. There were no Australians. What did I do? There were some funny things. I'll tell you about them. One

13:30 was I went into a bunker one night and they had, must've been sixty candles around the bunker and they were playing 'Purple Haze', a tune, Purple Haze, by Jimi Hendrix and they were drinking bourbon or brandy, I'm not sure, and coffee. That was one night I remember that was relaxation. I'd come in from the field and I walked up this hill and we got to the top, had a drink,

14:00 had a wash and we went into this bunker where the Vietnamese were in there and all the Americans sitting around and they were drinking and smoking, not dope they were smoking, and they were listening to outrageous rock music. Almost deafened my ears, sort of that volume and it was that sort of music. Didn't really appeal to me. That was one thing. I could go to Da Nang and I would mix with some Australians up there. I found

14:30 one time, I made some mistakes up there. I allowed, a young fellow came to me one night and said to me, Americans used to call me Daiuy too, American soldiers, they mimicked the South Vietnamese, "Daiuy, I want to have some love tonight." I said, "Yes sergeant, what are you going to do?" He said, "I want to bring a girl in here." I thought about it, I knew it was against the rules. I said, "OK,

15:00 don't get caught." He got caught, and I wore that. I was in big trouble over that. Somebody took a statement and I got my bottom kicked. I got my bottom kicked there, down in Saigon, in Canberra when I got home. I went down, twice in Canberra, had a big car pull up out the front and take me and fly me to Canberra and I did the bottom kicking round of Canberra, everybody. I eventually met a bloke I knew outside. I said, "Would you like to kick me in the bottom?" He said,

15:30 "Why is that?" I said, "I've had everybody else and I wouldn't like you to miss out." Yeah, but I'd been to everybody. Sort of put me on their list, "When you're finished with him send him over here." So I went around, but they used to have an Australian bar called Australia House. It's still there. People keep asking me where it is. I can remember where it is, other people forget. I can tell them what the street is even in the book on Vietnam, and I went back and I took a photo of it but it used to have a shed out the back and all the

16:00 Australians would gather there and talk, but I didn't feel at home amongst them. They were warrant officers or much older than me. They were soldiers who'd served with my father in Korea and there was nobody my age. I think there was one bloke came up my age named Ross Sidney. He was with the sensor program and he was a technician. I met one American, Captain Dean, and when I went back with my team I had Byleth who looked like all the girls would love him

16:30 in Australia, he looked like, who's that one, in 'Mrs Robinson' [Dustin Hoffman in the film The Graduate]? He'd been on LSD [drug] in Germany and they kicked him out of Germany and they sent him to Vietnam. He wanted to get into my team and because he'd been on LSD I wouldn't let him in. But he was brave and he was a good soldier. He'd fly in in the middle of the night and bring you ammunition. He'd go and collect bodies

17:00 where others would squib it and hide when they had to go and do those jobs because they were the dangerous ones. He'd do all that, but I didn't want him in the field because he'd hallucinate. He used to see ships. All the helicopters were big shark mouths. He thought they were attacking him. I said, "You can't come with me. You might be no good." He did put on a couple of funny things. He was going to shoot everybody one night. I had to get him out of the bunker,

17:30 and he was going to shoot people. I had to drive down and pick him up and throw him in the back of the jeep and bring him home. He'd gone off his brain about thirty or forty K away and they said, "We don't know what to do with him." So I drove down, or I was sent down by Colonel Wall to pick him up and bring him back. Everything was very tense when I brought him back, but I stopped that being tense by falling down a well, me. I fell down a well

18:00 there without a cover on it and I kept on going past during the day saying, "Look at that. That's dangerous, we should cover it." I came around that night, voom, straight down the well. I got caught down there, but I got my leg down and they pulled me out and everyone was laughing to see an officer fall down a well in the mud, and then that broke the, everybody thought how funny it was and we went off and sat down again. That was Byleth, 'Baby-san' we called him.

How much of a problem, you see

18:30 **I guess in a lot of American films about drug use among soldiers in Vietnam. I wonder how much of a problem it was with the men you were with?**

When I was at Quang Ngai I went around the tactical operations centre which was the command post, I found all these needles. I didn't know what, we're talking about 1969, '70, '71. I hadn't seen many needles at that stage. I found all these needles, I knew what they were straight away. They were in a window, where the window was

19:00 where the cords went in. I thought heroin needles, and somebody in there had been using heroin, not in the field so much. They used to smoke, I was saying the other day, they used to smoke it through their rifle, you know, marijuana. They'd put it in the chamber and light it down there like a pipe. They used to smoke it out of their rifle. That was their bong. I saw one day they, of course I won't mention

19:30 the names, but I knew something was going on. I could smell something. I thought what's that? I went along and I heard this music on. I could see a strange light coming out of a bunker. I opened the door. It was one of those black lights and there was a girl on the bed with absolutely white skin, a Vietnamese girl, and there was an American having sex with her with an American flag tied around his neck. I thought what's going on

20:00 here? They'd been smoking, the girl had sold them marijuana. Apparently pretty strong stuff and I said, "What are you doing? What's this for?" They said, "We just thought we'd do it." I said, "No, get up. Go on, go home. You're a nice girl. Go on, go home. I'll tell your mother," I said. She went out and went home. Yeah, she'd brought in some, they said, "You can't get this in Vietnam." This was some special marijuana they said. I don't know what it was, Cambodian

20:30 Gold or something they said I think, came from Cambodia. The Australian soldiers, I think they didn't use it at all, but I'm told that's not true. Some of my soldiers said, "No, some did." There were a few in about 3 Div [Division] they knew. I said, "Who?" They wouldn't tell me who they were, but they said there were some who used it. I would say I never saw any, never heard of any and I had my ear close to the ground.

21:00 They could get alcohol you see, for ten cents a can. They were given alcohol almost. They had a bar in a hut with tables and chairs where they could go in there with TV and drink alcohol. So they didn't need marijuana. So that was their drug of choice, alcohol, and they smoked cigarettes which were free, cigarettes. So they'd sit around and they had stereos which were beautiful stereos and they had those, they had music. They'd sit around, they'd have a few beers. They'd sit around and talk

21:30 or argue, or do something, but they didn't go for marijuana.

Was it something you worried about, officers intoxicated either with alcohol or drugs in the field?

No. No, I don't think so. I don't think anybody, I did see some officers use alcohol one day. Two officers, they were senior to me, they came along and drank with the South Vietnamese

22:00 and then the soldiers caught on to it. I said, "These two blokes are coming out with us tonight on ambush," and a corporal came back and said, "No, they're not coming with us, Sir. They've been bloody drinking with the South Vietnamese. I can smell it on them." I said, one was a captain and one was a lieutenant, and they said, "They're not coming with us. They've been drinking." I thought gee, what am I going to do here? Arrest the officers? I could have arrested them, and

22:30 I thought this is about my fourth day. Here I was going to arrest them, and I couldn't do anything else. So I said, "No." They said, "I want you to go there." I said, "We're not going there." I looked at where they wanted me to go. I said, "We're not going there, that's stupid. We're going down on the beach." And we were on the beach and we had a couple of contacts on the beach and one of the officers fired and I was going to take his rifle away and I said to him, "Don't you fire again or I'll remove my weapon." He said, "You won't remove my weapon." I said, "Yes, if you don't behave

23:00 yourself I'll place you on open arrest." It means I place him on arrest, I don't do anything to him, and I was going to have my sergeant standing there and a couple of soldiers to do it, and I think they'd been using alcohol at a luncheon with the Vietnamese during the day, and I don't think anybody else had been drinking in the field. I haven't heard of it and I wasn't aware of it. None I knew and I haven't heard of it in other battalions or anything like that,

23:30 using alcohol or using marijuana, cigarettes, yes, but not the other. Cigarettes, probably they're all wandering around with heart disease now and cancer, they smoked so much. But yes, I can't think of anybody who used alcohol. I think we did get a can, one can one day. It was useless, it was a warm can of beer the day we got our hundredth kill. The only score on the bored in Vietnam. We didn't have the number of yards gained or the number of yards lost.

24:00 Each time they killed a soldier they had a little stencil and they'd just stencil it, spray it up on a board, and the day we got the hundredth kill the OC [Officer Commanding] flew in one can of beer per man. It was horrible. I'd rather not have it. You could have that or a cold can of lemonade. I think everyone opted for lemonade, freezing cold lemonade, it was good and it was much better than a warm can of beer. But that was the one time we had alcohol in the field.

24:30 One, half a can, about that big they were, little cans. Yeah, that's the only thing regarding drugs. A lot of the Americans, Walker used to use drugs. He used to use marijuana. He was a big Negro I had. He used marijuana. I don't think he used heroin. Byleth used LSD in Germany and he used marijuana. He came out here afterwards and he said, he came out with me to Liverpool.

25:00 I had him and Peter Cosgrove and myself were sitting in a hotel in Liverpool and the cars were just going around the corner, vroom, vroom, vroom. He said, "Gee, Australia is such a nice place," because we'd saw an old major walking passed the hotel window. His name was Fred Spry and we grabbed him and pulled him in through the window and Byleth hadn't seen people treat majors this way before. Fred came in bought everybody a beer and

25:30 then went on his way home. His wife rang up the hotel and he went on his way home and had to tell her

lies. Byleth said, “Look, when I go back to America I’ll go back to a trailer park. When I get back there there’ll be a number of people who’ll be trying to get me back onto drugs because I provide them with their income.” He said, “But if I stayed in Australia this is a place where I could just, I could enjoy all this. You’re really backward here but it would be really nice.” He said, “You’re really backward. Blokes just

26:00 going around in hot cars around and around the block.” He said, “It would be really nice.” He went back to America, I don’t know what happened to him.

You mentioned Walker, can you tell me a little bit more? You mentioned very briefly before a confrontation you had with him when you first met him.

Yeah, Walker was the one with the afro and the big beard, and he was going to frag me, but later on we became friends. We’d sit down and talk and we became friends. Towards the end he was a fellow and I’d sit down and talk to him about things.

26:30 So I had Walker, I had Byleth. I had another fellow who had a chit from the US Supreme Court he didn’t have to carry a weapon in Vietnam. He was a conscientious objector, so he was walking around without a weapon. I said, “No, you get a weapon.” He said, “I don’t have to. I’ve got a certificate here from a judge that you can’t make me carry a weapon.” We’re talking about different countries, you see, America, and I think we were more different from the Americans than we were from the Vietnamese. He just had this in his pocket, “See, I don’t have to carry a gun.” Here was

27:00 an American soldier who didn’t have to carry a gun, and he had the Supreme Court telling him he didn’t have to.

How much of a worry was this fragging?

Well, to me I thought bugger it. The reason Walker didn’t kill me he saw I used to carry, I used to clean my weapon every night which their army officers don’t. I used to carry this big knife and I’d sharpen it every night and he thought God, this bloke’s funny for an officer. Their officers carry a

27:30 pistol, little pistol. Here was I with this thirty round submachine gun which fired automatic and he thought God, these Australians are funny people, and he said that’s why he didn’t kill me. He said, “I haven’t seen anybody as strange as you before.” So he decided, he said, “No, I wouldn’t even try it.” We’d sit down later on. I’ve got a photo of him somewhere, but not a real clear one. He was a big man, well above six foot and a big afro on top of that. He had all wild music, Walker.

28:00 Walker and Byleth, their music at that stage, ’69, was quite wild, The Animals, The Troggs, you know, they’ve disappeared. I don’t know where the Troggs have gone. I’m sure nobody remembers really, not even Molly Meldrum.

I think it’s just quite a crazy, I guess a picture of so much disciplined lost when a soldier is going to kill an officer?

Yeah, it is.

28:30 Now when I was with the Australians my platoon sergeant, if something like that happened he’d probably say to the soldier, “I’m going to kill you. Go on, get going.” But Walker was just, that was part of it, there was a breakdown of discipline in the American army and I just happened to be, I was put into this at the time when they were withdrawing from Vietnam and there was a greater breakdown because all they wanted to do was go home alive, not in a body bag. They just wanted to say, “I want to go home alive.” So they,

29:00 Walker, and here was I saying to everybody, “Come on, get your weapon. We’ve got to be ready,” and Walker said, “Weapons? You mean I’ve got to go out and kill somebody? I might get killed. I don’t want to go, I don’t want to do that.” And I was what the Americans called a lifer, I was a regular soldier. “You’re a bloody lifer,” and regular soldiers do things correctly and make other people do things correctly. I was called a lifer. You had other soldiers in the American army who were only in there for a small contract. Some of

29:30 their officers came out of ROTC, Regular Officer Training Organisation which was a university organisation and they became officers and they were only going to be in Vietnam and they would get out. They didn’t enforce discipline and I’d enforce discipline. I’d say, “No, you will do this and you will get up and you will do that and you will do what you’re told.” And he said, “You’re a bloody lifer,” and they didn’t like them, didn’t like lifers. Not only me, they didn’t like them right throughout their

30:00 army, and senior NCOs were lifers to. But that was his little warning to me, “Behave and modify your behaviour,” he was telling me, and I just had to think I’m not going to do that. I was taken away from it just by chance. I was taken away from it. I’m not sure if somebody said this had occurred, but I was flown from there down to Mary Ann and then down at Mary Ann

30:30 all those other things happened and I was down there so I was well away from Walker. I didn’t see him until, it must’ve been July, August, September. By that stage we’d become friends. I’d been in a major battle and when I got in he was very friendly with me. I got back in, yes. That was September, mid September by the time I got back in. I think I was out for about six weeks. This is a strange conglomeration

31:00 of a revolution in social behaviour in the world in the ‘70s with gender barriers breaking down, people’s social behaviour changing, becoming much more liberal. Music indicating that by a change in music, absolutely very stimulating music, and sometimes music fires those things. You’ll find the pulse of music changes with

31:30 social barriers, and then there’s marijuana introduced which people hadn’t heard much of before and it comes into the world and it’s such an easy drug to get hold of. I could probably become a registered marijuana user because this leg is spasticised. With that I could apply and be a registered user, just sit around on the front porch smoking marijuana all day. That’s the way the world has changed, whereas I could do that today and when I was with the police the greatest amount of expenditure was on

32:00 police running around trying to catch marijuana growers and now we’ve got it coming around the other way where they’ll be able to supply it through the medical system. Or in Canberra you can grow it in your own backyard, enough for your own use. While the New South Wales police service was spending all their money on finding marijuana growers, helicopters and searches and all, and now it’s legal just across the border from Queanbeyan, just there, and people are growing their own for their own

32:30 use. So these things change so quickly, a great period of social change and you can see that. I think you can see it in the music and people’s behaviour is much better now. You know, you see young people on the trains or all around the place, they mix better, they go out and they sit and play pool. There’s a much better relationship with males and females, males and males, females and females. They do all those things which weren’t around before that.

33:00 There was a clear divide. All boys were over there, all girls were over here. Boys don’t have relationships with boys or they’re outlawed from society forever. But by the mid 70s I remember coming down, I was at Singleton, coming down and seeing these fellows and thinking how interesting they were, blokes who were in sort of net stockings and great capes and bloody large hairdos like what, Muriel’s Wedding?

33:30 What’s the one where they’re on the train? The blokes with the feathers? That one, and they were in Oxford Street and I thought gee, interesting people. Before that they were poofters. It’s just a change. When I was at Duntroon on the staff I was sitting watching Rocky Horror [The Rocky Horror Picture Show] one Friday night in a movie show and down the aisle comes a Duntroon cadet and he’s got net

34:00 stocking on, high heels, a bustier, his hair all gelled and a large red cape and he comes across the front doing ‘Time Warp’. He’s now been decorated, right, and that’s what he did. When I was at Duntroon if they saw you like that you must have something wrong with your head and they’d throw you out. There’s an acceptance of behaviour doesn’t mean anything. It’s performance that is important now in society, not somebody’s external, what they wear. Many more things are taken into account.

34:30 Of course people are better educated I think. But this bloke went down, he’s now a decorated soldier for bravery. He’s been in the Special Air Service. Here’s a bloke who people would have said years ago, “He can’t be any good, look at him.” He’s bloody good, he’s a good footballer too.

You mentioned Mike, before, Walker and meeting up with him again after a battle. What was the battle in the interim?

The battle was the one I told you about where we went in and

35:00 there were 2,300 Vietnamese and 260 of us, ten to one we were outnumbered, and that’s where Al Harris was killed and Col Ackland who lives up at Buderim or up at the Sunshine Coast, he came in to support me. He was Zero One. He’s in this book somewhere. They wrote about him and he talks about the battle, and I was there in charge of it. But they were listening. They could hear my radio transmissions about thirty K away,

35:30 and Walker could hear what was going on, and eventually I got lifted out and when I got back Walker picked me up off the landing zone, shook hands and said, “G’day,” and took me in and they had cold beer waiting for me and sit down, and I went off and had a shower and came back and they all said, “Congratulations.” I sat there and talked to them. Because they’d listened to that and they’d heard that suddenly our relationship changed, and they all wanted to come out with me in the field and be part of my team. I had a team of five, people to

36:00 carry radios, two to carry radios and two other blokes, and we travelled together with the Vietnamese, and they said, “We want to be in your team.” Byleth, I wouldn’t let him go. I said, “No Byleth, you’ve been on too many drugs.” He was a good soldier. I’ve got a letter from a boss in Vietnam who said he didn’t give him an end of war decoration, and I think he should have. I’ll write to the boss and say, “Look, he was good.” He’s forgotten. He was a bad soldier, he’d always be in trouble doing

36:30 stupid things.

What were the differences you noticed between, you had quite a lot of contact with the US Army, the Australian Army and the South Vietnamese, I just wonder what the difference in tactics and discipline among the three forces were?

37:00 I think the Australian soldiers were a very cohesive group. It comes all the way down. I’ve explained what a platoon is to people, what I believe a platoon is. I have a different view. You see an officer goes

through, joins the navy. Another goes through and joins the airforce, and they probably take about the same time to train each officer, about four to five years, and they send the officer out to the aerodrome

37:30 and he goes down and he opens up this big hangar and there is an F18, a beautiful plane. He says, “This is my plane. Isn’t it lovely?” Or a naval officer goes down to the wharf and walks along and says, “This is my ship. It goes at this speed, it’s lovely. It had this many rockets. It’s big engines,” and then an officer in the army, an infantry officer walks down and says, “That’s my platoon, thirty people. They’re wonderful, aren’t they? Look at them. How can I

38:00 get hold of them, how can I become part of them? There’s nothing I can hug but that’s my platoon. They are the thing that I’ve trained for and lived for and now I’ve got them.” You want to do something with them. Line them up and march them around in circles or do something, but they’re your platoon. So you’ve got that cohesion amongst them, and in Australian society we’re different. They have a script of societies where people are given esteem by their rank, like duke or earl or whether they come from

38:30 such and such a family. Or you have achievement based societies, so you do well and you go up further, and Australia is an achievement based society. That’s one of the things. The other thing about it is you can have neutral and effective societies. Some are neutral and don’t show emotion, which Australians are very much. I’ve just noticed the men are starting to show emotion, and then you have effective societies where affection is shown and passed between people, and we are neutral I think.

39:00 We’re classed as that. The sociologists class us as neutral, individualistic and neutral, and I noticed just recently, John Russell, the little bloke I told you about, rang up and on the phone he was talking to me. I told General Blake about this. He said, “Mick,” he said, “You know I love you guys. I wish I was over there in the eastern states. I’m over in the west.” He said, “I love you guys.” I thought that’s very strange for an Australian man to say the word love. He said,

39:30 “I miss you so much, just being able to be with you and talk about old times.” I thought gee, that’s funny, strange. I’ve never heard an Australian man, especially an army officer, express the word love. I’m sure there are plenty of Australian Army officers who have same sex relationships, but he is just, he’s not talking about a relationship. He’s talking about just camaraderie and love, he says. I thought OK. So I rang General Blake and Blake was saying,

40:00 he said, “Yeah,” he said, “You must remember Mick, you and I are professional soldiers, but blokes like John Russell and Bob Fenwick, this is the greatest thing that’s ever going to occur in their life, been to war and been drawn together with their platoon and other officers,” and he said, “That will mark their life forever.” So the cohesion was in, we had very cohesive units and we had to, nobody would ever let anybody else down.

40:30 Not because of mateship, the old thing of mateship, because there was honour involved. You never let anybody down in battle, you had a responsibility to support them. The Americans were very aggressive. I’ll tell you what we did, one thing was preserve our soldiers and if we got into battle we’d say, “OK, we’re going to get a lot of casualties here,” we’d draw back and preserve them. The Americans were very aggressive. They kept on going. People say they’re no good, but they were very good soldiers and they just kept on going

41:00 to take their objective, and they were there to fight the war. They saw it and that’s what they did, and they weren’t bad soldiers. They were good, aggressive, they worked hard where they were put into battle I’d just hate it. Australians would’ve just, if we’d been put into battle in the same areas as the Americans we just couldn’t stand it. Our army could not have taken the same pressure from the North Vietnamese. Only today I was reading about

41:30 a North Vietnamese Division called the 2nd North Vietnamese Army Division, called the Gold Star Division. It was about 7,000 strong and it was very heavily armed. We came up against fairly lightly armed opposition, the Australians, but if we were taking massive casualties I don’t know how we’d survive. Parliament would’ve pulled us out of Vietnam I think. So I found the Americans

42:00 very aggressive. The South Vietnamese were aggressive.

Tape 8

00:36 **Mike, just before we had a change of tapes there you were talking about the three different armies, American, Australian and South Vietnamese. I’m wondering what you thought at the time of the casualty rate for the Australians and how you responded?**

01:00 I thought the casualties, I knew the casualties were very light, of Australians. The Americans were losing about 300 a week dead, so they probably lost another thousand that were wounded, and most of the casualties in the war were taken by the South Vietnamese. They took many more casualties. They did all the fighting in the war. People think they were just sitting around, but I don’t think Australians ever saw the South Vietnamese. They came into Vietnam and they arrived at a place called Vung Tau. They

01:30 went out and it was like going on an exercise, not at the war, and they did these operations with Australians and they left Vietnam. They commented on the Vietnamese being this and the Vietnamese being that but they never really saw any Vietnamese because they worked completely alone. No Vietnamese force were with them. I think in the taskforce base there was not one Vietnamese. We were completely isolated, and that was a decision taken for some security reason I think. So in our, where we live

02:00 there was not one Vietnamese person. Down south in Vung Tau they used to have women come in to make their beds, but up where we were we had nobody come into that base. I think there might have been some interpreters later on, but there were no Vietnamese in there, so I don't know how they make comments about the Vietnamese this and the Vietnamese that because they never saw them. It's known now, you can check all the casualties, the Vietnamese took most of the

02:30 casualties, Australians took very light casualties. The Australians lost, I think we lost fifty from my battalion and fifty, we lost 500 in ten years. Not very many, not very many really. What did the Americans lose, 50,000? And I think my platoon lost about five, five dead and I don't know how many wounded. Probably about twelve wounded.

03:00 **It's really quite surprising given the circumstances.**

Yes. I think, you know, the war, it was a very unpopular war while it was on. Now it's a very popular war. Everybody wants to be a Vietnam Veteran. Around here there are millions of them walking around with medals they are not entitled to, and actors and people on the net called wannabes.

03:30 You can go through the net and you'll find all these people who are not Vietnam Veterans, who are claiming to be Vietnam Veterans. There is one around here who walks around with two Crosses of Gallantry on from the Vietnamese Government and he didn't earn them. But I know, I have some but he didn't get any. He's around Mosman here, but they found him. There's somebody like the Inquisition and they go around and they find these people and they

04:00 find these people who are pretending to be Vietnam Veterans and they expose them. They go their workplace. They do everything. They go around and they tell their family and they say they're lying and they're wearing false ribbons and false decorations. The one here, I haven't seen him for a while, probably about three months, but he walks around with all these medals on not entitled to. They're all over Australia. There's a website showing who they are and where they came from and what they said they were supposed to be and what they really

04:30 are. It's all around the place. So it's now a very popular war, so when it's shown on TV I think kids see all these heroes and say, "Dad, what did you do during the war?" When Dad says, "I didn't do anything," they have to say, "I did this or I did that." It's best to have done something that nobody can check on like the Training Team or a Special Air Service Regiment because there's nobody who,

05:00 they won't tell you what they were doing and nobody can keep track of a Training Team because you work way out from everybody else. Yeah, there's a lot of people who claim they were doing these special jobs. I know a fellow just across from here. I'm going to have him around soon, in about a couple of weeks time. He's in the movie industry too and he claims he was in Vietnam. He wasn't. I know he was back here in gaol at the time, an army officer put in gaol

05:30 for theft. Yeah, so they've just changed. The complexion of the war has changed. Once it was a nasty horrible thing and people were over there bayoneting babies. Then we came back and there was Bryan Brown and Mel Gibson, everybody wanted to be part of it. Then when there were people going out saying, "I've got Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, have pity on me," they knew the girls would all put their arms around them.

06:00 Everybody, you know, "I'm a Veteran," and I saw it in '66. I went to a party up at Baulkham Hills and here was this fellow, he was supposed to have been in Borneo but he couldn't get used to the jungle, to being out in the jungle so he had to keep taking this girl, the bloke's daughter, out into the backyard. I thought that's not a bad one. But one thing about females is they're very compassionate and

06:30 sympathetic when somebody is a wounded bird, and to be a wounded bird is fashionable, because they talk to females, say, "Yeah, I was this. I'm very wounded psychologically or in fact," and then females immediately try to comfort them and become their friend. Naturally a lot of people go out into society to meet females and make them their friends,

07:00 so they use that as one of the many ploys, and females are naturally nurturing. They say, "Oh yeah, go on," rather than say, "Bugger off." They say, "Go on, yeah. I'll listen to you," whereas as men say, "What? Rubbish." So that's another reason. Some people, you see them sitting around, they're crying in hotels and clubs.

07:30 You think have you a right to be crying? Some do. Some have been at war and some have been on the fringes of it. A lot of the war was skirmishes. It wasn't a real war, they didn't see it. There wasn't a real lot of blood and guts, they didn't see it. A lot of it was skirmishes. When I was twenty and the enemy was five, I would always like to be the twenty, but there were five enemy, or three enemy or five or seven and that was the way the war was, and it was a skirmish between a small group and a small group.

08:00 A lot of the times Australians had the advantage and there were skirmishes between small groups of us and the enemy. That's the way it was, and I think it wasn't like the First World War where there were massive numbers of troops. The Americans had a very heavy war in Vietnam and they were facing a large number of troops all the time, and they were having thousands and thousands of North Vietnamese attack them.

08:30 The Australians did get into that because the Australians were right down the south of Vietnam and they had a number of big battles, Long Tan and Coral and Balmoral. Now they were major battles and they were similar to what the Americans had and what the South Vietnamese had. There were only three of them in ten years, but they were battles, really serious battles where there were thousands of North Vietnamese attack them and overran them a lot of the time.

09:00 I think the South Vietnamese had that. If you said that to an Australian, they'd say, "Well, they were bloody useless and inefficient, the South Vietnamese," but they weren't useless and inefficient. They were soldiers who were fighting the war and they were quite efficient brave soldiers. There's an Australian made a movie called, what's it called?

09:30 It was shot in Thailand. What's his name? He came from Balmain, the Film Co-operative out at Balmain. Neil? He made this movie. He actually served with the Vietnamese. It's a wonderful film about the Vietnamese army. It might be Men Against Fire, and he got shot.

10:00 He was out in Thailand in the main street during a coup and they shot him and he fell over and he left his camera running and the camera showed the whole incident as he lay there dying. You could see the Thai soldiers shooting at him. Neil somebody or other. The Balmain Film Co-operative he was part of. I got his film to show Australian soldiers because they didn't realise how much the Vietnamese did and he had it all there in the film.

10:30 They're the differences, and the Vietnamese were there. My battalion commander had been nineteen years at war. Nineteen years non stop. He'd been fighting in Laos across the border, all over. He'd been fighting big battles for nineteen years. He was only a young man still, and he used to sing. We see battalions might be gruff people, he got up at a concert and he sang a love song in Vietnamese. Quite different. Phuong,

11:00 he was, P-H-U-O-N-G, Major Phuong, and he'd been there nineteen years, so I suppose to have some normalcy in his life he had to do things like that.

I'm wondering if the low Australian casualty rate, as you say we weren't up north, we were down south, but I'm wondering how much the low casualty rate was attributable to rescue operations?

11:30 There were two things. I think we were very highly trained so we didn't suffer the casualties, and secondly, if we were going to suffer a lot of casualties, if they could identify that we were, there were a lot of, we sometimes held back, went around our casualties, gathered them together and got them out and pulled back from the battle. That happened a number of times where we'd pull back and knew the casualties were going to occur so we preserved the life of our soldiers. That's the decision commanders made at the time,

12:00 whereas the Vietnamese said, "You have to keep going." They thought in war if you don't keep going you suffer more casualties. That's what military people believe, but the Australian Army said, "No, we want to preserve our men. Don't take casualties." So they pulled back and they then took the casualties home and patched them up and we didn't lose as many people killed. And we also had a very highly trained army. The training system that got people to Vietnam was very good. It got them through

12:30 a series of training systems up through Canungra, and they had all these systems for various levels in the army, the commanding officers and the officers that are under him, and they were assessed continually. Now if they didn't make it they were just sacked. We didn't muck around and say, "Well, he's on his way to Vietnam." He's no longer on his way to Vietnam. I think in my battalion there were four company commanders sacked. There were only four and four were sacked. They replaced them,

13:00 I think. And then platoon commanders, there were a number of platoon commanders sacked during this assessment period to see if they were good enough to go to Vietnam. They were continually assessed and if they weren't good enough and the CO didn't think they were good enough to look after Australian soldiers you just sacked them and sent them home. It wouldn't do much for their career, but that's what happened to them. Colonel Kahn and the company commanders would not tolerate people who weren't good enough. So that's another reason we didn't

13:30 suffer a large number of casualties, and when it came down to it, where the leaders were required to act as leaders like at Long Tan or any of the battles, they performed wonderfully, both at sub-unit level at company, and the small unit person like a corporals. Corporals did well at battle and they were people who sometimes they were regular soldiers and they'd been in the army three years and they were at the corporal level, well sometimes they were National Servicemen and a few years before they might have been a bank manager,

14:00 and they were brought into the army, made a corporal and they performed well too. The training system

got them ready for that. Corporal Partridge, I got to Vietnam and I had, the first platoon commander was killed and the first platoon sergeant was killed and I think I had no corporals in my platoon. You're supposed to have three. Two were killed or wounded and I had none. I just looked around and I thought Private Partridge, come here.

14:30 I said, "You're going to be an NCO." He said, "When do I have to do the course?" I said, "No course Private Partridge. You're a corporal." Bang, that's it, straight off, corporal. "But I don't how to navigate." I said, "You'll have to learn." One minute he was a private and the next minute he was a corporal in command, and he was good. He learned how to navigate to the level he needed and he commanded his section very well for the rest of the year, and that's what happened

15:00 You go back and you say, "How can we do that in Australia?" Because we've got young people who go through a very good education system, they've got fluoride in their teeth, they eat plenty of meat, they have injections and they're well looked after medically so they are fit and healthy and they're well educated and when you give them a job they do it well. Now we can probably send every child in Australia through to university level easily with the education system we've got. Every child could deal with university.

15:30 It's just if they chose to or not, or they're willing to put the work in, and that's in this country. We say, "Why are we good at so many things?" Now I was living with a French girl back in 1991, '92, and they were always having shots at Australia. On one weekend we'd won the world motorcycle championship, tennis,

16:00 hockey, rugby union. We had a prize for literature announced and Australia won it, and then when you looked at music, the world musicians, there were about five Australians in the top ten in musicians, and then somebody had identified a young opera singer who was an Australian too, all in one weekend. And why is that? People say Australians are very laid back. We're not laid back at all, we're extremely

16:30 competitive and that's why we're good. That's why people go and play football. They think why football, football, football, football, football. Not only football, every part of life they're competitive. You go into a job, people are competitive. One person wants to be better than the other person and do well. They might not want to be better than another person, they just want to be better than whatever the standard is. "I want to be better than myself."

17:00 You go and watch the 'City to Surf' [marathon] and watch 55,000 run and fifty-five year old people running past. Jo and I were running the City to Surf. I ran over the hill down into Double Bay and there ahead of me on the right was a bloke who had been in the army with my father in Darwin in 1937. He was eighty-three and he was running the City to Surf and he'd run every City to Surf, so I went over and grabbed him. His name was Blue White.

17:30 **I'm just wondering going back to Vietnam, like how did you keep going? You mentioned earlier on that you were a professional soldier, it was a job and you're not necessarily fighting only for the defence of Australia. What kept you going deep down?**

Probably values. Pride is one of our values to keep

18:00 going, isn't it? You've just got to keep going regardless. That's one of the things about our values, right or wrong, what's appropriate behaviour. Appropriate behaviour for Australians is just to keep going, never give in, never give up, and that's what you do. I think I would never give up because I was afraid or I was going to be killed. A couple of times I felt very isolated. I'd been living sort of thirty kilometres inland in the hills

18:30 and there was nobody to talk to. I had a lot of authority and I had no level of anybody to sort of filter that authority through. So I was able to do things but I didn't have the authority to direct because the Vietnamese retained that. They were always in command. I had all the fire support. I was in charge of all the planes and all the artillery and all the gun ships. They had the authority to move the troops around the ground. I felt a bit isolated

19:00 then. I would have liked to talked to an Australian only there were no Australians around for hundreds of kilometres. I felt quite isolated then. I kept on thinking God, what am I doing this for?

And what were you doing it for?

I was doing it for just probably personal pride because you can do it. "I can do this," and just keep going. Anything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I just thought you've got to keep going and be good at it.

19:30 Not only keep going, but when you keep going you've got to be good at it I thought, and I think a lot of Australians would think that way. Why do we do it, why do we do things better? I saw a friend of ours, at fifteen she had cancer of the spine and was paralysed. She just walked 1,000 kilometres across Spain. She's in her fifties. And you'd have to say, "Why would you walk 1,000 kilometres?" I can't see any reason for that.

20:00 I'd get about, I might be able to walk 200 and I'd say, "Where's the bus?" I couldn't see any reason to walk 1,000 kilometres, but she did. I can't question her. She did it, that's her. As soon as somebody says, "I want to do it," I never question them because as soon as they say "I feel this or I think this," that's

their business. You can't query it because they feel it or they think it.

You mentioned that even though you were being restrained in some sense and limited, you

20:30 **nevertheless had quite a lot of authority. You mentioned that sometimes you felt a bit like a king cowboy, I'm wondering does that authority go to your head when you're isolated?**

When I was restrained I think I was restrained by my company commander who saw me as a likely casualty. He was a fairly wise fellow, had good judgement, he saw right.

21:00 "This bloke is going to be killed unless I restrain him," so he was exercising his wisdom and his professional knowledge as a soldier. Whereas when I was on my own I did have a fantastic amount of authority and power, and yeah, I think I felt that. I felt I was important, I knew I was important, and I could just, I was the one who could do all this. It was like being

21:30 an orchestra leader. I could say, "Helicopter gun ship, voom. Next, fighter ground attack aircraft, boom. Right, artillery, boom," on the battle field, you know, do all this. I had flares, voom. I'd bring flares out of helicopters, bring those out. The battle would rage on, and I was on a hill and I'd have to get involved with the battle, because you know, the enemy would attack us and I'd have to get involved with the shooting part.

22:00 I'd get involved with mainly the fire support part and maybe the casualty evacuation part. Yes, it was, when I came back I found the lack of authority was a bit of a shock. Suddenly I came back to normal. I was just normal old me. I went from a job, I went to a job down in Victoria and I saw people walking around and I thought God, you people aren't soldiers. I

22:30 thought you just don't know, and when I became a commander and I had to train a hundred soldiers, I don't know how well or badly they were trained, but they were trained very hard because I thought you've got to be trained for war. So they had to dig in, they had to sleep in a hole every night. They said, "Why?" I said, "Because I said." I said, "You'll train hard and you'll fight a war easily." So the soldiers I had under me trained very hard.

23:00 They turned out I reckon reasonably good soldiers, but I was hard on the training. I was unforgiving of any performance that wasn't any good because I'd seen what happens to any bad soldier and what the possibilities were when people aren't good enough. I found that was there. When I came back I did work to a large extent beyond what I should have, the level I put into the army, which apparently is a sign of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I was working

23:30 enormous hours and doing all sorts of things that I didn't need to do, just because I wanted to do it. I wanted to keep going. A fellow tells me that a sure sign of it. What you do is use all the work to black everything else out. He said, "You're no good. You're just like an alcoholic or a drug addict." He said, "The fellow that uses alcohol does this. You use this. It's the same thing." He said, "So you haven't controlled yourself either." I thought I don't drink, I don't belt my wife, I don't use drugs,

24:00 so I'm OK, but what I was doing was doing just the same thing. I was using all these things at work and the people who were working for me probably suffered. I don't know if they did, but they could have. They could have suffered because they had to work too if I was working. I'd give them jobs to do and I'd be working and they'd be working until 10.00 or 11.00 o'clock at night. I didn't feel anything. I'd just come home and I'd be right. I'd go back and do battle PT in the morning even though we didn't have to. I'd get them out, we were in a staff job and I'd say, "Right, battle PT,"

24:30 and we'd do that in the morning and then we'd get into our job all day and I'd work until 9.00 o'clock at night, 10.00 o'clock at night again, in a very simple administrative management job, and they'd be working just as hard and they didn't have to. I should have rested them because they'll have to go back out into the units and be soldiers and work hard again. In the army you sort of rotate from the units which are working hard out in the bush and get rotated back to managements and

25:00 coordination jobs and then you go out in the field, but you need this rest back here. Now while they were back here these people started working for me. They should have been resting and going out and playing golf. I was working them too hard. I realise that now but too late.

I'm wondering also when you returned after your second tour, or even your first tour, how you managed having bad dreams?

I don't think I had any.

25:30 When I first came home I had one. I flicked over out of bed because I thought a flare had gone off and I was near the seaside and sometimes near the seaside the sun comes over the horizon and a ray of light comes zipping in through the curtains and hits you and you think it's really white light, and I saw that and I went flick, out of bed onto the floor. Under where I used to sleep in Vietnam I always used to keep my weapon and I used to sleep north south so I always knew which way was

26:00 right, so that's north. So if some gun fire went off over there I'd say, "Right, north west." Right, south west, I'd know where it happened during the night because if I got on the radio I could tell what was going on around me if there was gunfire or something because I was north south and my weapon was across there so I could lean on my weapon. I knew where everything was. Here I was flicked out of bed,

and my wife was leaning over the side of the bed and I was crawling around the floor going like that. I think that's the only incident occurred.

26:30 I don't think I had many bad dreams. I had a few about the blokes who got burnt in the helicopter, but they weren't, I just thought about them, what happened to them. It wasn't sort of traumatic where I was screaming. It was just the fact that I felt sorry for the fact that they were, where would they go in Vietnam? Here, Bali made me think of that. In Australia they go into the burns unit

27:00 and I was in Royal North Shore at the time and people would come into the burns unit and be treated and go out. And these soldiers, where would they go in Vietnam? What about the infection they'd get in Vietnam because of the tropical climate. They were over there. I thought yeah, that would be their fate. They would just go off into some crummy little hospital with poor sterilisation. You think God, poor buggers. Because at night I'd see them, as we flew out at night with the casualties we come out and

27:30 I'd see on the ground, I'd see a line of lights going somewhere. That would be the North Vietnamese taking their casualties back. I used to think God, poor buggers. They'd go out and they'd go out into the black which was way out on Ho Chi Minh Trail and then 1200 kilometres up to Hanoi, or they might go to a few hospitals in the jungle. And my soldiers, I was taking the soldiers back to a hospital somewhere, the casualties that were on the aircraft that I was in.

28:00 I'd sometimes see this row of lights. We'd be coming back from a battle area and they'd be going away from it too, but on foot like our soldiers did in the Second World War, they'd be carrying their casualties.

I'm wondering if you were able to talk on your return to anyone?

It was easy for me because I came back to the battalion the first time, with my own

28:30 battalion that I'd served with in Vietnam. So I carried with me all the esteem of being a platoon commander in that battalion and everybody knew me. All the officers knew me. I was a platoon commander you see, so everybody thought I had high status. Therefore I could talk to anybody and I had people there who I knew. My soldiers were there, some of them and a lot of the people that I served with in Vietnam were around me. It was like I was surrounded by people I could talk to. The second time I didn't. Nobody knew what I had done and the level, so there was nobody to talk to,

29:00 and there are very few still. There are a couple around here and I've met some since. They do the same sort of thing and they understand the level of warfare, but even people who were in Vietnam with the Australians, I can't talk to them about the Training Team because the level of war we're talking about is just vastly different, so vastly different. They talk about these skirmishes. I'm talking about major large scale battles and you just get out of sync along their somewhere.

Well I wondering how

29:30 **you reacted to getting news or orders to end your second tour?**

Well after Sergeant Tinsley got the female into the barracks I got very quick orders. I was going home, I found out I was going home on the 6th of December in about July. They were closing down the war for Australians up in the north on 6 December.

30:00 So I came home on the 5th of November. I told my father. I said, "I'm coming home on the 6th of December." He said, "I'd heard that." He'd already heard it here in Australia, they were closing the war down and I was one of the last officers out of the northern part. So he, when I left it was OK. The Americans were very upset that I was going, so were the South Vietnamese. They could see farewell, they would never see you again, and

30:30 you fought with them and they felt everybody was deserting them and going over the horizon and they'd be left on their own, the South Vietnamese. Bye bye the Americans, see you later, sail away Australian, bye bye. The South Vietnamese were just sitting there waiting for the north to just come down. Within a few months they were down there and knocked them around, and so I felt bad about that. By about April '72 the North Vietnamese had overrun where my base was.

31:00 I thought all my mates would be there, sitting there trying to defend themselves against tanks and aircraft and things they'd never encountered before. I thought that was pretty bad. I also got a letter from the Australian Army which was a very interesting letter which told me I was not allowed to write to the Vietnamese officers because we'd changed our policy towards South Vietnam, "So you are instructed not to make any contact or write to Vietnamese officers whom you may have served

31:30 with in Vietnam," which I thought was a bit rude censoring my personal relationships with other soldiers I'd fought with. I got that letter, I'm sure they're around the place those letters.

And why do you think that directive

Well, the government changed its policy. It recognised North Vietnam, the Australian Government, in '72. We were one of the first ones to recognise North Vietnam, so it wanted to cut off South Vietnam because it was unpopular to be associated with South Vietnam. So I could have been a contact with South Vietnam

32:00 by talking to their soldiers and their officers I'd served with. They said I wasn't allowed to do it. Foreign policy decision, you see. What could happen? Some person sits down there, "Make sure you tell all the army officers who served with the South Vietnamese not to write to them." Do this, do that, and they just make up some policy letters and he writes them, gives them to the Minister for Foreign Affairs who signs them and sends them out to all the officers.

Well I'm wondering,

32:30 **given that the war essentially ended in defeat, how you were able as an individual to reconcile that?**

Yes, I think the Americans left Vietnam. They were never defeated in a battle, or the South Vietnamese were ever defeated in any battle, but they just

33:00 left the battlefield. Said, "OK, see you later." Left the battlefield. Towards the end they actually created a situation so that the North Vietnamese would negotiate. They got it wrong a few times. They thought we'll bomb them and then they bombed North Vietnam to a point where the North Vietnamese were ready to negotiate, but then the Americans failed to follow up and bomb harder and the North Vietnamese saw that as a sign of weakness. They thought you're weak, why haven't you come harder

33:30 now that you've got the advantage? The Americans sort of pulled back a bit and said, "OK, we've bombed them. They're going to negotiate and that's what we wanted," and the North Vietnamese said, "That's weakness. Having got the advantage you should have run up and kept on bombing us." See, different attitudes, and that's what they thought at the time. The Americans said, "No no, we've achieved what we want which is negotiation," and they just wanted to leave and

34:00 get Vietnam back on the track, which was elections in the south and the north to let the south exist. Same as in Palestine. What the Americans want to do is let Israel exist and Palestine to exist in their own territory. They don't want Israel to take over Palestine or Palestine to take over Israel. But it's very hard, people won't do that. They have their own agenda. They say, "Bugger that. Get out you Israelis."

34:30 The Israelis are very hard on the old Palestinians too, these Palestinian suicide bombers. It would be very hard if you two went out to lunch and I wasn't sure you were going to be back because a suicide bomber blew you to pieces up in Neutral Bay. That's how the Israelis live and I think during the guerrilla stage of the war in Vietnam that's what was happening too. You know, bombs were going off, civilians were being wounded and then the South Vietnamese

35:00 soldiers and families go so cranky with the VC doing this that they were happy to go to war. From 54 on, from '54 to '64 there was a lot of VC terrorism right throughout Vietnam, killing people, kidnapping, chopping off heads, things like that. Then by the time the war started again in '64, started up, the South Vietnamese were

35:30 strongly against the North Vietnamese and the VC because of the kidnappings. Don't know how many kidnappings, I could tell you how many there were, 17,000 I think there were in one year, kidnappings. They kidnapped people and take them out to the jungle, maybe for ransom, or maybe just to make them VC. I met plenty of people who were travelling along the road one minute and were suddenly off in the jungle the next being a VC. They just were picked

36:00 up, stopped, stopped here, "Who are you? Right, who are you? Pay a tax." You've paid your tax on the road. They said, "Young fellow, get out. Young lady, you get out. You're a nurse and you're an infantry (pvlr? UNCLEAR)," and they went off into the jungle and they did some training or re-education and they became a VC. They didn't put up banners, you know, recruiting now for VC. They just kidnapped them and took them away.

Well I'm wondering,

36:30 **given that you were a platoon commander and in positions of authority and you've spoken quite a lot today about your sense of responsibility, how did you deal with that after the war and that burden of responsibility?**

I think I, I don't know how long it stays with you, but I've noticed with the soldiers I am still their last point of contact

37:00 with the army. So if they want to know something about the army they ring me, but there's two things they give me. They see me as a last point of contact but they also give me a great amount of friendship, and since I've bee sick they've travelled from all over the place to come and see me. They ring up about three or four times a week to see how I am, and I've long left them thirty years ago. So there's still a great deal of friendship there which was only a friendship based on Vietnam. I have a responsibility to them if they need help.

37:30 Like if they have a submission to DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] on agent orange and DVA might say to a soldier, "You weren't subjected to agent orange." They'll ask me because I remember and I'll put in a submission for them, "Private so and so was there, there and there, drinking out of creeks," and I'll send photos to them and I'll give them grid references because I can remember where we were, "At this grid reference we got resupplied and here we drank

38:00 out of creeks," and I'll write that as part of an annex to the submission. That's my responsibility, to

support them in the peace and I led them in war but I support them in the peace.

I'm wondering if there was anything you asked them to do in war that you felt might have affected them long term?

Some of them I used, I used four people a lot who were the best

38:30 soldiers. If I was going out on my own and I had to go and do a reconnaissance I'd say, "One two three four," same four all the time because they were the best. I don't know if that has affected them in the peace. One has been in counselling for nineteen years, one suicided. The other bloke, he's a bit of a larrikin, he's doing well, he's made his way in life. I used to use the same four to come with me because they were good, strong, trustworthy, could work without my direction,

39:00 so they were independent thinkers and I used to take them all the time. Did they get more exposure than anybody else in the platoon and how has that affected them, I can't answer that. How did it affect them, go out? If I was going out I'd say, "Right, you four come with me," and they'd go out into hazardous situations where I'd leave the others behind and they might sit there and make a brew or have a drink and I'd take these four out and we'd go and have a look for a camp or something. So there was a bit more stress for them, and I know

39:30 that they have been affected. Natty, one committed suicide. Another one of my NCO's went in shot his wife. He had a stoppage and he slashed his throat and rang me up and said, "Look I'm just ringing, I just wanted to say sorry about this, but I've got to say goodbye. I'm going to shoot myself now." I talked him out of it. Then he came up and stayed with me. I put him into hospital for two weeks and they said he was OK, and then he came and stayed

40:00 with me. He was OK, says me, and they said yes, he was OK out at the psych unit, and then I sent him home. He's been OK since. He's dead, but he's been OK psychologically or psychiatrically. He did try to shoot his wife and only slashed his throat. Not really, only a pretend slash just around here. Now there's a big line around there, a very thin line around his

40:30 throat. He didn't really cut in and kill himself, around here. He didn't shoot himself which was good. That was one. Another fellow shot himself in South Australia. The worst one I heard was just over here the other day, another friend, who I wasn't in the platoon. He was an officer and he went out and he was missing for about six days over at Terrey Hills or across the Spit there. He went out into the bush and he was out in the bush and they couldn't

41:00 find him and he stabbed himself in the heart with a knife. It's hard to do. It's hard to stab anybody else. You know, in the movies you see people stab somebody and it looks easy but it's very hard to stab somebody I think. He stabbed himself in the heart and he died, he killed himself. Just over at French's Forest I think it was, they found up in the bush up there. Another mate shot himself out at Holsworthy too. He had a medical condition which was not affecting him.

41:30 It was a congenital medical condition, which passed down through his family, and as it started to get hold of him he just, boom, shot himself. I think it was the medical condition and not Vietnam that caused him to kill himself. But there are a lot of people around who are affected by Vietnam and if they've got a good family I think they survive. Family is probably the main thing that supports them. Their friends, sometimes their friends lead them down the wrong path.

Tape 9

00:32 **Mike, just before we swapped tapes you were telling us about quite a high suicide rate amongst people you knew. What was it about Vietnam that would, I mean for World War II guys there wasn't that same kind of suicide rate, so I just wonder what it was about Vietnam that pushed men just that bit further?**

I can explain it in terms of operations. See, in Vietnam there

01:00 were very long operations. You say that, but that shouldn't be a factor really because some people in World War II had long operations, but a lot of people in World War II had very short times in action. In Vietnam you might have gone for, my father wouldn't believe me. I was with him and three of his friends one time. He said, "How long did you go out in the jungle?" I'd say, "Forty-two days." He'd say, "I don't believe you." The other blokes would say, "I can't believe he went out for that long. How could you? How would you carry rations?" I'd say, "They'd come in by air,

01:30 by helicopter." "And what about ammunition?" "It would come in by air." We'd go around, "Who would you be with?" I said, "Me on my own, for forty-two days with my platoon?" "I can't believe that. We never did that in World War II." And my father was a platoon commander right through World War II, Kokoda Trail, Shaggy Ridge, Ramu Valley and Borneo. He went right through World War II as a platoon commander and he never did that sort of length of operations. Now I don't think that's the factor that causes them to be that. I think that maybe

02:00 when they came back here it may have been the factor, but not the fact that they didn't get support, but they got depressed and somebody didn't recognise it and they just kept going down down down down. And depression has one end, death, suicide. It gets a person to that end where they say, "Well, it's not worth going on." They've fallen into a well. They think life is not worth it. Suicide is easy.

02:30 The way they chose is hard. I'm not sure this World War II, I think the figures from World War II you'd have to look what time are they collected over. If they were collected over just the period after World War II there were a lot of suicides. Over the long term there weren't that many suicides, but in a period, say the first twenty years, there were a few suicides around the place. And then they had to work out which were suicides. They class

03:00 suicides now as a drunk who drives into a tree is now a suicide in Australia, if he's a Vietnam Veteran or a young man, and I think you could go back and examine all the factors like they were at war, they were in confrontation longer. They did longer patrols on longer operations and say, "Are they the factors?" I'm not sure of that myself. I don't think they are the factors which would lead to greater suicide because I saw the people come home and they were OK after that,

03:30 after these very long operations. They were long operations and people say, "No, the same as World War II." They weren't. From what I can make out from my father he says no, they'd go out for short patrols. It might be four or five days. We're talking about forty-two days on your own. It's a long time for soldiers to go out on their own just wandering through the jungle looking for the enemy. There were those sorts of factors. I can't think of

04:00 any others that may create a difference to them relate to stress, and stress then leads to depression. Depression leads to suicide.

Can you tell me Mike about the reception you received when you got home from family and I guess from general public?

Wonderful.

04:30 I knew on the 26th of January my wife had given birth to a son. So I came in on the HMAS Sydney, the aircraft carrier, I'm looking down and I could see my wife and she had something in her arms. I thought what's that? That was the baby. So I had joy, only too much joy. I came

05:00 down there and then there she is. That's me and her.

That's lovely.

Another one. They say it looks like I'm carrying a mine.

I wonder, you hear and you've mentioned that Vietnam Vets [Veterans] when they came back were called child killers and spat on. I just wonder what you saw of that?

When we first came back we got a tremendous welcome in Sydney, they were five to ten

05:30 deep on the side, more than Anzac Day these days. We marched through ticker tape. We marched past the Town Hall with bands and there was a welcome home. They say, "There was no welcome home for you." There was. Now I was there in '53 and my father went past from Korea, the same. He went past and I stood on the Town Hall, that's why I thought there might be two photos there. There's my Dad there on the left, but when he went past by coincidence my wife chose

06:00 to stand in exactly the same place as my mother and I stood as my father was marching past. So there has been no great difference. I can remember two, his and mine, and they were both about the same. I was part of both of them. So we were welcomed home by the City of Sydney as well as you could be, ticker tape and bands and marching along. It was all you wanted, and then at the end you'd give your rifle and you'd go on your own way. There were a few things though,

06:30 at the wharf, there's the wharf there, I was the Connex [container] officer. I was the officer in charge of letting people have their precious goods like stereos out of the container, and they'd come along and sign. "Number 54, Corporal Partridge, here's your stereo." Off he'd go, he'd pick up his bag and then he'd come to another table where I was, "Right Corporal Partridge, sign there. There's your ticket." What did he get? He got a second class rail fare home to Adelaide and

07:00 he headed off. He said, "How do I get up to Central [Station]?" I said, "I think you head up past that building there." So he went up past the, not the Mitchell Library, the State [Library], the Art Gallery, and he walked up to Central, got a second class rail fare home, down to Melbourne and then he got on a train to Adelaide next day, and when he got home to Adelaide he got a taxi and walked up the road with his bag over his shoulder and said, "G'day Mum, I'm home," and Mum said, "How was Vietnam Dave? Want a cuppa?" That was it,

07:30 nobody. The army just let him go. He was off into the distance. From Vietnam, from the army, I shook hands with him, "That was well done Dave." "Thanks very much." I still hear from him now. He's off in South Australia talking to his Mum. He went all the way home on his own, nobody looked after him. He wasn't flown back by a grateful nation who took him out of his job for two years. He was sent back. He walked up to Central

08:00 carrying his bag and then he caught the train and got a taxi home from Adelaide to Elizabeth. I think that's the suburb it is, he told me. That's what happened to him. I understand there were some of these people, you know, baby killer stuff. None of my soldiers have told me. One told me they told him in the RSL [Returned and Services League] it wasn't a real war and you shouldn't be here.

What reception did you receive from I guess your dad and his mates?

My Dad knew fairly well what it was like. He said, "Oh

08:30 yeah, tell me about it." And I didn't tell him. I think I told him years later. Probably about twenty years later I told him. I didn't say anything. His mates, they didn't have a clue about the war. They had all been soldiers but they didn't know about Vietnam. And my father has told about me from senior officers who knew me in Vietnam. That sort of thing, I was the son of an officer so yabba yabba yabba. "He did well," or, "He did this." So

09:00 that went off that way. So that's how he found out about me. The second time he knew I was in great danger. He heard of the battles when I was out on my own. He kept on saying to me, "You can't, you've got no right to die. You're responsibility is to stay alive," because of my family, and he wrote to me and told me that, that I haven't got the right to die. We did that sort of thing, yeah.

What was your wife's reaction to you going back the second time?

09:30 She wasn't very happy. She was cranky actually because other people who she knew that were in our class from Duntroon were saying, "He doesn't have to go back," you know, "He doesn't have to go back," and I said, "Look, I have to go back. I'm a professional soldier." She said, "You don't. You've got two children under two and these people tell me." I said, "Don't worry about those people. They don't know what they're talking about. I've got to go back. That's my job to go back." She said, "You don't have to though. What about

10:00 the boys, what about me?" So I went up to Brisbane to go back and I went into a party and Jo was there and all these other people, and they were saying, "You're stupid, don't go back." It was in January of '71 I think. I was doing a course up there and they were saying, "You don't have to go back, you're stupid," the same reaction. But my wife, I can understand her. Now I can. At the time I said, "Well,

10:30 so what. You're the family, you'll get by." She was in a crummy married quarters living on her own. This is my wisdom in hindsight, my maturity in hindsight. At the time I said, "No, I'm off," but she was there with two kids under two and she was about twenty I suppose, and since she'd been married she'd lived in one two three four five homes, two countries, and she'd only been marred one year. She had a

11:00 husband at war for seven months too. So she lived sort of going to funerals. She went to Charlie's funeral and Bob Potter's funeral, and so she'd been to a couple of army funerals, blokes just like me who are now dead. So it wasn't beyond conception or thinking that I could be dead soon too. I now feel sorry for her, or feel sad. I saw her at my son's wedding reception and she was

11:30 sitting across from Jo and I and I thought yeah, you poor little bugger. I'd known her since she was fourteen, and she was a school girl in Year 9 and I must've been in Year 11. Yeah, that would be about right. I've seen her grow up and I've lived with her all my life. I lived with her and her mother and father. So I lived with her like a brother and sister as well as being lovers and husband and wife.

12:00 So I'd seen her grow up all her life. I kept on thinking, when I think back I think gee, that was a bit unfair, now. I couldn't think that then because it was beyond me. I was immortal and these were the most important things to me and her and the kids, I thought you'll get by, you're strong. I said, "You're strong, you'll be OK. You've got money and a place to live and a car. What do you need?" They were all the things that I thought were important. I said, "I'll send all the money home. I don't want

12:30 anything. I don't want a thing at all. Everything I'll send home." I just sent money home. I thought, you've got money, a warm house and two kids and a car. What more could a person need? That was my perception of priorities at that time. I'm much more sympathetic with her position as it's been and the things she's had to endure over the last twenty, or the twenty years she was with me. She endured some terrible things, and the war was probably one

13:00 of those things that were terrible. We had a woman who used to visit us whose husband, and she used to come down and tell Marlene, "Gee, Michael's all over. They reckon he's going to be killed. He's way up north and they reckon every time they're having these battles." She'd come down and tell her and Marlene was about twenty-two at that stage and this woman would come and down and have a cup of tea and tell Marlene all these bad things that had happened to me. It didn't make her very happy.

13:30 I rang her from Vietnam. I found this way of ringing her. I found a bloke who could get me through to a relay station in Da Nang and I got a connection to the Philippines and I got a connection to Sydney and I got a connection to out where I lived, and she was around the corner at the shop with her sister and then they came back and I spoke to her on the phone from in the field, because I really needed to talk to her.

Why did you need to talk to her at that point?

14:00 I think I just wanted to tell her I was coming home, it wouldn't be long. Right, so just settle down, because the army was trying to move her out of the house. I said, "Put your foot down. Stay in that

house because I'm coming home." Because the army said, "No no, we want to move you away." I said, "No, just put your foot down and say you're not moving because I'm coming home on the 6th of December." So she did it and she wouldn't let them move her out, because we were moving to Victoria when I got back, otherwise she would've had to move here and then down to Victoria. So I said, "No, put

14:30 your foot down and refuse to do it," and I could've written her but when I spoke to her I could be more emphatic, so I did that.

How did the two tours of Vietnam change you as a young man do you think?

People said I changed. To me I don't think I did. Probably missed out on playing for Australia because of the war. That's what I say. Everybody else laughs when

15:00 I say that, but I think one thing it did, I tell people if I, when I was standing on a hill I saw all these blokes looking in at me and they were all dead, I realise you don't have a life in the bank. Sometime you say, I realise it now too, "I won't, I'll do that in the future. I won't do that now. I'll do that in the future or after I've retired, or after I've paid for the house, or after this."

15:30 I thought no, I'm going to do things. Not live a life, a rip tearing life, but when I want to do them I'll do them now. This stroke, the same thing has happened, too late. I would say to people, if you get to forty and if you can retire and live on just enough, just have enough money to live on, just enough to eat and you've got somewhere to live, do it. Don't keep going. Start living your life. I would go and live in Spain now or something like that where I could just get by,

16:00 cheap accommodation and cheap food, and take Jo and just live in Spain, live somewhere cheap and do those sorts of things right now. But I can't go now. If I get back to walking OK, and I don't know if I will. Medically I'm quite good. My heart's good, I've got a very good blood pressure, but my heart's pretty good. If I could get back to walking and being physically OK I wouldn't mind going to live in Spain. I'll probably keep this house because you can't get back into Sydney if you leave

16:30 Sydney, too expensive.

I wonder Mike, you mentioned right at the start of today that your father hadn't talked to you much about his experience during the war, but when you came [back from Vietnam] he did and I just wonder what the two of you could share about soldiering?

I think one of the interesting things that happened when I got back, I didn't have a father. I didn't have uncles. Suddenly I'd joined some other organisation. When I, before I left I was

17:00 Mike, he's the boy down there and we're up here, we're the war veterans. Suddenly I'd become a war veteran equal to them so they didn't treat me like a nephew or a son any more. They treated me like an equal. So I was up there with them. Suddenly a big jump out of my position as son, nephew and young fellow up to be their equal, and I was invited into conversations which I'd normally be excluded from. So that was, I jumped a generation because war service was a criteria

17:30 or a right of passage in Australian society. It was a gate you went through like your twenty-first birthday or when you got a licence or when you were allowed into a pub. Suddenly I was jumped up to the next level and they'd talk to me about different things and they knew that I understood because I was in a different category now, but that was an interesting part of society at that time I saw change, and it was, my father and I, we discussed things probably

18:00 right until the end of his life, about soldiers and about how officers performed and our senior NCOs performed and who was good and who was bad and why they were right to the end of his life, but we could refer to our war service what was good in war because we both understood that each other had seen war and we respected the fact that our opinions were based on experience, not based on just hearsay. So our discussion was more

18:30 evenly based rather than a parent child. It was really a parent parent relationship by the time I came back. He was, right to the end, I left the railways to join the university, he was always worried economically about me. I'd make decisions, "No, I'm leaving. I'm leaving the army. I'm going to work for the police." He'd say, "Watch out, what about your superannuation?" Because he was a Depression person you see. He started school in

19:00 1915, left in '30. No jobs around, so he had no money, no great amount of money. So whenever I'd do something he'd see it was a risk. I'd see it as an opportunity. I was with the police and then up came this job in the railways. He'd say, "Don't leave the police, they've got a good super scheme and you've got your superannuation there so stay there." I'd say, "But I want to go here." He'd say, "No, are you sure? Do you know what you're doing?" Of course I knew what I was doing, I went to lecture at the university. He'd say,

19:30 "But the railways, you've got your superannuation scheme." That was more important than the job, you see, because he lived it tenuously, economically. He had a house and he could just afford that and his wages, he could just afford to pay for the family and schooling and those things and a car. Whereas my wages were much higher and I was able to do more things with them, plus pay my superannuation. He was always worried that I would end up with not a great amount of money, and it happened to him. He

was in the army and the army changed

20:00 their superannuation scheme just before he got out. He didn't get a large amount of money, so he was always fearful right to the end, and he was advising about, "Don't do this. Are you sure? Are you sure you've got enough money? Are you sure this is the right thing to do? Why are you leaving a good job to do that? What bloody good is the university?" He would always be, right until the end. I was forty-five and he was still trying to advise me on money, and I'd bought him a house.

20:30 I bought him and my mother a house in the '70s because they were living in a flat and I said it was no good.

You mentioned that you felt the war service was a right of passage. I just wonder how you feel about that and whether you feel that that was quite a legitimate thing or whether it was quite an unfair load of pressure?

21:00 I think it's in Australian society. We made war service, we made Anzac a tradition. If you look back and say Anzac, there wasn't that many Anzacs around where we were actually fighting with each other in various theatres of war, fighting alongside each other as Anzac units. There were some in Vietnam, about five, but you know, we made it a tradition that Australians go to war

21:30 and that's part of our life. Between zero and thirty going to war, most people have been to war, uncles, fathers, sons have been to war. So that was part of something you did. Have you got your licence now? You went to war did you? You went to Borneo. You went to Vietnam, did you? You were in the Middle East, were you? Oh yeah. Other soldiers went to the Middle East or they were in Burma

22:00 and I was in Vietnam. Just something you did as part of your development in Australian society.

Would you have ever got the same level of acceptance or respect from your uncles and your father any other way but through that service?

I think I would have. It would just be by being myself and having a family. The same thing would have occurred, it just wouldn't have occurred so abruptly. This occurred almost, there was a point in time, whereas

22:30 what you'd do is you'd just become friendly with them and you'd have a family and you'd reach maturity where you'd be a father and a husband and provider. So you get that same amount of esteem and acceptance and they'd admire you for what you'd done, or how you'd brought up your children, all those other things that are important in life. But as soon as I came home suddenly it was there. I was here. I was back and I remember going to the officers' mess with my father and a few fellows and they were asking me about Vietnam

23:00 and I was talking to them on an equal level suddenly. I'm sure it would've occurred but for different cultural reasons, the fact that they would've been about family and you support your, and you're a good husband and you're a good father, those sorts of things rather than, and this one was just then, you've been to war so you must be OK.

I wonder looking back over your service is there a moment that stands out as the proudest

23:30 **time?**

No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I can't think of any. In my career I don't think there's been many highlights since. Some people have, 'Cos' [Peter Cosgrove] has gone on to be Australian of the Year and they want him for Governor General. I don't think that's going to happen to me. So I can't think of any highlight. They may be coming.

24:00 You never know. But there was no time when I could say that is spectacularly good where that was part of my twelve minutes of fame, as Andy Warhol says. There are plenty of times where I felt that in relation to my career or sport or something like that. That was part of it, where I'd won something, but it was just part of those twelve minutes. There's nothing that is spectacularly outstanding that I have achieved or I've been

24:30 given. No, that stands out like that. I was given a Cross of Gallantry by the Vietnamese. I thought that was a good day because they had a little parade and they took me out and I was in my slouch hat they gave me a Cross of Gallantry with a silver star. I thought that was a pretty good day. I would've liked my family up there. There's my Mum, "Hello Mum," you know.

25:00 "Hello Dad," my sister, "Hello Maureen," you know. They weren't there, but I was just in a Vietnamese, they had a Vietnamese audience and they got them around and they put a big parachute up which gave them a canopy. We all marched up and we came out and they gave us, two or three of us I think, Cross of Gallantry. I thought that's a good day. We went off and we sat down and had a normal menu which was crab and corn soup followed by little spring

25:30 rolls in soy sauce followed by rice and some or other, and then little crème caramels they used to have, upside down crème caramels and you'd eat those, and then bourbon and ice, which Australians don't drink strong liquor I don't think. I think young people start to drink Southern Comfort and coke now, but I never drank that. The Vietnamese would have bourbon and ice but it was too strong for me. I'd

think ugh, and they'd have this great chunk of ice

26:00 and this bourbon and it would burn me, but we sat there drinking that all afternoon and talking. That was a good day. It was really the esteem in the day I got from being with them, brothers together. We had to drink with our hands interwoven like this and we were drinking and getting our photos taken, and they gave me a girl after that. I was driving away and there was a young lieutenant there. She was a female who was a lieutenant in charge of civil affairs and she looked after the wives and made sure they were all fed.

26:30 They said, "I souvenir you," which meant I'll give you. "You have her for tonight," and the poor girl, one of the officers, a Vietnamese officer grabbed her, brought her over and put her in my vehicle and she was just crying her eyes out. She thought what's going on here. I said, "Thank you," and I drove off and I said, "Where are you going?" And I took her around to where she worked and I said, "See you later," put her out. But they were serious. They said, "You have for tonight. You're over here, very lonely. You can have her."

27:00 Yeah, they were serious about it. You take her home and you can have her. She was not very happy. I think she would have scratched their eyes out if she could get at them. They were lieutenants, they were only lieutenants too and that was their joke, but it's not a very good joke because they actually took some action. They grabbed her up in their arms and they took her over and put her in my vehicle. I was just sitting there waiting to go and they put her in the vehicle

27:30 next to me. Yeah, it was a funny day. They had that, and then later in the afternoon they got some flood lights and they put them up and they had a little stage and they had people get up and do acts. That's when one of the majors, which you wouldn't see in the Australian Army, got up and sang a love song. I thought yeah, that's funny. In Vietnamese, I could tell it was a love song because somebody told me it was.

28:00 He had a very good voice and he got up and sang a song. So when I see people like the Filipino President who sang a song, well then we saw the Indonesian President who sang a song, it's not strange to me because that exists within their culture to do that. Whereas we wouldn't do that. You couldn't see Peter Cosgrove going, he can't sing anyway, Cos. No, can't sing, but we wouldn't see that happen. If he did it people would get all

28:30 embarrassed. Firstly, he can't do it and he shouldn't have done it. It's disrespectful for a person in that position to do it, but Asians don't think that. They think it's a good thing to get up and sing and make a contribution. Yeah, that was a good day. Yeah, it was a good day I think, nice and just sitting around because we just lived in squalor like animals in the field. Sit there

29:00 and your senses get really high. You can hear and you can smell the enemy. You're looking for them all the time, like little rats, everything is attuned to finding that enemy. A bloke who comes from Mona Vale named Bob Fenwick, smell the enemy, he said, "I can smell them you know," and I think he could. What he could smell was there, they used to eat a lot of sardines or mackerel and he could smell it coming through the trees. He'd say, "They're around here, I can smell them."

29:30 On the day Sean was born he could smell them. They were there. He said, "I can smell them here Mike," old Fen. He's come back. His daughter is Leanne Fenwick, you know the one, volleyball? She's the volleyball one, big volleyball. But Fen, he was another good National Service platoon commander. And in Malaya, who else did we have? We had Jeff Kennett, you know the Premier [of Victoria], he was in Malaya with us, and a bloke named Max Gaylard.

30:00 Max Gaylard's with the United Nations in Somalia.

I wonder, having been in the service for so long what advice would you give to a young man who maybe would come to you if there was a war on and he wanted to go off and be a soldier what could you say to him, what could you tell him about soldiering?

30:30 If he was a professional soldier I'd say, "Why do you have to go?" If he was not a professional soldier I'd say, "Don't go." If it was you and you came to me and said, "They're going to take women for National Service, I've got to go to war." I'd say, "No, hide. Go up to Broome and get a job on a pearl lugger and hide. When they send you letters just chuck them overboard." I wouldn't go. I wouldn't send anybody to war. I'd just say, "Hide, go to Italy and get a job learning Italian down in Padua. Do the long

31:00 course, about seven years." You'd come back fat with a big red, you'd know all the red wines there are, and fat, but don't got to war. There's no reason to go to war. It's the most anti-social thing you can do. Why should you have to kill other people based on foreign policy? If they were attacking you or going to harm your family, well and good, you have to defend things, defend your family and property.

31:30 But to go to war for foreign policy reasons, there's no reason. Just go and hide, run away. Otherwise you come home and your life is largely ruined, as it seems for a lot of people. It's ruined. They go over and they go to an expeditionary war like Vietnam. They come back and they just fall into a hole and it's very hard for them to get out of that hole, and society is there to give you a hand now. It wasn't

32:00 always there, so society is there to give ex-servicemen a hand through the Veterans Affairs Department, but it's a very long haul I think for them. A lot of things creep up on you, fitness, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, all those things start to creep up on them and what they add to is stress.

They live this stressful life. I'd just say, "No, don't go." Hobbs and people like that, Stuart Rentaur came

32:30 to my place and gave them all scotch and then got them talking at my place, Hobbs and those blokes, and Molloy. Molloy lost his legs. Hobbsy, I still stay in touch with Hobbs. I hear from him occasionally.

33:00 **I just wondered, that's a very unusual attitude from a man who spent so much of his life in the service?**

I've got two sons you see, and I look at them and I say, "I don't want you to do what I did or to see what I did or have to be affected by it the way it could affect you." Not me, I would go back again rather than let my sons go if I was fit enough. I'd go back and do it for them because I think

33:30 I'm OK and I've always been OK. That's what I say. When I had this stroke they said, "Look, you're going to get depression." I said, "No no, you ask everybody in the army. They'll say Mike McDermott would never get depression." Other people would, yes, but not me, and I got it. They said, "You've been to Vietnam, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder plus a stroke, you'll get depression." I did, bang. It was pretty hard. I'd have anything again, but not depression.

34:00 It's terrible, a terrible thing depression. They reckon, old Jeff Kennett did some study and he thinks it's the thing that's going to affect our nation, the greatest thing in the next fifty years. So he's actually working in the anti-depression organisation, Kennett. I just think it's not worth young people going to war, the continual stress of it, the fact they have to kill another person is a thing,

34:30 and the fact they could be killed, maimed or wounded, emotionally or physically for the rest of their life. It's not worth it. And nobody's ever established a foreign policy reason to go there, you know. Iraq, that was pretty close because of a lunatic who had the ability to affect the world and they're actually affecting here and they're here in Australia. They're here in Sydney.

35:00 Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiah, they are actually here in Sydney and they are so rabid and their values are so different to us. If they feel like it and they can get political advantage they would see no problem in killing people. That's my opinion, in killing people or blowing something up to make a point. I had a look, I thought about it, I can actually suggest where they might do it.

35:30 I've thought about where they are likely to put the bomb so it creates the greatest disruption to society in Sydney. They've only got to do it once and then everybody's life is insecure forever. What will happen if I go down there in a tunnel at Wynyard and there was a bomb there before, and I go down the next time? How can I get to work? Will I be sure? Or your kids are going to school or going to work,

36:00 will they make it or will a bomb go off on a train? That's what they're hoping for. They'll make your society so bad that you'll, I don't know why, you have to look at who do you want? Say five of us went off to form a small society in Byron Bay. What we'd look for, you see it in the paper, a good one, things like Single White Female, have you seen that ad? Remember that film? White

36:30 So you look in the paper. What do I want? Non-smoker, good sense of humour, liberal attitude, Airies or Virgo, no drugs, so you've got to have the same values, haven't you? So you go off with the same values and you invite the people into the new society you're going to form, a little social cell in Byron Bay, which you're going to form for happiness. Now what we do in Australia, we've got a society,

37:00 we're inviting people in who have different values. We say, "Yeah, you can come, you can come, you can come." But what happens, their values are so different from ours that they come as a grating when they come close to us. It doesn't form the same, and they want to abuse our society and use it, but abuse it too. They have a lot of rights in our society, but they don't seem to have responsibilities. I think that's

37:30 one of the things that happens and I would say, I look at my boys or young people and I say, and it's affected me more since Bali and being in hospital. I go down to Balmoral for lunch some days, I look at all the young people and I think, gee, these people's lives are upset because we have people here threatening to hurt them or threatening to take over Australia by force.

38:00 What shall we do? They're actually threatening our security, and we paid a lot, we've paid dearly for our security, and one of the things we did in Vietnam, we paid for America to provide us with a security cover and help us in time of need. We've got that and we paid with blood, and now we've got people who we've invited to come into Australia or have come here under another guise and they want to now impose themselves by violence on Australian society.

38:30 Now it's got to the stage where it's only got to have one suicide bomber and everybody lives in terror every time somebody leaves their house to do shopping. Will there be a suicide bomber up at Coles or Woolworths as there are in Israel and places?

I was just going to ask, how do you think from your trip back to Vietnam, the Vietnamese people adjust to life, I mean living with the terror of war?

I don't know what happened to their,

39:00 I don't know if they have any psychiatric hospitals or facilities. I used to think at the time, what happens to their psychiatric patients. They had hospitals to go to, but they didn't have any psychiatric hospitals.

They had a lot of casualties. I used to see people who were absolutely shocked out of their mind but I didn't know where they went. But people seem to have got on with life. They're a collective society, we're individual. Where see ourselves as an individual, they see themselves as an individual

39:30 only as part of a whole. You can see that in the way that their family looks after each other. Any ownership in their family is group ownership and you'll see, you might find four or five families living in a big house. They build a big house and let all the families move in, whereas we have, we live on our own and then our big thing is we move away from our parents and form our own cell, and then later on what happens when our parents get old, we put them in an old peoples' home. What happens with Asians, they

40:00 invite their grandparents in to live with them. So they might have four generations in the one family, very collective. We're very individual. So that collectivism allows them to grow and sustain their emotional health. When I went back there I read some books on some soldiers who were going through all sorts of things. One bloke from Hanoi had to go around and find all the dead bodies on the battlefield and bury them. It was a very powerful book.

40:30 **I wonder Mike, the tape is just about to come to an end, and I just wondered did you have any final words that you wanted to say, anything that you haven't said that you'd like to?**

Yeah, I'd like to say that the program that you're presenting is an essential part of Australian history. It would be very good for researchers, but I think it's also necessary that it's taken by

41:00 teachers at various levels at the secondary and primary school level to introduce people to Australians At War. I can see that there are things being tried here in New South Wales by the Premier to try and introduce Australians to Australians and bring things out of the old trunk and the old wardrobe, but you'll do something so outstanding if you get the 2,000 people. It will take you right across society and I don't think anything like

41:30 that has been done in Australia before, and it will give you such a data base on opinion, experience, and something that I don't think is the Vietnam War, but conscription. The Vietnam War was probably the most political war in history and involved a lot of major players but it sort of ripped a lot out of Australian society and touched so many people. It's still touching people. They look at TV

42:00 and they either feel part of it…

INTERVIEW ENDS