Australians at War Film Archive

Kenneth Johnson (Katy) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:35 **I know you were born in Leederville. Is that where you grew up?**

Yeah, well, West Leederville. I was presumably born in that suburb and grew up in there until the war started.

So what was it like to grow up there?

Well, the primary

01:00 school was acceptable to the majority of people. There were very few that went to private schools. It was close to town and close to the railway line and a large majority always travelled on the train. There was also a tram that went on the longer routes through Leederville as an alternate. Eventually we

01:30 finished up with trolley buses.

People have mentioned trolley buses before. Can you actually describe a trolley bus?

Yes. It's a large, similar to a large bus, seemed a little wider than a bus, and it had two overhead arms that were attached to

02:00 a power cable. And there was a driver and a conductor. Pretty smooth ride, I think.

It's like a large tram?

Yes, except that there was little, if any, noise in comparison to what you get from a tram.

It's a pity they didn't keep them.

And being rubber tyred wheels, of course, it could move a lot easier on the road surface than a

02:30 tram track.

What sort of things did you get up to on the weekend?

Well, I, with an elder brother, I joined the sea scouts and we used to go to Pelican Point, Crawley and quite often, if you missed a tram you would, in fact, walk through Kings Park and drop down onto Mounts Bay Road and walk around. Save probably tuppence

03:00 on the journey, which you obviously would have spent at the local shop.

What did you buy?

Usually a raspberry type, you know, sucker, as it were. They were on sale at the city bars round Mounts Bay Road. And in the school holidays we would often walk out to what's now Perry Lakes and occasionally the city beach,

03:30 there being a plank road out there in those days and only the one.

When did you actually join the sea scouts?

Well, I had an elder brother that joined and it seemed not a bad idea. And it was interesting. More so than perhaps the normal land-based scout because we had several boats and there was a lot of sailing

04:00 and rowing. And on holidays you could often row down in the early evening to Fremantle and stack onto the wheat stacks, wheat being bagged in those days, and you kept there for an hour of two and then when the easterly breeze came in, we'd either sail to Garden Island or in later life, Rottnest.

04:30 And it was a good bunch of chaps. The majority of them, if not all, joined the RAN [Royal Australian Navy] Reserve system and I was probably one of the few that went to the army. That was only because

when we went down to join and we were asked to produce birth certificates and we suggested that, knowing we were underage, that we signed on then and there

05:00 and brought the birth certificates later. But that wasn't acceptable to the RAN, so the next alternate was the army was expanding and they weren't terribly concerned about your date of birth. So all you had to do was dream up a new date and give them that and you were acceptable.

Just going back to the sea scouts, what sort of boats were you sailing to Rottnest Island? Because it can get pretty rough out there.

Twenty, twenty-three footer

05:30 double-ended. And different type of sails altogether to the normal racing yacht that you see around there and we would have had five oars anyway. So if it was too rough and you had to put reefs in the sail to shorten that, you could always revert to your oars.

How many scouts per boat?

Oh, there'd probably be

06:00 seven or eight going over. We had minimum kit of course. You take the majority of your food with you, but if you were at Rottnest, you could walk around from Parker Point where we used to camp, to the settlement and buy up bread and milk and so on. And if you were at Garden Island, it was only a short journey over to Rockingham to

06:30 replenish your supply.

Still, you're doing quite a bit of distance?

Oh, you know, people acceptable. There was very few motorcars and we had time on our hands, so that's what you did.

What did your father do?

He was the chief clerk of the electrical and signals branch of

07:00 the state railways.

What would that involve?

Lord knows. I've been into their separate office, which was a two-storey building in the railway yards of Perth, near King Street, and I've been in there a couple of times, probably to borrow or ask for a few pence. But I wouldn't have any idea of what the

07:30 work was involved.

How much did the Depression affect your family?

Well, we always had a roof over our head and three meals a day. I can recall that the railway employees also brought dumped cases of apples,

08:00 largely from Mount Barker, and they would be freighted up to your local station, I guess on the house [free] and the kids of the family would go down to the station and carry the crate, the dumped case home on your shoulder. We were never short of food, but we never had a telephone in the house, never had a motorcar and I never personally owned a pushbike.

08:30 My brother bought a Gordonson for seven pound, I think. That didn't impress my father. And, in fact, in the long term, on a night ride coming back from City Beach on one occasion, when he moved out to pass a car, he ran into a truck and went over the tray and finished up with a broken

09:00 collarbone out of that deal.

Lucky he only got a broken collarbone.

He's still alive and will be 87 now and still riding a pushbike.

Really?

Yeah. Never driven a motorcar in his life.

Just as well he got the pushbike at such an early time. Did you notice any changes that happened with the Depression?

09:30 **Did you notice any poverty?**

The only thing that I can recall about it is that occasionally chaps who were out of work came around looking for any work and they were, some of them were selling timber clothes props. They'd be carrying two or three of them on their shoulder. You would only buy one of them every now and again.

10:00 And the other thing is, most people would have wood fires so you could probably say, "Well, you can

chop some firewood for an hour. And I think my mother used to given them a luncheon and, call it a haversack meal, to take with them in case they didn't strike some other benevolent family. And I do know another chap who at one stage worked in the Commonwealth Bank and he had

10:30 a nervous breakdown, and he survived by riding a pushbike around the suburbs of West Leederville selling buns. I presume he had an entree to a supplier and naturally called on all the people knew him and I think with a little bit of sympathy every mother probably bought, you know, a bun from him.

11:00 **Sounds like it was quite a small community?**

Well, West Leederville was a fairly large suburb. It went from the railway line just near the Subiaco Oval right down to Monger Lake. We used to swim in Monger Lake quite a lot.

You couldn't swim in it now.

Probably not. I'm led to believe that there were two yacht clubs on that, well before my time. But of course there's been a tremendous lot

11:30 of infill at the western and eastern ends of the place. One of our school mates in a homemade canoe in the middle of winter, when the water was fairly cold, was drowned there on one occasion.

Lake Monger, at that point, did it actually have a flow down to the ocean?

I wouldn't have known but there was, there was drainage

12:00 that went through from Monger, I think, into Herdsman and into City Beach. That probably, that project was probably one of the depression sustainment worker jobs to keep people employed.

Sounds like that area has got so much smaller with that lake.

Well, the lake has been confined an awful lot. And a lot of kids

12:30 from the local schools were down there after swimming. We weren't supposed to but the boys overcame the difficulty. All they had to do was borrow from their mother, unknown to her the reason why, a safety pin and swim in a singlet with the safety pin between your legs, because we weren't game to take our bathers down there, for some unknown reason. But that was very common.

13:00 And the other thing you might say was part of the depression, was I can only recall in all the primary school years, one boy going to school with shoes on regularly. Everyone was in bare feet in the boy line. I presume girls used to wear shoes. But all the boys were quite happy and learnt to kick a football quite successfully

13:30 without boots on.

What sort of sports did you take part in?

Well, there was the usual basketball for the girls and football for the boys. I can't recall much about any cricket in the summer, but swimming used to be on quite a lot and we used to go by tram from the school in Woolwich Street right

14:00 through Perth down to Mounts Bay Road and then around halfway to Crawley to the City Baths and the reverse on the way home. That was a regular, weekly occurrence and the thought was, you shouldn't learn to play other sport until you learnt to swim, and when you went to Perth Boys School that became a fairly hard and fast rule. And they used to put the lads

14:30 that couldn't swim in at the deep end with a rope tied around, tied around, with the appropriate knowledge, over their shoulders and back so that you could always lift their head out of water and that taught people to swim in a hurry.

Things have certainly changed since then. What sort of subjects did you enjoy in school?

Did I enjoy? Well, I don't think

15:00 you should talk about primary school because everyone had the same thing. When we went into the secondary business, and remember that in Perth there was Perth Boys School and Perth Girls. If you wanted to do a trade, you would have gone to Newcastle Street Technical School. And I went into Perth Boys and I think initially

15:30 you were just dumped into classes. At the end of that year, the sheep were sorted from the goats, as it were, and we finished up being promoted from 7C to 8A and ditto into 9A. And there was our introduction to the Maths A and B, which was trigonometry and geometry and

16:00 a few other subjects. There was a reasonable amount of agriculture science. Naturally, English and History. In fact, I think in the third year you were required to write one essay, the subject matter being given by the teacher and the other one you had to dream up yourself, and it was a fair task, you know, on top of your normal homework to write

16:30 two essays and they were all marked by the teacher. And come the end, oh, and you did woodwork as

well and technical drawing, they were junior subjects. And to tell you the smallness of the city, we all went down to UWA [University of Western Australia] in the undercroft and did the exam there.

17:00 Nowadays, everyone does it at their own school because there's that many kids. Oh well. And then if you went on, you would have had to probably go to a private school or Perth Technical College. But I wasn't that keen to bat on. And I, at that stage, was in the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], which

17:30 had a swimming pool in Murray Street, just east of Berwick, and a gymnasium and a basketball set-up. And I was asked by the boy who was work secretary whether or not I would like a job and I said, "Yes, thanks." And I was interviewed and given a job at Cook's Travel Service, which was then in Forrest Place. But after two and a quarter

18:00 years of pounding the streets of Perth as an office boy, I'd had enough of that and I had an offer of moving into a life insurance office in the Terrace.

When you say 'pounding the streets', what were you actually doing?

Well, twice a day you would have had to go to the tax department over the road in what was then the Post Office Building.

18:30 You would then go down to the tourist bureau in Hay Street, Orient Line, P&O [Peninsular and Orient], which was MacDonald Hamiltons in Williams. Then down to the Terrace to short of the West Australian building. You'd go to Adelaide Steam, Melbourne Steam and McIlrath McKechan for the interstate ships. Then down the bottom of William Street to Dalgety's

19:00 for the Blue Funnel Line ships, which ran to Singapore, and the West Australia, which ran to the East. And then up the hill and along to the corner of the Terrace and Howard Street to the Aberdeen and Cornwall Line who handled overseas shipping, often via South Africa. You were doing that twice a day collecting tickets in exchange for vouchers. And on these P&O and Orient Line

19:30 cruises to Fiji and the like, you might have to get thirty or forty tickets. And I do know that there was a rather idle passenger clerk in MacDonald Hamiltons, and he used to hand the book of tickets and if I wanted them, I had to turn around and fill in the butts and everything else. And when I'd completed the exercise, maybe for thirty tickets, he would come along and sign them.

20:00 And if I didn't write them out, we'd probably have had to go back three or four times to collect them. And I do also know of a chief clerk in Dalgety's, which was the Blue Funnel Line, and I would be sent down to get a ticket specifically for someone that had come into the office. And you might do that in your lunch hour and if you were interrupted. And I'd get there and he'd say, "What do you want?" And I would politely say,

20:30 tell him and always use the word 'Sir'. And he says, "You're not going to get it." So having stood there for five or ten minutes, he said, "Well, you may as well go, you're not going to get it." So off I'd go back to Forrest Place and the Chief Clerk would say, "Well, where's the ticket, please?" And you'd tell him the story and so he'd be on the phone and he'd say, "Oh, he was only bullying you." So back you'd walk again.

21:00 I met that same gentleman in the army, in Northam Camp, November of 1939, and I decided I wasn't going to be anywhere near his company for the rest of my days. I met his son subsequently, who was the principal of a high school, a very good sort of a chap, and I told him the story of his father.

Quite funny that you came in a circle

21:30 **eventually. So you've been in the sea scouts and you'd think that you'd naturally want to go into the navy. You told me the reasons why you didn't get in there. Why couldn't you get hold of your birth certificate?**

Well, I could, but it had me down at sixteen,

22:00 so I was underage. They need you to be, I think, eighteen, and, for some unknown reason, we weren't prepared to be a naval cadet, because the cadets were treated by the normal sailors as scum, as it were. And you were expected to travel on a separate compartment on the train, not get in the same compartment as matelots, as they call themselves.

22:30 And we thought, well, you were only paid four pounds sixteen per annum. Two pounds eight for half a, for a six day camp, and one pound four in June and September. That meant something to us. So we decided that if we couldn't become sailors, Able Seaman, it would be Able Seamen I would say, or Ordinary Seaman,

23:00 we weren't going to be a cadet. So, at that stage, the army was rapidly expanding and a new battalion here was to be formed. And on the local railway station I spoke to one of my friends, and he in turn said he was transferring from one unit to the other and I mentioned I'd been knocked back by the RAN and he was the one who said, "The army doesn't care about your date of birth."

23:30 Produce your own, as it were, and I was not asked for evidence of it. So I just dreamed up a new date of

birth and informed the warrant officer and signed the appropriate paper and you were in.

When you say 'we', who's 'we'?

Well, I went initially to the RAN enlistment

24:00 with two other schoolboys. But when I went to the army, I went basically on my own but I did know the one chap from the local district that was transferring. But you're put into a platoon of perhaps thirty people around the same age and it only takes a very short time for you to get to know them.

When you say you went into the army and joined up,

24:30 **can you tell me where you actually went to sign up and get the piece of paper?**

Enlistment then was in Francis Street at Swan Barracks and we paraded then of an evening in the main hall whilst a new depot was being built at the bottom of William Street in what was then known as Bizarre Terrace and I think now called Mounts Bay Road. When that building was

25:00 completed, we moved down to there, and that was handy because we formed a rugby team and we could change at the depot and just run across the road to the Esplanade to train on two nights a week. And the army also ran a basketball competition at Swan Barracks on a Friday night and pretty near every reserve unit produced a basketball

25:30 team and it was quite an entertainment and it kept people fit and you saw, got to know lots of people.

What did your parents think of you signing up?

Well, that was only one night a week, occasional weekends, or day parades at the rifle range at Swanbourne in the main and one six-day camp a year, which was at Rottnest for our unit.

26:00 And that was no hassle. But when the war started, infantry units were split in two. Half went to camp immediately in September to Rottnest and I was in the second half and we went over there in October. And that period, our then CO [Commanding Officer] was

26:30 selected as the new CO of the 2/11th Battalion, that being the new infantry unit in the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] system. And as he was a very competent officer and well liked and we'd known of him in a broad sense, as a private soldier, you don't have a great deal to do with senior officers, but

27:00 we were all very happy to say, "Well, I think we'll have a go at this." So we came back to Perth, stayed at home overnight and went down to Nicholson Road depot where the recruiting was and signed on. I did have one sister who said, "You're under-age and I'm going to tell the people concerned." And I remember my father stood up at the kitchen table

27:30 and said, "You'll do nothing of the sort" and that was the finish of it. So we went back to Rottnest for a short time, say another week.

What sort of things were you doing on Rottnest?

Well, our platoon, which would be say thirty-five-odd soldiers, were given the task of defending the west end of Rottnest. That was from the Neck to the west end and that's a distance of about two mile.

28:00 There was no engineering material provided for us such as sheet iron and timber for bedding. So when you dug weapon pits, overlooking bays in what you could largely say was beach sand, there were more cave-ins than was good, but we overcame those difficulties because we worked hard during the day.

28:30 You could get about a third of your platoon to go cray fishing. In those days, you could walk out on the reefs when the tide was out and a few would do a little bit of fishing and so we had quite a good diet, stuck out there on our own.

How many of you?

About thirty-five. And you'd go out there with a horse-drawn limber, with a water cart and

29:00 your tinned provisions and your bread. So the additional fishing haul was quite an impression on us. In fact, I recall we didn't eat tins of pie apples. The army would supply you with a seven pound tin of pie apples. And when we came back to camp at the aerodrome, our tentage

29:30 area, we didn't think we should give that back to the quartermaster. So my brother, at this time was under orders to move to the east, so I got twenty-four hours' leave and went back by plane taking the tin of pie apples with me. I put that in a convenient wardrobe and my mother eventually found it months later and thought

30:00 because it had DD [Department of Defence] stamped on it, it would be a great idea to hand it back to the services. But someone was fortunate enough to say, "Well, don't do that, just use them." That's the worst of being too honest, isn't it?

How long were you at Rottnest for?

Nearly a month. We had come back to Nicholson Road to sign up

30:30 before our month was up.

Is that the same time the fortifications were being built at Rottnest?

They had been built prior to that. The railway line was installed and the forts of the 9.2 [inch guns], roughly in the centre of the island, were established plus the smaller guns that were doing the southern entrance.

31:00 And there was a regular artillery staff there. Barracks had been built. I think their OC [Officer Commanding] was a Major Dewer, was a regular staff corps officer who finished up, to my knowledge, in the 2/3rd Field Regiment and then was subsequently transferred to India. And probably ten years ago, when someone was trying to chase him up, we managed to track him down

31:30 in a retirement home in, I think, New South Wales, but I think he would have been deceased by now. 'Dumpy' Dewer, and he was an extremely good rugby player too. He'd been through the Duntroon system.

During this time, how aware were you of the developments in the war? Was it a topic of regular conversation?

No.

32:00 The facilities available to soldiers were pretty limited. I mean, bearing in mind that we had drays and horse-drawn trucks, and they might have a gymkhana on an annual basis down at the Claremont Showgrounds and it was all bustle and run and activities on a competitive basis against

32:30 the other several units. We were the 16th Battalion. There was 11, 28 and 44th, but all largely under-strength. 16th would probably have recruited the most and had a limit of say 500. The other units might well have been into the 400 mark.

33:00 Infantry wasn't, you know, the golden apple for people to jump into. But it largely depends on the people you associate with and, once you've teamed up with a good bunch of people, you never want to leave them. But as for thinking about war, I mean, in the background we thought, "Oh well, it's bound to happen sooner or later." But one would have

33:30 had no idea of what was going to be involved. I suppose you'd think of an overseas trip; for the first time, this would have happened. I don't think I can recall anyone in our primary or secondary schooling who would have done even an interstate trip on a ship, let alone go to England. That was a month's

34:00 journey. So, although when the 2/11th was formed we initially went to Northam, for about, well I went up there on the 4th of November '39 and by the end of that month we were being sent to New South Wales to train as a division. So the theory went. But that classic

34:30 was that one brigade was in Puckapunyal, Victoria, another one at Ingleburn, New South Wales, and the third brigade, which comprised battalions numbered 9, 10, 11 and 12 that came from Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia and WA, finished up at Greta, due west

35:00 of Newcastle.

What sort of training did you get at Northam?

Very little because in the first instance, they never had uniforms. You were issued with a working dress. Very few rifles. In fact, they only came just before we left, so people were using broom handles and sticks to learn to slope arms and order arms.

35:30 The first aiming rest that we had in our company, we acquired the timber from the YMCA hut that was being built, borrowed a hammer from the quartermaster and a saw and nails from the carpenters on the job, and one of our chaps was a cart and wagon builder apprentice and he made the first aiming rest

36:00 that you could put a rifle in and teach people how to aim. There were no, there was a Lewis Gun but that was outdated and was going to be superseded. But the Bren did replace it, wasn't available to us until we got to the Middle East. So we got, what you might say, absolutely next to nothing. I suppose the only feature about it

36:30 was you had a bed and three meals a day, and you were paid the large sum of five shillings a day.

What were the living conditions like?

The usual Northam huts, military huts, and they probably stack twenty in, say ten on each side, sleeping on straw palliasses.

37:00 We did have a fair number of Kalgoorlie as enlistees and they had a little bit more money than what we would have had. And at the weekend, they used to ring up and get a taxi to come out with the usual crate of Swan [Lager] beer and I think you bought, it was either four or five dozen

37:30 bottles of the large type, because I remember I got a job as the company quartermaster and it was pretty simple to pick up, or have picked up, all the empties and you got a halfpenny a bottle on return and we picked up seventeen hundred-odd bottles. It started off the company funds. It was interesting to note that

38:00 four of those chaps were in New South Wales discharged dishonourably, one of whom reenlisted at least to my knowledge and finished up in the 2/ 4th Machine Gun Battalion as a POW [Prisoner of War] in the Far East. You might say that could be poetic justice.

38:30 **What did these blokes do?**

Well, I was away for the two months when the charges were laid. But our company commander was a lawyer and the CO was a lawyer, so they would know what was what. But talking post-war about these chaps, from others that I know that lived in Kal [Kalgoorlie], they were the likes of one in particular

39:00 would be the type that would break a bottle on the corner of the bar and then sort of ram it into someone's face. But to have four of them in the one platoon was no mean feat for some poor platoon commander to look after and I don't think they were a loss at all. There were a lot of other extremely good Kalgoorlie chaps that we actually retained within the company.

39:30 They were pretty good at sport, particularly football. But there were just these, as I say,

40:00 four no hopers.

Did you get any training on guns?

In Northam, we would not have had any light machine guns at all. Rifles were issued, to my knowledge, just before we left to go to the east.

40:30 That exercise was half the unit on the interstate passenger liner the Duntroon and half on the Westralian. And they pulled in at Adelaide and Melbourne and advance parties in Melbourne and we went by train through to Rutherford and Greta, or to Rutherford only, to prepare

41:00 that camp for the others who went on to Sydney and disembarked there by train, and on board the ship, there were still the same normal stewards that passengers would expect. There were menus printed as usual on a daily basis. And to come back again from New South Wales to here, we had the availability of one

41:30 ship only, the Duntroon, but they used three trains. Now, that was just for WA [Western Australia] and for our unit, so you can imagine the cost of that. And there was no divisional training at all because the facilities still were pretty poor and limited. Who dreamed up that brilliant idea as a senior staff officer, I wouldn't know.

42:00 But really when you look at it and analyse, it was just an arrant waste of thousands of dollars or thousands of pounds should I say.

You must have thought the situation was pretty ludicrous, the fact that you got pretty much no training whatsoever?

Well, it was all new. We hadn't been to the east before. We arrived there in December. As soon as there we got Christmas leave,

42:30 four or five days down at the…

Tape 2

00:32 **Can you tell me about what it was like to do training at Rutherford?**

Rutherford was a pigsty of a camp, tented, kitchen. Militia troops had been marched out to make way for us and it looks as if the kitchen and toilets were just left as they were as they walked out and we had a major job to clean the place out.

01:00 Fortunately we were only there for a pretty short time and we then moved on to Greta, which was still being built. The only incident that I recall there is between Rutherford and Greta there is a large Catholic church. Not a monastery. It was just

01:30 nuns living there. I'm sure nunnery isn't quite the right word either.

Let's just go with nun house.

And I got sent by the CO to see if they could line up some churns of cold water for the troops because lots of people weren't issued with water bottles. We didn't have them. And I spoke for the first time in my life, pressing the bell and speaking to the head

02:00 nun through a little grill, and on the day in question what she had organised was quite outstanding. Not only were there churns of cold water but she had tables out the front with her nuns and they had made enough tea to feed about 800-odd people, plus scones, and all that went over very well. And I suppose my

02:30 ego went up. Not that I had anything to do with the arranging of it. It was just her generosity. And then the CO called me on one occasion soon thereafter and said, "I'm sending you back to thank the Mother Superior." And I said, "Oh no, sir. Wouldn't you be better off to send an officer such as the adjutant?" And I think he was only just having me on because he did, in fact, send the adjutant

03:00 subsequent to that by vehicle to thank her for what they had done. It was a pretty fair effort. That was a pretty popular arrangement. And then I, having had Christmas leave in Sydney, in the first day or two of January I read on the routine orders on the notice board that my name was one of about

03:30 nine to go down to an officer cadet training unit at Liverpool for two months. So in due course we packed up our bags and went to Liverpool for two months, by which time the New South Wales enlistees in the 16th Brigade had already sailed for the Middle East in early January and our brigade was

04:00 moved from Greta down to Ingleburn, so I rejoined the unit at the end of the two months at Ingleburn.

Did you get any uniforms and guns when you were at Greta?

Limited equipment and clothing was issued so that we in fact could travel on the train in

04:30 battledress. And rifles became more prevalent. The issues out of the ordnance were quite a circus really. We have in our war diary a note that the CO and his adjutant and the quartermaster dressed as private soldiers, went along to the New South Wales

05:00 main Major Ordnance Depot servicing the area and they were hanging around there for hours on end. And they might get three or four articles given to them to put on board a three-ton truck and come back again. And he wrote a very smart note to the brigadier, Morshead and it also ended up, through some journalist hearing about it, publicising the information in the newspaper.

05:30 But things were that tough. As a bachelor resident in the Royal Club here, he was prepared, as an example, with several of his officers to go into the Esplanade Hotel in working dress, and that was it. I don't know what we did with our defence budget if we had one. We certainly didn't spend it

06:00 on clothing. And that is a classic that only comes out in the passage of time. You're given white singlets and white long johns. Now, we certainly didn't want the long johns, in the Middle East anyway. But, and a white towel. Now, you put them out to dry in the field and aircraft can see them from miles away. In due course, of course, we finished up with green underclothes and

06:30 green towels and the like that would blend in with the countryside. But it took, I think, until after that war and probably into the Korean and Malaysian campaigns for that to happen.

It sounds quite disorganised. Did you get any training at Greta?

No, there was, again, very

07:00 little training. You could get the use of rifle ranges and again there's a restriction on the amount of ammunition you could fire. And there'd be route marches. And then when they got to Ingleburn they again started to get a few more issues of varying pieces of equipment and the

07:30 training level improved to the extent that you might finish up doing a company, an occasional company exercise.

So how did the surroundings and training change from Greta and Liverpool? Was there an improvement?

Well, at Liverpool

08:00 we were billeted in what used to be known as the camp hospital and it had previously been training Australian Instructional Corps warrant officers. They were normally trained at Randwick but, due to the expansion, they were recruiting more and running more courses. And we were the first AIF infantry

08:30 [(UNCLEAR)] in that depot. And there was a regular lieutenant-colonel was the commandant and he had some Duntroon officers as platoon commanders and every section commander was a warrant officer Class One. So it was a fairly powerful organisation and they did, in fact, have the necessary equipment on their

09:00 staff. So, other than the fact that you were pushed all the time for two months, we got probably as good a training, in an elementary training, as you would have got anywhere.

When you say 'pushed' was that increasing your physical fitness?

Yes, they didn't let up. We often wore, in January, February, the same as in WA,

09:30 it was pretty hot, and many's the time we might have had respirators on our face for, you know, one or two hours and doing training in the sun.

We'll just pause while the phone goes.

Well, the respirators just were completely covering your face. Naturally they

10:00 made you as hot as hell and you might be lying on the ground doing grenade throwing with respirators on. Or you might have to turn around and jog a hundred yards and maybe do some bayonet drill. You really didn't want the additional handicap of a respirator in the climate that was there. However,

10:30 everyone got by.

Can you give me an example of an average day at Liverpool?

Well, there was the reveille. The normal, you know, the usual six o'clock, clean your weapons, get up and shave, have breakfast and then be ready on parade probably at eight o'clock, quarter to eight,

11:00 half past seven. And you were inspected by your section commander, this warrant officer, and then your platoon commander. And then there was a parade of the total and the commandant always coming across from his residence over the road, always with us called to attention and the adjutant would always be saying, "Commandant,

11:30 may I go on?" And the standard reply was, "You may." And then you did normal infantry elementary training. And they were hoping to teach us how to be leaders, so at intervals you became a section commander and the warrant officers were checking you all the time to ensure that you were developing

12:00 leadership capabilities. And then you would do elementary fieldcraft work.

What sort of things would you do as part of fieldcraft?

Well, the classic one is to identify the targets. And they have, you know, ten soldiers standing there hidden in the countryside and you'd have to find them and eventually, if you found four or five,

12:30 ten would end up standing up spread out over a hundred and eighty degree varying distance from, say, one hundred to three hundred metres away from you. That was always a classic. Compass work and navigation by day and night, map reading. And the only light-hearted thing that occurred at that camp

13:00 is that our predecessors apparently had made arrangements with David Jones, the big store in Sydney, and we were asked if we would agree to the same arrangement occurring and we said yes. That involved a double-decker bus load of the female staff coming into DJs [David Jones] for a day's work and at the end of the day changing into their evening dresses, etcetera, and presumably

13:30 the company provided and paid for the bus and they'd come out to the depot and we'd all been primed up and lectured beforehand.

Lectured in what way?

No funny business here. There used to be a, you know, bar going and dancing in the recreational hall and then presumably at, say, about eleven pm, the girls would all be mustered and

14:00 put on board the bus again and everyone would say goodbye.

Sounds like a pretty good arrangement.

It was not a bad arrangement. Only in the last six months some chap wrote to me in the east. He's writing, attempting to research the history of officer cadet training units and I saw this in the RSL [Returned and Services League] magazine or the Vet Affairs listing magazine, newspaper,

14:30 and I wrote to him and put him in the picture. He didn't realise that our course was the first that they'd run for infantry in the AIF and I'm now trying to locate the photo of the seventy-odd students. I think I gave it to the AWM [Australian War Memorial]. The other interesting thing that occurred there is that our particular warrant officer

15:00 had leanings towards being a bit of a queer [non-heterosexual] and that was pretty abnormal in those days, and eventually there was a court martial and he was discharged, he was discharged dishonourably from the regular army. I would have put him inside Long Bay Jail.

How was he caught out?

15:30 One of our students, [(UNCLEAR)] on the evening of one dance, I think he got as drunk as a lord and we being very young students, got him back to his hut and there would have been eight to a hut, four on either side. And instead of just throwing him on his bed as you would now, we thought we'd do the right thing

16:00 and take off his boots and clothes and put his pyjamas on. Now, you wouldn't bloody well do that now,

I'm sure. And this warrant officer, and everyone had mosquito nets, and this warrant officer decided that he'd enjoy the pleasures of this drunken cadet. And my bed was exactly opposite so I became probably the major witness. It was a bit of a debacle

16:30 initially because we thought the court martial would be in Liverpool at the camp. Other arrangement of other senior officers was it was going to be in the barracks in Sydney. So different parties. That was cancelled for that week and a week later those people were told to come to Liverpool. And I do know from my civilian contacts I had in Sydney that the defence

17:00 counsel was an officer in the Light Horse and he was none other than the father of the current Shann QC [Queen's Counsel], the father being Shann KC [King's Counsel], and I think he probably tore me to bits as a witness because I stood up, you know, how often would we have run into colonels with red tabs. I probably

17:30 stood to attention for ten minutes before I turned around and plucked up enough courage to ask could I stand at ease. And this chap had the brains to be able to question me by getting a sentence and splitting it into two. He wants a yes, the answer probably overall should have been no, but when you split it up into sections, it could be

18:00 fifty-fifty. And many's the time I turned around to the rear to speak to, or to look at the senior officer present, who had a legal officer alongside of him, as to whether I should answer the question and they would have a little discussion. And the question may well have been ruled out of order and I was off the hook. But I had to stand for ever, say thirty five minutes,

18:30 and then we went off for lunch and then I was grilled again for about twenty minutes after that. So I vowed and declared thereafter that the answer to my problems was that you never see anything in the future. And that was my first introduction to such an incident. It was basically unheard of, whereas nowadays you can pick up the paper every day.

19:00 **Sounds like a debacle from the beginning to end.**

Yeah, well, how the debacle concerning the location of the court martial, I wouldn't know. I mean we were students, just told to be dressed and be available at such and such a time; whether we were to be shipped to Sydney or not, we wouldn't even have known. But when you sat around for an hour or two and

19:30 the phones were ringing between Liverpool and Sydney, it was decided to call the exercise off for a week. It was to be one of the first major court martials of the AIF and they had invited by direction a number of officers from different units to sit in just to see how the whole show operated, because there were plenty of officers never been involved in a court martial before.

20:00 The likes of we poor students.

So at the end of the day this warrant officer got a dishonourable discharge?

He was discharged dishonourably. Now I did hear, but only second-hand and I've got no proof, that he subsequently was observed on a troop ship going to the Middle East in the 9th Div [Division] as a lance corporal. Whether that was a fact or not, I do not know, but I've never heard,

20:30 I can remember his surname, that's all. We did as a section quietly nickname him Cutie, but never to his face and never within his hearing.

While you were at Liverpool did you feel you caught up on the training that you didn't get?

Well, I don't know whether I was taught a

21:00 great deal on how to be a junior officer. It was more a lesson in perhaps what corporals and sergeants would have been learning. But from then on, you returned to your unit and I went back to my company quartermaster's job, thinking that was the ultimate in life because I was,

21:30 always had a roof over my head, plenty of blankets to sleep on and a reasonable amount of food. So we had arrived back here again, when again we were given another six days leave when the unit billeted at the Claremont showgrounds.

22:00 The authority authorising the promotion of about eight of us to lieutenants came through affective as of the first of March, but it probably would have been well into March before we actually heard about it. So I had to leave my Q [Quartermaster] store job and become a

22:30 platoon commander.

Am I correct in assuming that this is a pretty fast promotion?

Yes, well look, give you an idea how units had to stand. We probably finished up with about a hundred - and an infantry unit then was roughly 850 strong - I doubt if we had more than 120, 130 who'd ever been in the

23:00 service before. So when I went to Northam initially I was a private for three days, a corporal for seven,

and then a staff sergeant, and that's November, December, January and Feb and by mid-March I'm a platoon commander. So promotion certainly was pretty rapid. I had an awful lot of lessons

23:30 to learn because I was then nineteen and a lot of the soldiers were much older than I, and they were no doubt out to make or break me. And you could get some of these Kalgoorlie chaps, all day long, when the platoon was ordered to left turn or right turn, they would do the exact opposite. All day long.

24:00 It was enough to drive you to drink. And I know I spoke to my company commander at the end of a couple of days and he just said, "Just bat on. Just persevere. You will win in the end." And he said, "When they do a month on a troop ship, they'll have a lot of the stuffing knocked out of them." And that became true. Now, probably the worst offender that I had the showground in that

24:30 regard finished up in the latter stages of our time in Palestine, when I needed a chap under the designation as a runner, I thought in frustration, "I'll make him my runner" and he became the perfect soldier from then on. He had been a bogger in the mining industry so he certainly knew how to make his living on the end of

25:00 a shovel. And we used to share our weapon pit and I never had to use a pick and shovel again. He'd tell me to get out of the way and then five minutes and he'd done ten times the amount of work and there was always a weapon pit dug for the pair of us. And he finished up a great, you know, a great soldier. But he was there to make or break. And

25:30 the interesting thing about the chap was that during his sojourn in Germany he apparently was working on a farm but he had some problem with an ingrown toenail so the Germans put him in a some hospital to get that tended to and a South African flier, who had been shot down, finished up in the same hospital.

26:00 And this runner of mine said to him, "In case you ever run into K.D Johnson, give him my regards, etcetera and so on, and tell him that I'm enjoying life in a big way." And almost at the stage of saying, 'may the war continue indefinitely' because he was getting a reasonable quota of Red Cross parcels and cigarettes.

26:30 He was getting extra tucker on the farm and, you know, at the usual intervals of time, and he had his own frau. So what more could he lack? And I ran into him again in England and I said, "Well, I did get your message."

That's amazing, that you can actually get messages to each other when there's so many men involved over such a huge area.

27:00 Just, you know, it's sheer luck. The chap came into our camp and there would have been two thousand officers there, but he asked around and found out where I was and came up and told me the story.

You mentioned that you had some lessons to learn. What other sorts of lessons did you learn?

Well, I think being a new junior officer, there's an awful lot of things that are

27:30 new to you and you've got to be able to exercise a firm but fair control over what would be a platoon of thirty-eight men, of whom there'd be a platoon sergeant and three corporals and probably two lance corporals. So there's at least, say about thirty-five straight-out soldiers.

28:00 All mature men, you know, some of them would have been thirty-five years of age. And they're probably saying to themselves, "Who's this young brat?" organising themselves. Now, it was probably a bit unusual in those days for you to be promoted within the same company. I understand that during the war when they ran, those qualified

28:30 were sent off to another battalion altogether, maybe in another area of operation so they're dealing with new people who didn't know them before. I recall speaking to a British Army regular major in the engineers and he seemed somewhat surprised that you'd come up through the ranks. But that was the system and it worked quite well.

29:00 And eventually you get, if you do your job thoroughly and look after the interests of people, you do get the respect that's due.

Were you enjoying being a junior officer?

Well, the pay was a big jump. I went from, when I went overseas, or back in Australia, it was five shillings a day as a private.

29:30 A little more as a corporal and a little bit more, I think it was ten and six a day, for a staff sergeant. And I went to fifteen shillings a day as a lieut [lieutenant]. Now, salaries pre-war were pretty light on, so for me earning eventually, soon thereafter, I was on seven pound a week. That was like, you know, a bar of gold, and I didn't really need

30:00 the money. We had a very good pay sergeant who tackled me in Palestine and got me to sign an allotment of ten shillings a day when I was getting nineteen and ten, I think it was. And he said, "Well, you don't need the money" and I'd just been for a weekend in Jerusalem and I didn't drink, I just

smoked to some extent. And I probably

30:30 had taken three times the amount of money that I normally would, because you knew that a lot of your soldiers who had been on leave as well, they'd meet you in the street and they were broke so you'd give them a pound or, you know, ten bob as the case may be, and so I whittled away quite a bit of money. And he was smart enough to suggest to me I should make an allotment, which I did do to an elder sister, and she just received the money and banked it.

31:00 So I had quite a nest egg and after about five, the best part of five years of that, of ten shillings a day.

You've gone from Liverpool to Ingleburn, is that right?

Yeah, well, the unit have gone from Greta to Ingleburn. In the meantime, I deviated by going to Liverpool for two months and then rejoined

31:30 the unit at Ingleburn.

So what was that like?

Well, we did some exercise I recall on, who's the great man of New South Wales who brought in merino sheep? Macarthur-Onslow from memory. I remember that we did an exercise on their property with their permission and I think were given an introduction to the,

32:00 you know, the wherewithal and the what's about merino sheep. And I can't recall anything else. We did a long route march. On one occasion, we had a halt outside a particular hotel. The next thing is half the cowboys are into the pub. And when they got dragged out and shattered by the company commander, they said, "Well, why not?"

32:30 The name of the hotel was The Good Intent. They got away with that, I think. And again when we left there, our company fortunately came back again on the ship. So we had another week of a pleasant sea voyage and the best of food.

So how long were you actually at Ingleburn?

I would have been only there about a month if that.

33:00 **So from Ingleburn, you're on the ship…?**

Yeah, to Claremont Showgrounds and again, when you get here, you're on leave straight away. Six days or thereabouts. And we spent probably about five weeks out at the showgrounds, during which time we marched down to Rockingham and back again doing

33:30 many exercises on the way. The CO thought it would be a very good idea to keep us fully occupied and save us getting into trouble.

This was when you were on leave?

No, after the leave, when we fronted up back to the showgrounds into the bare billets, in the bare buildings that we occupied. And, again, a few issues occurred so that when we left here, other than automatic

34:00 weapons and mortars and trucks, which we were to pick up in the eastern states, in the Middle East, and carriers, we were in reasonable, you know, shipshape order. We finished up on a pretty punk troop ship.

34:30 It had been running, from memory, since the First World War. It would have been due, it was owned by the British India Line. It used to be a troop ship carting British troops to and from India, Hong Kong and the likes, Malta, Egypt and so on, on a regular basis. Pretty basic ship. No refrigeration. And it was due to be scrapped two or three years before the war and the

35:00 government, British Government, had retained it, knowing full well that war was going to be inevitable, and it finished up being dumped in Fremantle for some unknown reason. So we were put on board that with more troops than was good for the vessel. Varying protests were made but we didn't get very far with that.

Is this because there aren't enough beds?

Well, all the troops had

35:30 hammocks. The officers finished up, I know I was in a cabin of four. There would be no doors on it, just a curtain across, not that that worried us. But that's what would happen in a troop ship. I presume some of the senior NCOs [Non Commissioned Officers] might have been in cabins as well, but I can't recall those circumstances. We went into the dining room and we

36:00 were well served by waiters, etcetera, and good tucker. If you were given the job of a messing officer and go down to the troop deck on any particular day, the food that they were given was pretty crook and half of it used to be pushed out through the port hole. It was, you might say, almost the bottom of the barrel. However,

36:30 there's no alternative. You're on board the ship. We were allowed to open some canteen supplies that were going to Palestine so that the troops could get the odd beer. There was leave for a short time in Colombo. Initially, they didn't want us to go ashore and we were expected to be lowered into the lighters and row around the harbour.

37:00 You can imagine how popular that was. Eventually we were authorised to go ashore.

How long were you in Colombo?

I think it was for maybe two or three, two days. Enough time to refuel - all the local boys carrying coal in baskets up the gangway and dumping it - and I guess refuelling or acquiring

37:30 water and what other rations were available, hopefully fruit but there wasn't too much of that. And then on to Aden.

I guess Colombo would have been your first taste of a foreign country?

Yes, that's true and, you know, the lads would be inclined to be a bit mad running around in rickshaws.

What else did you get up to?

There? Well, I did have the name

38:00 of a tea-planting family from some friends of mine in Sydney. So when I got ashore, I rang them up and they picked me up, from what I can recall, and probably took me in their car on a bit of a tour. And then I presume we either went into the local, to the Galle Face Hotel, or their home but I can't remember which. Only an afternoon

38:30 and then they'd bring you back to the boat and that was it, when the convoy is ready and all ships are all ready to sail again..

How many in the convoy?

I think there were five ships in our convoy plus the naval escort. The naval escort would normally be, say, they had the battle cruiser, [HMS] Ramillies

39:00 and a cruiser from the Australian fleet. And the Ramillies carried on but halfway between Fremantle and Colombo, the Australian vessel about turned and went back to Freo [Fremantle] and it was taken over by either a British or a French vessel of similar complement to take you on to Colombo. And then

39:30 there'd be a change probably to go on to Aden. In Aden no one went ashore. All we did was pick up water as far as I'm aware and I don't think they would have had too much else. The only highlight there would have been, with all the lighters alongside, our chaps used to put pennies

40:00 on the open stoves on the deck and hot them up and then throw them over down to the decks of the lighters and, of course, there'd be a scramble from all the local natives and the poor sucker that won the coin would be his hand on it and it'd be as hot as hell. So they'd get a scream from that, but that's what soldiers tend to do unfortunately.

A bit naughty. Were there any

40:30 **other sorts of activities that you got up to on the troop ship?**

Well, there was officer training at regular intervals. Mat, sand table exercises, etcetera.

Sand table exercises?

Yes, you'd have a room like this and they'd put in timber framing and sand on it and they'd made features and they'd paint pictures as of a particular battle, depending on who's present and what

41:00 level you're at, and you're given a problem and you've got to solve that and you're all asked the questions etcetera. And then, of course, there are higher levels of it. There might only be a company attack or defence. Later on, there might be a battalion exercise. You'd be sitting as a junior lieutenant in the back hoping you weren't going to be asked a question that was obviously well above you. But the beauty about the

41:30 system is that if you don't know the answer, rather than try to bull your way through, the answer is that you stand up and say, "I don't know, sir." and sit down and that's it.

Tape 3

00:34 **Did you drop anchor at Port Tewfik?**

I doubt it. I think we were then, well it's possible that we did, and in due course we're called up along

the canal to the Bitter Lake where we anchored and we were there for several days. They lowered the gangways and we were all able to have a good swim around the place and climb back again.

01:00 And when available, we went further up the canal, roughly halfway, to a place called El Kantara, disembarked there, were fed and watered at the local canteen, the NAAFI [Navy Army Air Force Institute] run by the British Army. And then on to a train and off into Palestine.

How were you fed and watered there?

Well, you get sausage and mash

01:30 and a brew of tea. Hopefully you've got your own mugs handy.

Sounds pretty civilised.

NAAFIs were a pretty well established set-up. Under normal circumstances their canteens, seeing they'd been running for a long time with the British Army throughout the world, steak and eggs and chips were a great menu from the NAAFI for the British Army.

02:00 **What's behind the name NAAFI?**

Something to do with, I'm not sure. Lord Nuffield, the original maker of the Morris car, etcetera, was a great benefactor for the British Army in sports equipment, yachting and so on throughout the British Empire. Whether the N started

02:30 off for Nuffield or not, I do not know. But it purely is an abbreviation of letters, or the first letter, or a number of words that made the British Army's canteen and I wouldn't doubt the N might have meant Nuffield as a recognition of his benefactor arrangements.

That's really interesting. I thought it had the ring of wartime slang.

No, no.

03:00 **Can I just interrupt here? Earlier on you mentioned to Denise [interviewer] that it was suggested that through the voyage the Kalgoorlie guys could get sorted out. How was that so?**

Well, first of all they were very crowded in troop decks. They had a hammock to erect and to wrap up, take down every morning. There was little room for them. There was no air-conditioning

03:30 and, in fact, arrangements were made with the master of the vessel to try and make it more comfortable for the soldiers, that there was an officer guard of two persons on every watertight door, which were left open instead of being normally shut, and that allowed perhaps a little

04:00 bit of breeze into the varying parts of the deck to help, you know, living conditions. Their food was rock bottom and, as I mentioned earlier, a lot of it used to get pitched out through the port hole. And they'd often go and buy something at the canteen to make up, such as, you know, a packet of biscuits or the like. So I think

04:30 they had a lot of, you might say, a lot of the stuffing. They had to do some physical work on board the boat during the day when platoons were given areas in which they could do physical exercises etcetera and also kept the troops occupied. There'd be the odd boxing competition and I can't recall anything else to mess them around.

I'm just curious how if training wasn't going to

05:00 **pull them into line, how the troop ship might.**

Well, I think if you've got to put up with pretty rough conditions for a month, limited space and food and not very much to do, you can be bored to tears as against the freedom that they would have had at the showgrounds in comparison. However,

05:30 eventually with disembarkation at El Kantara, a rail journey to Palestine, a lot of the Egyptians were around on the canal selling eggs and numerous other things and attempting to take the soldiers for a ride. But it didn't, I can't recall the time, it wouldn't have taken that many hours to get to our camp, was at Gaza.

06:00 **So did any of the soldiers lose a wrist watch there?**

No, no. Not there. They would only have lost them probably when they got caught. But our camp was known as Koala 89. It was the lowest camp, looking down on the map, from Tel Aviv on the way down. There was a main road

06:30 from Tel Aviv to Gaza and Australian army camps were spaced out along this and we were within a couple of miles of Gaza. And we had alongside of us an Australian General Hospital, the 2/1st from New South Wales, and the limited number of nurses from the 2/2nd AGH [Australian General Hospital] that came

07:00 away on our boat from Perth were attached to them. They had barbed wire around their tentage. We

used to have to provide a platoon guard on a weekly basis to tour around the tentage largely at night.

Why was security so high around the nurses' tents?

Well, I think it's just providing

07:30 protection for females.

Were they protecting them from the locals or from the Aussies?

Well I would think, there was a tendency for more senior officers than us to keep themselves informed with the girls, well, the nursing sisters, and they would have odd mess nights and an odd dance. And naturally they'd ask officers to

08:00 the party. Junior officers were generally not asked. You had to be a captain or above.

So you were on the cut off line.

To get a look in. The only incident that I had down there in the week that I did guard was that there were, this time, there were a number

08:30 of people that were to be sent home on medical grounds - for instance, I had a brother-in-law with diabetes - and they were in a camp some miles further north. But several of these other lads from the group had come down from AGH to see some of their friends and got themselves fairly drunk and very loud. And I put them inside one of the padded cells, got on the phone

09:00 to our quartermaster, who was also a diabetic and coming home, told him that I had these several soldiers and I would care for them overnight in the padded cells and get them up about 6 am tomorrow morning and then what happened to them after that was his business and not mine. And all this was going on on the phone. Unknown to me, the colonel from the hospital was standing outside the door listening.

09:30 And when I finished the phone conversation and came out, I walked straight into him and he wanted to know the story. I didn't want to see these soldiers dobbed in and I thought any adverse arrangement might jeopardise their opportunity to come home, so I obviously told a story that didn't match the facts, and when I finished he said, "Well, I'm sorry, I overheard your phone conversation."

10:00 So I said, "In that case, if you want me to, I'll arrange for the soldiers to be put on board a vehicle and taken back to their camp now" and that happened. Now, on a weekly basis, at the end of your week on a Friday night, the guard commander was invited to be a guest at their mess and I thought, "Well, now how popular could I be" because I'd have to sit alongside this colonel. So I didn't

10:30 turn up at all.

What was the tall story?

And apparently, from what I found out later, they deferred starting their dining-in night for about half an hour hoping that I, you know, the guard commander would turn up, but he didn't. So they obviously went ahead without me and I never heard any other repercussions and I never went near the hospital set-up again.

11:00 **I'm sure he hasn't forgotten you.**

Probably not.

What was the tall story you had?

Oh, I just had to come up with quick thoughts that these soldiers were obviously drunk and they'd been found in the lines, etcetera, someone had secured them there. And I, you know, garnished the conversation so that there

11:30 was little if any blame that was likely to be attached to the soldiers. I think he was awake up to the fact that I had probably bulled my way through and missed out. So we went back to normal training.

Could you describe the guard house for me?

Nothing else but an EPIP [English Pattern, Indian Product] tent, Indian pattern,

12:00 large tent that normally would house a section of say ten or eleven soldiers, and that was your guard tent.

And it had padded cells?

No, the hospital itself was part, it had a limited number of buildings on a concrete slab. And, no doubt, they would expect an odd mental patient so they probably had, I think probably two cells with padded walls

12:30 so the soldiers probably couldn't damage themselves if they didn't know what they were doing. And I

utilised them for the benefit of these two drunken soldiers. At least I thought they'd be out of trouble.

You were about to return to basic training?

Yeah, you return to your company lines and you carry on with your normal training that went on. I think there wasn't much of Palestine that we hadn't dug up over the six months that we were there.

13:00 Bearing in mind also that every weapon pit that you dig, you have to fill in again at the end of the exercise.

So what was daily routine?

Well, some platoons would be sent down to the Egyptian-Palestinian border, to a place then known as El Rafah and they would go to the local village, hire some camels and go out

13:30 closer to the coast and they'd be there for maybe a week or ten days and they used to log aircraft movement: the time, the direction and what type of aircraft if they could identify it. Of course, they could also do a lot of swimming. That wouldn't be a bad sort of a run if you got it. I only went down there to look at the place on one occasion.

14:00 I was never lucky enough to get a guernsey [turn] to take my platoon down there. We did one exercise that lasted about a fortnight. Starting off from Gaza, you go to Beersheba and then you go up through the Hebron Hills and eventually come back on the bitumen road probably north of Tel Aviv. And we went along to a holiday camp on the coast. There

14:30 there would have been probably 110-odd EPIP tents, large enough for a whole battalion, and you'd spend a week there doing nothing else but go to the beach and eat, and that's where a NAAFI would have been and probably the majority of the soldiers would have enjoyed steak and eggs. You would get day leaves to Tel Aviv. You would get picket duties

15:00 on the same basis. You might get a weekend's leave in Jerusalem. The army took over the Fast hotel and we were able to stay there at a fairly economical rate, and we all did the usual tourist things and went into the varying parts of Jerusalem that were significant to the church. And

15:30 occasionally you might have been lucky enough to get a four-day leave to Cairo, in which case there might have been two or three officers from the unit that'd go off together. In Tel Aviv, you've got what was then the Arab quarters, Jaffa and that, if you were on picket duty

16:00 was your bugbear because, having gone onto the same leave trucks as the soldiers, you checked into the British Red Caps [Military Police] and they would say, "You can enjoy yourself until lunchtime but no grog," and then you would check in with them and about two o'clock you'd start your patrols around to control the soldiers who, at this stage, a large number would have had a quota of grog.

16:30 And the buses were due to leave at five pm and you would be lucky if you had twenty people out of a holiday party of a hundred. So then's the job of finding your soldiers. So the first place you go to is the Jaffa brothels and you're expected then to drag people out of the brothels and get them onto your truck and then back to the bus. Now, it was expected that that was your job as

17:00 a picket officer. I don't know that one officer sent billet buses home on one occasion at five o'clock and he would have had less than half the leave party on board and the CO was apparently not impressed because he didn't speak to this guy for about a week. Normally you always seemed to run into the CO when the leave buses got back

17:30 and we might not get back to camp until probably half past eight. But you'd run into the old man and he'd say, "And how many are missing, Johnson?" or the like. And I'd say, "As far as I'm aware, two or three" and he'd give a bit of a grunt and on you'd go. But you'd done your job; you'd got the majority home and that, you know, wasn't much of a burden. The first

18:00 time I was given a picket duty, and, you know, I was pretty young at this stage, a company commander much older than I by about fifteen years accompanied me as a, you might say, for me to be a learner. And that was probably not appreciated at the time but in retrospect you realise how, you know, beneficial it was to you. I think I got a weekend in Jerusalem and I

18:30 got four days in Cairo and I might have had one day's leave in Tel Aviv. But generally it was picket work. Some people were able to get to Haifa and some also would have gone into Trans-Jordania. So that was a six month period of a lot of hard work, exercises by companies, battalions and then brigades.

19:00 **Can you describe the conditions you'd find in some of these brothels?**

Pretty poor. It would be a rude awakening. Obviously, there'd be a fair number of drunken soldiers. There'd be urine and there'd be vomit on the stairway.

19:30 These lads bailing up these Arab women on the stairwell and in the cubicles that they provided. All in all, you'd wonder if the same soldier saw it in daylight when he was stone cold sober,

20:00 he wouldn't bother to go in there. But, you know, they hadn't seen a bird [female] for, say, two or three

months, they had a few bucks in their pocket, they enjoyed their grog and the first thing they'd say was, "Oh, we'll go round to the drums." But if you were on picket duty and stone cold sober, it was almost revolting. But that was Jaffa.

What kind of difficulties did you have

20:30 **dragging these drunken soldiers out?**

Well, I've been inside a cubicle and pulled a guy off the bed and said, "Get down the bloody stairs and get on board that truck!" I know I've done that on at least several occasions. Others, you'd strike them on the stairway and say, "Come on, get down there now. We're overdue by an hour or so."

21:00 They probably don't really care. They're probably apologetic to you the next day to you too.

Were they very apologetic at the time?

No, you know, "I'm enjoying myself" etcetera and they would probably sometimes get a little obstreperous. But in general they adhered to the discipline that was going to apply anyhow. We

21:30 used to prefer to leave the Red Caps down on the ground and let us physically handle our own soldiers. I think we probably spoke their lingo. We knew, we were better equipped, I think, to handle Australian soldiers rather, and for some unknown reason, soldiers invariably when they see a Red Cap, they go, "Let's have a fight" and that

22:00 would only add fuel to the fire and it wasn't necessary. They were there and they would drive their vehicles around and they were there as a back-up for us if required. And they would probably round up the last two or three that were going to be AWL [Absent Without Leave] anyway and they'd put them in their local, in their boob [gaol] for the night and return them to the unit the following day with the

22:30 request that certain charges apply.

How modest were the women when you were scouting around for these soldiers?

It's a profession where they had to earn dough [money] and things were pretty poor over there at the time. I don't think they gave a bugger, etcetera.

So you must have copped an eyeful?

Well, you would have and, but then again, units were set up with blue light outfits back in camp and there were blue light depots

23:00 within Tel Aviv itself that soldiers could go to. But, nevertheless, there still was a VD [venereal disease] hospital, or should I say a VD annex attached to the 2/1st hospital where there was an area fenced in and X number of soldiers would be there being treated by the medical profession.

What do you mean by blue light depots?

23:30 Well, a red presumably is to attract people. A blue light is for you to get some medical treatment. Having, if I say, the correct terminology is to have enjoyed the pleasures of life, there are trained personnel in the medical profession, quite often senior NCOs, and they attend

24:00 to what they have to do and hopefully minimise any possibility of VD occurring. It is a problem no matter where you go in the world with soldiers.

I've heard there was a soldier where the Australian and British army were regulating the brothels and numbering the women and checking their health?

In some instances, in some places, I think it occurred,

24:30 particularly in Syria at a later date, the medical officers at the unit would examine the women concerned and then place a restriction and they would have, say, for all I know, weekly examinations. No different to what used to happen down there at Roe Street when there were doctors that I knew in Newcastle Street in practice that used to examine the girls

25:00 on a regular basis to minimise the outbreak of venereal disease.

In Roe Street here?

Yeah.

What year was this?

Pre-war and post-war

Roe Street was…?

Was nothing else but a row of brothels.

25:30 **So given that the industry was pretty prolific here in Roe Street before and after the war, what kind of an eye-opener was it for you to be in these foreign countries?**

Well, if you recall one's age, I wasn't a frequenter of Roe Street prior to the services, so it was largely all new to me. But the MO [Medical Officer] of the unit was required

26:00 to give the soldiers of your company lectures on VD etcetera and you would attend those lectures the same as if you were a soldier, so you learnt, you know, a reasonable amount of what was going on and you just accepted that as part of life.

The lectures obviously didn't deter a lot of fellows?

26:30 No. Oh no. I don't know the real cause of not adhering to the good advice given, but I suppose a few beers and an odd bird that might be tempting or classed as good-looking.

'She'll be right, mate.'

Yeah, there's no doubt about it. But, however, that's enough of that subject now, I think.

27:00 We were the last brigade to move from, in November of 1940, from Palestine to Egypt and we went to Burg el Arab, which is close to the coast, if not on the coast, and not very far south of Alexandria and there we did some training.

27:30 The comment there that might be of some interest is that there was a divisional exercise with our brigade against the other two and in the course of the evening, when it was reasonably dark, I stopped another officer, or I assumed him to

28:00 be an officer or a warrant officer. He was taller than I, had a peak cap on, so he could well have been a warrant officer, and he was on the railway line slightly higher than I, and he was a prisoner. He didn't know the password so it was my obligation to capture him and I thought, "Well, if I get up on the railway line, he can pull me over to his side and I'm sunk." So I beckoned him forward

28:30 and grabbed his shirt and pulled him and he hit the deck, got up and dusted himself to assure me that he was a lieutenant colonel. And he showed me a note. He'd apparently been captured by a company two or three times previous to that and I could recognise the writing of the company commander

29:00 and it said if he was captured again to be let free. So I said, "Well, you're free to go now, sir" and that's it, "Sorry." Well now, at the divisional debriefing conference after, he apparently complained of the poor treatment he got from a junior officer of the 2/11th Battalion, which was obviously me, and I was apparently to be told that I would have to front up to

29:30 him and apologise. I thought that was a bit unfair. But the grapevine got to me, fortunately we weren't messing as a unit, we were all eating by companies and we're all in tents dispersed by about a hundred metres apart sort of business. The message I got via the grapevine in the unit was if the CO didn't see me for the next week, I

30:00 wouldn't need to go and front up and apologise. So I made it my business not to be seen. And what happened to that chap after, I do not know, but I think a replacement came into the system. But of course, obviously at that level, I would only pick up odd little stories. So it's probably better not to

30:30 conjecture what may or may not have happened. I just thought it was a little unfair, the circumstances in my book were quite clear. I was out to capture the man, he was bigger than I, he was on a ground-level of stone on the railway line on a higher… So beckon him forward and then pull him. If his foot gave way and he finished up on the deck, that was bad luck, I thought.

31:00 But, you know, that was it. However, in due course we expected to move to the Libyan desert before Christmas so we had an early Christmas party.

What happened at the Christmas party?

Well, there was a lot of food brought in and a canteen system and the officers expected to serve the soldiers at Christmas lunch, and they'd have lamb and

31:30 Christmas pudding and so on, and probably a free bottle of beer. But we were still there about a week later so we had a second Christmas party on Christmas Day. Soon thereafter, we were in the trucks and on our way past Mersa Matruh, close to the Egyptian border. Now, we weren't to be involved in the attack on

32:00 Bardia but it had got to the third day and it would appear that the situation had bogged down. So we and the 2/8th Battalion at least and I can't recall what the 2/4th Battalion were involved in, if anything, we were there to go through and try to improve the situation so the battle of Bardia

32:30 could be won and finished. That's the first time we were under fire. I recall that my company commander took we three platoon commanders out in a utility before the attack started to have a look at likely start lines and he checked with some soldiers that were already there, the most forward

defensive

33:00 line. There was some misunderstanding because we finished up well in front of the most forward troops. Fortunately, our company commander spoke Italian and we looked over into a valley and there's about a hundred Italians going through the motions of having breakfast. Our vehicle was turned around in a hurry. I grabbed the driver's rifle, which, I might add, didn't have a bolt in it

33:30 so therefore couldn't be fired, and the company commander called up two or three Italians. They came up. We put them on board the vehicle with the engine still running and beetled off straight away. We checked into battalion headquarters and the CO was just in the process of giving his orders out for that attack and our company commander arrives with two or three Italian soldiers as prisoners.

34:00 We went back to our platoons and got them organised. Now, the difficulty in attempting to vary a program of artillery apparently can cause a lot of problems and our CO being a first war man was well aware of that. So, rather than get the artillery to defer the start of

34:30 their program or altering it in any form, we jogged to the start line to get there on time. The other company didn't jog so we took over frontage of two companies.

What kind of formation did you jog in?

Well, by platoons and by sections and usually just, you know, a single set-up because we were well to the rear.

Single file?

35:00 Yeah. So eventually you get into arrowhead with perhaps two sections forward and one in reserve and the company headquarters just in the centre of the rear two sections. Well, fortunately our company commander was a pretty good operator. The first time we were fired on, naturally they're all down on the deck like a flash. And he's still standing up and he says, "What's everyone on the ground for?

35:30 Nobody's been hit yet." So sheepishly the platoon commanders stand up, they urge their NCOs to follow and so the soldiers got up and we kept rolling all the time. It was really only an exercise for us because we only got one casualty, a chap by the name of Geoff Angove who worked for the Post Office in Albany.

36:00 **What kind of casualty did he receive?**

Well, apparently his section went to a dugout and some Italians came out with their hands up but it was an officer behind them with a pistol and he fired and got the chap, I think, in the stomach area. So naturally his section let go and put a few rounds into the dugout. But the Italians

36:30 in the main, excepting artillery, which was in better shape than the soldiers, weren't terribly interested in war. Their officers came out after a time with suitcases, you know, and they'd have scent and silk type pyjamas and dressing gowns, all in dugout situations. The craziest dress that you could ever think of. But we were that short of people compared to the

37:00 numbers of prisoners taken that there'd just be a stream of several thousand soldiers, Italian soldiers, walking to the rear. We probably could afford to give them one soldier as a guard to every four or five hundred prisoners. Anyway, they were on their way and…

That must have caused some talk?

Well, there was some fairly

37:30 tough fighting to break into the tank trap by the 16th Brigade and they had quite a few casualties. I'm uncertain as to what the 17th Brigade were involved in and we were only brought in at the last minute. We were supposedly to be kept for Tobruk. However, with the battle of Bardia over, we then trucked to Tobruk.

38:00 Again another port on the coast, much larger.

How long were you at Bardia?

Probably a week or thereabouts.

Did you sleep in trenches?

Well, you got weapon pits. The days of trenches were over. Weapon pits, enough for two people. And one, you could, two people would probably lie down on their side only.

38:30 On the other hand, if there was only enough room, depending on the time you had to dig, for one person to lie down, the other chap could probably lie on the deck above, if there was no, you know, shellfire around the place.

And you'd be advancing and digging these daily?

Once you got to Tobruk, you took up a defensive area, a defensive position and you dug in, you have to dig in at night and you have to

39:00 arrive by night also to stop the Italians knowing where you were. Then you'd have to stay in below ground level all day long, so that the kitchen truck would come up and you would have breakfast, say, at half past four in the morning or thereabouts, five o'clock. It would then come back in the evening, probably sevenish or thereabouts for the evening meal. And you would have had a tin of bully between

39:30 two or three and some dry biscuits at lunchtime. If you had a compass, there would be observation usually by one of the officers, particularly the company commander, taking flashes on the artillery. Now, I got, for some unknown, not for some unknown reason, for a particular reason, the first patrol

40:00 that the unit got at Tobruk. If we hark back to the time in Palestine, I wasn't very happy with the padre. Now, in the army rules and regs [regulations] of the time, you don't have to attend the church parade, and I had examined the appropriate manual and found out that that was the score. But you have to be fully occupied during the church parade. Now, in a non-diplomatic manner, when we got

40:30 to the battalion parade on the Sunday morning, I said to my platoon, "All out those who don't want to attend church" and the majority did. So away we march and I believe all the brass were standing up on the hillside waiting for the unit to be handed over to the CO in turn and

41:00 then the padre. They're all goggle-eyed and, at the end of the church parade, I was asked why I'd done this. And I told my superior why and quoted appropriate military regulations and orders, and I said, "I supervised the cleaning up of the company area." So I'm off the hook. That was remembered by the appropriate people and therefore the first patrol of the unit was allocated to me without option. Now, there were a lot more senior officers than I that could well have done the

41:30 job. There was at least one in the company. However, I was given the job and I had to take about nineteen soldiers with me. This was a direction apparently by the brigadier. A reconnaissance patrol would normally only have two or three in it. I was told to take nineteen. So the Italians would have heard us a mile away. We went on and on and on and we left at 10 pm from the company lines. We were due back

42:00 at 2 am

Tape 4

00:32 Well, this patrol, obviously with the twenty of us all up, would have been heard a mile away by the Italians. We were in boots. Our task was to get into the tank trap, measure it and get out again. Unfortunately, in front of the tank trap were trip-wires and two of our NCO who went forward when

01:00 we were close to the tank trap set off the trip-wires and there was blinding flashes and much noise, etcetera. So the rest of us went to ground and when they recovered from the initial burst, they came back to us. And I thought, "Well, the game's away now. We can't get into the tank trap and get out again unknown."

01:30 So, we organised, I sent two people off with a compass ahead to report in that we were on our way back but we hadn't got into the tank trap. And we batted on with two of these soldiers on, no, one of them only on a leather jerkin or two leather jerkins buttoned together and two rifles put in as slings. So we're carrying their surplus equipment back and you take your turn around there

02:00 and we eventually leave from the El Alamein escarpment, which was on our flank, which were in allied lines. So we dossed down for the rest of the night, probably about 4 am, and early morning we heard tank engines start up so I sent a couple of soldiers over and they were fortunately British tanks. They

02:30 radioed back to our headquarters what's what and in turn our company commander fronted up with a big truck and got us aboard. The two soldiers that I'd sent off earlier, in the wide gaps in the dark, had walked between two companies and they had dossed down eventually until it became daylight and they could orientate themselves. Now, I saw the tank trap some weeks later and I'm convinced that had

03:00 we got into the tank trap we'd never have got out of it, because subsequent reconnaissance parties went out, say three soldiers, or two soldiers and an officer, carrying a makeshift ladder so that they could climb down into the tank trap and pace it out and measure by sight the far wall and then come back again. So we were out there without any ladder. So that was over

03:30 and done with. The battle of Tobruk again, other than where casualties are bound to occur on the initial break in, was such that, again, it was a walking exercise for us and I'm pretty sure in the company we got no casualties again. And eventually prop [stop] for the evening, we

04:00 didn't get our ration truck, blankets on board for the night, so we froze. The following morning we went down to an area opposite a townsite of the harbour, on the harbour, to naval barracks and we were billeted there for a short time. In the afternoon, the Department of Information, who was then working for the government relative to photography etcetera, came along, and I was the only officer of the company

04:30 handy and I had to organise a bit of an attack, which is a well known photograph now. It appeared and we, fortunately between several of us, have been able to name most of the soldiers in it. We've got a number imprinted on the photograph for every soldier and down in the bottom the same number indicates his regimental number and name. And that's over in the AWM now. It's been a well used

05:00 photo in many cases. In fact, a couple of years ago, the Royal Mint here, produced a leaflet on which was the photo. So I went in there and picked up a spare copy and I said to the girl at the time, I said, "Now, would you know anything about that?" She said, "No." I said, "Would you recognise that chap?" "No." I said, "Well, that was the premier of WA, Sir David Brand" who happened to be a corporal in

05:30 the same platoon. And that was news to her but you could understand it.

Had you staged this photograph?

Yes, it was all staged because the fighting was over, you know, it was seven o'clock in the morning so everything was finished.

Can you go into a bit more details of the past couple of days?

Well, in the naval

06:00 barracks, we were able to acquire a lot of tinned food, which we set up, and used their cooking facilities in containers, were a lot better than ours and we managed to acquire a lot. We had the usual old hot box that had been established in the army for a long time and was still being used in Korea, as far as I'm aware. Great big

06:30 lumbering boxes to cart up the side of a hill. We had plenty of tucker. I know my trousers had split right up the length of the seam and I diced them and put on a pair of brand new naval pants, blue, to be told by my company commander to get them off because I could be classed as the enemy. So I then had to find the quartermaster to get a new pair of strides.

07:00 I think there might have been the odd case of a bit of swimming in the harbour. Not much though. They have these, what they call sangers. They're nothing else but defended areas. They might have an ack-ack [anti-aircraft] gun or a field gun inside an area and they built up with rock a perimeter, and we organised for the benefit of this Department of Information photographer,

07:30 I had to organise an attack on the sangar from back about seventy yards. So we're all doing all of this and, at the vital moment, who should be walking out but our CSM [Company Sergeant Major] with an Italian flag under his arm. So we had to do the whole exercise a second time. And that is the photo that's been extensively used. In fact, I was

08:00 in Canberra on one occasion, I browsed through a new unit history of the 2/5th Battalion and there's the photo misused, and it mentioned something about it could be some of their soldiers. However, I made a few notes and I wrote to the authors and said if you looked at the official history you would find that the 2/5th Battalion was a long way away from this area and couldn't

08:30 possibly be involved. And I was able to name so many people out of it and I gave them a reference of my company commander if they wanted to make any doubt - who in fact, by this stage was a repatriation commissioner and he'd finished in the army, invalided out with a DSO [Distinguished Service Order] and an MC [Military Cross], and he was a lieutenant colonel. So I thought that would be a reference. And in due course the 2/5th

09:00 Battalion authors wrote back and said they were sorry, they were given the wrong information and they wouldn't use the photo if they ever reprinted the book. The AWM now have in their possession the right information, so if the photo's to be used again by anyone, it's there, and they own it, not me, at least they can quote what's what.

09:30 Anyway.

Set the record straight.

They obviously got lots and lots of photos, but as to who, where and when is probably lacking on a tremendous lot of them and that's the difficulty they're faced with. And unless that problem is solved in a hurry, it'll all be all too late.

How could it be solved, do you think?

Well, to give you an example, in the recent history that I knocked up by collation largely,

10:00 about two years ago, we have the unit football team who were on the Atherton Tableland, the AIF premiers. Now, the photo had appeared also in an earlier production dated 1984. When it came out the second time, about a month after the books were sold, a member of the unit association, who held a position

10:30 in the organisation, because I'd put the caption that the names were not known, I got a list of all those players. He'd had it since 1984 and had it been given to me, we could have added. What I've done now

is to provide the names to the AWM so at least they can sort of put some

11:00 piece of paper on the bottom of their photo and they know who they're talking about, and if there was ever a reproduction of ours. The same thing occurred with the nominal role. There's a chap that lives out of here in Victoria Park or Carlisle who was in our unit and left and went to several others, and

11:30 a pay sergeant who came from Queensland. Now, officially I don't have to show attached personnel in a nominal role, but we did put the MO and the padre and the pay sergeant. But this was the second pay sergeant. After it was published, another soldier of the unit that knows me very well said, "I know who the pay sergeant was and why did you leave him out?"

12:00 I said, "If you knew that he was left out, why didn't you give me a bell?" And I could have included him. The other chap, who went into two or three other units, also knew that his name was left off but didn't bother, as an individual, to ring me up and tell me. So there are two or three names that are omitted and I can't

12:30 see that there'll be a reprint of the book but I gave the publisher the information if he wants to proceed, well, after I'm not around and to reproduce the book. And he can add those names. But I think half the time, it's just idleness of people, you know, they're all getting a bit old and they say, "Oh, well, you know, it's not worth my worrying about" or, "He'll do it, not me." Because the battle to get willing workers is

13:00 still the usual hard game. There are not that many volunteers. However, to continue the story, we went then to Derna. There we earned our keep. We were…

Can you tell us blow by blow what happened?

In Derna, we had to attack across an aerodrome. That's usually fairly flat. There was admittedly a bitumised road going

13:30 across the aerodrome and it had little abutments built out at the side, obviously to allow for trucks passing to pull in on the abutment while the convoy or whatever was passing. Previous advice to the unit was that there was no hassle. So away we get out of these trucks, hurried snack,

14:00 and we started off I think about after one and we're still scratching to get there as darkness came. One platoon was on the left of the road and it got bogged down and was unable to move. We did have the advantage of the other two platoons of being able to sneak alongside on the edge of the road

14:30 with some slight protection from the abutments. The Italians were firing their long range Breda guns from the backs of trucks.

Across the aerodrome?

Across the aerodrome. And overall we finished up, I think, with a few, two or three, killed and about twenty to twenty-five wounded. You are crawling through thorn bushes keeping as low as you possibly

15:00 could. I think my company commander had a few rounds put into his haversack on his shoulder, on his back. It was the luck of the game as to whether or not you got hit or not. In the sweep with an equivalent of our medium machine gun, the Vickers, they would sweep from left to right or right to left.

15:30 Many's the time they might have just stopped and you could be two or three soldiers further on or, say, two yards further on and the fire stopped and moved back again so you were a bit lucky there. Other people would have perhaps been hit through the head. And there was a chap, Horner, I think he wouldn't have known what was happening, he got hit straight through the steel helmet.

16:00 We were keeping as low as we could to mother earth. On one occasion, some Italian aircraft came over and dropped some bombs. They should have been on to us but weren't. They were well in front. They created a great cloud of dust so, like a flash, we were up and we would have run a hundred and fifty yards and gained that much ground without being fired on. But the Italians could have fired but they were only firing,

16:30 you know, in the hope that they might hit something. They were all taught to conserve ammunition where possible. In the final event, my fellow platoon commander, Rod McRobbie, was sent to the left of the road and I was brought forward to take a firm base and provide covering fire while he did an attack onto the hangar. The message came through, "McRobbie's been hit."

17:00 Now, at this stage, it's dark. What had happened is his water bottle had been hit and, of course, all his pants were wet and nobody could say whether it's blood or water. Nobody knew at the time. Anyway, the company commander wasn't terribly concerned about who was hit and who wasn't. He said, "Get up and go." So by that stage I think they found out it was McRobbie's water bottle and not his person. We attacked

17:30 the hangar. I went around to the other side and threw a grenade or two into a building. Terrific explosion. The first time I'd thrown on such an occasion. An Italian…

What led you to go round the other side?

Well, there was a building behind the hangar and it had to be investigated to see if there were any

Italians in it. Now, if it's

18:00 dark and it's a building, the answer would be to throw a grenade in there and if there's anyone there they're likely to either be killed, injured or come out with their hands up. I was able then to, having thrown the grenade, to drop down on the deck behind a concrete apron, about a foot. So you were safe as a church yourself. An Italian Don R [Despatch Rider],

18:30 not knowing that we had captured the hangar, came hurtling around and McRobbie threw a pick handle at him and knocked him off the motorbike, and the Italian came out with a mouthful of abuse in Australian or in English. It appears that he was an Osborne Park vegetable grower, went home to Italy on leave and got called

19:00 up and got sent to Libya by Mussolini, and he wasn't impressed when he got hit by a… He wasn't of much use for intelligence in as much that he had only just recently arrived there.

You took him prisoner?

Yeah, and he got sent back. I had another little tiff then with the padre. The following morning there was a counterattack by the Italians with their light armoured vehicles.

19:30 **Sorry, can I just ask you, had you taken control of the hangar by now?**

Yes, we'd taken over the hangar. The artillery had come forward with their forward observation officer, so therefore they got a telephone line between their guns and the forward observation officer, and he's the one that can give the order for firing, and direct the fire too. And we had spent the evening trying to improve our positions. We were able to use

20:00 a lot of Italian weapon pits and replenish our ammunition. Our wounded had been picked up and taken to the rear.

Did you take possession of any of the Italian weapons?

No, not at that time. A day or so later, we did have a bath. They had that much mineral water, we got a big container and poured in bottle after bottle

20:30 and had a bath in mineral water. But that's putting the cart before the horse. Early morning, after a pretty early breakfast, the Italians came over with their armoured vehicles and we threw everything that we could at them. And with the artillery FOO [Forward Observation Officer] present, he was able to bring down some rounds on the ground and the Italians lost two killed.

21:00 And about two or three days later, they're still lying there, by which time another company had passed through us, so you might say it was as safe as a church. Being a cheeky individual, I rang the padre and asked him was he available to do a job in the army. And he said, "Yes." So I said, "Well, when are you going to come up here and bury these two Italians?" He wasn't impressed apparently. So he must have

21:30 spoken to the 2IC [Second in Command]. The next thing is he rings my company commander and I don't know why, other than the fact that I was pretty matey with McRobbie, but he got lumbered with me and we were told to draw two picks and shovels each and go across and bury the Italians ourselves. So we did that and thought, "Well, sooner or later, there'll be a day of reckoning." You don't, if you get such jobs to do, you don't bitch in the army. You just do

22:00 it and get on with it and an opportunity, as it were, payback, as it were, will occur later, and it did. But that didn't take place until I got to Germany.

Did you have an audience when you planned this stunt and spoke to the padre?

I jus spoke to him on the, you know, company phone line.

Did you have a few of your men around?

No, no, no. I just picked up the phone and dialled, etcetera, and spoke to him.

22:30 **Was it boredom that led you to concoct this scam?**

I just thought that what he might have done was to come forward automatically, instead of being back near the battalion headquarters, said to be looking after the sick and the wounded and so on. Not a bad idea to visit the forward companies and if he'd done that, we could have pointed out quite readily, there's a couple of chaps that we need to

23:00 bury.

You were still looking for retributions earlier after the incident with the tank traps?

Well, it just occurred to me on the spur of the moment. It wasn't any retribution at all. I just thought, "I'll get him to come up here and do something" and he apparently wasn't very happy with the suggestion. And so we buried the Italians and put up a couple of little crosses, etcetera,

23:30 with their ID tagged [Identification discs] onto the cross. And eventually we moved on south of Benghazi to a place called Ghemines, or the like, and Soluch.

Had you been camped in the hangar?

We were there for a couple of days, then we moved down the escarpment to a lovely little town, Er Regima, and we were the first troops in there. And what did we do?

24:00 We took over the governor's residence. Slept in a double bed for the night.

What did you do with the governor?

Oh, he'd gone.

Was the village still populated?

Only with Arabs.

Did you have to remove anyone from the governor's residence?

No, no, it was empty and we just took it over. It was right on the waterfront. Lovely gardens and all of this.

Food in the larder?

24:30 No, but we had ample of our own at this stage. But, unfortunately, after one or two nights, the brigade commander came along and found that the residence was more to his liking and standard, so we were sent on our way and he took over. So, at least we had one or two nights there. We then were in trucks which skipped

25:00 Benghazi altogether and went south because the Italians had withdrawn and were moving out of Benghazi and some from Derna as well. The armoured division had taken a big left hand arm to get below the escaping Italians and they had fought a battle with them. They had some

25:30 British artillery and infantry, as far as I'm aware, with them. We sat around in our vehicles in case we were wanted, fortunately weren't. So, we were to guard numerous thousands of Italian prisoners that night, but fortunately General O'Connor came along and spoke to our CO and he put British troops on the job and we slept

26:00 out in the rain for the night and the following day went back to the east side of Benghazi, to a little place called Tocra, which is an ancient Turkish fort area. Initially we were sleeping in caves on the beach and I've read and seen TV [television] documentaries

26:30 on the Middle East since, and they looked as if they might have been burial grounds, you know, going back several centuries. Eventually we were to have been moved within the fort itself.

Can you describe the fort?

Well, it's just an ancient, if you saw one building with the, you know the sort of the grey wall or ochre type wall, that just was,

27:00 you know, looked as if it was pretty ancient too. The local Arabs had used it, and then I was allocated a room that had been previously used by all the animals during the winter period and there would have been about a foot to eighteen inches of dung compounded on the deck [floor]. Now we would have had to shovel that out, so I was unimpressed with that as an idea.

27:30 So I got hold of the MO and asked him to pass comment thereon and he condemned it. So that obviously didn't improve my relationship with my company commander. We were told to go back and sleep in the caves.

How many rooms in the fort?

Oh, I wouldn't have a clue now. It had an amphitheatre and it's pretty hard to recall how big it was. But

28:00 the bulk of the unit were able to be billeted in it. A few days later, the company was moved down to a few hundred yards away to the local school and we moved late afternoon out of the caves. And I noticed, by coincidence, after the evening meal, I went into a room, which is our Q store, and we had an anti-tank, a Boyes anti-tank rifle and a

28:30 box of magazines, five of them, and I noticed our box was missing. So, with Corporal Brand, the premier of the future, and our platoon sergeant and myself and three torches, we searched the ground back about three hundred yards, the caves, etcetera and couldn't find them. So the following morning early, I spoke to all the storemen and all the CQs [Company Quartermasters] and I then told the company commander.

29:00 And lo and behold, five minutes later, I'm on a charge sheet for losing Commonwealth property. It shook me to the core. But just as I was going to step up into the CO's office, a storeman came hurtling along and said, "We've found them, sir." So charge was read, I was asked to say what I needed to say and I

told the CO that

29:30 they'd been found. He, being more experienced than I, told me then that they are looking after a campaign for someone who has made a blue to take a penalty and it'll usually get published in divisional orders so every officer can read it throughout the division and say, "Well, we'd better pull our heads in." He said,

30:00 "You probably would have lost six or twelve months seniority." Well, that really didn't worry me. I was a pretty junior lieutenant. But I got off the hook fortunately because the magazines had been found by somebody.

Where had they turned up?

I don't know where they found them but we got them back and that was it. I was just a bit, perhaps, shocked to think that I got caught. Next thing

30:30 is we had leave occasionally into Benghazi. I can remember McRobbie as a platoon commander in charge of a picket on one occasion with his batman, who was a bit obstreperous in there. He picked him up apparently, bodily, and threw him on board the back of the truck and said, "Don't bloody well get off it." That was presumably just,

31:00 they would have had just a few more beers than was good for them. Now, the unit then, after a couple of weeks there, you might say in recreation. You could go down to the beach and swim and there was water around.

What about the local people, were you mixing with them?

Not really. There was only a few Arabs around the place and they're

31:30 rather nomadic.

So you didn't take much interest in the Arabs at all?

No, you'd probably be more inclined to try to talk to the Bedouins. But, of course, there's always a language barrier.

What fascinated you about the Bedouins?

They all seemed to be cleaner and tougher. They lived a pretty rugged life. Everything they own they carry, as it were, on their camels. And now, the average WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK [fowl] around these places is more the bantam style. They haven't got too much feed

32:00 for them. And I well recall there that, after breakfast, or on one occasion I was pretty hungry apparently, I had my usual porridge and then I got through fourteen of these eggs for breakfast. Fourteen. But they weren't the full…they'd be, more pullet size.

Did you make a big omelette?

No, I just ate them. Boiled eggs etcetera.

32:30 Someone passed comment and I said, "Well, look, I was a growing boy" and pretty open air life, you were. Anyway, I managed to knock off the fourteen. That was my record. We made our way back to the west of Tobruk then to an open area that had been a landing strip area. I think it was known as El Gazala. And there we went back to basic training again.

33:00 You know, rifle exercises and so on to smarten up again, because when you're in a period of action say over six weeks, people tend to get, you know, pretty slack. So back you went. You cleared parade grounds and you did elementary training and weapon training again during which time I was apparently to be transferred to the mortar platoon to replace an officer there. And I don't know what was to happen to him.

33:30 **Why had you been chosen?**

Lord knows why. In the regular army now, as far as, say, Korea, we would have had two mortars in those days. I think regular army finished up with six mortars and it would have been a pretty, you know, a more senior lieutenant or perhaps a junior captain that would have got the job. Now, I'd been given a number of jobs over there

34:00 and probably, you know, in the background of the testing in Palestine, for instance, the first extra job I got was to organise with the Jewish engineer contractor.

So are we moving forward to Palestine now?

No, no, I'm just re a couple of incidents. I had to organise the hot water showers for all eight hundred and fifty people, you know, and I thought there were a lot more senior people who could have organised

34:30 that than me. Then the padre, who was very busy in his normal duties, complained that he had too many letters to censor, because we used to be saying to our diggers, take our letters up to padre and get rid

of them, so we didn't have to censor them. We got a direction, first of all, to censor letters ourselves and not pass them on and then secondly,

35:00 I was given the job of mess secretary/treasurer. I stood up at the meeting and said, "But, I don't want the job." The CO said, "Sit down, Johnson, you've got the job." You wrack your brains then, "How do you get rid of the job?" So I spent up big without authority. I bought mats for the mess and quite a lot of tinned fruit and so on. And I do know one captain, now deceased, who was getting more pay than I, bitterly

35:30 complained about his large mess bill, because they all had to share the cost. So I said to him at the time, I said, "Well, why don't you get rid of the secretary/treasurer? And you won't have a problem." Soon after that we'd moved on to Egypt and we then messed independently. So I thought with those two incidents and then the patrol, first patrol, and then the tiff with the padre over the burial set up, I wasn't doing too

36:00 brilliantly. And then being charged by the company commander.

Do you think they were trying to pass you on?

I think possibly out to make or break me. I had to leave C Company and go over to Headquarter Company where the mortar platoon was. And then, soon after that, I'm told I'm on my way to Palestine to a three-week course on mortars. So I went to that.

36:30 The brigade major, who was a regular soldier and who had originally been 2IC of our battalion, came along and he was with the CO when I left, and he gave me a letter to give to his brigade commander, then in hospital in Alexandria, Red Robbie and, "Give it to him personally," he says. So, we duly get to Alexandria and I go to the hospital

37:00 and the matron wouldn't let me in to hand the letter over to the brigadier. And I said in the passageway, "Well, in that case, three weeks later, I'll have to return it to the brigade major." And he, Red Robbie overheard me and called me into his room. Now, Red Robbie had two staff cars: one full of loot and one the normal official vehicle.

What kind of loot did he have stashed in there?

He would have had the opportunity in Tobruk particularly

37:30 to be able to go through fixed officers mess for the navy and the army, and probably the air force as well. Whatever looked good for him. But there was one thing about it. When there were to be inspections of our soldiers, we were always warned that, at ten o'clock tomorrow, we'll say, there'll be an inspection

38:00 of all your troops for loot, which obviously gave everyone tons of time to get rid of it, you know, into another place to recover later.

Had your platoon done pretty well with loot?

With loot? No, no, I think we, well, we didn't have any more facility to carry it. We did, at Tobruk, finish up with a case of condensed milk and tins

38:30 of fruit and stuff under the seats of the car, but that was all we would have been interested. But at least Red Robbie was a gentleman to that extent. He also asked me when I was due to go to school and he said, "Well now, I go for a drive in the afternoon. You're welcome to use my staff car other than that."

39:00 And he said, "Please don't use my standard." You know, a brigadier's got a purple pennant. Both the drivers of these two vehicles came from our unit so I knew them. Trouble was, I couldn't laugh indefinitely because they were broke at this stage and I had to keep the three of us going financially.

Did the pennant fly about the car?

On the front of the bonnet, you've got this pennant, you know, about a foot high and it's a

39:30 triangular set up.

So he said, "You can borrow the car but don't fly the pennant"?

Yeah, you know, I thought that was very diplomatic. And he said, "Well, you don't need to leave here for a few days. Enjoy yourself." He was very, very good and he sat down in his room and he explained different things relative to the desert campaign that I wouldn't have known about or didn't understand.

40:00 He being more in the brass line, knew a lot more about it than I and he was very helpful.

Why do you think he might have chosen to take you under his wing at that time?

Well, I just happened to bring a personal note from his brigade commander. That was all. He probably knew my name or face and that was all. So I went off then

40:30 by train to Serapeum in Palestine.

Did you get up to any mischief in the car?

No, no. We behaved ourselves well.

What use did you put the car to?

Oh, just drive around in the evening and go to a nightclub or whatever, the pictures, etcetera, and you had the facility of not having to pay for, retain a gharry to cart you about from A to B.

Bit of a perk?

Yes, it was useful.

Did you have a car before you entered the army?

41:00 No, no.

So it would have been a bit like borrowing your old man's car?

Yeah. We went to the school for the next three weeks. It was a gentleman's course because I think the Brits were still almost on peacetime, you know, procedures and establishments.

Tape 5

00:32 **You're at the British base and you're about to do something called a gentleman's course. Is that right?**

Well, they kept gentleman's hours. You knocked off, you had a morning session from, you know, sort of eight till twelve. Then you knocked off till lunch. You had one period only after lunch.

01:00 And then you had a rest period for the rest of the afternoon.

Incredibly civilised of the British to set up such a wonderful schedule.

And you might get one period in the evening. And that went on for the best part of three weeks.

What sort of things were you learning?

We were doing three-inch mortar training, including firing. And pistol. There was an awful lot of that. And I don't, they might have had

01:30 a little bit on two-inch mortars, which are small things about this long. And there was largely British Army. I think I might have been the only Australian there. So most evenings, the Brits would have a motorcar or access to it and be into Tel Aviv.

How come you were the only Australian doing it?

They, the British running the schools, make vacancies available for Australians. In this instance, they might have only had one,

02:00 on the previous course they might have had three or four. So, depending on the needs of their own army in particular, so there are vacancies. The good thing about it is that you are allowed to overdraw your pay book to pay a mess account. Now, whether you had a mess account or not they don't check up, so, the idea is, if you're thinking ahead, you overdraw your pay book,

02:30 it gives you another few bucks [pounds] up your sleeve so that when I got back to Alexandria, I could stay in the pub for three or four days, you might say AWL, and that I did.

I thought you weren't a drinker.

Well, I'm not a drinker but, in fact, I was sitting at a table in the Cecil Hotel there and a merchant navy captain and his engineer chief

03:00 asked could they occupy the spare seats, so I said yes and the skipper said, "What would you like to drink?" And I got a bit confused. I said, "Oh, a whisky." I had my one whisky I think and then I had to excuse myself and go upstairs to the room and stay there for a while. One of my colleagues, there was three officers from the unit apparently came into the pub at some stage when I'd gone to bed,

03:30 including my company commander and another 2IC of another company and the pioneer officer, Jock Murray. They looked at the register at the pub and found out that I was there. They probably had already heard from others that I was. I woke up in the morning. Murray had somewhere along the line conned some of the pub staff to let him into the room and I woke up

04:00 in the morning, Murray's in bed next to me still dressed in his suit and he had his cap on. I caught up with him years later in the reserves system here when he was CO of the 28th Battalion. I was looking

for a bed around the place and him being CO, he had a tent and a bed lined up, or stretcher at least. And he said, “Oh, and you may as well come in here and doss

04:30 down here.” I said, “Well, you owe me a bed, don’t you?” The interesting thing about that chap is that he finished up in the Army Kashmir Commission for some years and then he became the successful manager of the Albany Whaling Station for a long time. Finally died. They found him collapsed in the toilet at the bottom of York Street from a heart attack.

05:00 I returned to the unit a couple of days.

You said before that you were AWL?

Well, I just stayed in the pub in Alexandria. My company commander said to me at the time, “You may as well stay here for a while because most of the bulk stores are already loaded on trucks ready for transport to Greece.” And there was little, if anything, to do at the camp at Amiriya, just a few miles

05:30 out of Alexandria. Eventually I went back to the unit. I duly arrived and the first thing I asked for ‘was so and so here’, a captain. Now, in the army, senior officers, officers senior to you are not authorised to borrow money from juniors. This instance this chap had asked to borrow money from me and, like a mug, I said yes.

06:00 Admitted, he did offer to return it to me in the desert but, you know, all I had was a little money belt and nowhere to put it, nothing to spend it on. So I said, “Forget about it till later.” When I got back to the unit he had been transferred elsewhere so I was broke for a bit longer. He’s now deceased and I’m still waiting for my ten pounds sterling, I might add.

06:30 Twelve pound ten Australian.

That was a lot of money in those times.

And within a couple of days, we’re taken to the port, Alexandria, and put on board the Pentland, which was a Dutch passenger ship, and we were one of the last bulk or large units to ship, be shipped to mainland Greece. We’re

07:00 frantically, just prior to disembarking, we were told all we could do was take off what we could carry. So you packed the rest of your stuff and that included, in my instance, a brand new leather suitcase, [(UNCLEAR)] uniform and so on. And, in fact, we went ashore with football togs, not knowing anything. Even though the wheelers

07:30 and dealers of the system were largely planning a withdrawal before we’d ever left Alexandria. The ship was to go back to Alexandria with all our bulk kit on board and unload it and put it into the kit store. We left one baggage officer behind and I suppose he thought he was doing the right thing. He unloaded all the bags, got the time to do it and the labour.

Back at Alexandria?

No, in Athens, Piraeus.

08:00 He unloaded everything in Piraeus and the next thing it goes into a kit store, which got bombed and set on fire and the whole lot went for a row. But he probably thought he was doing the right thing. The unit itself went to the outskirts of Piraeus, Athens. They’re two cities a bit like Perth, Fremantle. We camped there the night.

08:30 **I’m not quite sure why you’re just in shorts and casual gear.**

No, we’re in winter battledress but we were intending to take and did take to mainland Greece, our football togs, thinking we were going to be there for some time, and we weren’t told anything. The result was we took that equipment or clothing, whereas the planning authorities

09:00 much senior to us, of course, were already planning the withdrawal and had we been told, we would have taken minimum clobber over with us. The following day we were put on board a train and taken north to Larissa, a fairly large town, you might say in central, northern, towards the north east.

Is that a day trip?

Yeah.

09:30 And I think we might have been travelling overnight as well. But we then detrained and got on trucks and were taken in a north- westerly direction to Trikkala.

How much information are you being given as to where you going or what you’ll be doing?

We, as platoon commanders, were told nothing and I think the CO might have even been scratching to know what

10:00 was what.

Was that unusual?

Well, obviously the more information everyone gets, the better and earlier the better. But then we were going to a foreign country and I suppose there might have been even a shortage of maps, etcetera. But we finished up joining the 17th Brigade. Our own brigade was elsewhere. There were two battalions of it and we as the third battalion

10:30 joined the 6th Div Victorians, the 17th Brigade, and we were then to dig in, in the Trikkala, Kalabaka area, near a river. And the orders…at that stage, our CO would have seen the Victorian brigadier and got his orders that there was to be no withdrawal.

What did you think about joining a whole lot of Victorians?

It doesn't mean anything. And they,

11:00 we didn't see them physically. Oh, you can get along with most people and, on the whole, Victorians are probably not bad sorts of people. They probably well think the same of us. We, after some time and when we dug in there, there was a great deal of effort put into it. Soldiers were walking, having dug their weapon pits, were walking

11:30 four and five hundred yards forward of our position, looking back to see that the camouflage on all the weapon pits was as near perfect as you could ever get it. They were, you know, really going to stick this fight out. Anyway, because of thrusts and collapses in other areas, we got the orders to withdraw. So we could only carry on our back

12:00 what was what, so I had a brand new sleeping bag and valise that was left on the side of the hill. We put, a blanket or a greatcoat were the best you could carry on the bag, and away you go and leave the rest behind you. So therefore I'd done my sleeping gear and I'd done my new leather case. We got across the major river by boat,

12:30 bridges having been blown.

What have your orders been at this point?

Well, nothing else but to withdraw to a rear area and take up another defensive position. Now, there would have been probably a great open plain with about ten miles stretched before we could get to the area of the next defensive position, in which case vehicles were often bumper to bumper.

13:00 And the German air force, with no opposition, had a great field day because all they had to do was to go up the column and drop bombs, turn around and come back and strafe with their machine guns. We had lookouts on every truck and the side rolls, canvas sides rolled up, so the trucks would frantically stop when there was an aircraft alarm and out we'd bale. And, in this particular instance, a

13:30 section of mine went to the left of the road, up a valley re-entrant. The rest of us went to the right down the valley. Those that went to the left, unfortunately, got hit by a direct bomb and I basically lost, you know, eight or nine men in one fell swoop. I know that the NCO was on the road directing his troops at the time. What

14:00 was left of him was a chunk of spine that you could have put in your hand and that would have been it. However, war is war so you've got to press on. The CO's driver, in his sedan car, was shot through the windscreen and killed. The CO was badly injured to the extent that he had a pinched nerve in his shoulder and could hardly move. With the assistance of his adjutant,

14:30 they pushed the vehicle just off the side of the road and let it go down the cliff and then they started walking and eventually they got picked up and so on and got a lift. You then get up into the area of what they called Brallos Pass. Now, apparently, centuries ago, the Greeks fought the Turks there and had a win. So that's when Blamey's

15:00 issued his Anzac Corps 'order of the day' telling us that the Greeks had done a wonderful job and we were here to better them, as it were, and stay. That gets spread out to all troops. When got in, climbed up the hills in a zigzag fashion, etcetera, and eventually got into Brallos area.

15:30 We did then have our final position reallocated and had to hoof it through the scrub some four or five mile back to a main road to dig in and to dig in there if we had the picks and shovels, which we didn't have. Now the last position that we held, and mind you we were there for, say, twelve days at this stage, and we hadn't fired a shot.

16:00 **Can you hear any of the enemy in the vicinity?**

Only aircraft. You could see in the distance, the artillery were firing very successfully at long range and disposing of tanks and dispersing of ground troops and making them disperse. The cable that we had for telephone communication couldn't reach the

16:30 then acting company commander. When the CO left, his 2IC went to command and our company commander went as 2IC of the battalion, so our 2IC became the new company commander or acting company commander, and probably I was the most experienced platoon commander. So

17:00 I had a reserve position and the telephone managed to get to me and I was able to shout the comments

to the OC who was some distance away.

Is this the most senior position that you've had up until now?

Yes. And what I'd done is for about a week you are a platoon commander and you get another job given to you as an acting 2IC. So to help out,

17:30 to make things smooth. Now, that's when Dave Brand was shot and badly injured in the arm or elbow and one or two others were shot. We gave them covering fire and they went over the hill and were able to be evacuated. We batted on there until about a quarter to nine that night,

18:00 that's 2045 hours if you want it militarily, by which time the Germans had been giving us a pasting and you could hear them and you could see them in the daylight hours but not so much at night. But they were probably exhausted too and didn't realise how close they might have been to victory. I understand from later comment

18:30 that the brigade commandeer thought that we would lose at least one company of men being overrun and that would be about 120. However, the Germans were obviously at the end of their tether too in physical exhaustion and they propped and stopped short of us. That allowed us to withdraw behind the hills, get into our vehicles and go off with

19:00 no lights initially and then shaded lights later on. And we went down past Athens into a westerly direction into a placed called Megara, a small fishing port, under the trees, we would have got there in the early hours of the morning, and everyone's dispersed anywhere under the olive trees. The trucks were disabled to the extent that tyres were

19:30 slashed, oil run out of the vehicles and the engines revved up and seized eventually, so that there was no great value of them, during the course of the day, although there were aircraft overhead trying to find us, but under the olive trees we were pretty right and we remained fairly motionless, as it were. The orders came

20:00 that at darkness we were to, by companies, having sorted ourselves out before, to move a few hundred metres down the road to the wharf. We were then ferried out to the cargo ship, Stirling Castle, and climbed up in that and find yourself a nice corner where you could probably get a kip [sleep] for a while. We would have sailed

20:30 about 3 am to try and get away from the mainland and the bombing as far as possible, however we weren't far enough. When we woke up, there were nurses on board, they having been evacuated by a separate arrangement to us and put on board the truck. And by coincidence our CO was there, he having been evacuated out of the hospital,

21:00 and a few other people, our doctor having gone to the hospital saying, "Anyone from the 2/11th Battalion that's fit and able enough to walk and get on board a truck, come with me." So he pulled a few out. On the way, probably around, you know, 7 am, German aircraft again came over, by which time we had lashed all our weapons on to the railings of vessels because

21:30 the cargo ship only had one Breda gun for ack-ack fire. Within the convoy of several vessels, there was a British ack-ack cruiser. By that I mean that it's a vessel that can fire a tremendous lot of ammunition into the air and keep aircraft well away. There were some bombs that landed

22:00 close to the water. I know the adjutant, Ainsley, who was standing close to me and the CO, and he got a bomb splinter in his upper arm and that allowed him to become a hospital patient and eventually evacuated from Crete to Egypt. Depending on what ship you were on,

22:30 the ship either went direct from mainland Greece to Alexandria or it went to Crete, unloaded, and went back again to the mainland on the next night to another beach to pick up more troops. We happened to be on one that went to Crete. Having arrived there, we disembarked, made our way into the countryside, away from the port, sorted ourselves out as best

23:00 we can and, at this stage, we have only got the weapons that we could carry. You were lucky if you had a blanket or a greatcoat. But after, say, twenty-four, forty-eight hours, we moved to a place called Georgioupolis, then a small fishing bay. And we were there to take up an

23:30 anti-parachute role. A short time later, when presumably the senior officers had done a better reconnaissance or a more thorough one, and decided that this wasn't that important, we were moved about probably twenty mile by foot to the east side of the town, as we pronounced it,

24:00 Retimo, but the Cretan or Greek word is Rethimnon. There we joined the 2/1st Battalion from Sydney, whose major role was on Hill A, overlooking an airstrip, and we were on Hill B helping. There's a battery of the 2/3rd Field Regiment, which came from here, and an augmented company of the 2/7th Field

24:30 Ambulance, which also came from here. We would have been in Crete perhaps from roughly Anzac Day, or late on Anzac Day or thereabouts of '41 until the 30th of May, so there's about five weeks. Now, boots were worn out and there was not the opportunity

25:00 to have them repaired. Replacement boots were those that were made in India and they're all inclined to be on the narrow side, so those that had to get replacement boots probably had pinched feet for a while. It was pretty hot as Cretan summers go and therefore any working that we had to do in digging weapon pits etcetera, was in

25:30 battledress and it was fairly hot going.

Where have you got the equipment to dig in from?

Well, shovels and picks in limited numbers were provided from the base at Crete. Remember that there were British troops been there with a number of British commanders for about six months before, and there were Cretan or Greek army personnel. There were a lot of Italians there as POWs.

26:00 **How did you find the Italian POWs?**

We never saw them. They were, we knew they were on the island but not near us. Tucker was pretty light on. In fact, we ate by platoons and you had a kerosene tin as your cooking utensil. And we would send

26:30 two or three soldiers out during the day to the villages for them to buy whatever they could, such as bread, eggs, honey - that's about the like you could get - and they'd come back and we would share that. That went on, the small, very small parties could walk down a wadi, the dry creek bed, and have a bit of a swim in the ocean. But

27:00 they had to be careful of reconnaissance aircraft and if they took off their uniforms they'd camouflage them probably in the creek bed and just walk across the sand and rock on the beaches, in the nuddy [nude]. The only sensible soldier in our company I saw at the time, instead of wearing underpants he'd worn a pair of khaki shorts. So he was able to peel off his rig and work in a

27:30 pair of khaki shorts. Now, one of my, I had taken then, in mainland Greece and Crete, when I should have been the mortar officer, and I forgot to tell you this early. One of the new officers for C Company had gone to Greece in the advance party. When we got there, he was in hospital. So I hightailed

28:00 back to my company commander and said, "If we are to get into action immediately, I won't know these soldiers of mine now. So how about they leave the chap who's already had the job for twelve months and let me come back and take over the platoon that's short of an officer?" That was apparently agreed to by the hierarchy, so I came back to C Company, basically from my arrival, well within twelve hours of my arrival in

28:30 Piraeus. So I'm back in C Company but with another platoon. One of the chaps, two brothers, Maynards from Kalgoorlie, Jim borrowed a fiver from me to go down to the local village with a couple of mates and just have a few red-neds [red wines]. Jim overstayed, as did his mates, came back

29:00 much worse the wear and when we were standing around that evening having tea out of our dixies, I said something to Jim about, you know, "We'll see you in the morning." And he threw his dixie of stew in my direction, missed me and hit the CSM in the forehead who got all the food over him. Jim then came towards me and I just pushed him and he went down a weapon pit.

29:30 I said, "Leave him there for the rest of the night." We felt that he had to be charged but, as he was a pretty good soldier, my company commander worked out, you know, a reasonably minor offence for him. So he was charged and probably fined, you know, two or three pound. I got chatted after by the acting CO for not pressing a more

30:00 important charge. Now, it's an interesting thing, I'd also lent, in England, a quartermaster a tenner and he's now deceased and that's still an unwritten debt. The first soldier out of our company that I met four years later in England was Jimmy Maynard and he came up and he said,

30:30 "There's your fiver." Just the difference of people. And he would have been brought up in Kalgoorlie as a bogger and he played a lot of two-up and so on where honesty plays a major part.

What's the difference between the Poms [English] and the Australians?

Now, I'm not with that.

I thought the guy who was still owing you…?

31:00 They were Australians. The two officers were both captains, all right, therefore both senior in rank to me. He happened to be in England in the reception group that met us as we came out of Germany.

OK.

However, I did act for him as a quartermaster for a short time and I looked after myself

31:30 and a lot of my friends. I believe he passed a comment, he told me to look after myself but not to give the whole bloody store away. Anyway, we were unaware of the top security business that was confined largely to the island commander, this General Freyberg. And

32:00 on the 20th of May, they landed at the west end of the island, over the Suda Bay area, Canea the town and Maleme, the airstrip, which was the more important. We'll call it an airfield rather than an airstrip. Those aircraft had to return to Athens and other island

32:30 areas, refuel, and they were doing a lot of their refuelling out of forty-four gallon drums with hand pumps, and reload with ammunition and also new troops. And they were to be dropped at Heraklion at the eastern end of the island and at Retimo and us, so our paratroopers didn't arrive until probably around the 4 pm mark of that day

33:00 and we, at this stage, were, you know, raring to go and I think they got a bloody big thumping. There were an awful lot of people killed. Aircraft, some were set on fire, the odd one shot down. The unfortunate and unlucky old parachutist might have had his chute ropes caught on the

33:30 tail of the aircraft and he'd be dragged behind the aircraft on his way back to Athens.

And what were you doing during this time?

We were basically fighting by platoons from weapon pits. But if a parachute…the area which we occupied was terraced. We had vineyards in the front of us and all we could do there was to put tripwire at, you know, below

34:00 knee height, and have weapon pits. That's the best of the defence we had.

What was this place called?

Retimo airstrip. There are occasions when parachutists will land on the lower portion of ground and you're up slightly higher. So first up, best dressed in this war.

34:30 So, what you've got to do is to be prepared to jump out of your weapon pit to get close to the chap down on the lower level and knock him off before he knocks you off, and that did happen. We had one parachutist that landed between, in our rear and close to the company headquarters and there were two of us firing, myself in one direction and the other chap

35:00 from the company headquarters, and eventually this parachutist put out a hanky [handkerchief – white flag] and we stopped firing and they went out and brought him in. When his boot came off, his foot was actually basically shot away from his leg. But he was man enough, as it were, to walk say twenty or thirty yards on that and not complain. I recall giving him a cigarette, etcetera.

35:30 Now, that went on for quite, you know, until the early part of the evening. We did a clearance patrol in front of us through the vineyards. We batted on for the next several days until we were forced to move in a westerly direction towards the town of Retimo where German troops had landed towards the town

36:00 unimpeded and they were able to set themselves up.

How easy is it for you to get information about the various positions where the Germans have landed?

Well, we could see that they'd…we'd already seen on the day of landing that where had dropped down there. With their radios, etcetera, they had called up additional support, so they might get an odd parachute dropping food. And they'd put down, say,

36:30 three parachutes in one that might drop a motorbike or a light anti-tank gun. We were a bit confused initially when they dropped their canisters, which are metal containers about this long and about that wide, that square, and they might have medical supplies in, they might have food or they might have, say, a mortar barrel or mortar ammunition. Now, they knew all these different coloured chutes would be dropping certain things other than individuals.

37:00 But they also had field signals and each soldier in his hip, well, not his hip, down the side of his pants, he had a little card as a reminder, a ready reckoner, as it were. Now, we picked up these and when we were moving towards the Retimo town and we had a couple of, say, a couple of mile to go, we were able to gather some parachutes and if you put them out in an arrow formation that inferred that there

37:30 was enemy ahead a thousand metres. When you put an arm on it, that increased the distance and little arms across the main stem increased the distance by a hundred metres. So put these out to find that Germany aircraft would see them and they went ahead and bombed their own troops, which pleased us

38:00 no end. Eventually on the fourth day when we were very close to the church, chapel and spire that the Germans had occupied, and, of course, they were well-equipped with sniper rifles and if they get into the spire of a church high up and they've got telescopic sights, they're pretty accurate.

38:30 Result was that we had one platoon pretty close to the enemy and the aircraft could not strike them but they could strike the rear two platoons, one of which was mine, and the mortar platoon and the company headquarters. So basically from about lunchtime until the evening these aircraft, being replaced from the

39:00 mainland at regular intervals, were just coming down firing their weapons ad lib. And, as they came in

from the edge of the hills, so they'd come closer to the road and then in turn down towards the ocean. It's a bit like, say, the freeway as an example and they started off belting the houses along the east side of the freeway and then worked down towards the water's edge, as a classic example.

39:30 Now, they were that low that you could see quite clearly the goggles on the pilots' faces. No opposition, so all they've got to do is go. Well, eventually our turn had to come and I unfortunately got belted in four places, right ankle and left foot, left hand and right upper arm.

Is this strafing?

40:00 From the strafing. This is the luck of the game. I was lying like that and the bullets went there and missed my head. The mortar officer was lying on his back with his back on the soles of my boots. He had his hands over his stomach, over field glasses and the rounds that, after my feet, hit his hands

40:30 and were deflected by the field glasses and didn't touch his body. He lost two fingers on his left hand and two on his right. Eventually, he was getting around the dressing station with two great big armbands like this. Now, people didn't mind helping feed him and they wouldn't mind helping him to spend a penny. But when his bowels

41:00 wanted some attention there weren't many volunteers for it. Poor bugger. And that was the thing, you had to make your own way to the back. It would be the best part of two kilometres.

Have you been evacuated?

No. You've got to find, the company has to remain where it is, but the wounded have got to get back. Now,

41:30 there were no medical orderlies with trolleys or stretchers or anything like that sufficient, though any medical orderly left would have been better to stay with the troops. So if you've had your field dressing put on your hand or arm or leg, you'll probably need to crawl anything from say thirty to forty metres to get low down out of the, hopefully,

42:00 the sight of the enemy. And then you could stand up.

Tape 6

00:32 You're hit that quickly that you wouldn't know. I think where you would get most pain is if you got stomach wounds. For some unknown reason, I think there was only one chap with us with a stomach wound. The soldiers managed to capture a donkey and put him on that and with someone holding him on, led him back the two ks [kilometres] or thereabouts

01:00 to the rear company headquarters. The rest of us that could walk would either hobble or walk as best you can. I can remember Shanahan, who was a captain, 2IC of B Company, was halfway along in a little hut and he'd found a keg of red wine and as I went past him he was, "Hey, come in here, Kenny, you can have a wine." I remember saying to him,

01:30 "I don't drink, Pat" and went on. I got back to the rear company headquarters. We had something to eat but by an hour or so later you've got cold, you go to stand up and you're probably going to fall over. So someone grabs you and the unit headquarters sent down a carrier on which they put several stretchers and we got carted up to the battalion headquarters

02:00 in the rear, alongside of which was the RAP [Regimental Aid Post]. The doctor has a look at you. He was Queensland doctor, Jim Ryan, known by all the troops as Killer Ryan but a good sort of a chap.

Why was he called Killer?

I don't know. He got a nickname. To be sure that there's nothing in here where the bullet came in and out there, he just

02:30 gets a stainless steel rod, about an eighth of an inch diameter and about, you know, ten inches long and just jams it straight through to check that there's nothing still in there and he dresses you up as best he can and then they send you on a bit further to the rear, to the 2/7th Field Ambulance, the advanced dressing station. Now there,

03:00 we had German doctors, a lot of German medical equipment, and if it wasn't for that we would have been pretty well stuffed. We had three Australian doctors, all from Perth, Palandri as their OC and Gallash and Max Mayrhofer.

Why did you have German equipment and doctors?

Wall, when parachutes, medical equipment drop down and we uncovered

03:30 it and found it was medical equipment, we obviously sent it on to our RAP. And, in turn, it might get sent

on to the ADS [Advanced Dressing Station] where there are more patients, because they're taking patients from the whole area. Now, there are no beds, of course, you're sleeping on mother earth. You've probably got a parachute above you or a tent fly and there's a German parachutist lying alongside me for a week.

04:00 He got the same food, he got the same treatment that I got. Now, as for operations, Max Mayrhofer as the surgeon, I recall amputating a German soldier's leg. And all he's got is an old army FS [Field Service] table to work on. And when the Germans successfully took over the dressing station,

04:30 a German colonel of their medical corps had a look at the amputation and congratulated Mayrhofer on the job that he'd done. Pretty rough circumstances under the open air, doing all the things that they did. There wasn't a great deal that they could do. Drugs were fairly scarce. For instance, this ankle, which I think four bullets had

05:00 chopped into it and they just cut my boot off so I finished up with only one boot. It really needed a jelly-type substance on the bandages that they put, but they didn't have it. So, when I got to the dressing station, the ADS, and they wanted to check it out and attend to it as best they could, they got a couple of medical orderlies to hang on to each

05:30 arm, one on the other leg and the doctor was working on this leg, and he knew that as he pulled off the bandages, which were all blood soaked and attached to your leg. He said, "Now call me all the bastards under the sun." as he did it. So you did. But that's all over in a few minutes and they dressed you up and we were there then probably for another six days.

06:00 When the Germans had successfully taken the western end of the island and to relieve their troops at Retimo, come in an easterly direction and then would have gone on to Heraklion further east. They were very smart in evacuating their medical personnel by plane. Straight down to the airstrip and off. We were moved into

06:30 the local school for a while and whilst we were there, one of their soldiers, in the lunch hour when few sentries were around, came along and knocked a watch off one of our patients.

Did that cause a bit of a stir?

No, there's not much you can do about it. Not that we weren't guilty of the same in the Libyan campaign.

07:00 There were quite a lot of Italians would have lost watches along the way. A German officer came in after lunch on a general inspection. One of our officers spoke to him, he called the soldier in and the habit with Germans was they used to drop their contraband down their jackboots. And it was still in the jackboot so he had to produce it, hand it back to

07:30 the soldier with an apology from the officer, because he would have at least spoken English whereas the soldier didn't. I don't know what happened to the soldier but he probably got charged and, or roasted. We were told it was a disgrace, you know, to the German forces, etcetera, and the chap got his watch back. After a few days, say a week, we are

08:00 eventually taken back to the airstrip and well treated by the Germans. We had to be taken from their trucks across some double-apron barbed wire to where the aircraft were. And I was physically lifted as a lying body across the wire from two soldiers to another two and put in these troop-carrying aircraft and we were taken back to Athens.

08:30 **What actually takes place when you become a POW?**

First of all, you don't believe you're going to be caught. In fact, the force commander, who was then a lieutenant colonel but finished up a major general, in his memoirs, he writes, never in his born days did he ever think he would become a POW. The Germans arrived. There were, for instance, our unit, as many as could, took off into

09:00 the hills. A lot of them got so far and were battling for food and clothing and it got pretty cold in the mountains and would get captured by Germans as well because they had patrols all around the island at that stage. 52 of our unit got off Crete out of about 720 or 30.

09:30 The rest were either wounded, killed or whatever. We finished up well in excess of 500 POWs.

When did you realise that you were a POW?

Well, on the 30th of May, when the remaining forces had quite and we didn't, we only heard the story later from some of our people, German officers and troops appeared in the

10:00 dressing station. "Oh, Christ, we have lost the war."

What happened?

They just walked in and took over the place, sorted out their own troops and then, when that problem was solved, then looked after us by closing the dressing station down over, say, twenty-four, forty-eight hours and put us into the local school.

And what's going through your mind?

Well, your mind's a blank.

10:30 **You don't fear for your life?**

You don't believe it's going to happen to you but it has. The future you don't know what it will be like. You probably believe that the German parachutists were pretty good. You'd believe that the rest of their serving personnel would treat you in the same way. And I think it fair comment to say that the majority of us

11:00 had treated Italians and Germans that we'd captured ourselves, because we had a number of German POW paratroopers, like human beings. You know that you can't give them a great deal because you haven't got it anyway. They got similar tucker to us, short as it was, and they complained about the shortage of tucker and our commander said, "Well, that's what my troops are getting. I haven't got any more to give you."

11:30 **How did you actually weigh these things up?**

Just say, "Oh well, got to take every day as it comes from now on and see how the future unfolds." So we went back to Athens and taken by ambulance in to the centre of the town to what is now known as the polytechnic college or school, a university or whatever.

12:00 And there we were left under the care of the 2/5th Australian Hospital staff who'd been left behind and they looked after us. Limited in medical facilities that they had available. You were pretty hungry all the time. There wasn't a great deal you could do. I think if you'd been better fed and a few more drugs and, say, tablets

12:30 and ointments, you might have been cured a lot quicker than normal. However, that wasn't to be. We were there for probably five to six weeks and the Germans shut down that place and shifted us out to Kokenia, a suburb of Piraeus, and we were put into a reformatory, a rectangular, say, three or four storey

13:00 building. And that was it. They put the officers up in the rear, top wards. And the little interesting thing there that filled in, some old chap from the NAAFI had come into the hospital with a telescope. Now, don't ask me why but he did. So we used to get up on the roof with the telescope and on Wednesdays and Saturdays, all the boys would be taking all their girls off

13:30 parking in broad daylight but thinking they were home and hosed in a wadi, while we're up there with a telescope, and whoever was on the telescope had to give a running commentary and that included one of the majors from the medical ward too. He used to take his turn, etcetera, and it provided a bit of amusement there. That went on for some time and then they

14:00 moved, a chap, Roy Farren, a Brit, second-lieutenant, passed a comment to me about escaping and I asked him what he had. Under the Geneva Convention, a private soldier, including a lance corporal, will work for the detaining power. An NCO or warrant officer may work if he choses to and an officer won't work. Also an officer

14:30 is given, according to rank, so much of the local currency. We were given camp, German, what they called 'lager marks' [camp money], not worth a bumper out in the normal circumstances out in the street, from which in Athens we could buy figs. I bought a pair of sandshoes and a razor so I could have a shave and I was able to acquire

15:00 a few clothes. I bought a civilian suit. But I had probably, you know, twenty or thirty soldiers out of the same company as I in hospital. So when you got paid and they had nothing, there was a tendency to give them a lot, a fair share of your money. So you didn't finish up with 78 Marks yourself, you probably finished up with 20, 25.

15:30 Farren said to me, "What about escaping?" I said to him, "How much have you got?" He had a little white pillow slip with a couple of chunks of dry bread, a couple of packets of figs and I think he said he had 2½ pounds sterling, cash. I said, "Well, that's not enough to get you anywhere." I basically had nothing. Anyway, in the ward of patients,

16:00 of officers, there was a Commander Beal, who was the commander flying off HMS Illustrious, but they had a shore job in Crete when the Illustrious was out of action, and there was a British Army regular major from the engineers of the name of Pester. I spoke to both of them and said, "What do you think?" And Beal was the one that sealed it.

16:30 He said, "Now, Johnson, how many lieutenants are there in the army?" I said, "Oh, there'd be millions of them." He said, "You get outside of this place and you're looking for medical attention, you might not be able to get any. You get any dirt or infection in your leg, the next thing is you've lost a foot or a leg." He said, "There are that many lieutenants in the army, my advice to you is to stay where you are

17:00 and to forget it." And I accept that as probably very sound advice. Farren used to sit out the front of the hospital in tan boots, white socks, khaki shorts and a khaki shirt and his white pillow slip. Eventually a guard on the front was pulled in for some unknown reason. Farren walked, say fifteen yards, to the

wire,

17:30 crawled underneath it and then had about three to four hundred yards of open wadi country to walk to the nearest houses, and did successfully. He wrote to a New Zealander that he was friendly with and said that it was just too easy. But if you read his book called Winged Dagger, it wasn't quite that easy as he pictured to us in a letter to Germany.

18:00 The same chap finished up back in the UK [United Kingdom] during the war and he was on raiding missions into France with a harem-scarem around the countryside, shooting up the Germans and so on. But, you know, it's a pretty hairy game. When he'd get back to England, he'd get on the grog for a while. I presume drowning his sorrows. I then read

18:30 about him that when the British were fighting the Jews in Palestine, they needed a similar operator on their side to counteract the Arabs or the, that's right, the Arabs. Farren was imported from the UK and dressed as a civilian. They strung a Jew up for some unknown reason. Farren unfortunately dropped his felt hat with his name inside it at the

19:00 scene. The Jews, the Arabs picked it up and took it to the Jerusalem CIB [Criminal Investigation Bureau], who handed the hat back eventually with the name obliterated and said, "Well, we don't know who belongs to it." Farren took off and went to either Lebanon or Syria. A senior officer of the Palestine police and from his unit went and brought him back again, coerced him to come back. There was a court

19:30 martial. He was obviously found not guilty and flown out of Palestine. Now, in retribution, the Arabs caught up with him eventually. Sorry, not the Arabs, the Jews. His brother unfortunately opened a bomb parcel and was killed. The parcel finished up with the brother instead of Roy Farren. I then heard

20:00 of him as a charter operator of an air service in East Africa and finally he was a Crown law officer in one of the Canadian provinces, so he had a pretty chequered career. So that's Farren. I missed out on that opportunity. It was bad luck. I'm quite convinced now that if you are to go anywhere, it's got to be early on or never at all, because once you get to Germany

20:30 the problems are manifold and you would have more tin than would be in a tin mine to be able to get out.

Did you mention that he actually wrote back to you in Germany?

He wrote to a New Zealander officer that was friendly with him and he said, when he'd got back to Alexandria he'd written to him, or from England, and said, "I'm here. It was just too easy."

21:00 But, I think, reading his book, it was altogether different. So, we then moved out of the Kokenia hospital to some Greek barracks nearby. This Commander Beal was there. I had two watches at this stage. One from a soldier of mine that was killed. Beal had lost his and he was always asking the time so I gave him the watch and told him the circumstances

21:30 how I acquired. I said, "If we're both alive at the end of the war, I'd like to take it back to his family." I wouldn't have been home here five minutes when I had a letter from the UK, from Commander Beal, please confirm your address so he could send the watch out, which he did do. And we took it up to the family in the hills on some Sunday and that was the only thing that that family ever recovered from their son.

22:00 We were in this Greek army barracks, which were pretty chatty [rough, dilapidated]. All their toilets are on squat-hole arrangements and rats are running down out of the holes. But after about a week or two, they took us down to the port at Piraeus and we were shunted on board a small cargo ship of, say, two or three thousand tons - I can't recall whether it was Greek or Italian

22:30 owned - and we went up the coast towards, to eventually disembark at Salonika, a journey of a few days. We had on board with us, besides Commander Beal, we had a lieutenant commander off the Glasgow, a British cruiser, two Royal Marine officers and I think there was a lieut of RNVR [Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve]. And as we went up the coast

23:00 you're very close to an island. In fact, you've almost got to stop when you want to turn, to allow to turn the boat almost on a stationary basis to get round the gap. And they thought, "Well, we might have casualties, but we could capture this ship" until they worked out when we approached, there were minefields there, and they said, "Right. Well, if there are minefields here," their training taught them that there were minefields at the other end and we wouldn't know them and therefore you can put that idea

23:30 out of your head. We duly arrived at Salonika, hoofed it [walked] from the wharf to the camp, met up with a lot of our soldiers. In fact, there was one of our corporals, Jim Young, who was going to work down the main street, bare feet and underpants. That's all he owned. I'd acquired quite a lot at this stage and we were due to go on the train to Germany the next day, so I thought, "Oh, well, I'm bound to get, there'll be plenty in Germany."

24:00 So I left the majority of things that I had behind with these people.

What had happened to their uniforms?

Well, if they were medically handled, they probably would have had to cut, quite often the doctors were quite ruthless, they just cut their pants off or they cut their shirt off and throw it away. That's all very well if you can get a replacement.

24:30 **Why weren't their clothes replaced before they were put to work?**

Well, the Germans weren't giving them anything. There is a regulation in the Geneva Convention that you should be clothed and equipped by the detaining power. But if you didn't have any boots, they probably gave you clogs to

25:00 work in and clogs are pretty bloody hard for Australians to work in, in fields etcetera, and factories. You would be given perhaps a Yugoslav or Russian greatcoat. None of their own stuff. Fortunately we were on our way within twenty-four hours. Salonika was a camp full of bugs. People that had been there for weeks were pretty

25:30 light on. A few that had tried to escape and got caught, the Germans would have a tendency to leave them on the wire for twenty-four hours for all to view as a deterrent to others. A few made successful escapes out of that camp. We went onto the station and the Germans are notorious counters and you've got to be in fives. Now,

26:00 a German up the train a few carriages, they put forty to a cattle truck, said he was one short. So one of our soldiers who had an eye removed and still bandaged up, just took off and walked down to make up the numbers as he thought. When he got there though they found there was a miscount and they sent him back and when he came back, because he'd stepped out of line,

26:30 the NCO that was with us, regardless of the injury the chap had, ploughs into him with the butt of a rifle into the small of the back, you know, full blooded jabs like that and there's nothing he can do about it. Fortunately, there were only twenty-five officers in this party. The bulk of them had all gone to Germany and it's really only hospital patients and the lesser number of them. There were

27:00 fifteen combatant officers and nine doctors and one padre. One of the doctors, a bit, could speak German. We were in the last truck and with only twenty-five of us compared to forty, we had a reasonable amount of space. Now, the first night I shivered in my sandshoes and shorts and a shirt.

27:30 There was a padre from New Zealand who happened to have two sets of battledress. He had some barathea pants and a battledress pants and jacket, and he said to me in the morning, "Where's your battledress?" And I said, "Well, I don't own one." So there and then, gentleman that he was, he took of his barathea pants, gave them to me and put on his battledress. I was happy to take his battledress but

28:00 he insisted that I had that and it was a pretty good gesture. The openings on the cattle trucks are about this long, say, two foot six by about a foot with barbed wires on them. And they don't stop the train every five minutes for your toilet arrangements. So you share so many loaves of bread and some tins of swine flesh, about the size of a tin of pears

28:30 or pineapple. So you open that up and that would have to be your pee tin. And then you got up and empty and squeeze it through the bar and tip it out. The soldiers in the guard, there were a number of them up the middle of the train in a cattle truck with straw, and then there was a coach with the others, and being young people like us, they were looking out at the Yugoslav countryside. But all of a sudden

29:00 they'd get a shower of urine, complained bitterly. So the next thing is, the train stops, their senior NCO comes in, opens our truck up, jumps on board with his pistol out, "You English dogs" and "Swine hounds" etcetera. We were the worst in the world. The doctor implored him to go and get a German officer, which he did do. They talked to each other in the German language,

29:30 the German saw that the exercise would be repeated without option. So he moved us up into the centre of the train, in the truck where the straw was, that was a bit softer on our hips, and shifted the Germans into our truck, so that sorted that out. Now, they stopped once on Zagreb station, it was either Belgrade or Zagreb, and the local Red Cross gave us

30:00 some soup. Other than that, there were two other stops in the seven, eight day journey. Most people fortunately were constipated but they would stop the train in the countryside and let out, say, one or two trucks at a time and they'd surround you with guards and people would have to try and get rid of their toilet problems if they could, but if they were constipated it was too bloody

30:30 bad.

Just in an open circle?

Just open bush and that's it. So if you had a camera you'd have picked up about forty backsides if that'd thrill you. We duly arrived at the Stalag 8B, which is in Lamsdorf and it's over towards the Czechoslovakian, Polish, German border. There were thousands of British troops there and a large number of Australians, and

31:00 there were also thousands out on work parties but attached to the headquarters of this stalag. By sheer

luck, the British government had sent to this camp, there were so many soldiers there, bulk crates of battledress, boots, winter shirts, winter singlets and long johns and socks. So in no time

31:30 I got myself completely re-equipped and I was given a blanket. That's right, don't think I got a greatcoat but at least I got a blanket. And there was a system of bartering. These camps are run on rackets and you can bet your bottom dollar that the organisers of the rackets are the warrant officers. Now, you're not supposed to, but you can get underneath the wire in the compounds and go from

32:00 A to B. I was the only one out of our party that was prepared to do the bartering, so I get my rake off, and we're dealing in cigarettes and you find people, some guy wouldn't smoke any cigarettes so he's helping a mate, he'd get rid of the lot. So I used to crawl under the wire and get off and do the bartering, come back and get my ten per cent or whatever and live a little better. After the six weeks, we

32:30 fifteen combatant officers were moved to what they called an Oflag [Offizierlager – POW camp for officers], stalag being a diggers' camp. Now, before I left, I had already met our padre who, to my knowledge, had got himself on an Italian hospital ship up from Piraeus to Salonika, and the journey on a hospital train from Salonika

33:00 into Stalag 8B to look after the sick and wounded soldiers. I might have thought that the bunk could have been better used by a soldier that was crook.

You were a bit sceptical, were you?

Yeah. He came up to me before we left and he said, "Now, Johnny," as he called me, "You're pretty well in here. How about introducing me?" So I took the opportunity of saying,

33:30 "Padre, it cost me plenty to buy into this deal. It's up to you to fight your way in" and left him. Now, when I went to this Oflag, we met up with many people that had been captured in 1940 from France, Belgium and Norway, and we were dumped into a hut where there was a spare bed. It was all British armoured corps officers

34:00 and they had one or two of their mates in the boob [gaol], having been caught escaping. One of the two, I think, had walked into Switzerland. With all the bends in the countryside, he'd walked into Switzerland, walked out of it, was a bit unlucky. We agreed, and they helped us move and gave us a bit of clothing, etcetera, to another unit. We were formed into five battalions in that camp, largely army but there was one

34:30 battalion of RAF [Royal Air Force], RAAF [Royal Australian Air Force], Rhodesians, Canadians and so on, whoever got shot down, naval officers and Royal Marine officers.

And how did you all mingle?

Pretty good. Yeah, pretty good. It all worked out pretty well. Our CO was a Sherwood Forrester. Not dynamic.

35:00 Got caught in his sleeping bag, I was told, in Norway but, you know, just unfortunate. I suppose the Germans arrived a bit early in the morning and he was still in his sleeping bag. Now, he used to come out, we're in, say, blocks of 400 in hollow [square] for morning counting. And he'd say, "Stop snowballing there, gentlemen." And he'd

35:30 turn his back to speak to a group over there, someone would be throwing a snowball from the opposite side. But there was another chap, commander of 3 Battalion, you would not have taken one liberty with that guy. When you were called to attention, you bloody well came to attention and you never answered back. You stood there like a ramrod. He really ran a, you know, a straight ship.

36:00 **What set him apart from the others?**

Well, he had the dynamite to lead and the ability to get people on side.

What is that dynamite?

You just learn how to handle people and he, obviously as a professional soldier, he had a vast experience. You know, probably half of those chaps would have had twenty-five years in the regular army.

36:30 **So it wasn't fear, it was respect?**

It was respect. You can easy pick out, you know, someone that's trying to win the argument, as it were, with fear, and you don't take a great deal. Now, I might have lost the track a little bit. But we did a train journey to the Oflag and were appropriately billeted

37:00 and I met up with my fellow colleagues for the first time. There were about five British camps. There was Spangenberg Upper and Lower, Biberach, Eichstatt and one other, and the large number of Australian troops on Crete had been sent to Lubeck. They were all brought in, in a period of time

37:30 to the one camp at Warburg, which is perhaps a rural area, not that far from the Ruhr. So we'd really

gone right across Germany and that's where we joined up. I was with one other officer out of our unit and we were dumped into this hut. Unfortunately, they decided that, as we were the closest to a perimeter fence, we'd dig a tunnel, and the

38:00 bloody floor shaft was right underneath our bed, double bed. So you couldn't get onto your bed and have a kip during the day at all, because the tunnel work was going on. Now, there was a professional engineer in charge of this project. And I know I still had a bandage on my ankle but you're still getting down. Every day, before we started to dig, we just

38:30 go down the shaft, we're standing in water because it was natural seepage. Well, I'm not an engineer but I deduced the fact that if that was the case, there'd be water all the way to the perimeter, another fifty yards away. I couldn't see the bloody sense in it. So I got a few mates out of the hut and say, "You know, I'm going to withdraw my labour. There's no point in it. How are you going to dig in, you might say, mud

39:00 and water?" We were reported to our battalion commander and paraded to him and I stated my case and presumably he believed me, because that was the end of it. The tunnel closed down and that was it, finished. Now that'd be an isolated incident. There was a successful escape from there. One of the chaps who was in the other half of the hut, there were about fifty on each side,

39:30 was a Stuart Walker who was a lecturer in German at a London University, had lived in Germany, in the Munich area, learning the dialects. Bloody good officer. If you ever wanted to put a dollar on a soldier that would make a successful escape, it would have to be 'Alfonse' Walker, as he was called. He would get out and get into

40:00 a picture theatre near Munich to fill in an hour or two for a train, with forged documents, etcetera. He's been in a train sitting alongside an SS [Schutzstaffel] officer, talking in German, naturally, about the English luftgangsters and the swines that they are, and so on. But, sooner or later, you've only got to make one error and you're lumbered. Or

40:30 maybe some security on a station looks at your pass and there's some minor error in it and he picks it up so you get lead into the room, locked in there. They call the SS people along and you're lumbered. Now, Stuart Walker would have been out about three or four times and got caught every time and yet, if you were asking me who I'd put a dollar on, it would have to be him. Another chap,

41:00 **Any risk that he'd be shot?**

Well, it's possible, yeah. They'd come back to camp eventually. Hopefully, the SS would get rid of them to the Wehrmacht. There was no love lost between the SS and the Wehrmacht. And we would prefer, actually, to get back to the Wehrmacht at the earliest opportunity. You would get checked by the commandant, charged by him,

41:30 two weeks, maybe three weeks in the cooler, solitary confinement. You get your food taken into you and, if you had the right sort of guard at the right time, he'd probably allow you to get a few cigarettes in and an odd book, etcetera, to fill in the day, and sometimes, people when they get seven or ten days in the cooler, reckoned it was a peaceful existence. They liked it because most of the huts were, you know,

42:00 fifty to seventy people on each

Tape 7

00:39 **Getting rid of your padre problem.**

To get rid of my padre problem, one of the British Army orderlies in this camp eventually finished up elsewhere when we got moved down towards Munich and they got decreased, the number of orderlies. He was a BEF [British Expeditionary Force] chap from Glasgow, pretty

01:00 strong, pretty solid, but a pretty good sort of a citizen. I met him in the last week or two of the war in Moosburg camp near Munich and he came up and he said, "You had a bum sort of a padre." So I checked him out that he had the right man. He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, why do you say that?" And he said, "Well, I finished up being his batman." And he said, "He threatened…" and this guy would have been then about,

01:30 you know, twenty four or five, "because I didn't sweep under his bed on one occasion" - you had those brooms of, you know, bush stuff, that unless you spread water everywhere over the floor, there's just clouds of dust - "because I hadn't swept under his bed, he threatened to put me across his knee and spank my bottom." Now, I ask you, how could an adult male, who would of

02:00 then have to be forty-five to fifty if he was a day, come up with that. Now, the interesting thing as a corroborate to that, the Roman Catholic padre, Gerry O'Callaghan from East Fremantle, used to come to our reunions regularly, always had a flask of whisky on his hip and say, "You'd better have one on the church." He always, and I was in the post-war reserve force, he always used to ask me about the Catholic padre and I said

02:30 to him one year, “Why are you always checking me on that?” He said, “I am the unofficial representative of the archbishop and it’s my job to find out if the padres we provide you are any good.” And I said, “Well, in this instance, I can tell you the answer’s no. He’d be better off looking after all the old dears with an afternoon cup of tea.” That guy was removed from his posting and sent elsewhere forthwith. Now

03:00 that’s just the difference of people seem to handle it. And I think it’s fair to say that the large majority of people will say that the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholic Church would have produced better people for the services than anyone else. Our guy was a representative of the Anglican Church and I thought a pretty poor

03:30 example. However, we got rid of him.

What sort of representation did the Salvation Army have?

Well, there’s usually a Salvation Army rep within the brigade and he’s organising brews and biscuits etcetera for the troops, particularly they had going in New Guinea. However, in our instance, after eleven months there was one major successful escape.

04:00 Electrical engineers were able to fuse the lighting system of the whole camp. They’d previously made ladders that had a platform on it and, as you know, the perimeter of a POW camp had two upright fences in the centre, there’s a lot of tangle wire and there’s a tripwire on your side. And when the power was fused, out came these homemade ladders, several of them, plonked on the ground

04:30 and everyone had their possie [position] and they ran up the ladder, ran across and jumped down. And to my knowledge there was probably around the 50 to 60 did that successfully. I think there were two only made successful escapes.

There’s two fences, so you’d have to run up two ladders?

No, your ladder goes up and then it’s got a platform that drops down and

05:00 hinges on the far wire. So you had to, that distance had to be estimated to ensure that your flat, when it dropped down, would hit the far wire. That was a pretty successful arrangement.

Where you there when it happened?

Well, it was very close to the wire, the wire that they used was very close to our hut. In fact, the first we knew about it was that there was lots of firing because the Germans in the sentry boxes

05:30 were firing ad lib at anything. We all hit the deck in a hurry. And in the morning we saw the ladders there and numerous German photographers taking snaps of it, etcetera. Something that was an innovation to them, no doubt.

And you got no word of the fact that this was going to be happening?

Didn’t know a thing. But when you are in different units, or in different blocks, if

06:00 you’re not physically digging, you are one of a party of stooges. You’re either getting rid of spoil by carrying it in straps over your shoulder and two legs of pants sewn up at the bottom and you’re walking down the other end of the camp and getting rid of it underneath other huts or trampling it in. You could be watching through a window for one or two hours on the movement of German

06:30 guards. You could be making rope out of string from Red Cross parcels to pull the things. Numerous. And then there’d be other people making maps, enlargements and so on. Compasses and so on. The first I heard of compass is that one of the chaps from the BEF wrote to his father and said, “I want you to send me such and such a razor.” The father had been in the services and twigged why

07:00 and he had to make a special trip to London and get this. They were magnetised. Now, when he gets this razor, he gets a couple of needles and he strokes it and strokes it up and down and transfers the magnetism. It’s pretty crude, but nevertheless, if you’ve got a spindle and these two needles, you can get a north point and at least you’ve got that and if you can read the stars, that’s also helpful. Anyway,

07:30 with this camp, we had a radio brought in by doctors from France in numerous pieces shared amongst people, remembering that two thousand people have got to be checked out. Half the guards were, you know, yokels and fairly elderly, didn’t have a great deal of interest, so they could accept any story. And then there’s always experts

08:00 amongst three thousand to be able to put it together again. So we were getting the news read to us in the evening, on most evenings, not all, depending on the circumstances of guards. You just got a news brief. That’s when we learnt about British propaganda.

What did you learn about British propaganda?

Well, they can tell a lot of lies too, same as the Germans. A couple

08:30 of weeks before you leave that camp, you've got to get your contraband dismantled and they used to put a lot of it into medicine balls. We would get some medicine balls checked out and put into a store. And one of our chaps there was known as Searg. I don't know who he was. I know he was a Brit and he had a bundle of keys and he

09:00 could get in and out of anything. And come night time they'd get into the room which was said to be secure and which had already examined the equipment, pull that out, put in the contraband, as it were, medicine balls etcetera, and get the same ones that they'd taken out rechecked the next day. So with a bit of luck you would get your

09:30 stuff in and out of camps. It might mean that you don't have the radio for two or three weeks. But so what. For instance, when D-Day happened, that news was withheld from us purposefully till German newspapers, that we could buy limited quantities of, had it in the paper that came into the camp. So you could then tell everyone officially what was what.

When you say the information was withheld from you, what do you mean?

10:00 Well, they'd picked it up on the news about D-Day but didn't tell us because someone could inadvertently be talking to a German NCO and officer in which they'd automatically twig, "Oh, they must have a radio in the camp." So then there'd be a great search. However, after eleven months we went by rail down

10:30 towards the Munich area.

Why are you moving at this point?

I don't know. Ask the Germans that.

So there's no particular reason.

Don't know why we left there, but we were sent down of Eichstatt, which is a town nearing Ingolstadt. Ingolstadt's the major town, Eichstatt the small one. It's a very strong Catholic church

11:00 town. In fact, there's a Catholic university there now. And the camp that we occupied and which had been built in brick largely, two storey, was used by the German army as a barracks and after our time it was used for the wandering, migrant population of Europe, and then it became the headquarters of the Bavarian

11:30 police as a training camp. Now, we did about two and a half years in that camp. The most successful escape out of that camp happened to come from Block 2 in which I lived. I teamed up with some Brits from the first camp and thought, "Well, I can walk to the other end of the camp whenever

12:00 I want to and meet my fellow Australians, but I'm quite happy to live with these chaps. They're all good sorts," etcetera, etcetera. So one did. Fortunately my friend, fellow platoon commander had, before I'd met up with him again, he'd written to who he thought was the secretary of Good Durant or DNW Murray in London,

12:30 which was the major holding of the big warehouse group in Good Durant Murray, not in existence now. And this chap was the chairman of directors and he was also a first war man who had been in the Middle East and knew Australians, and he got the staff to kick in and then they sent us cigarettes and other odds and ends that we needed. And at the end of the war we

13:00 went to see him and stayed with him for a while.

It sounds with your experience as POWs with the Germans, it doesn't sound too oppressive.

Well, if you're a soldier and you've got to work, come what may the weather, and you're in the coal mines, it's pretty rugged, and a lot of those soldiers were over towards Poland, and in the winter of 1944, so

13:30 that the Russians didn't release them, Hitler decreed that they all move westward and they had three months on the road through the middle of winter through the snow and quite often at night, when it would be dark at four o'clock, they just had to drop, doss down in the snow.

I'm aware that there were a lot of POWs that had quite a bad time as a POW through the Germans. What I'm suggesting is that your time was actually not too bad.

Yeah, as an officer

14:00 you're not allowed to work so you've got to combat boredom. There were a few who, it got the better of them. They were clambering up the gates at the front, "Let me out to fight the Bolshevik menace," so they'd take them away and send them off to a mental hospital for a while or they'd come back, I couldn't recall.

Would you say your main enemy wasn't the Germans, it's boredom?

I'd say, the other thing is

14:30 you're hungry all day and every day, whether you get parcels. Now the aim of the Red Cross was to give you a tin of cigarettes, a fifty, and a parcel a week. That probably averaged out over the time at about half of that. Because you weren't physically working you weren't expending much, you all lost weight, and they played a little bit of sport but very, very gentle sport.

15:00 There was softball that the Canadians from Dieppe brought to us. There was soccer and there was rugby but it was all like touch rugby and so on. A lot of betting. The beer that they were selling us, when you could buy it, you could drink a stein that long and wouldn't, just as if you were drinking lemonade, the alcoholic content in it. There was a

15:30 library. A lot of the Brits were professional in their theatrical world and some of the plays that they put on were quite outstanding.

Was there some sort of a send up of the situation? Like Hogan's Heroes [American television comedy series about a German POW camp]?

Well, that's fairly far-fetched but I always used to look at it because you'd get a great laugh, particularly when you get old Sergeant Schultz [German guard character in the series]. Now, half the German NCOs and soldiers

16:00 were pretty dull, you know, they [(UNCLEAR)] and clicked their heels, etcetera. But in every camp they had a gun security officer who really knew his job and he had under him several senior NCOs and workers, and they were permanently dressed in overalls and they would be with their steel rods underneath huts trying to find where tunnels were, etcetera.

16:30 And they were pretty successful at it.

How many tunnels would there be going on at any given time?

In Warburg, there could have been eight or nine tunnels at the same time, but largely a lot of them a terrible waste of time. Now, when someone escaped, it kept us occupied, gave us something to do, annoyed the Germans. At Warburg, when someone had escaped, they'd set up three or four tables

17:00 with all the files of everyone with a photograph on and you're expected to pass and your number, name and photo were checked. Now, these RAF guys with their flying boots, used to join arms together and walk upwind to this guy and kick all theses black cinders in the air. So there'd be clouds of bloody dust everywhere and he, now you had to do your lolly [lose your temper], no matter who you were, so out comes his pistol, he gets the guards

17:30 and he'd arrest that group - and there'd be another five that came along. Now, Wing Commander Baden Powell [means Douglas Bader], the legless pilot, was that and whilst he didn't like the Germans, he was an absolute bloody pain in the neck eventually. Now, if you got caught out on a morning of Powell and they decided to search your camp or your huts, you might not get back till two o'clock in the afternoon by which time you haven't had any breakfast, you wouldn't have had

18:00 anything for lunch and if it's in the middle of the bloody winter, you're standing in the snow frozen bloody still. And when you went back to your hut, lots of wardrobes were used and put on the side to put in your tins from the parcels, the Germans would come along, put their hand in there and just go like that and pour the whole bloody lot on the floor. If we tried to make a bit of hooch out of barrels and we'd saved up raisins and sugar for months on end.

18:30 **Raisins?**

Yeah, etcetera, the buggers would, and we might have it in the roof of the hut, they'd get in there and find it, lower it down and take it out into the snow and many's the time I've been out there with others on my hands and knees picking up the raisins or sultanas so that we could reuse them, etcetera.

Was that ever successful?

No, the first Christmas

19:00 we used a French water bottle, etcetera, and we distilled a small bottle of wine for each person and an unstilled bottle, and everyone drank it and they wouldn't have known the difference, they could have been drinking water. It was a total bloody failure. Now, there were many courses run and the Red Cross used to send out info [information] to you. You could get glasses sent to you.

19:30 There'd be an optician in the encampment. He'd test your eyes and the prescription would go to the UK and eventually a pair of stainless steel specs [spectacles] would come out. It'd take months to get here. Perhaps another racket to get on, your family or next of kin were entitled to send you a clothing parcel every three months. The answer to that problem was, take a long time to come from Australia, you let continue

20:00 but you wrote independently to the paymaster in London and gave him authority to debit your pay book and gave him a list of stuff that you needed. And he would get, obviously, Red Cross people or the like to buy it and bundle it up and send it. So, if you got the system going, you were getting two parcels instead of the one. Canadians would be getting, once Dieppe fell and a lot of them

20:30 came in the camp, they would get parcels sometimes of five thousand or ten thousand cigarettes, because Canada, USA [United States of America] were basically untouched. They therefore could sell them to, you know, in part. So people would be writing out a cheque, or in our instance we'd have to get the paymaster to debit our account and debit some other chap in another bank or branch. So that went on.

21:00 And you made the best of a pretty boring bloody life. Winter too, you're always permanently cold.

What sort of clothing have you got on in winter?

Well you have, first of all you've got battledress. You've got to wear boots all the bloody time and, you know, seven days a week, 365 days a year, gets pretty boring.

21:30 At night you would often leave your battledress pants on, a pullover and we became experts at unpicking socks and other woollen things and making a pullover yourself. You'd use a wooden needle, probably somewhere between the thickness of those two fingers. So we all learnt how to, well most of us learnt how to do that. Someone would do the finishing off for you, etcetera.

22:00 **Knitting?**

I started it when I came back here for a while but I gave it up. I lost interest I suppose, and when the [(UNCLEAR)] compared to the soldiers was concerned, we only had about seven or eight nights to march, to get to the next camp, [(UNCLEAR)]. Now, we

22:30 started off in the day and we looked like a refugee column because we had prams and God knows what, carting our clobber and a couple of horses and carts with Red Cross parcels on. And the Yankee [American] air force came over, down a valley, and I suppose we could have looked like a Hungarian refugee column and all they did was press the buttons and I think we finished up with 47 wounded or thereabouts, in the 40s

23:00 anyway, and about seven or eight killed. I know that we got off the road and I would have been, probably, five yards off the road just lying down in the semi-wet ground. And when there was a lull and I looked up and I looked around, rounds had been hitting the ground and throwing mud up onto the backs of my trousers. So mostly, it was a German officer then standing in the road with

23:30 his pistol out, telling us to go back to camp immediately and we're all running across the road into the pine plantation and telling him to go and get stuffed. And we stayed in the pine plantation until darkness came on and we then wandered back into camp. And the senior British officer then made, had discussions with the commandant, who said, "I have no option

24:00 but to see that you do move." We decided we would march at night and lay up in farmlets and villages by day. In fact, in one camp we got hold of a big sheet of tin and put in whitewash, POW At Rest. Put that out in case the aircraft came out. Now, that was a picnic. I thought it was the most enjoyable part of my four years.

24:30 **You've had a successful escape.**

Well, look, anyone could have walked off on that march and it didn't mean anything. The theory was by the senior British officer, as SS bands were around anywhere and young kids with rifles, we are better off to stay where we are in a large group. First night marching, the boots, to wear

25:00 boots with this protruding ankle, it rubbed down and was as sore as hell and the column moved on. One of my mess mates spoke German so he stayed with me and eventually a German guard picked us up at the end of the column. He's got a pushbike with his rucksack on his back and a carrier. So, in no time we've plied him with cigarettes, he's got our bags strapped on his pushbike and pushing it. He said to us, "If you want to go,

25:30 now, go, doesn't worry me" and we saw no sense of it. We got into the first village, he said he would come and see us at lunchtime. So after lunch he came along, picked up a couple of us, took us off a mile, half a mile to a nearby farm and, of course, we were then carrying largely chocolate, tea, cigarettes and soap, all valuable trade items, and you

26:00 could go to a farmlet and there'd be a couple of kids so you'd give them a little square of chocolate for the kinder [children], which they hadn't had for years, and you'd do a deal with the old dear and you'd get a couple of loaves of bread. We'd already knocked off chickens and eggs from the farmlet that we were billeted in and we'd also knock off their potatoes. And we were eating pretty well. There was no rain

26:30 if anything and it wasn't a hard place to do. You know, you might walk twenty ks one night and fifteen the next. So we went to Moosburg eventually.

Where were you heading?

To Moosburg. That's further south, closer to Munich. That was again a very, very big stalag; 7A, I think they called it, and there we met up with a lot of others that we knew. Some from Italy, West Australian chaps that we'd run into.

27:00 And after a while we took over running the camp with the German guards who had a rifle, but they had a British officer standing alongside of them.

Is this after the war is over?

No, the war is still batting on. In the last three or four days.

So, you've voluntarily walked into a stalag?

Well, we were marched to the stalag, under German guards, in the seven days to get in from Eichstatt

27:30 to Moosburg. We were an organised column under German command. But, as I say, as the guard say, "If you want to rack off, go." A few did rack off and they might have got back to England a week before us but so bloody what. It was fraught with danger and not worth the effort of trying to shoot through.

Were you really sure that the war was going to end?

The next thing is we could hear gunfire in the distance

28:00 and tank fire. Tanks went through the village and beyond the camp. Didn't worry about us immediately. Business was under control. And that would have been, you know, early at seven o'clock in the morning or something. About lunchtime, who should appear but General George Patton and in the afternoon, donut machine girls

28:30 were on tap, that they'd brought in. Now, we were supposedly not allowed out of the camp. But if you talked your way out and got out, we did that and came back with some poor German lady with a Red Cross armband. The Russians had gone berserk and they're riding horses around the town and they're full as a boot and they're raping women right, left and centre, and she wanted this stopped. So we thought, "Ah, she's a good

29:00 excuse for us to get back into camp." By this stage we've each got these ration packs on our shoulders, about this long.

When did the Yanks come into the picture?

Well, they were there. They came in around before Patton. Before Patton, they'd arrived. Once the tanks go through and beyond, you've got ground troops that are coming up after, be they mounted on trucks or what, and they occupied the town and started to try and

29:30 put some law and order into it. We put this German Red Cross lady on board, took her into the camp, took her to the adjutant, and he took her to the senior British officer in an effort to see what they could do. Well, that didn't concern us. Naturally that night we gutsed ourselves and naturally that night we were in total bloody agony from [(UNCLEAR)]. Now, Patton said within a few days

30:00 he'd have bulldozers alongside the camp and there'd be an airstrip and we'd be on our way. That didn't happen. And eventually we were moved some miles by truck to a town named Landshut, which had doubled its population through evacuation of German civilians, and it would have been about forty, fifty thousand strong. We went out there because there was an airstrip and we sat all day long at the airstrip and nothing

30:30 happened other than the fact that there'd be something like fifteen Dakotas circling the air waiting for the opportunity to land. About fifteen parked on the edge of the strip and about fifteen trying to take off. And they were bound for France or Belgium, loaded with 25 POWs. Now, as one kite went down the runway, things were that tight, its wings clipped several other kites and about three or four aircraft nose on, on fire. So there's

31:00 an odd life lost there and they said, no more flying for the rest of the day. So we hoofed back into town and there we met a Canadian lieutenant colonel and we were, at that stage, I think it would have been about eight lieutenants, about eight diggers. And this Canadian colonel took us up to the attic of a block of flats. And someone turned

31:30 around and said to him, "Who won this war, Colonel?" And he said, "We did, of course." "In that case, we're not bloody well sleeping here on the floor." And we all picked up our bags and just walked off and left him. He probably, to this day, couldn't work out what. We went across the town, across the river, and there we met a Yankee captain and there were pre-painted non-fraternisation signs,

32:00 yellow background, black print, and they would be, you know, the size of that wall there, fenced off, and there was one of these in front of this block. And the Yank said to us, when we told him what we were after and he said, "Righto, just give us about a quarter of an hour." Well, a quarter of an hour lasted a bit longer. We found out eventually he had a frau in tow and under the non-fraternisation he was

32:30 doing the exact opposite. He came down and he wanted to clear the whole of the ground floor. And we were a bit receptive and we said, "We're better off probably to take one unit on each floor" so that's what happened and the German chap who…and we gave the old dear the tucker. She hotted it up for us. I slept between the sheets

33:00 in a double bed with Harry Dross from England that night. I don't know where ma and pa slept but that was their worry. We opened up the wardrobe and there was a whole ham, cured ham hanging up there. And he was very anti-Hitler and all this sort of stuff. In the chest of drawers, there's Palmolive soap still with its black and green there, so he was into the rackets as well.

33:30 We threatened the old dear within an inch of her life if she gave the accommodation away in case we didn't get away. We finished up going back to the airport. In late afternoon, we got on board with less baggage, less number of people, about eighteen on board instead of twenty-five and just a little hand grip as it were. We had to land three times in France before we could get someone to take

34:00 us. There were that many people on the move. We eventually unloaded. The Yanks were there with their big camp. They said, "Help yourself to whatever clothing you want. Hop into the dining huts and eat what you like. There's your beds, go for your life." And the following morning, again we were fed for breakfast and then the Brits took us over to another airfield and we were dumped on board Lancaster bombers and went to

34:30 Aylesbury in roughly the Midlands. Now, on that day a number of aircraft went for a row. I think there were about four or five. Air Marshal Tedder came over. The big hassle was, they knew who were the crew on board but they didn't have any bloody passenger lists. So guys that might have been…well, a couple of guys I know that were POWs from 1940 were killed on that day, you know, within

35:00 a spit of home, so they were a bit unlucky. I think it was pilot fatigue because the chaps that brought us from Germany to France were flying from about seven in the morning until nine at night and then they were flying, doing the same the next day and the day following. So I guess you'd have to accept pilot fatigue.

35:30 But I don't think there was an answer to the problem. However, we duly arrived at Aylesbury, were deloused. Women on their WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] uniforms sat on tables in front of us dangling their legs. We were so, what can I say?

Distracted?

Distracted that we were often saying, "Excuse me, I want to go and see a mate of mine" and you'd go over to one of your fellow colleagues.

36:00 We were put into a British army camp.

Is this in France?

No, in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, UK. And the colonel there gave us ten pounds each, two cables to send home to your folks, one provided by the government and one by Cable and Wireless, and any clothing you wanted. And he said, "The trucks leave here to go to the

36:30 station to take you south at nine tomorrow morning. If you're not here, too bad." So people were allowed to please themselves what they did and they were all back at nine. We all got a train to London. We had about an hour or two to fill in changing trains. It was so bloody big, all the mob I was with walked around the one block so we wouldn't lose our way. We got out on the train and went down to Eastbourne, which was the area of the reception

37:00 group, to be met by a new captain who was lining us up in threes, etcetera, and telling us what to do, and some of the people just turned around and said, "Go and get stuffed." And they weren't prepared to accept discipline to that extent. Now, the chap that was running Eastbourne Reception Camp, as far as I'm aware, was a lawyer,

37:30 KC. I think he had something to do with the comforts, Australian Comforts Fund. Probably not the type to run the camp. Now, Ian Campbell, who was then our lieutenant-colonel and a professional soldier, he gets himself orders forthwith. He's promoted to brigadier and to run the camp, and he's an ex-POW. However, what he did do

38:00 was get a lot of us to volunteer to do different jobs, and we could talk the same language as the ex-POW soldier. In a work party of taking beds by truck from A to B, there was a major in charge of this work party and I stood by and listened. Soldiers said to him, "Who are these beds for?" And he said, "More POWs coming from there."

38:30 And I said, "Well, the bastards can look after themselves" and we just walked off from the work party and he didn't know what to do and they got away with it. Now, after some time, Eastbourne was a very good place because the Urban Hotel on the waterfront was full of WAAFs, near the officers mess there was a Wrenery [billet for WRENS, Women's Royal Naval Service] and down the

39:00 road there was the Land Girls Army.

Very good.

So we reckoned Eastbourne was pretty good.

How long were you at Eastbourne?

Probably two and a half months. Once you got checked out medically, you were given a roughly fourteen-day leave pass and a rail warrant anywhere you wanted in the UK. I went off with my colleague, who waited a couple of days till I got there and we went to Aberdeen.

39:30 **Why did you decide to go there?**

It was one of the northern spots and he had relatives there. So, we got there at lunchtime and were fed and watered and then we were taken on a tour of churches of Aberdeen that afternoon.

Thrilling.

So I said to my friend, I said, "These are your relatives. I don't know what you're going to do tomorrow but I'm bloody sure I'm not getting

40:00 involved and I'm off." However, Auntie left us alone and we went up, we had slouch hats on, and there was a Gordon Highlander who had been a POW on the next bus stop. He came down, when he saw the slouch hats, to see if he knew us. We didn't know each other. So we did a tour with the Gordon Highlander pointing out all the pubs and we didn't get home for lunch until about

40:30 three o'clock. You could almost see the old dear rolling her sleeves up ready to getting into us. However, after a few days, we'd seen Aberdeen and we got a train back to the UK. We then rang this chap Hewitt from DNW Murrays and he told us what train to get. He met us. He took us into a hot house and he'd got little seedlings this high and he broke off a couple of leaves and told us to rub them. I thought, you know, "You're

41:00 half crackers." We were told then to smell our fingers. He was trying to grow gum trees and this was to give us the taste of a gum leaf, etcetera. He looked after us better than anyone could. He lined up some of the talent from his office, younger staff. He said he didn't think that we would want to spend all our time with himself and his wife. And that became a bit of a home. When my offsider came home earlier than I, I was able to go to the canteen service in Eastbourne and pay cash and buy up say two or three cartons of poultry, ham and the likes, all sent from Australia, tinned fruit and so on, and I got hold of a British three-ton truck, which was the only one which was available, and got delivered to the door in Surrey and got out and said to Mrs Hewitt...

Tape 8

00:33 We were due to leave Liverpool on the Mauritania. There were about two thousand New Zealanders eventually and about two and a half thousand Australians. There were three trains to get from Eastbourne to Liverpool. For reasons unknown to me, I was on the first train but told I was the baggage officer and all the baggage was coming on the third train. I might add that previous

01:00 ships, the diggers used, when the train would stop somewhere some diggers would get off the train and go to the local pub, sell half their clothing and eventually arrive back in Eastbourne almost in rags, and they were reequipped, etcetera and put on the next. And the British Admiralty weren't very impressed with losing, you know, in some instances there could have been twenty or thirty people didn't front up. However, in our instance

01:30 I was up all the night and so I was pretty cheesed off. It was a cabin of ten officers. I picked out my bed and sorted that out, went and met the third train and I've got soldiers from the same company volunteering to shift officers packs. I thought, "There's something wrong here." However, I couldn't work it out. When we get to the wharf, they're loading it up on slings, under our supervision, and there's a dirty big

02:00 valise, giant size, and I said, "Well, put that in the sling and get rid of it. We've a month on board this ship to sort it all out." And they said, "No, Mr Millet said that he wanted this in his cabin and we were to carry it up." So I said, "All right. Two of you, get lugging with it straight away." So that happened because we were due to sail at five and this was about half past four. Eventually we got organised.

02:30 And I walked into the cabin, a bit brassed, you know, this bloody man's army, threw my hat on my bed and someone says, "Sh," and rushes me into the bathroom, "There's a bird underneath your bunk." They tell me what had happened, one of our NCOs had fallen in love with this bird. They'd wrapped her in a valise in Eastbourne, put her on the truck, put her in the toilet on the train, stood guard

03:00 outside the toilet for the twelve-hour journey, rewrapped her, put her on the truck to get her from the station to the wharf and carried her up into the cabin. Now, there were ten lieutenants in this, one of whom was a professional soldier and the rest were wartime. We all agreed that she could stay there and we'd put her down on the troop deck in the morning, in the early hours of the morning. The diggers were prepared to kick in and pay her fare if the master wanted

03:30 a fare and that'd be it and she'd be moved off to another quarter and that was fine. The professional soldier decided that his career might be affected by being included in this so he promptly went along to the Australian lieutenant-colonel, who had above him a British colonel as OC troops, and told him

04:00 the story. I came out of the dining room early and was first to open the cabin door to be met by these two officers. And the Australian chap from Melbourne said to me, “What’s going on here, Johnson?” I said, “I don’t know, Sir.” He said, “Well, you see me in my cabin at ten tomorrow morning.” So I find out the story, what had happened. I went to see him at nine o’clock the next morning and knocked on the door,

04:30 told him the story unofficially, and he said, “For Christ sake, don’t say that on any inquiry.” So I then got the remaining nine up on the boat deck and we’re all lying around with our heads in the centre and we worked out a plan of attack, as it were, so that we had a constant story. The girl in the meantime

05:00 had been moved from our quarters. The Red Cross girls, etcetera, were going to look after her and some girls had kicked in and reclothed her, as it were, because she was in battledress. All that worked out quite well. Unknown to us, there’s a major sitting nearby on the deck reading a book on a deckchair. When the inquiry came along, who should be the man

05:30 handling the inquiry but the major. Now, whether he heard us working out our salvation or not, I do not know. He would have, I thought he would have had to hear some of it. But anyway, it all got sorted out. Nothing ever happened to us. When we got to Panama, we went through the canal, tied up for a few days and were on our way with the bird still aboard.

06:00 But, however, skipper had had to radio back to Liverpool to tell the maritime people and tell the family about the girl and where she was, and the admiralty insisted that she be disembarked. Now, we’d just got underway and we were just chugging along and a US Coastguard came alongside. There was a loud speaker announcement to tell us

06:30 that if you wanted to say farewell to this girl, we had to be on such and such a side, port or starboard, and such and such a deck. So those that were interested went down and wished her luck and she was taken off the boat and I’ve never heard or seen of her since. We then went to Honolulu.

Was she a good looking bird?

Oh, I wouldn’t have a clue. She had to be pretty tiny to be wrapped up in this valise. You couldn’t believe that you could stack someone in. Must have been sheer hell.

07:00 When we got to Honolulu, they gave us two pound to go ashore and we were all to march up to the swimming pool and were going to be given lunch and a bottle of beer or something and a free swim. Well, there was five thousand off the boat. That didn’t seem to thrill too many of us. So the poor senior officers marching us along got there with probably a couple of hundred.

07:30 The rest of us just broke off as we went along and you hopped on any conveyance that was around and there’s an awful lot of traffic in Honolulu from the traffic area. And so we went into town and we happened to be having a bit of tucker, I think, in the YMCA and some lady came up to us. She was the wife of the Ford representative in Honolulu. So she looked after

08:00 us, took us home, etcetera, fed and watered us, and the old man took us back to the ship. All up, there would have been about twenty-five AWLs from that job. Soldiers were being brought back to the wharf by the Yankee police and they would have sold most of their clothing. Some of them would be in bare feet and underpants. They’d peel off and crack each other. Then

08:30 they’d clamber up the gangway arm and arm and have another bloody stoush [fight] on the deck. You’ve never seen such a mob of no-hopers the next morning and of course they had to be reclothed. But there were about AWLs and the Yanks flew them to Brisbane and then they were railed down to Sydney with no penalty. We got off the ship, first of all they went to Wellington then to get rid of the New Zealanders.

09:00 Then we went on to Sydney. And the colonel then said to us, if anyone had any pressing needs, because we had ten pounds for the whole journey, if we had any pressing debts you could front up. So you could get in before, you could hear the same story ten times, get in early, “Had some big gambling debts, sir.” You get, say, another tenner [ten pounds] out of him and that gives you some dough [money] to go AWL, which I intended to do. I had a mate to

09:30 look after my bags and I went off with a New South Welshman, AWL, and I had a note in the general details depot. You arrived and your name and number and unit were announced and there was a big circle with all the rels [relatives] hanging around. I had a note to meet relatives and I thought, “Oh, who do I know here?” because I intended to go out to Manly to some friends I knew.

10:00 And it was, the only way they could get in was to say they were relatives. Now, as I went down to pick up my bags from the centre, to go off with them, some dear lady with about three or four kids, came rushing across to meet her dear beloved husband, bowled me over. So you’ve just got to get up, dust yourself and say, “Oh, well, no harm done.” And off I went to Manly and a week later I checked

10:30 in to be told by the captain that I was the only officer missing off the whole ship. So I said, “Well, I’m not missing now, am I? I’m here.” So he told me that I’d go home on a train. The other Western Australians had gone to the showgrounds, I think, for a while and then they’d come home on a train.

So, where did you spend that week?

Out at Manly.

What were you doing out there?

Well, I had friends and I stayed with them.

11:00 Knew them quite well.

What friends were they?

Well, the boss cocky of the house was the secretary of our company and he'd looked after me at the start of the war there. And he had some talent lined up and he'd a niece and she had another friend, so it wasn't a bad sort of an occupation. So this chap told me to front up

11:30 at his office to get the train in, say, two days hence. A quarter of an hour before the train was due to leave, I got off my seat outside his office and knocked on the door and said, "Do you think it's about time we went to the station?" He'd forgotten all about me so I had to rack off for another couple of days leave. This time I got as far as the station and he found out then the seat had been given to somebody else, so back I went to Manly again. And the

12:00 third time we finished up at the general details depot and again there were about twenty-five AWLs from varying units from WA and we finished up back on the same ship, that by this stage has picked up some Brit troops and some New Guinea people that were going to Fremantle, and we came non-stop from Sydney to Fremantle and

12:30 got off the ship there in the Roads. And in the main your families were at Karrakatta to meet you. And so I told the AWLs to sit tight and I went along because the old man told me that one of the chaps dealing with our movement was a friend of his. So I went up and

13:00 introduced myself and gave him a bit of a line and I said we'd been in Sydney without any cigarettes or any other ration, as it were, reporting every day, so he gave us another cigarette ration and gave us another fortnight's leave. I went outside and gave the leave passes to the soldiers concerned and I said, "Now,

13:30 I've done my quota of work for you. On your way and don't bloody well let me see you again" and that was the finish. And then you go through, you front up at Western Command and then you get your marching orders down to a convalescent home in Swanbourne. And my predecessors had told the matron, she had said to, because they had a bit of a play-up set-up with a number of them.

14:00 She said, apparently, to one of them, "Thank the lord that's the last of you." And he said, "No, there's one more to come and when he comes you'll know about it." Fortunately, I met him around town and he told me the story, so I was able to beat him by as soon as arriving I said, "I understand you've been given a number of stories from colleagues of mine." I said, "Now don't believe any of it. I'm here to go

14:30 through the system in an orderly fashion." And you were sent off by car to the Hollywood [Repatriation] Hospital on a daily basis to see a doctor in the morning, a specialist of some description, and they went over you, if you were happy to do that, and so you'd get your whole body checked by different experts in different theatres of work. And then eventually you go down to the Karrakatta DGG and you get your pass out, which happened in,

15:00 I think, October. So near enough, I did probably about a month short of six years. Now, you tell me that people that went to Vietnam for a year and you get other people going to Timor for five and six months and they get great grants and they're suffering the greatest problems of all time. Now, there was absolutely no

15:30 counselling at the end of the WW2. You sorted yourself out. I happened to see the general manager of the firm I worked for in Sydney and he just said to me, "I intend to do what Mr Bennett," who was his predecessor, "did after the first war. That is, you people have got a month to make up your minds what you're going to do. You either work here or you're on your way." And that's the

16:00 way and, if that's the system, you better pull your socks up and adhere to it. So that's the story. Now, the only other thing that I'd like to mention is some of these other bits and pieces. I might need specs to read that. I can handle it. There are only a few bums you run into.

16:30 I think quite often the worst feature is that if you stand back and watch NCOs train some recruits, it's probably the first time in their lives that they, you might say, are mad with the power, and they have a tendency to shout and roar at soldiers all the time and I don't think that that gets anyone on side at all. And I'm sure

17:00 if they adopted a different approach, a lot of the said bastardry that goes on wouldn't exist. I mean, we as private soldiers used to work our guts out and enjoy it. We used to volunteer in Rottnest camp or weekends at the rifle range to empty all the pee buckets, etcetera, because if you got on the hygiene patrol and you did your work in a hurry, you'd

17:30 have about three or four hours to sneak off and hide and have a rest and not worry, you know; we used

to do this and then, of course, in the late afternoon it was your responsibility to put out the pee buckets again. Now, those sorts of things never worried us. It was just part of life.

You mentioned that you had a few thoughts of your own or some advice you'd like to share with us upon the army.

18:00 Well, that would be one of the things. I think a lot of NCOs need to handle themselves a lot better in their instruction. I had a warrant officer who worked fulltime for the SEC [State Electricity Commission]. His name was Alan Malone and his, well, a son is the ex state cricketer, Malone, the fast bowler.

18:30 Now, Alan Malone would have recruit soldiers eating out of his hand in the first week and they used to be addressing, 'Mr Malone', and all this sort of stuff. He didn't belong to me but he always used to volunteer to come to camp with us

19:00 because I had the last lot of national service people and I was always short of people. So that's who I used to borrow. While I was in the polytechnic hospital in Athens, there was an electrician, who we nicknamed Sparks, used to come in always carrying a lead and a light globe and be selling

19:30 us packets of figs or he bought my razor for me and I think he bought the sandshoes. And he wanted to know our addresses when we were leaving and so we gave him our names and addresses and they've all got these crucifixes in their homes. He hid that info in there and the Germans respected that if they did any searches. And he wrote to me after the war, so I sent him a few clothing

20:00 parcels, mainly because he'd made me the godfather of a daughter that had been born. But after a year or so she died because, you may recall, in '44 or '45 in Athens in particular there was this fighting going on between the communists and the royalists, and there was a tremendous shortage of food and she just died through, I think, a lack of food and medical attention

20:30 not available. I lost track of him. On one visit back to Athens, he came to see us at the hotel. He didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Greek. The only translator I could get on to was the bellboy in the hotel. And he kept on being called away to do jobs. So it was a pretty awkward set up.

21:30 I think I've covered most of that. The only thing that I haven't mentioned before, and I won't use any names or units involved, but I am aware of the fact of some of the skulduggery that has gone on in the system. In this instance, there was a senior officer in Queensland,

22:00 a brigadier, who was duly met by a medical officer that had arrived in the camp and said, "I've been directed to medically examine you." He said, "But there's nothing wrong with me." He said, "That may be, but I've been told not only to medically examine you but to find something wrong with you." Now, OK, examined him and he found that he had

22:30 a hiatus hernia, which the guy didn't have anyway. But that went down. That gave some power back, that obviously wanted to get rid of this chap, the opportunity to have him discharged on medical grounds. Now, by the same token, I've argued with a Doctor Horner, now a professor in the Australian National University,

23:00 at length over a book he wrote on General Vasey. And there are a number of major discrepancies in that that I thought were very, very unfair on several unit commanders. Now, when we were in mainland Greece for the first week we were under the command of Brigadier Savige of 17th Brigade.

23:30 Our commander, 19th Brigade, did not take over our unit until week one was up by which time our CO was medically evacuated. Now, Vasey, in his letters home to his wife, turned around and said, "I couldn't recommend

24:00 so and so and so and so," the other CO being the 2/8th Battalion, "because they did nothing in Greece." Now, I don't know anything about the 2/8th Battalion. But Vasey, because we were under his command for a week, wouldn't have had the authority to recommend someone for doing something anyway. So, you know, it's an unfair statement and I think some of the

24:30 things that he was able to write about, obviously his letters weren't censored, and I think that few of the professionals in the early days might well have proved themselves as man to man, than what they did. Now, it's probably true to say that

25:00 there were a lot of top professionals that knew their job and did it well, but there were always some that stepped out of line and tended to stab each other in the back. And I can't see that's the way to win a war. However, rather than name any people it's probably better to leave things as they are. But my source of information, relative to this medical

25:30 examination, would stand up in any court. The source is impeccable but, as people are dead now, I can't see the sense in naming anyone. But I am aware of the names and I am aware of the source.

If you'd like to name some names we can embargo your comments for the time.

Probably better

26:00 not to, I would say. There's no harm done. Funnily enough, I have written to the then Doctor Horner and to this day, and that's a few years ago, I have not had an acknowledgement. But when I sent a copy to the National Library in Canberra, I had an acknowledgement and a

26:30 thanks to say that this gives us another viewpoint, which in the future researchers will be pleased to be able to read and it gives them an opposite view, etcetera.

Would you like to share that opposite view with the archive today?

Well, I sent, I'm sure I sent the Veteran's Affairs Department a copy of the letter.

27:00 I think I might have a spare if I could dig it up and it wouldn't worry me. I sent a number to different unit associations but because it became a thing of contention, most of the people are prepared to say 'let sleeping dogs lie' and back off, whereas I think if there's something bloody well wrong. In the post-army here, I had at a weekend conference

27:30 an argument with the then senior staff officer in Western Command. I rang him from work the next morning, Monday, and asked him would he talk to me and see sense and he told me no, you will need to get on with that job, and that was to accept the responsibility of training all the NCOs in Western Command. Now, when I went to camp

28:00 twice a year, I never had enough NCOs to cope with the intake that I was getting from the National Service, so I didn't see how the bloody hell I could also run the command NCO requirement. So I thought, well, I lost a couple of night's sleep over this. Then eventually I rang up Western Command and I said to the AQ [Adjutant and Quartermaster], "How do I see the commander in a hurry?"

28:30 He said, "On personal grounds, I'll fix it for you." So I went up a couple of days later. My name in Western Command, I might add, against the list, no notices, right, as an honorary member. So my sister-in-law used to be invited, another senior officer's wife used to be invited, and they'd talk,

29:00 all the women would talk to each other, "No, we're not going because we're not invited." So I thought, "How can this guy do this?" So I fronted the brigadier and I said, "This guy needs to give my wife an apology and give me one" and I said, "If he's supposed to be your senior staff officer, I think he's the worst bloody soldier that you've ever had and I wouldn't give you two bob for him."

29:30 And I said, "And I won't walk into this mess until he fronts up and apologises." Now, at about half past three that day, oh, and he was on leave but I told the commander I wouldn't go into his mess but he put his hand on my shoulder and invited me in as his personal guest. At the other entrance, this chap came in and the commander turned around and said to me, "I didn't know he was coming. He's on

30:00 leave." After I left, he called him into his office and apparently gave him a bloody rocket. The chap rang me at work at about half three and said, "I have just received the greatest rocket of all time from the brigadier and I need to apologise." I said, "Well, I work in the Terrace and I live in Ardross. Name the time and the date and I'll be available." He eventually came down to see me at work and

30:30 he must have, he had a staff car driving around the block, the girl must have been on a merry go round system because he was in my office for around the hour. And I started the conversation by saying, I said, "It's obvious that you hate my guts." And I said, "The feeling may well be mutual. But," I said, "you make your allegations against me and I won't interrupt you" and I said,

31:00 "And I want the same right of reply." I stood up in the end and I said, "Well, we agree to differ and that's it." I shook hands with him and I said, "You're not going to get me to order" and I said, "and what you do about your NCOs, I'm stuffed if I know, but it won't concern me." He wouldn't have been around here for another five minutes, he got dumped back in Canberra. So, the system provided that he got moved.

31:30 Funnily enough the brigadier that followed him, that gave him the rocket, got transferred some months later into the same department or section with this chap under him again. I thought that was poetic justice.

Has the RSL been a valuable association to you?

Yeah, I initially joined the RSL like everyone else; as you get discharged, you pass table after table. I joined the local

32:00 branch but they were all chaps older than I and probably more established, a lot in the building game and there used to be a keg every Sunday morning over at Applecross. Well, first of all I was much younger and I really didn't booze at all and you got a comparatively young family. Therefore, I never fronted up and after two years, I think it was, I let my membership lapse. About four or five years

32:30 before I retired, the unit association largely, and I was about one of the few workers left used to meet at Anzac House so I used to duck off from work with the arrangement was when I arrived I raised the questions I needed to and tell them what I'd done, because I used to look after all the Cretan affairs and scholarships and so on, and then excused myself and go back to work. I therefore

33:00 felt that I had an obligation to rejoin the RSL there, which I did do and I've naturally kept my membership up to date. I know the current secretary, Shane Sears, pretty well. He's a good sort of a guy. I've known a number of presidents. Chap that did seven years, roughly, Jim Hall lives up here and I was talking to him on the blower the other day and two others. I've got on pretty well with

33:30 all of them. If I've had a problem, generally they're not life threatening in any form, I've gone to them. We had an argument in our unit that we believed, and we have this right in our association, that if you were in the unit you're entitled to march on Anzac Day. We didn't want wives, girlfriends, children, you had to serve in the unit. And on this occasion this lady fronted up with her two

34:00 daughters, so I very politely explained the rules and regulations and she's in tears and all this sort of stuff. And I said, "Well, look, I promise you that we will rediscuss the matter at the next meeting and I will give you a written reply." She then went to Howard Sattler and the chap that's now back in the ABC, that left radio and went to parliament for a while.

34:30 **Alan Carpenter?**

No, a big chap. He's in ABC Radio in morning sessions now but I never listen to it. And they really got stuck into the situation and they got onto the president and so on. The president rings me at about ten o'clock at night and I explained the story, etcetera, etcetera, and he was quite happy. The subsequent president told the same

35:00 peanuts that I wasn't a bad sort of a guy and they were happy for me to stick around and do what I was doing. We discussed the matter and we stuck to the original motion and that was our right. However, after my time, others that have followed me didn't police the rule as I had done and therefore others have drifted in. But as our association

35:30 now has shut up shop because of the age of people and the lack of people to take on jobs. As an example, the chap that was treasurer, secretary and editor of the magazine for about twelve years straight couldn't get a replacement. His wife had died and he was going to sell his home and so on. So we decided the best thing to do would be to shut up shop. We had about six

36:00 and a half thousand bucks to disburse with, gave that to largely the charity. About five hundred bucks to the 11th/28th Battalion as a prize over a period of years, of about a hundred in value for the best soldier or whatever they chose. And we gave the RSL for their home amenity set up, eleven hundred odd bucks. We got rid of the dough. I left the bank with about four or five cents

36:30 and I said, "You can put that in your charities box." Now, some of the chaps still go into Anzac House at roughly the same time as they previously met and have a few beers, a chat and disperse, and two of them still go down Hollywood fortnightly hospital visiting. But I thought, "If we've quit, we've quit." And I do some things still. For

37:00 instance this unit book which I largely put together.

Do you want to hold it up for us?

I am not the editor because largely they're individual stories. Initially notes by COs, three in number, and then we got different soldiers to write different stories.

37:30 For instance, 'Sinner' Carroll sailed across the Mediterranean in about a sixteen foot dingy himself and that was no mean feat. Several others were in barges so we put in one barge story. I got one of the chaps who did the three-month march in the winter of 1944 to write his story and I wrote a story on POW life

38:00 and produced the nominal role. We had to have a lot of checking and that, etcetera, and I'm told by the people in Canberra that they are very satisfied with the quality and it will help researchers in the years to come a lot better than

38:30 what they're equipped. I did not supply one photo, although my photo appears here a bit more frequently. I gave John Burridge, the publisher, every photo and said, "You select what you want. Print it. I'll sort them out into a sequence and give you a caption and names where possible." So that happened. When I picked up the book, I see my name's here and I said, "How come? I'm not the bloody author." He said, "I'm not concerned about you.

39:00 Fifteen, ten years down the track, people want to know something about the 2/11th Battalion, they may remember the name of the book, maybe the name of the author. Every book's supposed to have an author." And he said, "You're the only bugger that's done any work, so your name's there." So that's that.

I'm sure it's a valuable record.

Yeah. So where are we?

39:30 **...the decision to allow families to march on Anzac Day presently?**

Well, as an individual, I would still believe it's preferable for units to march. Now, when this discussion and argument took place with Howard Sattler, and if you're a local you'll know what sort of a mouth he

is, and I don’t say that disrespectfully, that’s just Howard Sattler and nothing would ever change him.

40:00 I got hold of the unit president of the RSL and said, “Now, look, why don’t you, you’ve got a group of kids from Legacy and they march at the front of the column. Why don’t you get another banner made for relatives, right?” Which they did do and they advertised, not that well for the year one, got relatives to march as a group. And I thought, “Well, that solves the problem.”

40:30 I wrote and told this dear lady, I rang her up two or three times and never got a call back and she was not home. I wrote her at least two letters, told her the score and I just thought she was, you know, totally bloody unreasonable but I wasn’t going to get into a fight and an argument with her. I’m happy the way Anzac Day runs. For instance, I didn’t go last year, I marched basically during the

41:00 period when I was in the army reserve system. By compulsion, we were always on parade. So basically I haven’t ever been marching. And it’s only in the latter stages when I retired from the army that I marched on Anzac Day as a civilian with the 2/11th Battalion. We did have some discussion with the 11th Battalion

41:30 of the 13th Brigade and I told those chaps that they were another unit altogether. They didn’t know us and we didn’t know them. What they needed to do, the same as the other 13th Brigade units, was to get themselves authorised with the RSL and march as a separate unit, which they eventually did. Initially it was easy for them to tag on

42:00 to us. And I thought, “Well, you know, if you’re not…

INTERVIEW ENDS