Australian War Memorial

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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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TITLE: (NX19837) Opie, Clifford William (Gunner)

INTERVIEWEE: Clifford William Opie

INTERVIEWER: Joyce Thomson

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SUMMARY: Clifford William Opie as a gunner 7th Division Artillery, Middle East and South West Pacific Area, 1940-1945, interviewed by Joyce Thomson

TRANSCRIBER: **WRITE*people***

TRANSCRIPTION DATE: 11 August 2004

THOMSON: Would you please describe how you came to join the AIF in the Second World War?

OPIE: Yes. After Dunkirk I realised that the war was serious and after my friend Ken Maxwell rang me from Sydney and told me that he was joining the AIF I decided to join immediately. I want up to Sydney and with my friend joined the AIF and after joining parted company since my friend had been in the Sydney Militia Unit and was immediately sent to Ingleburn but when I came to Wollongong I had to resign from the Militia and I was sent to the Showground.

THOMSON: And where were you accommodated in the Showground?

OPIE: First of all we were accommodated in the cattle pavilion just after the cattle had been taken out of the Showground after the end of the show.

THOMSON: [inaudible]

OPIE: And then from that pavilion we were sent to the horse stalls where after some wet sand had been thrown on the ground of the various stalls we slept on floor palliasses there.

THOMSON: There was no heating of course.

OPIE: There was no heating and it was bitterly cold at night, the wind whistled through and as a result two of the chaps in the unit contracted pneumonia and subsequently died. Fortunately, we left there and we were then sent to the pavilions, another pavilion where I stayed until, fortunately, I was transferred to Ingleburn and joined my friend and subsequently to that the unit, the 2nd Sixth Field Regiment of the 7th Division was formed.

THOMSON: And what were you training for? What particular work did you do?

OPIE: I was training to be a Signaller Gunner. That particular duty is taking orders from the observation post to the gun positions so that the guns can fire at the gun position.

THOMSON: What speed did you get up to in your studies?

OPIE: I cannot exactly say that because at Ingleburn I didn't study intently and although I was proficient in taking what they called R-Toc, that's speech on the telephones and speech on the wireless I had not at that stage, learned Morse Code.

THOMSON: What sort of training did you do then? Were you routing marching?

OPIE: We did route marches, but the main training was to become proficient in the knowledge of telephones, field telephones, and the wireless.

THOMSON: And then you were moved to Bathurst was it?

OPIE: Yes, we were then moved to Bathurst where our training continued. It was more intense. We went on manoeuvres and I remember one manoeuvre we were sleeping outside during a snowstorm. It was very cold at Bathurst on those manoeuvres, but normally we slept in huts constructed of galvanised iron and not lined and that too wasn't too warm.

THOMSON: What did you have? Sleeping bags on the ground?

OPIE: Well I had a sleeping bag because I took it in to the army with me. Some of the chaps didn't have sleeping bags but in the huts themselves we slept on palliasses on wooden floors.

THOMSON: And what was the food like?

OPIE: The food was – it varied. Sometimes it was all right, sometimes it was atrocious but we got used to it.

THOMSON: And then you sailed on the *Orion*?

OPIE: Yes, we came down from Bathurst on the train and we embarked on the *Orion*.

THOMSON: That would be towards the end of 1940?

OPIE: I think that would be the date, yes.

THOMSON: What was it like leaving Australia? Were there any crowds? Did anybody know you were going?

OPIE: Oh yes, we had quite a farewell gathering and I remember that there was a band on the wharf and a band played when we left.

THOMSON: It must have been a pretty depressing feeling.

OPIE: It wasn't too good. We realised that we were then in for it.

THOMSON: And where were you quartered there on the *Orion*?

OPIE: On the *Orion* we were supposed to sleep down below under the waterline in what had been the holds of the ship, which had been converted to one big room. In that room we were supposed to sleep on hammocks strung between the pipes and also to eat in the same area.

THOMSON: Where did the ventilation come from?

OPIE: From the air vents which they had.

THOMSON: The air would be pretty …

OPIE: Yes, it was very fuggy, very fuggy indeed yes.

THOMSON: How many men in the hold?

OPIE: Well there was a whole troop. We were B Troop and we occupied one of these holds and the other units were divided into other holds.

THOMSON: And where did you wash?

OPIE: We washed in communal bathrooms.

THOMSON: And did you sleep on deck every night?

OPIE: Yes. I slept down below the first night out of Sydney and I realised that it was so impossible to sleep properly that I took my sleeping bag up on deck and I slept on deck every night till we got to the Middle East, through the cold and through the heat.

THOMSON: And where did you disembark?

OPIE: We disembarked in the Red Sea, in Suez at least and we went immediately up to Diasenede(?), our camp in Palestine. We were about the first troops in Diasenede(?).

THOMSON: And who was in charge of your lot?

OPIE: At that time we were under Lieutenant Colonel Thwaites, I think that was his rank.

THOMSON: And what had you done all the time on the *Orion*? How did you fill in the days?

OPIE: We had schools, the schools continued and my particular study was signalling, especially the Morse Code which I hadn't mastered when I left Australia but I did master it and when I did I was promoted to the exalted rank of Acting Specialist Signaller Gunner and I got about two shillings more in pay.

THOMSON: Can you remember what you were being paid? It was something very small wasn't it?

OPIE: 7/6 I think it was.

THOMSON: And you'd been working as a solicitor in Wollongong before.

OPIE: That's correct.

THOMSON: And how would that compare with your weekly rate as a solicitor?

OPIE: As a solicitor in those days I was getting about 10 pound a week.

THOMSON: My goodness, what a difference. And then you were in Palestine and what are your next memories?

OPIE: My next memories were being transferred to Syria when the Syrian campaign broke out. We were fighting the Vichy French and we went up in our trucks to a place called Matullah. It was from that place that our guns first fired in anger.

THOMSON: And how were you situated? Were you on a hill, or dug in to trenches?

OPIE: No, we had slit trenches otherwise there was no cover. But [tape turned off].

THOMSON: And where were you situated whilst the fighting was going on?

OPIE: First of all we started at Matullah where we fired on the Vichy French for several days and then we advanced from there to Mojeurn (?) and I was in the forward reccy group that went up with a couple of the officers to reccy our position before the guns came up. Advanced to a position just before Mojeurn (?) where the Vichy French were posted, entrenched. It was during that reccy that we stuck opposition from – we were ambushed actually by some Vichy French and we managed to fight the group off and it was then that a couple of our chaps were killed. But we got through and we established this gun position and then the guns came up and we commenced firing on the Vichy French in Mojeurn.(?)

THOMSON: Was that a successful encounter?

OPIE: Yes because we were supporting our infantry and our infantry took Mojeurn,(?) pushed back the Vichy French and then the Vichy French established their gun positions outside Mojeurn(?) and commenced firing on a road along which our trucks went. Every time they

saw a truck along that road they used to fire. So we had to fire in retaliation and after so many days the Vichy French retired altogether from their positions and Mojeurn(?) was saved.

THOMSON: And where did you sleep at night? Did the war cease at night?

OPIE: Yes because we were in a safe position where our guns were and the Vichy French hadn't targeted on our position at all so we were able to sleep comfortably.

THOMSON: You just slept in the open or did you put up tents?

OPIE: We put up tents.

THOMSON: And where did the food come from?

OPIE: That was all brought up. The kitchen was established when the gun position was established. Everything was in order.

THOMSON: It seemed to be quite a well conducted repel then?

OPIE: Yes it was after we established the gun position. But it was there that I found the necessity for Morse code as we were unable to contact the observation post by means of telephone or by speech on wireless and fortunately we got into communication through Morse. It was the only time really that we used Morse regularly during the whole campaign.

THOMSON: And the observation post would signal to your position for the guns to fire.

OPIE: That's correct.

THOMSON: That's what they'd do and then …

OPIE: That's correct.

THOMSON: … that would allow the guns to be trained on to a particular spot.

OPIE: That's correct.

THOMSON: And then they'd fire. What happened after that? Where did you go after then?

OPIE: We proceeded down to the coast and we established another position up in the mountains not far away from what used to be a very favourite holiday spot called the Seders.

THOMSON: Were you fighting there?

OPIE: No, no, we were just bivouacked there. That was our only Mojeurn(?), after Matullah, was our only real fighting. After that we were bivouacked in this place near the Seders and then from that place we went further up the mountains overlooking the a valley as it was thought that the Turks were going to join the Vichy French but they never did, and they would have come the other way.

THOMSON: And how long were you there? Were you doing exercises whilst you were bivouacked?

OPIE: Yes, yes we were and we were also in this mountain place constructing a sort of fortress in the rocks.

THOMSON: What? Digging in into the hill?

OPIE: That is correct.

THOMSON: And what was this for to hide the ammunition and supplies?

OPIE: Well to make it safe in the event of the Turks coming over from the valley. That we would have a bit of cover.

THOMSON: And how long were you there?

OPIE: I can't actually remember the time I was there, but after that we went down to a camp on the coast not far away from Beirut. I remember that we used to go into Beirut for leave. At least we went in there about three times I think and we also went to Aleppo and we also went to Damascus.

THOMSON: And were they all peaceful places?

OPIE: At the time yes, they hadn't seen the war at all. At that time the Vichy French had given up, surrendered and there was no war.

THOMSON: What sites did you see whilst on leave? Were you interested or did you spend …

OPIE: Very interested, very interested yes. We went to the old town of Baalbak and saw all the ruins there, all the Roman ruins and Damascus was a very interesting city. We went to sundry places there. Of course we also went to the cafes and places of entertainment but in Damascus we spent our leave at one of the good hotels there one weekend and it wasn't too bad.

THOMSON: And then you went across to the Western Desert?

OPIE: That is correct. From there we were transferred over to – first of all we went to a staging camp outside Cairo, the name escapes me now, Ikimimaru (?), Ikimimaru(?) it was called and we slept in tents there for about a week. I remember a terrific sandstorm we had there which was very uncomfortable and then we were transferred from Ikimimaru(?) after getting our 25-pound of guns, I'm wrong there. No, we went up to Marsa Matruh; this was afterwards with the 25 pound of guns. We went up to Marsa Matruh and we were in dugouts underneath the ground there. Marsa Matruh was the fortress after Tobruk. If Tobruk had fallen we would have been the artillery going into action.

THOMSON: Did you see any action there at all, or was it just a holding?

OPIE: No, it was just a holding fortress and it was very fortunate that they didn't come because at that time we had guns that were modern in the First World War. And a couple had their muzzles tied up with rope. Goodness knows what would have happened if we had fired them.

THOMSON: Did you handle a gun at all or were you just running around with your Morse code key?

OPIE: No, I wasn't running around with my Morse code key. I only used Morse, as I said, outside Mojeurn(?). Other places where we could lay a telephone wire to the observation post we used telephones to take the orders. And if we couldn't use the telephone then we had speech over the wireless.

THOMSON: And did you carry a gun at all?

OPIE: Yes we had a 303. Every man had a 303 gun, yes, and bandoliers of bullets and one thing and another, yes.

THOMSON: And where did you go from Marsa Matruh?

OPIE: From Marsa Matruh we went down – this is when we went to Ikimimaru(?) right. And when we went to Ikimimaru(?) we thought we were going to go over to Greece and be reinforcements in the Greek campaign. But fortunately the Greek campaign got too – well not dangerous but it was very difficult and as a result of that after we got our new 25 pounder guns we, instead of going to Greece as we thought, we were transferred to the *Mount Vernon* American troopship to go, as we thought at that time to Burma as the Burmese campaign was starting.

THOMSON: Well where did you go?

OPIE: I can remember that we went to Ceylon and at Colombo we stayed there a week whilst it was decided whether we would go to Burma or go back to Australia. Fortunately through

our Prime Minister who persuaded Churchill that it was no good us joining the Burmese campaign and that we were required in Australia we came back to Australia.

THOMSON: And did you have leave in Sydney after being away?

OPIE: First of all we were at Perth. We landed at Perth and the Western Australian Perth people treated us very well and I remember that we had a couple of days leave there which was very enjoyable. From Perth we were taken by ship, by the *Mount Vernon*, to South Australia and we were in a camp outside Adelaide at Woodside for quite a few – well a couple of months I think we were there weren't we? At Woodside.

THOMSON: And what were you doing? Training still?

OPIE: Still training, yes.

THOMSON: Any alteration in the training?

OPIE: Well we had what was termed the "bull ring".

THOMSON: [inaudible]

OPIE: And that was because it was more intensive training because they realised that we were the first regiment to come back to Australia and that we would be needed in New Guinea.

THOMSON: And why did the training alter?

OPIE: It was very intense.

THOMSON: What were you doing? Route marches?

OPIE: Yes we did quite a few route marches and we did training on, I remember, an oval where we used to have full packs and we would have to march for quite a considerable time

with full packs on. I think the idea was to toughen us up. That's why we called it the "bull ring".

THOMSON: And then from Adelaide you went to?

OPIE: From Adelaide we went to Casino if I remember.

THOMSON: In New South Wales?

OPIE: Yes, yes. Near Lismore. And we were camped there for a while. And from Casino we went up to Caboolture north of Brisbane. That was our last camp before we went over to Port Moresby.

THOMSON: And what date did you leave for Port Moresby can you remember?

OPIE: I can't recollect. We were in Port Moresby just before the Japanese were nearly at the end of the Owen Stanley Range which his just north of Port Moresby and at that time I remember we went up to the beginning of the trail up the mountains and spoke to some of the Militia that had been over the Owen Stanley trail and were retreating quite hurriedly and we spoke to a couple of them and they said the Japanese are nearly here, it's no good trying to fight them, you'll have to leave Port Moresby quite soon. Instead of that our infantry started pushing the Japanese back along the Owen Stanley.

THOMSON: What were conditions like there? Was it a very steep climb? Mud?

OPIE: In Port Moresby where we were first of all camped the terrain was quite hard because in that particular area there's not so much rain. But then we were transferred to a camp out of Port Moresby, about four miles out, and there we had rain every afternoon and the ground was very, very soggy.

THOMSON: And were you fighting each day and coming back to camp at night?

OPIE: No, we weren't fighting at all. We were training, still training. The Japanese had not reached the end of the trail and our infantry, as you know, pushed them back. Well, at that particular position there was no scope for a 25-pounder gun so we were camped there until the infantry had pushed the Japanese right back to Buna and with the assistance of the Americans had subjugated the Japanese at Buna. After that, after the Buna campaign had been completed we were transferred to Buna by plane, these Douglases had all their seats ripped out, just really shells and we sat on the floor of these Douglases and we were transferred over the Owen Stanley Range mountains to Buna by these American planes. I got the fright of my life going through the chasm between two of the mountains of the Owen Stanley Range. The plane flew, what I thought was going to crash straight into one of the mountains. We didn't know that there was that gap between the mountains and of course the plane flew safely through the gap. It was rather a moment I tell you. I just saw this mountain looming up at us. But we were transferred to Buna just after, as I say, the campaign. Some of the Japanese dead were still in their dug-outs I remember, before we established our camp on the Buna peninsula.

THOMSON: Then what did you do there?

OPIE: We trained. Trained. And also I remember we went up to further up the coast up to a place that had been a port before the war. I can't remember the name of it?

THOMSON: Lae?

OPIE: No, that was afterwards. Oporto or some name like that. And from our positions, which we established there, we saw the dog-fights between the Zeros and the American Hurricanes which was a – well it was absolutely terrible to see when one of our planes was shot down but we didn't mind when a Zero was shot down. From our position we saw some very big dogfights. The Japanese bombers used to come over with a supporting fighter, the Zeros and the Zeros used to be up high protecting the Japanese bombers. Then the Hurricanes used to come over and go for the Zeros and that is how we saw these dog-fights.

THOMSON: And were there no RAAF planes?

OPIE: Yes there were. There were also Australian planes yes. But a lot of Australians were flying the Hurricanes.

THOMSON: And then when happened to you next?

OPIE: Well we were told that we were going to stage an amphibious landing at Salamoa where the Japanese were ensconced on the hills around Salamoa and the only way of being transported was by sea so that our Commander, in his wisdom, hit on the idea of placing our guns on coconut sangers over the holes of what used to be the barges that used to carry the petrol before the war. The fuel before the war. And then these barges were towed by an American Higgins barge, which was the lightest landing barge that the Americans had at that time. So that the gunners were on the old rusty barge with the 25 pounder guns fixed to these coconut sangers and all the other members of the troop, or the battery, were standing in these Higgins barges.

THOMSON: And what was the name of the Commander?

OPIE: I can't remember who the Commander was at that time. I think it was Daley, Commander Daley I think. Of course we had the B Troop, we had other troops and we also had Regimental Headquarters.

THOMSON: Did you ever see Blamey?

OPIE: No, but I heard about him.

THOMSON: What did you hear?

OPIE: I heard that he had been instrumental in organising the whole campaign that he had been one of the Generals that had been responsible for the AIF campaign being organised so that the Japanese were pushed back over the range, that actually New Guinea was saved.

THOMSON: And what about the Americans? Did you cooperate with them at all?

OPIE: Yes. At Buna the Americans had their camp, which was a much better camp than ours. I remember that even we used to go to the American camp where they had a bakery so we could get some bread as a change form our army biscuits. We used to get bread from the American bakery.

THOMSON: And what was the relationship between the Australian troops and the American troops?

OPIE: Very good. We had no trouble at all. I know that a lot of chaps made some money by selling their cigarette ration and one thing and another to the Americans. They seemed to have plenty of money and plenty of equipment. In fact that's what they relied on, equipment. Even in their guns or they actually relied upon fire power rather than manpower.

THOMSON: And did we rely on manpower more?

OPIE: Well our guns, I think, did a better job, because when our guns fired they fired on some target. With the American guns they just fired haphazardly and hoped they hit the target.

THOMSON: Were you firing guns at all at that stage between Moresby and Buna?

OPIE: No.