



Australian War Memorial

Sound Collection

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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INTERVIEWEE:

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SUMMARY:

TRANSCRIBER: C L SOAMES

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Tape identification: Recorded interview between George Silk and Neil MacDonald, Tape Number 1, recorded on 21/12/1984.

Well, first of all, can we start with something about your background and your education? You were born in New Zealand, I understand.

Right - yes, I was born in New Zealand on 17 November 1916, in a place called Levin - L-E-V-I-N - which is north of Wellington.

Where did you go to school?

Oh, well, I went to primary school in Nelson, and Auckland, and then I went for two years to the Auckland Grammar School, and failed to ... because I was at the bottom of the class, every year, consistently, at age fourteen I left school.

And what was your first job?

I was working on a dairy and sheep farm in the western part of the North Island, in very rough country, and milked eighty cows each night and each morning, and if I wasn't milking cows I was breaking in rough country - breaking in the bush - and learned to plough with a team of four horses, et cetera, et cetera. I got five shillings a week and my keep, and after two years, after many confrontations with the mistress of the house, who was an ex-school teacher and could see what a poor person I was because of her insight into school children, I was fired for being incompetent. And that was the best thing that ever happened to me, but it was probably a very instructive two years of my life because I developed physically and probably developed mentally more than I had in any two years in school too, just being out on the land working in this rough land - probably a good thing.

What did you do then?

I got a job in a hardware store in Auckland, which mainly consisted of weighing out bags of lead-headed nails. People in the state asked me what I did when I was a youth, I said I weighted lead-headed nails, which causes consternation because nobody in the states knows what a lead-headed nail is. And so I'm able to make drawings and show them. Do you know what a lead-headed nail is?

Now, I don't know what a lead-headed nail is?

God, you have to be kidding. A lead-headed nail is used for fastening on corrugated iron roofs on houses. The lead seals the (water) out. Every Australian knows what a lead-headed nail is, that's for damn sure.

And when does the camera work come in?

Well, the hardware store went broke after two years - I apparently didn't weigh out enough lead-headed nails quick enough for them to make a profit and they went broke, at which point I was offered a job by a one-man camera store next-door, which I, of course, took. This was - don't ask me exactly - it was in the '30s when things were pretty bad - the early '30s, I guess.

Let's see, where was I? Yes, I went to work - he offered me a job working in a small photo store. He encouraged me to take out cameras. His cameras consisted of Rolleiflexes and Contaxes, and Leicas, and Bell & Howal - he was the New Zealand agency for this equipment, he was a very bright man. He said that I would eventually be selling these items if I stayed with him and I'd better learn how to use them. And so he said take out a movie camera one weekend, or take a Rolleiflex, and help yourself to film, and just do it, and this is what I did. He didn't mind how much I used.

What sort of photography were you doing at this stage?
What kind of things, what were you going after?

Well, I was sailing at that stage of the game and I was climbing mountains, and I was skiing, and I was trout fishing, and I was racing a motorcycle, and any one of these, or all of these things, I photographed. As nobody had ever photographed them in New Zealand or Australian before, because everything was being photographed with a 3x4 camera, or something or other - a 3x4 Graphlex, or a 4x5 or something - and so I sort of took the first ... made use of the miniature camera. From the very moment I picked up cameras I picked up miniature cameras, which was very early, which is early in the era of miniature cameras in Australasia, and my pictures ... I would have a hard job taking better pictures now than I sort of instinctively took with these - I learnt to use them very quickly.

You weren't reading much about it, you were evolving your own style?

Yeah.

Very much so, yes. Well, how on earth did a New Zealander manage to land a job with the Department of Information in Australia?

This is going to be a long interview, isn't it? Well, as I was at the ripe age of seventeen - you said twenty-four, didn't you?

Well, somebody calculated twenty-four, yes.

I was born in 1916, you figure it. When the war started in September '39, if I remember correctly, in New Zealand you were given three months - if you were my age - you were given three months to join up or be conscripted. The time started eroding, it got down to be September, October, November - but God, it got to December, it must have been more than three months.

It got to December and I decided that I had to do something. It had occurred to me that the only way I'd feel comfortable going to the war would be to photograph it. The way I'd been photographing things, doing sporting things that I was involved in in New Zealand ...

(Incidental conversation)

... and so I decided that the only way I could really comfortably go to the war was to photograph it because I had - and indeed, it was necessary to have someone like me do it because I had developed this documentary sense, instinctively had developed this sense of the documentary and had been following documentary movies, and studying them.

The [nuke of the nought].

And what-a-name's films from Canada.

Grierson?

The Grierson school. I mean, I'd been following them, and got involved with other guys that were following them, and when I say that all I shot was amateur movies, we were really into it. We were a club and we were really into shooting movies, but in an amateur way, but using the documentary process, you see.

Had you read Grierson on documentary at that stage, the book on it?

Probably, our club entirely revolved around Grierson and ...

Basil Wright's 'Song of Ceylon' did you see?

Yeah, sure.

And 'Man of Aran'?

Oh, sure, yes, absolutely, absolutely.

So you are growing out of this movement as well. I mean, what's interesting me, of course, is that as well, Damien was following a parallel ...

Of course.

... parallel pattern.

Absolutely, except that he was ... see, the only difference ... that's why ... you saw in his letter, when we met ... when we met ... He came on the troop ship and met me, and we sat down and didn't stop talking for about twenty hours, it was immediate - absolute, immediate thing.

How did Damien Parer impress you when you first saw him?

Oh, well, I mean, it was just like a twin brother, it was just quite astonishing.

Did you talk about how you ought to go about shooting action footage, about his thing about being there?

No, no, no, we just ... we ... no, I don't think we ever talked about ... if I understand you correctly, we didn't ... I don't know what we talked about.

Movies?

We talked about movies and we talked about photography and what we were trying to do, and it was very obvious to anybody listening in, and certainly obvious to me, that we both felt a very strong crusading ... we felt that this was our crusade in life at this ... it was so bloody important to us to document ... that we'd got here somehow and we were just determined to document what happened to the diggers. And strangely, I say, What happened to the diggers? I don't think we ever discussed this, but in looking at these pictures this morning, and thinking about Damian's films, the ones that I've seen - I've seen very few of them - and looking at my pictures - we never photographed the brass, either of us, we photographed, we literally photographed, the diggers because our perception was so stark. As I say, the moment we met in this bloody boat, instead of packing my bags and leaving we just sat down and talked, and we just continued the conversation that I'd been having with these two or three guys I'd had in Auckland when we would look at Grierson and what's-a-name's films, the American ...

[Flaherty]

Flaherty, oh, yes, Flaherty. And we just sort of continued on and that's why it was ... and sometimes we would just talk all night. And occasionally someone would come along and we'd meet someone - a writer - there was one particular person whose name I can't remember now, he was an Englishman.

Morehead?

No, no - he was an Australian - no. Occasionally someone would come and join in and we'd get into a three-way go-around, it was really think-tank stuff in terms of photography. But we didn't discuss, I don't think - what was your question?

(Laughs)

What did you say we would discuss?

To shoot the material, but you are discussing more generally about your interest in documentary and all this sort of thing. It may be ...

How we'd applied this, how we would apply this into covering the diggers.

Yes. You were saying about Damien.

Yeah, well, I think that Damien and I had a oneness of thought that had to be quite amazing. You know, it happened to me again, this same oneness happened, when I joined *Life Magazine*, you see. It was as though it was ... it's just astonishing, I just walked in there and I was the ... I just fitted ...

What they wanted.

... just fitted so exactly I didn't have to ask any questions or do anything. It was the same with Damien, and this probably doesn't happen to many people in their lifetimes, that you fit in so exactly with someone. And I think that because of these conversations we had with each other that what later became important coverage, mainly in New Guinea, for both of us, really came out of these conversations we had, and they bore fruit eventually for both of us, as a matter of fact, right at the same time - and it was partly because of the conditions up there, but we were ready for it, really ready for it.

Let's go with the New Guinea stuff, if I may, because we've come to this. What happened? - we are jumping a lot of time actually, we'll come back to the desert later - but you went up to New Guinea. There was a plan, I understand, to link the pair of you together, that you were going to do the stills and he was going to do the film. What happened about that? - you were supposed to go together.

I didn't know about that. There's a little confusion here. I was not available to go to New Guinea with him because I was in New Zealand.

Right.

As I told you previously, when we came back from the Middle East I simply bought a ticket on the flying boat and flew to New Zealand - what the hell, I want to go and see my folks. I didn't ask anybody in the Department of Information, I just got on (the plane). I just went over for a week, what the hell, they are not going to miss me.

Well, so I did that and unfortunately - that's not true - the New Zealand film unit in Wellington - I mean, I was in the paper, my picture was in the paper, you know - and so the next thing, I got a call at my parents' house from the head of the film unit in New Zealand - a pretty powerful outfit, done a lot of good work - and they had, without asking me, been in touch, through the minister of something or other to the minister of something or other, from Wellington to Canberra, they had talked the Australians into letting me do some work for them in New Zealand. I wasn't consulted - I mean, a very, very nice guy, head of the film unit, he thought I'd be delighted, you see, and he thought this was a pretty good joke on me, and so I went along with it. But it sort of spun out for about ... for quite a long time. Oh, I had an accident too.

I went skiing and had a bad fall and broke my head open, and I was in hospital. Once again, I had a lot of things happen to me

that were nothing to do with the war. I'd forgotten about that. So I spent a lot of time in New Zealand, much longer than the week I'd expected to spend. I spent probably a month shooting pictures round New Zealand for the New Zealand Government, in connection with the war effort, and then I probably had a month with this - I had a skull fracture or something like that, something pretty bad - I've forgotten what it was - and then I eventually came back over here and Damien had already ... shot the Kokoda Trail. When I arrived here I think the film was just being shown - I didn't see it because the day I arrived they shot me up to New Guinea to take over from Damien, you see. He'd gone part way up the Kokoda Trail and then the Japs had come in and there'd been a retreat, and he came back out with that really incredible film. By the time I got up there the Australians had pushed across the top of the ranges and were about to take over Kokoda where there was a strip. The Army told me to wait and that within a couple of days I'd be able to fly in to Kokoda, which, thank God, I did because by the time you'd walked over the Owen Stanley Ranges you weren't much good for anything, it was a pretty brutal operation.

And so I flew into Kokoda and joined General Vasse and General Woten, and those people, and continued with them all the way through to the day before the fall of Buna when I collapsed with all the diseases that everybody got up there, and was pulled out.

What about your approach at this stage? It was fairly fully developed now, you were shooting ... I mean, we were talking this morning about you actually being there and being able to shoot a man, which is on the cover of *Bloody Buna*, of shooting from the hip. This is also the period, I gather, of the famous blinded digger being brought in by the black man.

Yeah.

Were you getting in close, were you after action, were you after the lives of the men?

You are after the actuality. There's a document happening in front of you and you try to freeze it, but in trying to freeze it you try to bring the emotion as well that's happening there. I mean, you don't freeze it by setting up a 8x10 camera, you freeze it by trying to grab it, in that sort of stuff, to try and make it effective. That's why the film frames from Damian's film was so good. I mean, you had to do those ... suddenly, with Damian and I, we had to feel it very strongly. When I came here this morning I said, 'I'd like to see a contact sheet of the twelve pictures that were on that roll of film that had the blind Australian and the Papuan native on it', because, as I remember that incident, it was Christmas Day, and I had been back to the battalion headquarters - I think I was sleeping mostly at battalion headquarters - and I was making my way up to the front at that moment - the front being only a few hundred yards away across this field of tall kunai grass - a sort of a cutty grass - and I remember very distinctly that as I was walking - the troops were up there, four to eight hundred

yards ahead of you, but you couldn't see them, they were all dug in - you turned around behind you and the headquarters was in the jungle, and here was just this path going through - I was the only person on the path - and then suddenly I saw two people walking towards me, from a half mile away. And obviously, because of the way we'd trained our minds, and trained ourselves, in this, to document things, I remember feeling there was something distinctive about these two people - I couldn't see that one guy was blind and one was nude, but there was something strange. And of course, what it was, that one holding the other - probably, who knows, but I could feel something.

And so as they got closer I could see, indeed, that here was a guy, looked like he'd lost his eyes, and here was this tender scene of this - you've got to look at that picture, this native is helping this man so tenderly, it's a very compassionate picture - and I saw all this just in a flash, and I felt it in me, and for a second I thought, God, I've got to take a picture, but I sort of didn't want to, I didn't want to interfere with this awful - this guy losing his (eyes), I didn't want to capitalise on the scene. And so as I remember it, I squatted down beside the track and set the camera at ten feet - the Rolleiflex at ten feet - and as they went by - I didn't even look through the finder, to try not to be looking, you know - and took one shot. As I remember, I took one shot - of course, I could be wrong, that's such a long time ago, but I didn't take a lot of shots, I know that. I let them go by and I see this morning, reading it, that the fellow's name is printed there. Now, the only way they could have the name is for me to have got it from him, and I was very good at getting names (laughs). It makes me really a big shot, doesn't it? It's come back to me since lunch, thinking about it, looking at the picture, that I think that what I did, I ran back after they had gone by me, several hundred yards, I thought, I've got to get his name. And then I ran down and I got over the emotion part, and I went and talked to him and got his name. But I didn't take any more pictures. I'd love to see the contact sheets to see what I did do.

(Laughs)

Tape identification: Interview between George Silk and Neil MacDonald, recorded on 21/12/1984. Tape Number 2.

Another of the great shots was the one where you are standing up, looking down on a machine gunner, surrounded by dead bodies. Can you tell us anything about how you got that one?

Yes, that picture was taken outside of Buna, on the approach from Cape Endaiadere - between Cape Endaiadere and the mission at Buna, I think, probably, within one or two days of the fall of Buna. I had been, for two days, with the Australian troops when they captured Cape Endaiadere and then pushed along the coast to Buna. That picture, as I remember it, was taken after a tremendous amount of fierce fighting that day - or for two days, as a matter of fact, of fierce fighting - and this

particular battalion had fifty or sixty per cent casualties, as I remember it, in doing this.

(Incidental conversation)

And at the time this picture was taken they had come to a position where they couldn't advance any more and the Vickers machine gun had been brought up to try and - that's in the picture, it's of a Vickers machine gun - and they were using it to try and keep the Japs down, contain the Japs. While they were doing whatever they were doing - which, I think, was just marking time and getting their breath back because in the picture you can see that there are diggers sitting with their backs to coconut trees and you can be sure that the other side of that coconut tree is where the bullets are coming from. I heard this gun chattering and someone said that there had been a lot of trouble there, a couple of guys had been killed, and I went up to them. And while I was there, lying down - I'd crawled up to them - and when I was there, the two fellows that are in the picture manning the gun, came in while I was there because the previous crew had been killed. And as I remember it I think there were three or four Australians killed at that time, just before I'd taken that picture. In the picture you can see the helmets, the empty helmets, lying there, and you can see one dead man. I just stood up briefly when they started shooting, I just stood up briefly and shot a picture and crashed to the ground again. And they didn't like that because it would draw fire, of course, but that's the only way I could do it. And that was one of the pictures that the Department would not release because it had dead men in it and they didn't feel they should ever show a dead body. That was the beginning of 1942 that I brought those pictures down here, just after the New Year, I think. They felt that that picture, and most of my other pictures, were too awful to use, including the blinded Australian. I felt that I had done my bit better than I ever thought I could do it, in taking these pictures, and was incensed that they wouldn't release them.

You circumvented this though, didn't you?

And it really ate at me - and I was very sick with malaria and everything else at that time which probably drove me to do things I mightn't have done otherwise, which meant circumventing it. And I got hold of about three prints - 8x10 prints - through someone in the lab there - in the DI lab in Sydney. And a lot of people had been coming to me and asking me where were my pictures, other correspondence from other countries - US and England - but really from US and England asking where were my pictures. You see, I was the only correspondent between Kokoda and Buna, there was nobody else on the Trail, just nobody, I was the only one. And so my stuff, they were terribly interested in anything that I had. So they came demanding the pictures and I said, go to the Department - the Department wouldn't release them - and finally this one person, Bill [Chickering] of *Time Magazine*, came to me and he said, 'Look, George, I know the story and I know you must have got tremendous pictures. Look, if you'll give me a couple of them, a couple that you think are good ones, I'll get them

passed by the censor and send them to the United States.'

I thought about this for a couple of days and then I called him and said, 'Okay, if you show me the pictures with the stamp on, passed by South-West Pacific censor,' - which was MacArthur's headquarters in Brisbane - I said, 'you can do that.' And so I think he took three pictures, flew up to Brisbane, had them stamped, brought them back, showed them to me, and sent them off to the United States.

And of course, then the dam burst because I didn't realise ... I mean, I thought that really nobody would take much notice of it, that nobody back here would notice that there are a couple of pictures from Buna back in the States, you know. But as soon as *Life Magazine* took the picture of the blinded Australian and used it as a full-page section they called 'Picture of the Week' - it was the 'Picture of the Week' - and it immediately caused a big stir. Newspaper articles about it started appearing in the United States and the correspondence for the Australian dailies, in New York, cabled their papers here saying 'George Silk's fantastic picture of the blinded Australian is causing a great stir here, is considered the greatest picture taken in the war so far of a fighting man', and things like that, you know. The editors here picked up the phone and called the Department of Information and said, What pictures? Of course, I didn't realise all that would happen, I was pretty naive, wasn't I? and so I was up for treason from then on. I managed to escape from that because by that stage of the game I had all the newspapers on my side. When the story came out of what I'd done, the editors of the newspapers, including the Sydney Morning Herald, said, Oh, for God sake, those bastards! - meaning the D of I, you see - and so everything, the reservoir just burst with emotion, the result of which [Horze] got fired - Ashley ...

Relieved.

... relieved, and Calwell came in, and it was a new department created called the Department of Information and Censorship. It was no longer just the Department of Information, they added the Censorship to it, officially I guess, because I'd got this censorship stamp. I don't know why they did it, but anyhow, that's pretty much what happened. And somehow I [lucked] out and left it all, and went to enjoy my (inaudible).

Can you give me your impressions - he was one of the few people that Damian Parer every said anything unpleasant about - can you give me your impressions of what Bob Horze was like as a person, just to meet, and that kind of thing? He was the secretary of the Department of Information.

No, I really can't because I really ... I only think I met him once. I wrote him a letter of my resignation and we had a correspondence about that, and it wasn't until later that I met him and that was under very unpleasant circumstances because he had to approve my accreditation as a war correspondent in the South-West Pacific because the Department of Information was in

charge of accrediting foreign correspondents and I was now a foreign correspondent. And so I had to go to his office to get an accreditation and it became a very sticky scene.

There was supposed to have been a confrontation between you when he tried to order you to Melbourne after you resigned from the DOI. Do you recall that?

Yeah ... your referring to something you saw in a file.

Yes.

Did it say I collapsed with malaria?

It was after you'd got out of hospital and there was some reference - they even got a travel warrant for you.

You see - got what?

A travel warrant to send you down to Melbourne actually, at one stage. They went through the whole rigmarole actually, and they'd already sent you a letter accepting your resignation. It was really quite odd.

Yes. I think it's possible that - you see, malaria comes back on you and I think I did go down to Melbourne. The next day, on Flinders Street, I collapsed in the gutter with a really violent malaria, and couldn't walk, you know - delirious - and I was put in hospital again, I think. So I think they were probably all very happy to get rid of me, eventually.

Can we come back to another of the great shots, in New Guinea, in this earlier period, or just before all we've just been talking about? The one with the Bren gunner firing from the hip, which is outside Buna, I understand.

I don't think he's firing from the hip, he's using the coconut tree - there's the book over there, right here.

Yeah - oh, I see, yes.

This is a coconut tree and he's resting it on the coconut tree.

Yeah. Do you recall that one? It's one of the knock-out shots of the ...

Yes, I certainly do, that was taken before the Vickers gun shot of the dead crew, that was taken during the advance, that was taken during the advance with the Stewart tanks, the half dozen Stewart tanks they had there. The Stewart tanks would lead the attack, and the diggers followed along, either beside them or behind them, or in line across with them, and the tanks would endeavour - the Japanese were in the coconut log pillboxes which were just a trench with coconut logs piled on them, several deep, and in a slit - a firing slit - through which they could shoot through. It was not possible to get them out of there except by going right up to the bloody pillboxes - the slit trenches with the coconut logs on them. The Stewart tanks

enabled the infantry to do that by just - they'd pick one pillbox, that place, those cupboards there, and everybody would just concentrate on it. The other periphery troops would try and keep down anybody else that was getting up and shooting, or trying to quiet them down, and they'd demolish one pillbox at a time. The Stewarts would go in with their two pounder, blasting in there, and their machine guns, and the troops would just have to go in, right into the pillbox. You saw that one picture there of the smoke coming out of the pillbox; the guy's just thrown a grenade in, you know, and it killed the Japs in there.

And in this picture here, as I remember it, this is a very long, very wide - this is a battalion movement here and these troops are spread out over a good two hundred yards across the jungle, and advancing. They'd advance fifty feet and get stopped, and then the tanks would have to come in, and the Bren gunner comes in, and they just mow down another one more pillbox, and they can advance another ten feet, and this goes on, and on, and on. I think this guy got killed, in one of my pictures, either this guy or ... one of these guys in this picture got killed and was carried away.

And where were you - you were standing beside them?

They were standing up so I stood up, of course.

Naturally, yes. You weren't armed, of course.

No, thank God.

But it's a stunning shot. I mean, as Dudley McArthur was saying earlier, you can see, in a good print of it, you can see the sweat coming down the faces.

Well, I think that those pictures taken on a two-day period at Cape Endaiadere - and they are best illustrated in that book, War in New Guinea, where it's got this picture as a double page - and it's got other pictures double pages there - of this fighting. I think those pictures that I took there are certainly amongst the best action pictures I took in the war. They are not like they are an entirely different type of picture to the blinded digger, you know, but to actually show troops in a fight, I mean, I think I succeeded fairly well. And it was on the second day of this thing that I collapsed and I was nearly left there. Some guy came along and rolled me over with his foot, Apparently I groaned and they realised I was alive - they thought I'd been shot, you see - they didn't know who I was, I mean, I just looked like anybody (else), we all looked so scruffy, you know, had a beard. Apparently I moaned when he rolled me over and they called the medics, and I was unconscious with malaria and they got me out of there, otherwise I probably would have died right there, one day from the end of Buna.

You also started using the tanks for cover - there is a shot there, that we just looked at earlier this morning, which may have influenced Damian, you think.

Oh, ah-ha, I wouldn't think that, no. I mean, anybody uses a tank for cover, that's what they are there for, whether you are a photographer or a fighter. If you can use the tank for cover you will, it's just an obvious thing.

Incidentally, I don't think I ever had ... Ron Williams had his conversations with Damian, and I was not included; then I had my conversations with Damian and Ron didn't seem to be included. I was thinking about it when I was going in there. And, you know, what I was saying about these conversations that Damian and I would get into all night, it occurs to me that Ron was never there. And I don't know why, but Damian and I was a one-on-one thing; I'm saying that in case you should say anything to Ron. He may verify, or not verify, but I don't think he was ever there when we had our real sessions, which is curious.

No, it's something that's paralleled right the way through work on him, but a lot of people have these one-to-one relationships with him.

With Damian?

With Damian - Max [Dupain], others - and they all thought - he had this gift for friendship - they all thought they were the only one. It's very interesting that you should say that.

Yes.

Well, coming back to the Middle East - we didn't get what we wanted you to comment on earlier - but could you comment on, perhaps, Ron [Mazlan] Williams at that stage of his career? I mean, the reason I mention this is because quite frequently we meet them as mature men, and it's interesting to get your impressions of them as they were in, say, their late twenties, early thirties.

,,, I don't really know how to put it into words because I was really never a friend with Ron as I was with Damian, and I think Ron recognised me as being young in my ways, and naive, and he was intellectually much older than I was. I think I was, intellectually, very young when I went to the Middle East, I'd lived a sheltered life and I think it showed. And I think Ron was very - he was genuinely an intellectual person, and he has a great wit, and I think he probably had a fairly ... pretty good education, and he had a lot more going for him in the intellectual business of ... in the ... what am I saying? I'm getting stonkered. I think that maybe he was a little impatient with me - okay? I think that he wouldn't be now - okay? I think that maybe he was a little impatient with me and I think that he had good reason to be. And he didn't really have to worry about me because Damian was his worry, and he liked to battle with - if he wanted a battle or wanted to do something interesting, he would sort of battle with Hurley, just for laughs. And so I really didn't ever feel that I knew Ron Williams very well, nor did I get close to him.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Tape identification: Interview between George Silk and Neil MacDonald, Tape Number 3, recorded on 21/12/1984.

(Incidental conversation)

You asked me about Frank Hurley.

Right.

You shouldn't have stopped me, damn it. What was I going to say? I think that Frank and I just didn't see eye to eye in any possible way. He was dealing with 8x10 cameras and [Dubray], [Dubree] - what do they call them? the movie cameras.

Dubree, I think.

The big heavy movie cameras you put on a tripod - and I was dealing with a Contax or a Rolleiflex, and an [Imo], and no possible way the twain could ever meet. He considered I was just ... he looked at me as a child, just toying in photography, because he couldn't understand anything but his own way of photography - and as anybody that knows it who has studied Frank Hurley, he's done an awful lot of photography, and an awful lot of good photography, but he was of no help to me - or Damian - in what we were trying to do, which was the new wave. There's just no way that the old guy could understand what we were trying to do. I wish that I had known this, I wish I'd know what I've just said, as clearly then as I do now because if I had I wouldn't have let it worry me. He did worry me because he put me down, I felt; all the time he was putting me down he showed no faith in anything I did. And I felt lost and far from home at times, believe me, in that apartment with Frank Hurley, in Cairo.

But I eventually got over it, apparently, by simply just not being there, just taking off in a pick-up truck that I had and going out in the desert and looking for the fighting, and finding it, and not particularly worrying whether it was Australians, or New Zealanders, or British. If there was a good fight going on I'd go there, and in fact, some of the best pictures I took of tank fighting, or around the results of tanks fighting, was in Sidi Rezegh which, of course, was probably the most famous tank fight in the whole of the Western Desert in that period, which led to the relief of Tobruk. All the tanks were going one way and so I went with them, thinking I'd get some pictures when they got into a fight, and suddenly there were tanks on fire around me and there were things skipping across the desert beside me, which I later learned were armour-piercing shells which skip when they hit the desert, they skip just like a bloody stone on a pond. Of course, I didn't know that at the time. Fortunately, it was getting dark and the fight discontinued, and the tank guys came over to me and wanted to know what the heck I was doing. Then they produced some beer and we had a long talk about it, and

had a lot of fun. Then at dawn the next day, they all started off again.

And sure enough, Tobruk was relieved and the Black Watch ... I think, maybe, I thought there were still Australians in Tobruk because just before the relief of Tobruk the Australians were pulled out - the 9th Division, I think it was - and they were pulled out, I think, at the orders of Curtin - not Curtin - was Curtin in charge or the prime minister? I think that he demanded the Australians be pulled out because they'd been in Tobruk for nine months - I think nine months - and I think I probably went up there thinking they were still in there, in Tobruk. It never occurred to me to ask anybody if they were or they weren't, I just presumed they were still there - why would they pull them out just as they are going to relieve Tobruk? - and so I probably went up there thinking they were still there.

Anyhow, I went marching in with the Black Watch - now, this is rather strange, I'm not quite sure. The Black Watch, I think, were in Tobruk and they burst out - does that make sense? - and they got decimated, they had sixty or seventy per cent casualties, an incredible number were killed. And somehow I joined up with one company of them towards the end of that break-out. How in God's name I got to be with a company of the Black Watch, when they are breaking out from Sidi Rezegh, I don't know, but this is what happened in the desert. It was like the ocean, in between groups of GIs - fighting forces - you could drive in between, nobody shot at you because they didn't know who you were, or they couldn't see you, or something.

So somehow I found myself with some Black Watch and they were sort of clean mopping up. They were so full of hate that I was scared. Anybody that they saw they just killed, they just fired a Bren gun until they cut them in half, even if a guy is trying to surrender - which wasn't uncommon in war, that's not uncommon, but it's not a nice thing to see. Here again, I'm merely pointing out that here I was with the Black Watch, and with the 7th Hussars, or something or other, a tank fight - and I'm sure that the Department of Information must have been wondering what the hell I was doing (laughs). But it only points out that we were a very disorganised outfit. Frank Hurley was supposed to be in charge, he didn't go anything, we were not organised, I just drove off by myself and found a fight and took some pictures, had a little fun, you know.

You were in your pick-up truck, then you abandoned the pick-up truck?

When I went with the troops, sure. Is that what you mean?

Yeah.

Sure, sure, I'd just leave it somewhere - you had to leave it if you were going to go on foot. I'd try and leave it at a headquarters of some sort, but if not, just leave it. I mean, there was nothing in it except a couple of barrels of wine, and anybody is free to help themselves to that. There is always

plenty of Italian wine around to be put on, and all I had was a couple of 35 millimetre cameras and a little bag of film, and so the back was always filled with one red and one white cask of wine, for my friends. It didn't cost me anything.

Not a drop passed your lips, of course. About your ... somebody listening to this is going to wonder, I just had a glass of water. Anyway, about the equipment that you were working with at that stage, you were using, also - quite unusually, you mentioned before, for that period - a modified telephoto lens. Can you explain something about that?

It wasn't a modified telephoto (lens) - well, I was using 180 millimetre - 18 centimetres, yeah - 180 millimetre lens made by Contax. It was only a 6.3 lens, which is a very small aperture - 6.3 Biogon lens, and it was a real find for me - I found it in Tel Aviv and probably paid £50 for it, or £20, or whatever it was. I went and bought it and it enabled me to use a very long telephoto lens on 35 millimetre which, in many cases, made the pictures much more dramatic than if they were just shot with a 50 millimetre lens.

What stage did you start trying to experiment with a motor driven camera?

That wasn't until after - that was when I joined *Life Magazine*. After I left the Department of Information I found a camera repair person in New York city who I was telling my troubles to, and he said that there was such a thing made and he would see if he could locate one. He succeeded in locating one and we put this contraption on a Leica. Indeed, I used it for about six months in Europe - it was a winder; when I pressed the trigger it would self wind, you know.

Why did you do this? What was the reason?

I did this so that, simply and purely, so that there would be one less thing I had to do if I was in combat. If you start trying to do too many things, you can't keep track of what's happening around you, and also, sometimes, if you can take three quick pictures, or ten quick pictures, you are going to document the scene much better, or you are going to get one picture out of those ten which is outstandingly better than the other nine. And I did not just buy the motor to hold it up and press the trigger, it was just a way of automatically transporting the film, which left my mind free to work easier.

Talking about that, actually that quite famous layout that is in the book that Frank Johnstone put out, of the Japanese in the water with the hand grenade. Can you tell the story of that one? - well, that series really.

Yes, well, that was in New Guinea, of course, and it was on Cape Endaiadere - I think I'm pronouncing that right. The battalion - I should know the number of the battalion - was brought up from Milne Bay where they had been doing some jungle training, or came back from the Middle East, and they were

brought up as fresh, brand-new, fresh troops because everybody else had come to a dead halt, and this battalion was brought up with about half a dozen Stewart tanks, which were the first tanks that we had there.

At dawn they just charged right in. One tank went along the beach - in that book you'll see the pictures of the tank charging along the beach, and the soldiers with fixed bayonets behind the tank, charging along to keep up with the tank. They went ... the Japanese in one pillbox were missed by the tank in that first wave of troops, and as soon as they passed the Japanese - about six of them - ran out of the end of the pillbox - which was right at the edge of the beach - and ran into the water, started swimming. And some troops that were either - I don't know what these Australian troops were doing, but there were a few of them behind the main wave - immediately started shooting at them and a couple of them were signalling to them to put their hands up - they were putting their own hands up like this and saying, 'Put your hands up' - of course, they couldn't speak to them, but they were signalling. And there was one Japanese did put his hands up, and the other five were shot dead. And he put his hands up and started coming back in - and you could see that his hand was closed, you know - I think we were against the light and all you could see was the silhouette of his hand, and you could see that it was a fist, that he had a big fist - and one Australian yelled out to the one that I'm photographing, 'He's got a grenade! - he's got a grenade! - look out, he's got a grenade!' and this guy then signalled to him, in the pictures, to drop the grenade. The guy then took a few more steps towards us and pulled the pin, and killed himself. He just disappeared into the water and killed himself. And I shot those pictures with a Rolleiflex and it really sort of amazes me now - I mean, this happened, very quickly, and how the hell I wound it on and recocked the shutter, and shot - this is where a motor would have been the perfect thing - and I shot it like a movie. That's where I got the idea of movies really.

And that was the first time that the world knew, the first time they heard, that the Japanese committed harakiri when they were captured. Of course, it went on from there and became (inaudible) - thousands committed harakiri up there, and jumped over cliffs and killed themselves, and had the charge, yelling 'banzai', and they'd charge to death, and if they didn't get killed they would beg you to kill them, or they would kill themselves, you know.

We'd better go back to where we started from because I'd then like to go on and ask you about your subsequent career. But could you tell us now the story about how you actually did get into the Department of Information when you came up to Canberra? - the last time you visited Canberra actually, in 1939.

Yeah, the last time I visited Canberra. Well, I started to tell you - didn't we talk about this?

No, we went off on a slight digression.

I should probably start back with the fact that I figured I had decided that the only way I could go to the war fruitfully was to be a photographer and to document the war, and so with this in mind I went to the recruiting office in Auckland, New Zealand, and spoke to the officer that was doing the recruiting, and told him what I had in mind, that sort of thing. And he said, 'Young man, there's no question, just sign here and you'll be a photographer by tomorrow night.' I said, 'Oh, no, I don't think that would work.' (Laughs) I must have been really naive, mustn't I? I remember saying I don't think that would work. He gave me a real hard line and tried to talk me into it, and I said no, I wouldn't do it. Then I went and I left there and I went and talked to a couple of people, and they said, no, you did the right thing. And I said, 'What the heck do I do now?' because I was not a professional photographer, indeed, I was not a professional photographer - I'd worked on a newspaper, et cetera, et cetera, but I knew a lot about it without having ... didn't have to do that - and I was really convinced that I was in the right track.

I finally came down to the fact that the only other thing I could do was come to Australia and try and get a job here, and if I didn't succeed then I would just simply have to join the Australian Army, or join the New Zealand Army - I would have to join the Australian Army because I didn't have my fare to get to New Zealand. And so after bugging around in Sydney for about three weeks, and using up all my money, trying to figure out who'd I go and see, it suddenly occurred to me, in a flash, that the only person to see was the prime minister. Something must have been in the paper, or something or other, I think - I don't remember anything prompting me, I think I just arrived at it out of series of thinking, and trying to figure out, what the hell, I'll go and tell him what I want to do and see what would happen. And that's what I did, except that I only got as far as his chief aid, the man in the striped morning suit, who told me that he appreciated that I obviously had something very serious to talk to the prime minister about, but it was impossible to see the prime minister unless I told him what I wanted to see the prime minister about. And I said, 'Well, if I tell you, that's as far as it will ever go.' And he said, 'If I promise you that I'll tell the prime minister if I think it's important, will you tell me? because,' he said, 'otherwise that's as far as you are going to go.'

And I looked at him and he was really very sincere, and I came to the conclusion that he really meant what he said. So I broke down and opened my package of portfolio pictures, told him my story, and he said then, after about three minutes, he picked them up and said, 'Sit tight.' And he went in, and about twenty minutes later he came out and he said, 'The prime minister wants to know if you could leave these pictures here till this afternoon as he'd like to show them to the boys in the cabinet at lunch time.' I can remember this statement, 'the boys in the cabinet'. And I said, 'Sure.'

And so I came back at three o'clock and the man in the striped suit said that the prime minister is not in, he can't see you,

but he told me to ask you if you could go to Melbourne tonight on the train. And I said, 'Why?', and he said, 'Look, you came to see me, didn't you?' He said, 'The prime minister would like you to go to Melbourne; can you go?' and I said, 'Well, I don't have enough money.' He said, 'Oh, we'll give you a ticket.' And I said, 'Okay, I'll go to Melbourne.' And I didn't catch on really, and he gave me my packet of pictures back and I went to Melbourne. I was met by Mapleton, or Stapleton.

Mapleton.

Mapleton - and taken to a hotel, the Victoria Barracks Hotel, taken to the [Abacrombie office] of Melbourne and fitted with this flashy looking uniform you see here, and within a couple of days I was on a boat heading for the Middle East. And there was no report of my appointment until after the boat had left Perth, they didn't announce my appointment. And then, because of the business of me having got the job over - the AGA's wanted to have one of their older hands, their most senior man, appointed to this job, and Menzies didn't want their most senior man - the man told me - someone told me later - Percy Spender told me when he came to the Middle East - I got very friendly with Percy Spender - and he told me the story, he looked me up, in fact. I was photographing and he said, 'Oh, you're George Silk', and he told me a lot of the background of the story because he was one of the people that approved it, you see, approved my appointment. He said that the AGA had tried to force Menzies to take an older person, which I presume was Hurley - I only presume - and Menzies didn't want to, he wanted a young man.

Menzies must have been sort of extraordinary, he understood exactly what I was saying when I said I wanted to photo-document the troops. He must have because, I mean, the appointment was immediate. And so eventually I got news clippings from Australia, and from my folks in New Zealand, saying that I was being called a scab by the AGA and that my pictures would never get used, and that they'd sent detectives to New Zealand. The first thing that my poor mother knew about my appointment was two detectives arriving on the doorstep asking her questions about me, and not telling her why they were asking them, and of course, she was beside herself. Then the newspaper stories told the story about the two detectives going to New Zealand and they finished up by saying, 'He's not even a photographer's bootlace' - I've got the clipping - 'He's not even a photographer's bootlace'. And so I was sort of on the hot seat and when Frank Hurley came over, you see, I had a lot of things going against me, but things were really mounting up. It was sort of amazing I survived really.

Well, tell us about the time you nearly, quote, 'court martialled', after you smashed a camera.

We did that, didn't we?

No, you told us, but we didn't have the tape (going).

Well, a camera strap broke when I was up on top of the mast of

the troop ship I went over to Egypt on - the [*Strathaird*], I think its name was - *Strathaird*, is that a name you remember? - beautiful troop ship, beautiful ocean liner, she still had the crew on, she just took us over just as though we were first-class tourists - and I was up on the top of the mast and the damn thing caught on something, it broke anyhow, and this Contax fell to the deck and broke, smashed to pieces. A couple of these red-tab officers in General Blamey's headquarters staff decided to have fun at my expense, apparently, and they had a court martial in which I was - or a court of enquiry - court of enquiry, pardon me - a court of enquiry into this camera, and I think they did it at my expense for laughs. Later they said they were doing it for practise, they had to have these things, but it really didn't help my morale very much, to be made to stand up in a dock like a monkey.

Tape identification: This is Tape Number 4, an interview between George Silk and Neil MacDonald, recorded on 21/12/1984.

Would you say that perhaps the contemporary photographers, rather like Hurley - you saw Hurley as the old school - but the contemporary photographers would regard you as old school, or do you think you see a continuity between what you were doing and what they are doing now?

Do I see? - oh - I've never discussed it with them because it never occurred to me that I'm old like Hurley was - of course, I am - and so I've never really thought about it too much. But if I do think about it I would say ... I would have to say that I don't ... I find it bothers me that the way to become famous in photography, and make a name for yourself, and make a lot of money, has been, starting with the Vietnam War, has been for young guys to pick up a camera, that weren't even photographers in many cases, and go to the front lines and just be ... not just be brave, be stupid, because they figure the only way to get pictures is to be in the front line, and if they get them they'll be used, and they'll become famous and make a lot of money. The result of this is that the death rate has just gone up to such an extent that I just hate to think about it. And of course, I may have been one of the people who led them into this because they know that I was a war photographer, and I went on from being a war photographer to being a successful non-war photographer, and made enough money to live on, and made a great deal of money, as a matter of fact - for a New Zealander I made a lot of money, and it surprises me, and so they must look at me and probably regard me as a figure that they followed.

But I didn't do it that way. I had to go to the war because, one way or another, it just seemed to be the right thing to do. It worked out that I became famous because of the war, yes, and then I made a second career after the war - it took me quite a while, it took me several years to get away from the war type photography and start being creative again - it's very difficult.

Bob [Capper] said, 'George, what are you going to do when the

war ends? The only thing you know how to do is take pictures of the war, you're really in trouble' - 'Thanks a lot, Bob.'

What did you do after the war? Where did you go after the war? What sort of photography did you start doing?

I didn't do anything of significance for several years. Until I finally got married and started having a family, and realised that I had to take stock of myself, that I realised this, that I was just treading water, which is no way to live, and there is not much security in that. And I started rethinking everything and the resultant career, the new (inaudible) photography came out of me just then while sitting down and taking stock. I couldn't have lasted much longer, I'd have been fired, I'm sure - I wasn't producing anything of any significance.

And what are the things that you are most proud of in your later career - I mean, what sort of layouts and work that you did that you are happiest with?

Oh, the next question is, What picture do you like best? There's no answer to these things - there's no answer to these things.

What ones give you the most satisfaction of the group that you did of that period?

There's no answer to that because you always think that the last thing you did, or the thing you are doing, is the most satisfactory, and I'm particularly a person who does not live in the past, and if I did I wouldn't be here looking for pictures, I'd have them all, I'd have collected them all, as they happened, and I'd have kept the negatives. A lot of photographers do, it's amazing. I find photographers that have all their original negatives, even though they worked for government outfits, or *Life Magazine*. I don't have any of mine because I never lived in the past. And these guys are all thinking about the future, but living in the past. David Douglas Duncan has every negative he ever took, when he worked for *Life Magazine* and worked for the Marine Corps in the war, and he has them all. How he gets away with it, or how he lives with himself, but he does it. And when *Time Life* wants to use any of his pictures, he charges them for them, even though they paid to have them taken. I mean, I take my hat off to him, I wish I had a little of that zeal, but I'm still the naive New Zealander, I guess, I never sort of thought that way. And so I have no favourite picture. The next story was always going to be the best one.

What I'm really getting at, really, is the sorts of things you started doing. Let me put it to you another way ...

(Voice in background) What is the difference between what you did after the war and what you did in your later career?

Well, I started to specialise because I was just all over the

place. I even bought a 5x7 camera, that's how desperate I was - I didn't know how to use a 5x7 camera, it's ridiculous - because I just hadn't sat back and taken stock of myself, or if I had I didn't know how to handle it, and I didn't have Damian Parer to talk to, and there was no World War II to ...

Focus.

... focus on - there was no focus. And what happened was, I guess the sports editor had had me do two or three things for him in the early '50s and he just liked my work very much, and liked working with me. He asked me if I wouldn't come and just work for him in the sports department. I said, 'God, no, I'm not a sports photographer', and he said, 'Like hell you are not. You take the best sports pictures of anybody in the magazine.' And he said, 'Why don't you just come for a few weeks and do nothing but work with me. We'll talk (inaudible) into some sort of an arrangement like that. And if you don't like it at the end of a month or two months we'll call it off.' And so we tried it and it worked. He became a person I could focus on something with and we became very good friends, and we would sit up all night chewing the fat and throwing out ideas, and various incredible things that created incredible pictures. I mean, things so simple as putting a camera on a ski, except that nobody had ever done it.

I wanted to do a skiing story - and God, I love to ski - and so I wanted to spend the winter skiing. And he said, 'You can't take skiing pictures any more, they are all the same', and they were. Ever since the '30s nobody had taken a different skiing picture until I literally put a camera on a ski. That's why I went to Sun Valley and got friendly with the barman out there, who was a ski bum, and said, 'Hey, how about putting a camera on your ski', and he said, 'Are you nuts?' and I said, 'Probably.' He said, 'Why do you want to put a camera on a ski?' I said, 'To take some good skiing pictures.' He said, 'Oh, that wouldn't give you a good picture.' And I said, 'Well, let's try it' - 'How would you do it?' - 'I'll have to bore a hole in a ski and put a camera on.' He said, 'You are not going to make a hole in my ski', and I said, 'Well, how about I make a hole in my ski and use my skis.' He said, 'What sort of skis have you got?' and I said, 'What would you like?' and I had him, you see. Being two o'clock in the morning, and he and I are doing a little drinking, and so I had him nailed.

And so the next morning he selected the pair of skis he wanted and I drilled holes in them, up and down, so I could place cameras in different places, you know, and we started working. And it was a miracle, the moment I saw the first picture come back, the first picture, I said, 'It's a new world', and it was. I just went on and put cameras on surfboards, and cameras on ice boats, and cameras on airplanes, and started living again. What happened was, I got to the point - and incredible point - where I suddenly realised - someone interviewed me and said, 'How do you do this?' and I said, 'What do you mean?' and they said, 'Well, how do you know what you are getting?' I suddenly realised that I was taking pictures intuitively, in my mind, as though ... I mean, when the picture would come back it

would be so perfectly framed it was unbelievable that I hadn't used the viewfinder. Of course, I put the camera on whatever it was, I know that would be contained there, but then I had to shoot it remote with a radio, or something or other, and the picture would come out. And people literally wouldn't believe that I hadn't been there looking through the viewfinder. And what happened, I developed a sense in, my mind, of exactly what I was getting. Once I started working this way I never had a surprise, I got exactly what I ...

Set out to get.

... exactly what I thought I was going to get. And I used that ... I mean I put a camera on the football field - it was kick-off. I flew down to Melbourne with the guy that - he then worked with public relations for some big outfit - and he flew down to Melbourne and we became good friends. We got back to the States, and son of a gun if he wasn't appointed the commissioner of one of the leagues - football leagues in the United States - and he still is. I can't even remember his name, you'd probably know him, he's such a famous guy.

And so I called him up and said, hey - he'd just become commissioner of the league, and the league was just sort of really blossoming, it was really big business - and I said, 'Do you know, I've got a really good idea for a picture, of football', and he said, 'Well, go ahead', and I said, 'Don't you want to hear what it is?' He said, 'George, if you want to do it, you do it.' I said, 'I think you'd better hear what it is.' He said, 'Well, I'm busy.' And I said, 'I want to put a radio-controlled camera eighteen inches from the football at the kick-off, of the Baltimore game, the opening game of the season. Next Saturday, or Sunday, I want to put on a camera on a little stand with a radio next to it. It will only be very small.' And he said, 'Do it.'

You know, the television cameras were all up there paying thousands and millions of dollars to photograph it all, and I walked on. And I said, 'Well, look, I'll need some help on this.' He said, 'You want me there, George?' I said, 'Yes. If your not there they'll never let me do that, you know that.' He said, 'Okay, I'm going to be at the game anyhow. I'll come down before the start, to the halfway mark, I'll meet you there and we'll go and do it.'

He said, 'Okay, go out on the field and put it down.' So I went out on the grounds, on the field, and put it down - I felt pretty stupid - and put it down - I'll tell you why I felt stupid in a minute because as I turned round to come off the field, the guy that was going to kick off the ball said, 'Hey you, if you want a picture of me kicking off the ball you'd better turn the camera around', and I looked around and realised that in American football the side that kicks off is different to the side in rugby - okay - and the guy that won the toss ... and so I put it facing the wrong way. And so I had to go back and turn the camera around. And I said, 'Is that okay?' and he said, 'Sure.' I said, 'Will it bother you?' and he said, 'No.' I said, 'Can I put it a little close?' He said,

'Sure.'

And so I put it there and went back. And they blew the whistle, and I pressed the tip - one exposure - on a [pennon] camera - do you know what a pennon camera is? - it's a banquet camera, it only takes 120 film. So I got the whole stadium in, nearly 180 degrees, and here's the ball, this big - the pictures that big and the ball's this big, and his foot's just hitting it, you know. It was a good picture, sort of unusual, you see - shall we say, slightly unusual. There are all the press photographers sitting up there in their box, with their Big Bertha cameras, you know, 40 inch lenses, and so forth. And so then one of the linesmen then came across from the other side and picked the whole contraption up and brought it back - and that was one chance, one shot - I did a lot of things like that - but it worked.

By specialising, first of all, in sports, and then in animal photography to a great extent - we should say, really, the thing that's now called environmental problems and the environment. I got sick of sports photography after about five years, I'd had it completely, because I'd sort of run out of sports to cover. I would never go back and cover the same sport twice, no way. And I just worked (inaudible) - I went to Hawaii and did surfing for two months, I took the first surfing pictures that were different - I did it for a lot of sports, updated them, as it were, in photography. Now my methods are the normal thing, and so on and so forth.

What about text? Did you write your own text to go with them?

Very often. On the surfing thing I did a 5,000 word piece that went with it, and on the philosophy and psychology of surfing. I interviewed one of the surfers who was a school teacher at a very good school in Hawaii - high school - and he was a very bright guy. That's the first time I use a tape machine. I got talking to him and was interested. I said, 'Why do you surf?' - it was really dangerous what they were doing then - there were only about six people in the whole world that could ride the surf at Waimea then, which is the big surf, and he was one of them. I said, 'You are going to get killed here', and we got talking about it, and I thought about it. I went and bought a tape machine and next time I caught him I said, 'Hey, let's talk', and we talked, and I got enough out of one tape to do a 5,000 word piece on the psychology of surfing - and I couldn't even spell the word psychology. When I would get really involved in something like that, then I would love to write about it, but I'm not a reporter - do you understand that? - I'm not a reporter. You couldn't send me out and tell me to do a story on something. If I get really involved ... I mean, just like ... still the same as Damian and I talking. When you get really involved, then your mind unfreezes and you can write and do anything, it's marvellous. But it doesn't happen very often. I've only written about seven or eight pieces like that, but they've all been pretty good, I say it myself.

You retired about ...

When I write like that, there's no room for the editor to take out one word, it's sort of amazing. They can't do anything with it, they just have to run it straight because I do it very tersely, no room anywhere - I don't write novels.

Just some basic things that we'd like to just know. You married when?

1947. I met my wife on a ski lift when I came back from China, and she was the first white woman I'd seen since I'd come out of the Orient, so I married her.

And this is the lady that's arriving in Sydney on ...

Right.

And how many children?

She gets mad every time I tell that story.

(Laughs) I bet she does. How many children?

Three, a boy and two girls. The boy is an architect in Seattle and the eldest girl is a photographer, her name is Georgiana, not named after me, named after my wife's grandmother who was Georgiana - and nothing I could do about it, I didn't know why my wife wanted to name her Georgiana. It wasn't till about a year or two later that I discovered that she wasn't being named after me but after my wife's grandmother. And then I have another girl name Shelly who is in Connecticut and has just had a baby - we have four grandchildren at this stage of the game.

Why did you give it away? I mean, why did you retire?

Well, I think ... when *Life* folded in '72 - the *Weekly Life* folded in '72 and I was out of a job. At first that didn't bother me, and then I found, when I started trying to go out into the big world and work, that I didn't like it, that I'd probably grown so dependent on the corporation that I was surrounded with, by all this marvellous talent - for thirty years I was with *Life Magazine* and for thirty years I had all this talent surrounding me. They coined the term 'group journalism' and that's what it was, it wasn't just me. I told you about the sports editor, we'd sit down and have these sessions, and out of it we'd throw ideas around, and get a little drunk, then marvellous things would come out - might or might not come out of it. And when *Life* folded and I went out into the big world, I just found no sympathy, or recognition, or interest really. Oh, yes, everybody would like me to do what I did for *Life* twenty years ago, that picture you did of what's-a-name, of the America's Cup, can you do us something like ... an article like that? and we'll give you a guarantee of three days. That would have taken me three months to do, that story.

The *Daily Telegraph* in London, two America's Cups ago, called me every week for about seven weeks before the Cup races, and

the poor picture editor said that the editor wanted nobody but me to cover the races for them. And I said, 'Well, look ...' - not just cover the races, do an essay on the boats, before the race, so they could run it race time. I know what they had, they had a story in 1962 of the America's Cup boats that took me three months to do - not working very hard, but it was a very, very good story, a really in-depth story of the boats, a portrait of what the hell these boats were, you know. And so they kept calling me, and I said, 'No ...' - I know they had the story in front of them - and I said, 'You've got the story in front of you that I wrote in '62 for *Life*?' - 'Yes, that's right, that's the one the editor remembers and he made me get it out.' I said, 'Well, look, that took me three months. How long would you give me to do this?' They said, 'Three days' - I hadn't said anything, you know - I said, 'Three months?' - he said, 'Three days. We'll guarantee you three days.' And I said, 'I could go up there for three days and it could be fog the whole time and,' I said, 'you'd be very unhappy, wouldn't you?' - this is on the phone to London. And it just went on, and on, and on like this. Finally, I just got ...

This is the sort of general attitude I ran in to, and I finally just couldn't stand it any more, I just didn't want to ... I think that my history of work at *Life Magazine* was my own worst enemy when I went out and tried to get other work. Everybody would point to a story that I'd done and want me to do the same sort of thing, only better, in a tenth of the time for nothing practically. And so I said, 'I don't need that.' I looked at how much money I had in the bank and I said, 'We'll do something else', so I bought a thirty-foot yacht and I've been racing it ever since.

(Laughs)

(Break in interview)

I was in more combat after I left the DOI than I was when I was with the DOI. I didn't see much combat in the Middle East, I was sick for a lot of the time. So the main combat I saw in the Middle East was ... I saw some in Syria, and I've seen my pictures there of shell bursts, and troops and things, that are credited to Damian Parer; they are my pictures, not his.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW

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