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MR HERBERT KEMBLE

Interviewed by Dr P.A. Pedersen

Cassette 1/Side A

Dr Pedersen: Interview with Mr Herbert Kemble who served in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and then the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War. The interview was recorded at Mr Kemble's home, 9 Raymond Place, Bilgola Plateau, on Saturday, the 28th of December 1985. The interviewer is Dr P.A. Pedersen. Herbert, I wonder if you can describe briefly your life in New Zealand before the war, how old you were when you left school, what you did before joining the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, and then outline briefly your wartime service.

Herbert Kemble: I left school at 14 and was employed in various capacities in various jobs until the year about 19 – no, I've got the date wrong I think. Anyhow, I ended up in a retail store in Christchurch as a window-dresser. The war broke out in 1914, as we all know, and I enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. I transferred later on, some six months or so later, to the Australian Imperial Forces in Sydney and saw service in France from that point on.

Dr Pedersen: Herbert, why did you join the NZEF?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, for adventure mainly, but there probably was an element of patriotism in my action, king and country and all that, but I wasn't initially fired by it I think. One other more important motive was the desire to get away from an unhappy domestic situation, the reason for which would have more relevance in a different context and would possibly take too long in the telling here.

Dr Pedersen: Herbert, can you describe the voyage to Egypt at the start of the war, such things as training on board ship, what the meals were like, entertainment and discipline?

Herbert Kemble: Well, yes, I remember in some detail what it was like, and not too happy either. Well, for instance the food. To anyone used to ordinary variations of the traditional English meat and veggies, the uninspired results of shipboard chefs' efforts for the rank and file were almost inedible. Only persistent hunger overcome revulsion for most of the time. On one occasion the men held a burial service over the main meal, consigning the rejected repast to the deep sea and its inhabitants, with some reservations about the morality of it. The hilarious occasion was fittingly presided over by an ecclesiastic student destined for a career in the church, 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, if the sailors won't eat you, the fishes must', he intoned as the body was cast overboard.

Entertainment. Well, there were weekly sessions, I think from memory, concerts organised by an officer from volunteers amongst the rank and file, mostly of a sing-song nature, popular songs sung in chorus by the audience, accompanied by music from an ancient piano. They were all very enjoyable and helped to pass away a good many rather dull moments. The training, well, we had route marching, we had physical training, physical exercises, signalling, learning all about semaphore with flags, we learned the morse code and learned to practice it, that sort of thing, which kept us fit, I suppose, in many ways and, again, helped to keep us from getting too bored.

The health of the people, the men and officers, well, most of us suffered from diarrhoea. A standard remedy for everything, the famous notorious number 9 pill. Crude latrines consisting of planks of timber above apertures leading directly into the sea. Very unpleasant, very smelly and uncomfortable, and, I would think, unhygienic. Well patronised by diarrhoea suffers. Bad cases were hospitalised. I think generally speaking we managed to maintain a certain standard of health. Gambling was very popular. Old regular army soldiers made fortunes running crown and anchor games and two-up.

Well, we looked at the sea, we talked and got to know one another and I think that on the whole we enjoyed the whole experience. On the way we did see our first experience of war. That was the occasion when we were in convoy with a large contingent of ships carrying the Australian Imperial Forces. Suddenly, one of the escorting cruisers dashed away out of sight and we learned later that she had gone to destroy the German pocket battleship, the *Enden*. * There was a great deal of excitement about that but, of course, we knew nothing about it until we learned all about it later. That was a diversion. We did a bit of fishing. I think on the whole it was very enjoyable, except for the rather appalling conditions.

Oh, did I mention too that we slept in hammocks? Not the best of places to get a good nights sleep. I regularly lost my personal possessions, because we had nowhere to keep them except in the hammock and my personal possessions were usually stowed under a makeshift pillow in my hammock and I regularly lost them to thieving marauders and never recovered them. Any attempt to do so was just laughed at.

Dr Pedersen: Herbert, I wonder if you could describe your reaction when you got to Egypt? Presumably this was the first country other than your own that you had seen and it would have been a totally different civilisation with many new sights and sounds.

Herbert Kemble: Well, it was all very exciting. We were being confronted by an entirely new, completely foreign environment, the way people dressed, men in white nightshirts you might say, and the women all in black with only their eyes showing, faces completely hidden. It was great to see the way the cities and the towns looked, the congestion, the way people lived, quite foreign to anything that we had known, the shops all looked different, dwellings all looked different, the pyramids were marvellous, we climbed the pyramids and were staggered at the immensity of them. My own reaction to them was, well, I knew what they looked like from photographs but to see them really, in reality, was an immense eye-opener to me because they were so huge, so vastly bigger than anything that I had expected. The River Nile, we sailed on the River Nile. We thoroughly enjoyed being six bob a day tourists.

Dr Pedersen: Did this initial enchantment wear off once you saw how the people charged you exorbitant prices for everyday goods and how they tried to take advantage of you at every opportunity?

Herbert Kemble: Yes, that we felt wasn't quite fair. We felt that we were being taken down. We haggled and haggled with the vendors of this and that. Hard boiled eggs, oranges, we were besieged everywhere we went by Egyptians trying to sell us things, but we had very little money and we couldn't afford most of them. The Egyptians, I might say, were rather despised by us, we looked down upon them as being an inferior kind of human being and we did everything we could to show it. We didn't see very much of high society, naturally, the Shepherd's Hotel * in Cairo was out of bounds to us, and so we came in contact mainly with the average, shall we say working class, Egyptian and that's about it I think.

Dr Pedersen: Were the relations of New Zealanders with Australians very good at this time in Egypt?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, yes, I think we admired each other immensely. We got on very well together, there was no trouble there. We did have trouble with the Egypos because, well, we did feel that we were being taken advantage of, and …

Dr Pedersen: This led to such things as the Waza * riot and so on.

Herbert Kemble: Yes, that's right, there were problems of that kind where the boys took it into their own hands to mete out justice, or what they considered to be justice, leading up to such an occasion as that as you mentioned. So there was a good deal of hostility shown between us and the average Egyptian.

Dr Pedersen: Turning now to training in Egypt, could you describe the types of things that you did there, training routine, the nature of exercises and so on?

Herbert Kemble: Yes, well quite briefly it was just the usual routine training period of route marches, and very strenuous ones too in the heat and the sand of the desert, a long way from civilisation we'd march away into the country, if you can call it the country, mostly into the sandy desert. Other routine military exercises were rifle shooting at a range, physical exercises, bayonet charging at dummy figures hung on ropes.

Dr Pedersen: It all seemed very much as though it was still regarded as an adventure at this time. What was the mood like on leaving Egypt and then on the eve of the landing?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, there was a great quiet suddenly descended on everybody because we realised that to us the great adventure had become something of a much more serious nature, the realisation of the fact that we were now going into something that was a matter of life and death, that it was very, very serious indeed. We were not told exactly where we were going but we knew from rumours that we were going to meet up with the Turks and that the real thing confronted us. So we were rather subdued, but quite naturally, normally I suppose, to a situation that was so new to all of us.

Dr Pedersen: What were your impressions of the landing?

Herbert Kemble: Well, we, the New Zealanders, didn't arrive until after the actual landing, we were some hours later. The actual experience was, of course, jumping from one ship into a barge like Lieter * and being conveyed to the beach. We jumped into the water, bullets were flying everywhere – we could see the bullets actually landing in the water – and the sound of rifle fire and gunfire was very pronounced and that brought home to us very vividly the fact that we were now actually at war. There was that feeling about it, but at the same time an excitement and an overwhelming impression of something that had gone for us personally to a point where we had no control over it, that we were in this for good or ill and could do nothing about it.

We accepted the situation, we lined up on the beach in formation, military formation, shoulder arm, slope arms, left turn, or right turn, whatever it was, march in single file up the gullies to a point where we reached that position now occupied by the Australians. We were told to extend our formation and take up a situation on very hilly, stony ground and we were given the order to fire. We couldn't see the enemy exactly but we could see the evidence of his situation because we could see flashes of gunfire and the bullets were whistling around our heads.

Dr Pedersen: Developing that further, what was your reaction to this first experience of war, its sights, its sounds, the first casualties that you saw? Did the officers have much idea of what was going on or did everybody just do as he thought was best?

Herbert Kemble: There are one or two questions in that really. To answer them all, I think it was all very confusing. As an individual I didn't know what was going on, I had no idea, except that we were inside of the enemy, they could see us, we probably couldn't see them because they were hidden in trenches. My impression was that nobody knew very much at all about what was going on, that is to say that there was no definite evidence of any plan, that we were playing it by ear, that orders were given as it were on the spur of the moment, 'Take up a position here, shoot over there', and now and again we'd be given an order to advance and in that case we would move forward and - oh, there were trenches, they'd been built by the Turks, of course, and we would chase the Turks out of a trench and occupy it. But I didn't see at that time any hand-to-hand fighting. By the time we got to the trench the Turks were already retreating toward their own headquarters, I suppose.

Dr Pedersen: Did it ever occur to you in those early days that the Turks might push you into the sea?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, that, of course, was something that we did think of. It all looked very, very hopeless to us. Days later we realised that we were in an impossible position. I think that occurred to us very early in the piece, that the terrain was so hilly, so steep. It had been like that for millions of years, there was no sign of anybody ever having occupied

it, no cultivation, no sign of cultivation, just steep hills, deep gullies rising to sharp jagged peaks, and most difficult country to move over. It all looked so terribly hopeless.

Dr Pedersen: You participated in the attack at Cape Helles, the attack on Crithia, * very early in May, and you were wounded there. Can you describe that? Were you given much notice for the attack? Did you know what you had to do or was it much the same as what had occurred at ANZAC before, that is, you had very little idea of what was going on, everything was confused and you just did what you thought was best, you did what you thought you were supposed to do?

Herbert Kemble: That's right. We were transported from ANZAC Cove to Helles by gunboat. We landed there and formed up in fours and were told to march and we marched to a certain position. The terrain was quite different there, it was very flat, not at all rugged like ANZAC. We were told to pick up from a heap a shovel or a pick from the heap of picks, each one to take either a shovel or a pick axe. The intention obviously was that we were going to go somewhere and dig in. Well, what happened was that having done that we lined up in single file and were told to extend our formation a few yards apart, each individual a few yards apart and in the receipt of a whistle blow to advance at the double.

By this time, of course, we were very conscious of the fact that the enemy were not very far away because the bullets were whistling around our heads just as we stood in formation. Then the whistle came and we started running, and we knew that we were running toward the Turks. We hadn't gone very far when we fell into a trench or jumped over a trench or stumbled into a trench occupied by British soldiers. In my case it the Munster Fusiliers, an Irish regiment – I learned that later. I fell into the trench, climbed out of it, a shovel in one hand and a rifle in the other, and ran toward the enemy, and that's where I got wounded. I felt a blow like a hammer blow on my leg low down near the foot and I fell. I sprawled on the ground and the rest of the unit went ahead and that's the last I ever saw of them, the last time I ever saw them.

I lay there wondering on earth was going to happen next, to me anyhow because that was my personal feeling, what's going to happen to me. A voice spoke to me and said, 'C'mon boy, I'll look after you', and it was a sergeant who helped me back to his trench. He unwrapped the putty from my leg and put a rough bandage around it, a dirty pocket handkerchief out of his own pocket, and there I stayed for some time talking to him and the other boys, and how glad I must have felt because I know I was very glad to be out of it, and they came and took me away on a stretcher onto a hospital ship.

Dr Pedersen: How long were you on the hospital ship for?

Herbert Kemble: Only for a matter of perhaps a day, a day and a half perhaps. I landed at Malta and was taken to a makeshift hospital – it wasn't really a hospital, it was an army barracks converted into a hospital. I was eaten alive that very night by bugs. I'd never experienced bugs before. It was an unpleasant experience because my whole face was red, blotchy, covered with sores that itched like the devil.

Dr Pedersen: And how soon was it before you were back at ANZAC?

Herbert Kemble: It didn't take long for the wound to heal. It might have been about a month. I saw the doctor periodically, perhaps once every couple of days, and one day he asked me how I felt and I said, 'I feel like going back'. He said, 'Do you really want to go back?', and I said, 'Yes, I do'. He said, 'Okay, I think you're fit'. So I went back to ANZAC.

Dr Pedersen: At ANZAC, particularly after you'd been there for a while, what were your impressions of the atmosphere there, such things as morale, food, sickness, monotony, news from home even?

Herbert Kemble: Well, it was a great improvement on the early days, things had improved vastly. In the early days it was pretty rugged. We had to rely on makeshift meals, such as tins of bully beef and very hard ships biscuits, but by the time I got back

things had improved and better meals were made possible, and I think that possibly the soldier was more comfortable. They had been provided with warmer clothes. In the early days, the first week or two, it was absolute hell because the weather was freezing cold at night and we had nowhere to live. I mean, we had nothing to dive into, we just slept on the open ground with a ground sheet over us – well, we had trenches but they were no great protection from the weather. During the day it would be scorching hot and at night time just freezing cold. In that respect it was hell because, well, a lot of soldiers became ill from just exposure, and I think that that's what happened to me. I did fall ill, I had a fever, became very sick and incapable of carrying on in my usual way. The doctor said that I'd have to go into hospital. So after a week or two back at ANZAC I went into hospital.

So I never went back to ANZAC, I was taken back to New Zealand and discharged as unfit. They thought that I had tuberculosis. A board of doctors, a medical board, decided that I would never be able to continue so they discharged me.

Dr Pedersen: So just to clarify that, you were wounded at Cape Helles, went into hospital at Malta, went back to ANZAC for a week or so and then fell ill and were returned to New Zealand.

Herbert Kemble: That's right.

Dr Pedersen: Just before we leave the Gallipoli campaign, can you describe the attitude that you had towards the Turks and whether that attitude towards the Turks changed as the campaign progressed, in your experience?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, yes. Well, before we got into action against the Turks we were told that we were going into action with them and to be very careful about them because they had a reputation as being fierce fighters and ruthless and to be aware of them, take no chances, and told to treat them as badly as we could, that is to say if we saw a Turk lying on the ground wounded that we were to kill them, because we could not rely on their nature to accept – how shall I put it? – that they would shoot you from where they lay in the back

as you passed, they would do things like that to you. So our instructions were to take no chances, that they were ruthless and fierce. But I think that as time went on we forgot all that, that they after all were just human beings, and there were times when we had an armistice period when we buried the dead between us. On those occasions we were quite friendly, we would hail them, talk to them, shake hands – not shake hands but wave to them. So there were times when we would just forget that we were enemies.

Dr Pedersen: Fine. In your experience was there any cynical hostility towards British troops? You saw them, compared them to yourselves and regarded them as far inferior?

Herbert Kemble: Not in my experience, no. I think there was talk of that but I had no personal experience of it. No, there was talk, yes. I think that was probably due to the fact that at one point there was a landing made by unprofessional British soldiers, but the regular soldiers I think were held in high esteem.

Dr Pedersen: Herbert, having survived Gallipoli and all its horrors why did you then return to the war by joining the AIF and exposing yourself to those same horrors again?

Herbert Kemble: Well, of course, I had come to Sydney with no idea at all of doing what I did, but the reason I came was to join an old school friend, and I thought too that I would like to have a look at Australia, Sydney in particular, and a break from the routine and have a bit of a holiday and meet my old school friends. Well, I arrived in Sydney and took a job and there was a lot of talk at that time about the referendum being conducted by the government regarding conscription. I also had a private reason for getting away from myself – I wanted to escape from myself, I was unhappy and at a loose end and didn't know what the future held for me. So I joined the AIF because I was in favour of conscription. I thought it was the duty of the country to do all in its power to support its forces supposedly fighting for the empire and Australia's good. I believed that to be effective an army should be at full strength. Under the volunteer system it was not being maintained. The solution was to reduce the overall size of the force. Did Australia want to

do that? If so, how sincere was the Prime Minister's promise to commit our help to 'the last man and the last shilling'?

Well, at that time I was working with a young man about my own age who said to me one day, 'Look, if you feel so strongly about the need for more reinforcements to keep up the strength of the forces why don't you enlist?'. I said, 'Well, of course, I've done my bit', and he said, 'Well, never mind, it's a great adventure'. He said, 'I'm going to enlist so why don't you join up with me', which I did.

Dr Pedersen: It's interesting that you say that this friend of yours said that it's a great adventure. When you arrived in France in 1916, for those that were already there had the idea that it was a great adventure been well and truly dispelled?

Herbert Kemble: Well, I think that it couldn't have still been a great adventure to a lot of – I think so. I don't think that patriotic motives were the main reason for enlisting, I don't think it was. I think that, yes, overall perhaps that was the overriding motive, but to most of the guys it was a great adventure, even though it meant …

Dr Pedersen: Even after Gallipoli?

Herbert Kemble: Yes. I don't think that adventure is necessarily something that is enjoyable, it's a risk you take.

Dr Pedersen: What were the contrasts as you saw them between war in France and war in Gallipoli?

Herbert Kemble: Well, of course, to start with the terrain was quite different, the rugged nature of Gallipoli compared with France which is mostly flat made the two – well, you couldn't compare them really, the difference was striking. The actual fighting conditions in Gallipoli were pretty primitive, for one thing we could never really get very close to the enemy, most of the time we couldn't see him, and the rugged nature of the country was

quite different, and, of course, trench warfare hadn't been invented at that time. We couldn't move about, there was no room to move at Gallipoli. It was very difficult to maintain any sort of cohesion between the various units. We were separated by gullies and hills and sharp spurs of land jutting out here and there. So I think the cohesion necessary in a battlefield between the various units was almost impossible to maintain.

Dr Pedersen: And, of course, in France warfare was a lot more scientific, you had aircraft, concentrated artillery …

Herbert Kemble: That's right. I don't remember seeing a plane at all at Gallipoli, I don't know about that. But, yes, the open country, the nature of the country, it was civilised, there were villages all over the place, when we were not in the mine we were living in homes in the villages, put up by the people who were living in the towns. Nothing like that happened at Gallipoli where if we had to leave the line it was either just down to the beach for a dip in the ocean or taken away in a ship. No, it was quite different. There was more room, it was vaster, much more room to move about, and from a military point of view movement of units was much easier and it was more cohesive.

As for the actual fighting conditions, well, it was much the same because once you get stuck into a condition where you can't move and you're halfway up your body in mud and slush and wet through most of the time, well, it was much the same on Gallipoli, but it was much more comfortable in France because you could get away from it all and you couldn't get away from it in Gallipoli at all. In both instances I think the discomfort, the physical discomfort of being in trenches and in gullies and whatnot was much the same.

Dr Pedersen: What were the attitudes towards the Germans and can you contrast those attitudes with those held towards the Turks?

Herbert Kemble: Well, the Germans, we had a great respect for them as a military machine. The Turks, I think that, well, it was quite different I think. We became in a way rather fond of them, that they were something that we had learned to live with and we

didn't fear them. I had no great fear of the Turks at all. We thought that we would never really beat them and take over but with the Germans we did fear them. We felt that we were up against something vaster, something mightier, much more menacing than the Turks. We could see the Germans, we could see all that was going on because it was flatter, and there were more planes, much heavier artillery fire and it was all much more dangerous, we felt. We felt that we were up against something that was vast and possibly unbeatable.

Dr Pedersen: So it did occur to you at times, particularly in the early days, that the Germans might win the war?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, yes, we thought that they could. Our only hope, of course, was that the Americans would come in and save us. Up to that point I don't think I ever thought that we would ever win.

Dr Pedersen: I see. Another contrast between France and Gallipoli is that at ANZAC you were very much in isolation, there was no civilian population in any close proximity to the battlefield. Now of course this wasn't the case in France where several miles behind the line you had villages and, as far as can be the case in war, life proceeded fairly normally. What was the attitude towards the French and what were your relations with them like?

Herbert Kemble: Well, the whole scene was different. We did have, as you say, a population behind us and life was going on normally for them, and we could retreat to a point where our comfort was something to be appreciated, because we were billeted in the homes, not always in the home but at least in reasonably comfortable conditions, and we could spend whatever money we had in the shops, we could buy wine and associate with the people on a social level. We also liked getting into contact with the female element and life became vastly different, much more comfortable. That, I think, made a great difference to our feelings about the war.

But as for the population in general, well, I don't think we got on very well with the froggies at all. It isn't that we disliked them personally, but we always felt that they were rather difficult people to get on with. We couldn't converse with them because of language difficulties and there was a tendency amongst them I think to take us down, overcharge and that sort of thing. But generally, I don't know whether it was just an impression or not, but they never at any time gave us the impression that they were very friendly. I think that they behaved better to us as Aussies than they were to the British. I think they liked the Aussies possibly better than they did the British.

Cassette 1/Side B

Dr Pedersen: Herbert, your battalion, the 19th, served at Possier * at the height of the fighting there. The shelling at Possier was among the most intense of the war – in fact, your battalion lost 453 casualties there. Can you describe what it was like to be under such shellfire, the sights that you saw, any experience that you had with soldiers who were shell-shocked and whether the battalion as a whole was shaken by that sort of experience?

Herbert Kemble: It's difficult but, still, there must be an answer for those questions. By this time you must remember that I'd become a little bit hardened to things so that things that at one time might have shocked me or made a great impression on me are shoved aside, discarded as being of no great relevance, and they are something that perhaps in the years that have elapsed have lost their importance. I remember being very, very impressed and moved by the way the soldiers accepted the hardships and the sights, the way they accepted the death of a mate, their fatalistic attitude towards the war, that they're in it, can't get out of it, had to put up with it and accept that things that happened, dramatic things, lose their force and lose their significance, dismissed almost from their minds to be remembered perhaps in more leisured times.

Incidents like, as I say, as I saw, a man being almost blown to pieces by a shrapnel shell or a shell that landed near them, the sight of a person lying dead, a man you knew, were momentarily tremendously shocking but dismissed from your mind because you had something of more immediate concern to do so you went on about your job. Later on the real force of what you had just witnessed comes back and becomes something very real and potent. I knew that I was in the middle of a great event in history but I could only see those little things that affected me myself as an individual, I couldn't see the whole, and that's the way I remember the war. If I see the war in a larger more powerful perspective it's because I can look back on it now with the knowledge that it was a great event in history and that I was a participant, but not in any way responsible for what was happening, I was merely a cipher, a number being ordered around, told what to do and asked no questions.

Dr Pedersen: If I can just get back to shell shock again, that was something that hadn't been encountered in medical terms before that time. How was it treated, and I believe your brother was a victim of it?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, that's right. Well, I don't know how it was treated but I did see the effects. The immediate effect seemed to be that a man lost his mobility, his mentality you might say, that he was no longer responsible. He became ill, not so much physically but in a way that was very hard to describe. You'd think that there was something strange and something funny about him, he didn't want to do anything, he just wanted to lie down, he didn't want to take any part. He seemed to be unaware that he had a position that had become normal to him – that is, the position of a soldier whose job it was to carry out orders and behave as a soldier – so that he lost that awareness that we know of from experience. He seemed to be different, to have lost his … and the treatment, no, I don't know what they did, they just sent him out of the line, said to him, 'Look, you're ill, old boy, go and lie down'.

Dr Pedersen: Your battalion, the 19th, launched one of the final attacks on LaSomme * at Fleur * in November. This was conducted in dreadful conditions of rain and mud. Did you ever question, inwardly at least, the leadership and the tactics which seemed so devoid of originality as to result in these continual fruitless assaults with very heavy casualties?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, only in a minor way. No, I wasn't in a situation where I could be very, very critical of things like that, I don't think so.

Dr Pedersen: After the event though, did you ever wonder then?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, yes, I think that I did, but I wasn't in a position to criticise constructively, it was just, as you say, to question why, and yet, you know, at the Battle of – what was it – where you were sent into battle and 'Theirs is not to reason why', said the poet, 'Theirs is but to do or die'.

Dr Pedersen: How often did you see your commanders, battalion, brigade, even divisional commanders, in the line?

Herbert Kemble: Well, I'm tempted to say never but I don't suppose that would be quite true. I didn't ever see anybody above the rank of a lieutenant or a captain anywhere near where the fighting was going on.

Dr Pedersen: What about Birdwood, * for example?

Herbert Kemble: I did see Birdwood on one occasion at ANZAC, he was in a group of several other officers, three or four. He was just walking along the beach at ANZAC, ANZAC Cove beach, and he was devoid of rank insignia, but he was dressed much more carefully and cleanly than the rank and file soldier. He was distinguished by that. I recognised him from pictures that I'd seen of him. Apart from that, yes, I did see him on one other occasion. Oh, by the way, I think that ANZAC wasn't his dwelling place at the time, he was living somewhere else. He used to come, I understand, to ANZAC to consult with his officers.

I did see him on one other occasion but this was after the war in London when I was working at headquarters. They told us that he was coming to present the medal colours of the 1914 experience – this was in 1920, I think. We lined up and he came along and pinned a colour badge, a medal colour thing, on my chest and asked me a question about what unit I was in and that sort of thing and just moved on. He seemed a very nice person.

Dr Pedersen: Monash, in contrast, was a much more remote figure. You might have heard his name but you never saw him.

Herbert Kemble: Never, as far as I know. I think there were occasions when he might have appeared on parade and I think that did occur. On a ceremonial occasion the battalion or the regiment would appear on parade before officers of his rank and he might even

address us. But I don't remember ever seeing – I couldn't say definitely that I ever saw Monash.

Dr Pedersen: I see. Turning now to some of the events in 1917, the 5th Brigade, of which the 19th Battalion was a part, participated in a very confused attack at Bullock Court * in May 1918 and this attack became one of the worst fights of the war for the AIF because of the way it was conducted and not least because of the terrible casualties. Do you have any recollections of that attack, what preceded it and, in particular, the effect within your battalion?

Herbert Kemble: Yes, I think that the effect was mostly one of shock and of such a profound nature that they just didn't want to discuss it, they would rather not dwell on it. They thought about it a lot, there's no doubt about that, and here and there you'd hear remarks of the nature of 'Well, why is all this necessary? What the hell's happening? What are the generals doing to get us into a situation of that kind?', but in the main the tendency was to dismiss it as being something better forgot. They would rather talk about leave, rather talk about what a wonderful time they're going to have when all this is over, they'd talk about girls and their relations, have they had any mail recently, in other words to forget and smother it in little mundane details, that was my impression.

But I didn't want to think about it, I'd rather forget, I didn't want to dwell upon the tragedy and look upon – look, a sense of humour is the most marvellous thing that God ever gave us because it gives us an escape, we can think of other things that are going to help us to go on as normal human beings and not as the victims of great tragedies outside our control.

Dr Pedersen: I see. Well, following on from that, and in many ways closely allied to it, was there any time when you and other soldiers believed beforehand that a plan was hopeless, couldn't lead to success, but you went over the top because you had to?

Herbert Kemble: No, from a personal point of view I don't think that I ever thought in those terms, but others might have done. No, I was not in a position to determine that what

was being done was either good or bad, no. After all, I was a very young man, no experience of international politics or the ramifications of world politics, nor of course was I ever in a position to be really critical in a fundamental, progressive, constructive way of the rights and wrongs of the attitude and the behaviour of generals.

Dr Pedersen: Even after such terrible casualties were suffered?

Herbert Kemble: Right, even after that.

Dr Pedersen: Returning to more mundane things, can you describe the bonds of mateship that existed, how strong were they and could they exist in peacetime do you think with the same sort of intensity? What are your chief recollections of the soldiers, your comrades of that time?

Herbert Kemble: Yes, my recollection of it is that you do learn to appreciate the value of friendship, how important it was, perhaps much more so than in civilian life, because you've been through so much, you've suffered so much together, and I think that gave you a bond that you valued. You looked at people, a person or a group of people, you could stand off and admire them objectively as being people that are wonderful and brave and you were full of admiration for them. I couldn't see myself that way but I could see other people that way because I had seen them go through. I can't see myself going through things. What I suffered was nothing to what I had seen other people suffer. Only through them and the way they behaved and the way they reacted could I get a full appreciation of how wonderful human beings are. I came out of the war with one great thing in my mind: how wonderful human beings are when they're faced with adversity. They can laugh off tremendous tragedies of a personal nature. Outwardly it hadn't affected them at all, but we, of course, know that deep down they have suffered. That is what came out of the war for me.

Dr Pedersen: On the 8th of August 1918, the Australian divisions as a whole participated with tanks in a major attack for the first time. What was it like attacking with tanks and how did you feel about them?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, it was a great thing to see them in action, yes, to feel that there was a new weapon that we had that was probably going to end the war, that we could go into battle knowing that we had a new and powerful thing to help us. It was a great sight to see these lumbering things and to know that we had an additional armour. It was something quite new, it gave us a feeling that, well, we'll come out of this on the winning side.

Dr Pedersen: In the second half of 1918 was there the sort of feeling amongst the Australians towards the British soldier as had prevailed at Gallipoli, that is, that the Australians in their advance were constantly taking their objectives and yet the British either side of them were failing to take theirs? Did the Australians at the time regard the British as inferior to them?

Herbert Kemble: I don't know about feeling that they were inferior but that the generals themselves were using the AIF unjustly as a spearhead, as a battering ram and, well, for whatever reason they had it was not quite fair. It was flattering.

Dr Pedersen: So there was a definite feeling then that the Australians were being overworked?

Herbert Kemble: Yes, oh, yes, we all felt that.

Dr Pedersen: Was there also some complaint that in spite of that the Australians were gaining too little credit for the considerable achievements they'd won?

Herbert Kemble: I can't speak on that at all because I don't know what credit they were given.

Dr Pedersen: How was your battalion disbanded at the time when casualties and the War Office decision to reduce divisions to nine battalions led to the disbandment of a number of Australian battalions?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, we felt hostile toward the people of Australia for not keeping the unit up to strength. We were acting, of course, when we did act, in ignorance of – well, not complete ignorance of what was behind the reasons for it but it was just that we felt that we were being separated from our friends, that was the immediate effect, that the guys with whom we had become familiar, we knew all about them, we knew them personally in a more intimate way, were going to be shoved into another unit. I think that was the immediate effect of disbanding a whole battalion and shoving them into battalions. I think that was resented perhaps.

Dr Pedersen: They refused to comply at first, though, didn't they?

Herbert Kemble: Yes. There were meetings, we were addressed by different people, perhaps a sergeant – no, none of the officers – an NCO, yes, who would get up and say a few words and we'd all rally around and listen. But the attempt to make us mutiny was only half-hearted really, but there was that element of feeling, it was felt very strongly by a lot of people that it was unfair that this should happen.

Dr Pedersen: You mentioned the Americans earlier in the interview, how did they impress you as soldiers?

Herbert Kemble: Well, the only way I can put it is they looked very, very efficient and professional; they behaved as if they'd been well trained, they knew what they were up to, they carried themselves as if they were the lords of the earth. They behaved in that way, that they were so superior, that they had come to get Europe out of an unholy mess, that the USA was going to save these incompetent, hopeless Europeans from the mess they'd got themselves into. They looked like that, that they were the men who were going to save us from destruction. They were well dressed, their uniforms and their armament was all very

superior, they looked professional, and I think that although we didn't like them, you know, 'These bloody Yanks, they think they own the earth', that was what we felt about them, but there was no doubt about it that they were competent and professional.

Dr Pedersen: Turning now to the war and its effect on you personally, did you become fatalistic at any time and think that you would not survive the war?

Herbert Kemble: I didn't ever have faith that I would survive it; on the other hand, I gave myself a 50:50 chance.

Dr Pedersen: Did the war become a way of life for you, particularly after three or four years, the only life that you knew? It became your most immediate experience and this was really how life was, there was nothing else?

Herbert Kemble: No, I never felt that. My determination at all costs was to remember that I wasn't really a soldier, that my personality, my individuality was something that I held very precious, that I would never ever reach a point where I abrogated that right to a self, a personal, a free person to think and behave as a free individual. The army didn't give me that, I was merely a cipher being ordered around, told to do this and do that and obeyed or else. But there were times when I felt that the life of a soldier was pretty good, when you were on leave you were free to come and go as you liked, except that you had to be back at a certain time and that your time was limited. But in that time of freedom you could say what you liked, within reason, and do what you liked, as long as you turned up at a certain time reporting back to duty.

There were good things about army life, that is, that you had no fear of ever being hungry, unclothed, out of a job, all the fears that go with civilian life were taken off your shoulders. That was something that was a bit insidious because it had an appeal, that you were taken care of, that some God up there was looking after you, no more worries, the only thing you had to fear was going back into the fight and being shot. So that part of it was quite enjoyable. The lack of money was a disadvantage, you were very limited in that respect.

But the life of an army, no, it never occurred to me to actually engage in it for the rest of my life because as a person I was non-existent. To maintain and keep that, my individuality and my own personality was paramount in my mind, my most important and valuable possession.

Dr Pedersen: I see. If I can just digress, you were hospitalised through illness for two lengthy periods in England. How well were you treated?

Herbert Kemble: Oh, very well, oh, yes, everything the best. On a hospital ship on one occasion I was accidentally, I think, placed in a cabin with a lieutenant, and of course I was just a private at that time. It wasn't very long before they had moved me out. This lieutenant, conscious of his rank, objected to being domiciled with a private so out I went. That's the only unpleasant thing that ever happened to me. No, I think that I was treated by the doctors and by the nurses and by the populous when I was free to roam around – the people of Britain were very good, they took us in, made us comfortable, fed us if necessary, made us feel that we were important.

Dr Pedersen: Herbert, as an artist and a poet you must be a sensitive person. Given that, how did the war affect you and has it continued to do so?

Herbert Kemble: Well, the first part of the question, how did the war affect me, it broadened my mind tremendously. I became a more adult person, I developed from the very naïve and ignorant person that I was to a person more aware of the world and its difficulties, the realities of life became very real to me and I think that in that way I was a beneficiary of my experience. I became more aware, more deeply aware of what I was up against as an adult, a responsible adult with a family. Those things had never occurred to me before and I think that I can give credit for having gone into this great adventure and coming out of it a better and a very much stronger person.

Dr Pedersen: Do you think that the country rewarded its ex-servicemen sufficiently?

Herbert Kemble: No, I don't. I have a feeling that maybe the country should have done something special for everyone who went through the war and came back reasonably whole – a lot of them came back wounded and physically damaged in some way, physically and mentally, a lot of them did. But those who came through in tact, you might say, as I did, and I don't think I can blame anything that I've done or felt since, I cannot point to the war as being totally responsible for what has happened since, but I do think that everyone who went through that ghastly experience, and it was ghastly really, I think they should all have been rewarded in some way, not only the generals and not only the ones who won the VC and not all those who just had a medal given to them, I think that they should have been rewarded in some way and to be made to feel that they were something special, not just a returned soldier but a very important and vital thing in the survival and in the life of the nation, and it hasn't been done.

There is one little thing, and I think it's rather minor, that the returned soldiers have been given the privilege of a loan to buy a home at very favourable rates of interest. That is nice but it's not, unfortunately, available to all and I think it should be. If it's not available to all it's because, very largely, individuals are individuals and they're not all built alike and some fall by the wayside. But I do think very, very strongly that the government or the country should have done – even now, it might not be too late – I think they should all be recognised as someone who performed a very, very exceptional service to their fellow citizens.

Dr Pedersen: Herbert, thank you very much. H.F. Kemble, tape two, end of interview.

[End of interview with Herbert Kemble.]