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## TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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**Title** (VX116349/V19987) Geisler, Victor James (Sergeant)

**Interviewer** Martin, Harry

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**Description** Victor James Geisler, Sergeant of 39th Battalion, interviewed by Harry Martin for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

Discusses prewar education; religion; nationalism; bandsmen; health; embarkation; SS Macdhui; food and medical supplies; stretcher bearer; air raids; Australian American relations; leisure; concert parties; AIF Militia relations; propaganda; casualties, demobilisation, Australia Army; 39th Battalion; 2/2nd Battalion. Mentions Melbourne, Darley Camp, Royal Park, VIC; Seven Mile, Port Moresby, Kokoda Track, Papua New Guinea; Balikpapan, Borneo; Celebes; Keith Murdoch; Jim Davidson; Keith Baker; Ron Terry.

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Tape one of an interview recorded with Victor Geisler on December 2nd, 1988. Recorded at Windsor and Mr Geisler was a member of the 39th Battalion – a bandsman. It begins in five seconds from now.

Victor Geisler, can we start by you having us telling us where and when you were born?

I was born in Creswick in Victoria on the 8th November, 1923.

What sort of early life did you have as a child and so on. Did you come from a large/small family?

A family of four. My mother came from Creswick, my father came from Rushworth – he was a first world war veteran – and we had a happy but humble family life in the early years. My father spent many years as a member of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and I lived in Williamstown for some years and then joined the military from there and went to the Royal Park Recruit Reception Depot where I joined the band under Bob McAskall – who was well known as a football coach in latter years – and from there I volunteered to join the 39th Battalion who were going to Port Moresby on garrison duty.

Let's just go back a bit to get a sense of the time and the period in which you were growing up and their attitudes of that time. As a young person, what sort of aspirations do you think you had? What did you see yourself doing in life when you were still at school?

When I was still at school my ambition was to be the captain of the biggest ship that ever floated and instead of doing that I ended up carrying a musket in the military.

What led you to think you'd like to be captain of the biggest ship ever?

I presume because I lived by the sea at Williamstown for many years and spent a lot of my spare time learning to sail, learning to row, and also spent a lot of time around the docks learning about ships, talking to seamen from other countries and all that sort of thing and just developed a general love of the sea.

What was your father doing in those days?

He was a member of the fire brigade.

What sort of family life was it? Was it hard in those days on a fireman's salary? How were the economic conditions?

No they weren't all that bad because – even though it was depression times – my father was probably well off in those times because in the fire brigade he got his uniform provided and I think he was paid the princely sum of about four pounds ten a week – which wasn't too bad, apparently, in 1930-32, or whatever the years were.

Was it a political family? Was your father interested in issues of the time and so on?

To a point. When I say that my mother was very much a church goer. My father always made sure he had to work on Sundays and I went mainly because I had to go. I was told to go. The latter years I – after the war in particular, I even used to play the organ in the church on some occasions when they couldn't find an organist – but outside of that I wouldn't say that we were very religious – apart from my mother's lead.

You said you father was a first world war veteran. What was his role?

He was a member of the 23rd Battalion in the infantry.

Whereabouts did he serve?

In Egypt and various campaigns – Gallipoli – various campaigns over there.

Was he inclined to share his war time experiences with you when you were a child?

Not a great deal. He would discuss occasionally some old photographs he had and odd times somebody would come and call on him that he'd been serving with overseas and that would generate a little bit of discussion about it but other than that he never talked much about war.

The sense of being British seems to have been very much a part of the Australian sense of national identity back in those days. How do you think your family saw themselves? Did you feel British or where do you think they saw themselves in terms of identity?

That's a good question because with a name like mine – it's of German origin – my father was Australian born – my grandfather was German. My father was very much pro-British and even I when I was little used to get an occasional clip in the ear on ANZAC Day because I wore my father's medals to school and I would get a little bit of a beating because my father was a traitor to his own country according to the kids who would hand out the beating.

What was the rationale of that ...?

Well because they said being German he should have been fighting for Germany, not for Australia.

Did you get a hard time apart from that for being German as such? Did they see you in those sort of terms?

No, They didn't and my father – his family lived in Rushworth – and there were quite a lot of German migrants in that area and they were very well accepted there.

(5.00) What did the ANZAC tradition mean then? Did it mean anything to you particularly?

The ANZAC tradition to me I suppose, would stem from the little bit my father did talk about and in particular from the pictures that we – the odd pictures we saw of him in uniform and in the desert situations with camels and what-have-you. It did make me somewhat proud of the fact that he'd been involved in the tradition of the ANZACs and when I was old enough then to go to the second world war – in fact I lifted my age a few months from seventeen to eighteen to go because I thought that it was my place to be there because of the tradition, if you like to use that word, that came from my father.

As Australia moved nearer war, as it turned out, was there a sense of expectation? Was your father a close student of the politics of Europe that he saw that another war was looming?

No, I wouldn't think that at all until – I think my mother first alighted onto that thought when Chamberlain went to Germany to try to stop a war and she said there and then that she didn't think he had a hope of doing this and that we would see war. But my father was inclined to

disagree with that – he thought that the British would be able to stop it. Of course as history turned out it didn't happen that way but she sort of saw it coming where my father didn't.

As far as schooling was concerned – how far did that go for you?

Oh, I went to school up to what was in those days, Leaving Certificate and then I studied accounting and I'm also a Fellow of the Catering Institute of Australia and a Fellow of the Credit Management Institute so I started into this business that I'm in now in the hospitality industry from about 1950 and I've been in it ever since.

Had you already become a cadet when you – around the school leaving stage?

No, they didn't – I was going to Williamstown High School at the time and they didn't have any cadets down there.

So where did you first get the sense that Australia looked like it was going to be drawn into war? Was it right when war was announced by the Prime Minister or before that – was it looking like it would happen?

Oh no, to me in those years – I listened to what was said at home but principally not until we saw it in the newspaper reports and radio reports about what was happening overseas and when – when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia was the first thoughts that I had that war might ever come this way and in fact in those days, people thought of course it would be confined to the Middle East and not to the Pacific and after about one year of that of course, you could see very much was going to happen, it was going to spread right across the world and of course when it started – the Japanese started to move down onto – into the Philippines, well then of course I thought it inevitable that before I was much older we were going to have war on our doorstep.

Was it this that then led you to join the Militia?

Yes. I thought to myself that the average person being called up at the time that I knew – people that were older men that had young families and whatever – I thought to myself well if it was good enough for them to be called up to go then I should go and offer to do what little bit I could do and that's how I come to go and join it.

Can you recall where you were and what your feelings were when it was first announced that Australia was at war because Britain was at war?

I think from memory now I was at home and I think my mother drew my attention to what she had said earlier about it and told me what dreadful things were likely to happen if the war spread across to our shores.

So whereabouts did you actually sign up with the Militia? What was the process, what did you have to do?

Well I went to the Melbourne Town Hall and told them I wanted to volunteer for military service and ...

(10.00) Why the Melbourne Town Hall? Was there a rally or they were accepting recruits there?

No there was a recruiting office there. Prior to that I did try to join the navy following on my earlier remarks about wanting to be the captain of a ship in those particular times the navy had a – I suppose you call it a waiting list – you couldn't just walk in and sign up and get in and in

the meantime I decided I would go and join the military so I went to the Town Hall and gave them my particulars and so on, and told them that I was available and that I was a musician at the time in a – or a bandsman in a Kingsville and Yarraville band in Melbourne which was an A-grade band and Mr McAskall – who was the bandmaster at Royal Park knew of me and told me that if I wanted to join the military would I come and play in his band for a while, and that's how I got in there.

When you went along to join up, what was the situation? Was it a small office, what was the attitude towards you? Was it hale and hearty, all very official and brisk or what?

It was quite a big depot in their office as I recall it now, with probably about a dozen people at desks interviewing people who were joining and I don't know whether they were all there for the purpose I was – whether they were joining at their own accord or whether they had had notice to turn up or what, but there were quite a lot of people being interviewed. Medical examinations were done there and ...

What did that consist of?

Well the doctor would go over your chest and your lungs and all this sort of thing and the inevitable piddle in the bottle which stories do go about, was some blokes pass the bottle along the line and all got rubbed out (laughs).

Were many young men anxious not to be accepted?

I do know of quite a few at the time – I couldn't think of names now – but I know of people at the time who did not want to be involved in war at any cost and who went around trying to get themselves hooked up into reserved occupations but I wouldn't say it was rife but I did know a few people who tried to do it.

What was the attitudes then towards young people where there were those differences of opinion? Would they be shared in a friendly way or were people starting to get fairly strong tempered about it?

Oh, as far as I can remember the general attitude amongst people my age who had joined the military, they couldn't care less about them. They thought if that's what they want to do let them do it. There was not antagonism as such about it.

There wasn't the suggestion that they were being cowardly as such?

No. No.

So, at the recruiting centre, what was the manner. Were people sort of friendly or were they sort of keen to encourage you or was it very sort of official-like, do you recall?

Oh they were pretty friendly and helpful – in fact once the fellow the other side of the desk learned that you were a border line case with age and that he could detect that you were fibbing about your date of birth he would say to you, 'look do you really want to go on with this yet, would you sooner come back later' or whatever and when you said no, no, you'd proceed – they'd sign the paper and away you'd go.

What about your parents? What did they think of it?

Oh my father was – my mother was dead by this time – and my father was quite happy that I should serve if that's what I wanted to do.

So what happened from there?

Well I went to Royal Park. I stayed there – I'm not sure of timing now – but I think about six months and then we were told that the 39th Battalion was being formed at Darley and that they wanted people from all walks of life – or all ranks in the military – to go and join the thing if you wanted to go to New Guinea in the garrison duty and I thought age-wise and so on and the fact that I'd been drafted initially to this band job in Royal Park that I would have little chance of catching a ship going overseas so this was a way to get there so I volunteered along with many others to join the 39th.

Why did you do that?

Well – two things I think – one was a sense of the fact that if you were going to serve in the military there was not much serving you were going to around Royal Park, if you wanted to do some part that seemed more real in the situation of a war then you should go where these things were to be done and not change the guard at Royal Park every day.

What was the sort of feeling – about the possibility of going overseas? It seems that with many young men in the first world war it was sort of seen as a great adventure and perhaps a rather romantic sort of view as to what the war meant. Where the attitudes of young people for the second world war perhaps based a bit more on reality because of what they knew the first world war had meant or was it much the same as the first world war fellows do you think?

Oh, I don't think there was much of the romance about it. I think it was more of the fact that for most of the people I mixed with that they realised that these things had to be done – wars had to be fought once they got to the situation they were at and therefore we should go and even when we got to Port Moresby that whilst it was supposed to be garrison duty the fact the the Japanese were already advancing into the Pacific areas and down from Manila the attitude was well if they're going to come here, let them come now, the sooner the better sort of thing which was I suppose, a little bit ambitious when you weren't really trained for this kind of thing but one very quickly learnt.

While you were back in Australia as a bandsman, what sort of instrument were you playing?

Oh I played the tuba.

So what was the training involved for a bandsman – in what way was it different to that of most of the fellows?

Well it was different inasmuch as until we got to the camp at Darley we were actually involved in an infantry battalion, all the work in Royal Park was ceremonial work and once we got to Darley of course we had to start then to learn something about the workings of an infantry battalion and in particular the stretcher work and so on which was expected of people in bands.

(15.00) Where had the tuba interest started from? Had it been a musical family – how did that come about in the first place?

Oh I had been learning to play brass instruments from the time I was about six years old, roughly.

Why?

Well my mother was not very musical – she could sing – but she didn't play piano. She had me taught piano from a neighbour who in depression times used to teach me an hour a day for two shillings a week and with that backing – and I eventually did fairly well with piano and organ – but in those days ...

What do you mean by that? You did fairly well?

Well I'm quite a reasonably good player of both piano and organ now, but – and I used to play the piano quite a lot in more peaceful situations during the war in dance bands or whatever and paid to play in the generals mess and that sort of thing.

But as a child when you were learning – were you playing publicly at all at sort of local functions or that sort of thing or ...

I used to play the piano when I was about fourteen I used to play for small dances in local halls and so on, and the reason I learnt to play brass was because I was interested in good quality music and I went to the local band and asked the band-master could I learn to play the trumpet and he had one look at me and said 'I think that the size of you and the look of your lungs and your mouth and so on, that you should try the tuba'.

So what was implied there – that you were too big for the trumpet or ...

No he thought I was well built to carry a tuba and he couldn't find people that wanted to play it because they all wanted to play the trumpet.

What were the tunes of the day do you recall?

Oh, no I don't particularly principally – though I can remember a lot of military march, marshall music, and popular music like Gilbert and Sullivan stuff – *Maid of the Mountains* all that kind of music.

So what sort of fellows did you find yourself along with as other people who were bandsmen – what kinds of instruments and the general attitudes and so on?

Oh, very good types of people and most people who want to learn music are like people who want to learn anything else – they apply themselves and therefore they don't go wasting their time – they spent their time at their hobby of learning music and practising music and so on and I found a very good mixture of people involved in this sort of thing.

Did you enjoy it during camp?

Oh yes, very much, yes.

What sort of things were you playing there – were they teaching you military airs as well or was it sort of mix of popular and military ...

Well principally it was military music – dance music if you had the odd occasion to do such things – and we used to play it before we were overseas – used to play at concerts and so on and of course a lot of – in Melbourne – a lot of ceremonial work and concerts in the Melbourne Town hall and also they used to have a lot of parades in the streets and so on in



recruiting drives trying to get people to go and sign up and I presume that some of the military music, or the martial music might have succeeded in that respect.

Were there any songs of numbers that were particularly stirring that would have touched people, do you think it that way?

They used to play a lot of the music from the first world war like *Madameselle from Armiteres* and all those sort of things which I think would have stirred up some of those patriotic feelings in young blokes whose fathers had been to the first world war – I don't know – I can only guess at that.

Did it stir you? Were you touched by the nature of that sort of music to sort of get your feelings up or ...?

Well I always have taken the view – even from before military service – that a brass band was the best thing ever to get your feet going. If you heard a brass band marching up the street you couldn't help but march in time to it. That's the way it's always struck me.

What about the concerts – what sort of concerts were they?

They used to put concerts in the Melbourne Town Hall – again to do with – mainly to do with wartime, with Comforts Fund raising money and all this kind of thing. In some instances they'd had soloists – I can't particularly recall who they might have been at the time – I can remember prominent speakers speaking at them. One that comes to mind was Sir Keith Murdoch but I don't particularly recall many of their names now. I can see some of the people there and can't tell you who they were.

What sort of things were being said do you recall – the kinds of appeals being made?

Well they were appealing in particular to people to join the forces and to serve the – to save their country – and save the British Empire and so on.

One might suppose there'd be references to Germany as the enemy. Do you recall that being done and whether or not it sort of concerned you or worried you as a person with German forebears?

No it didn't worry me from that angle, but Germany was mentioned a hell of a lot and a lot of the songs to do with some of the first world war songs of course were slinging mud at Germany and they were popular songs when Germany was fighting England. Likewise in the music part of the thing – to do with the Japanese when they started to come south – if there were any songs that fitted the occasion they were always brought to the fore – but again it's a bit hard to remember exactly what types of songs I'd like to bring to mind.

(20.00) When you look at some of the propaganda material from the period – the Germans were often painted as being sort of brutes, monsters – almost sub-human in a way. Did it ever seem to you as sort of odd, or you wonder about the process that was identifying Germans in that light? Did you think that can't be quite right or ...?

No as far as I could see at the time and what I'd learned from talking at home and what I'd learned from the papers and so on I took them to be just people like you and I who were being led in the wrong direction. I would have taken the view which I think lots of people do – and did at the time – that soldiers fighting for their own countries like that were doing exactly

what we were doing. We felt we had something to defend and something to do for world – against world domination by these people – and I presume they felt the same way.

What about the street marches? How would they go? Would they have troops marching in front with bayonets and develop a lot of crowd interest? Can you recall the sort of mood of the time?

Only – you only really had marches of that type usually before contingents were about to embark on ships for overseas and that used to bring a lot of people into the streets and so on and the ticker-tape farewells and all this kind of thing but I didn't see a great deal of that because I was only in the Royal Park set-up for about six months and after that of course we were gone.

Did you see some of those? Did you play at some of those marches though?

I think from memory we would have done three or four of that type of thing.

Was it moving? Can you recall?

Very moving as far as the crowds were concerned lining the streets – but I think as far as the average – what I could gather from the – well I suppose the look of the average person marching – he seemed to be very happy and interested in what he was doing.

What about the ship boarding departures – did you play for any of those?

No, no we didn't. We only marched through the streets of Melbourne then the people would be taken on trains or trucks to the ships.

It seems at the time of the first world war there was every much a feeling of wait until our boys get there, they'll sort of sort them out and it would all be over very quickly. There was something sort of innately superior about our – maybe our physiques and that we were that much better. Were there similar sorts of feelings at the time?

Those feelings were very strong. I don't know – I did hear debate back here quite a bit about the bad leadership in some cases of instances where Australian troops were in forces that were being beaten back and so on but in the main, once you become involved in these things and learn more about them the criticisms were probably in a lot of cases unfounded.

So at the time when you were to leave – what kind of instruments did you – were they good instruments or sort of a bit battered or ...?

The ones we left Australia with were – I think some of them must have come out of the Ark – but they were still all right, still good. In fact any good instruments like I imagined a good pipe to be – I don't smoke – but I imagine a good pipe would be the older it is the better it is.

Do you become attached to your instrument? Dose it become like something very special to you?

Oh yes – and strangely enough if you put half a dozen instruments of the one type in a row and if they were all very similar instruments you'd still go and pick you own up. I don't know why.

What about on the way over – did you practice or have occasion to have impromptu – not exactly parties – but musical moments.

No, on the ships the instruments that we had were all packed away.

So when did you first get access to them again?

Oh about – oh I think the next time I saw an instrument was not till about 1943 – before I left.

So as a bandsman – that was pretty well the end of your bandsman career almost?

Yes, yes it was, yes. I did play in a band in Melbourne for a short time after the war but then I had a wife and a young daughter and I didn't have the time to spend at it because I had to work as much overtime and so on as I could fend to eventually buy myself a home and so on.

Well when you arrived in New Guinea, do you recall what your feelings about the place were – how you saw it?

Well I was quite interested and the fact that it was a country I'd never seen. It was a tropical area. It was full of whopping big mosquitoes and so on – on the march from the wharf at Port Moresby up to the 7 Mile aerodrome. Balmy to a hot sort of an evening as I recall it and once you had finished this seven mile march in those conditions and tried to sleep amongst these bloody big mozzies and so on – I started to wonder what the hell I'd gotten myself into.

(25.00) They were malarial mosquitoes and I gather it was a while before things got settled down and you got proper sleeping attire and medications. Were there many men it's believed got malaria from that first period?

Yes I wouldn't know numbers but there were a lot. We set up an RAP in a marquee just near the 7 Mile 'drome and we had a lot of sick blokes in there – I would think from memory now probably about forty where they didn't have hospitals to transfer them into and so on and we had to try to look after them on stretchers or on ground sheets or whatever they could find to lay them on.

What about your own health, did you pick up anything at the time? There was a lot of dysentery and other problems as well.

Yes I was a dysentery sufferer for a while but after a sojourn at a place called – a camp called 'Shit Hill' – fed on arrowroot for a few days you come good and you get out again.

What was the attitude towards that as an illness. Because of the nature of it one might expect there'd be a lot of ribald humour?

Oh no, the doctor when you went into the place would say 'what's wrong with you, have you got the shits?' and you'd say 'yes sir'. 'Well get over there' and that was sort of as much humour as came into it because after that it was continual race to the latrines and back for some arrowroot.

What were the latrines like?

Stinking, rotten things. You had to dig them out and when we got a little bit more sophisticated they were made out of forty-four gallon drums with a hole cut in the top and a flue into the back like an old Malleys heater so that of the day time you alternated them and the day time you put paper and wood and stuff in and burnt the previous days takings and then used clean ones for the next day and reversed the procedure.

As a bandsman and would-be stretcher bearer, what sort of medical training had you had to that point?

Precious little. We were shown basics as far as application of dressings were concerned. The tying up of broken limbs with splints and make-shift splints and so on but outside of that I asked the sergeant in charge of the RAP at the time whether the best thing I could do to learn something about what I was attempting to do because they didn't have much time to teach us then. I wrote to my father and got him to buy me a first aid book written by Warwick and Tunstall and the bulk of my knowledge of the thing came out of the book until you started to get amongst bombs and returning aircraft where we were helping some of the medical orderlies of the air force cleaning out tail gunners' turrets and so on and it's quite a – well – no place for a squirmy stomach.

What happened? Where did you first encounter that particular requirement?

Well on this 7 Mile aerodrome business we were – that's where we first started to get sticks of Japanese bombs dropped on the place quite a lot because of the fact the aircraft were using the strip. Port Moresby had been heavily bombed at that time and we used to get quite a lot of it around the 7 Mile 'drome. At one stage there we were – it speaks volumes for the safety of a slit trench and another trench and in both cases filled the trenches in and we were able to breath up our arms – while blokes pulled some dirt off us and so on.

What was the feeling, you were literally buried alive then?

Yes. It's a very eerie feeling. The fact that you're still alive and you know you're still alive and you can hear blokes very quickly starting to pull dirt from you and move sandbags that had fallen down and so on – you're not very concerned.

You weren't feeling that you were going to suffocate?

No, no, not at that stage.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification. This is side two of tape 1 recorded with Victor Geisler of 2 December 1988 and it begins in five seconds from now.

Did you feel that you might suffocate, was it that packed?

No it was pretty loose sort of a situation, the ground was very dry and clay and therefore the dirt held in lumps like little rocks rather than a fine dust.

How long did it take to get you out?

Oh it seemed an eternity but I think about four minutes, five minutes.

And what about your comrades, any hurt?

No. Everybody was all right and got out and abused the Japs and otherwise no harm done. I remember also at that time I had – I'd left a shirt hanging on a tent – on a line inside a tent and some shrapnel had gone through the tent and through the shirt and the next morning I put this shirt on because I didn't have any more shirts and it had this line of shrapnel holes through the thing – through the front and through the back – and an old ex-rubber planter who'd joined the New Guinea Force because most of those fellows did and I think he was a colonel or a major

or something because of his standing in the area – would come round inspecting what had gone on and he said to me 'what happened to your shirt' and I said 'a shrapnel went through it' and he looked at the back and looked at front, he said 'good God didn't you get hurt?'

How did that make you feel? Did it make you feel anxious or make you feel lucky?

Lucky I think.

Where were you when the first bombs went off that were any where close to where you were? Do you recall the moment and how you felt?

No. I think the first time that we got them close to where we were was in the night and it was a very bright moonlight night and it's a strange feeling watching bombers silhouetted against the moon – the first time you've seen them and sat under them – and then you – in the light of the moon – you see these silvery bombs coming out of the belly of the plane – they look like a packet of needles coming down – and it's a rather eerie feeling until they start to go off and them of course the eeriness goes and you duck your head and either go to ground which wouldn't have done you much good with daisy cutters going off.

You were saying that part of your duties involved getting people out of bombers and that, so how did that come about. When did that first happen?

It happened when some of the air force, the Australian Air Force planes were landing after they'd been involved in fighting with Japanese Zeros and so on and whilst it wasn't our direct responsibility, we were just helping air force medical fellows who were quite close to us there on the aerodrome defence situation.

What was the first occasion? Can you recall what you saw?

Oh the first time – the first one I saw was a turret gunner who had been badly shot up. He wasn't dead but he was in a hell of a mess and they got him out and of course there's quite a lot of blood etcetera to be cleaned up out of the turret. That was the first on I can recall. Quite a mess.

Did it upset you?

No. It didn't. One quickly came to realise it was part and parcel of being involved in war pursuits and you might as well get used to it.

(5.00) How bad did it get? Did you find some people who'd literally be cut to bits?

I didn't see any that would really come into that category although I suppose the fact that clothing hadn't been removed from some of them they could have been in a very much worse situation than the mess in the turret would have suggested.

In the tents where you were looking after people who were just generally sick and so on – what kind of people did they have who generally assumed the job of going around looking [after] people? Were there enough doctors to go around?

Well in the case of the 39th Battalion at that time it only had one doctor and we were sent around to various companies, infantry companies and platoons which were widespread around the area to be looked after and we'd have to go around there once a day or whatever time you could be spared to find out if anybody needed any RAP help such as dressings for

tropical ulcers, any of the kind of thing which you could help them with, with the limited supply you had of ointments and sulphonamides drugs and so on and outside of that if you couldn't help them of course you had to get them back to the RAP and the sergeant there would decide whether he could help them further there or whether he'd have to send them off to hospital. The medical facilities were in pretty short supplies as I understand it at the time but they did get a lot better as time went by and some of the returning Australian General Hospitals from the Middle East theatres were sent up there and that of course put a different slant on the whole thing but by then wounded were being brought in from the Owen Stanley areas and so on and of course they were very very busy in those places but they did have a lot more medical help and so on than what we had in the first place.

Before people started to come in from up on the Kokoda Track and so on, just how bad was the rate of sickness. Were you getting people who were so bad they were being shipped back to Australia and so on?

We had – from what I can recall – we had a few people sent back that had things, mostly other than malaria and so on because even though there were some bad cases of that most of the people that I can recall at the time got over it. There were people who were contracting scrub typhus but the average one of those that I knew of died from it. They couldn't do much for them.

What form did that take? What caused it?

The scrub typhus apparently was caused by a tick which gets under the skin and it had the effect of the fellow, he'd get very drowsy as in malaria or dengue fever, and then he would start to get sort of thin and look like he was wasting away.

Was it wide spread enough that people were pretty worried about it?

No, but those, when cases were reported the 'medicos' were quite concerned about it but fortunately I don't think that it reached anywhere near the proportions that the likes of malaria and dengue fever did.

What sort of treatments were being used for that and also for malaria then?

Well for malaria the only thing they could give you at that time was liquid quinine and after they started to get supplies through – provided you could get your hands on some – you took a teaspoonful each day and that was supposed to keep you, tried to immunise you from malaria. I suppose it had some success. I had malaria once but I've never ever had any sign of it since so it must have worked. Used to send your teeth black.

What about dengue fever?

Dengue they treated mainly with sulphur drugs but it didn't have the prevalence or the ill effects that I can recall that malaria did.

And the tick related illness?

The scrub typhus, well that was bad but as I say I didn't see a lot of cases of it but I did know people that died with it.

This teeth blackening that you referred to. Was that permanent?

No, no, after you got off the quinine, or eventually when they got it in tablet form it didn't happen. Then they eventually brought out another tablet called atebirin which was yellow and

that came out of your skin, onto your skin and made your skin have a yellow tinge around it something like an oriental would look.

What about food then. Were you getting enough fresh fruits and vegetables and so on?

No the bulk of the food you got was canned, mixed vegetables and bully beef and that sort of thing.

Did people complain about it?

Everybody complained about eating bully beef and dog biscuits which was the name given to the army biscuits. The only thing about them was of course they were nourishing. Plenty of oatmeal and stuff in them and also the thing that was always on plentiful ration was herrings in tomato sauce which was commonly known as gold fish.

(10.00) What about the hours. Were you being rostered on night duty and so on?

Well hours were not really known in those places. After the days work was completed, or after nightfall, you used to do picket duties, two hours on and two hours off or if there were enough of you there you'd only cop one two hour stretch for the evening and that was principally – there were no enemy in the area at that time – that was principally to watch for, or listen for approach of enemy planes and if you heard them or the signal operators got a message through that there were planes coming from any direction you fired a rifle once which would warn people that you could hear the things and as they became closer and so on you would fire three times and that was the signal for an air raid red as it was called at the time which would wake people up and let them know to be prepared for some bomb dropping.

Would that be followed by a siren of any sort?

Oh yes, on odd occasions because you'd hear – you could hear an aircraft coming and you wouldn't know – you wouldn't be sure whose it was and very very odd times it was our own and then once the American planes started to arrive there of course it was a different story altogether then because they were coming and going all the time. There was a time there where the rumour went round that the Kittyhawks were due to arrive – and you may have heard and read this before too, but it actually happened – people, blokes on the airport defence there saw these plane coming in low and got out – instead of shooting them – got out to welcome them and waving in all directions and tossing hats in the air and they nearly got blown off the ground – they were Zeros – not the Kittyhawks. The Kittyhawks arrived about two days later.

And got shot at and one came down I believe.

They shot one – I believe they lodged a bullet in the back of the – not in the pilot but in the headpiece behind his head.

What about the sentry duties. The night duties. Were they taken seriously at that stage or would fellows be keen to use it as an opportunity to have a bit of a sleep.

Oh no you daren't sleep because of obvious reasons. You see even sentry duties at battalion headquarters and so on had to be taken very seriously because nobody knew at the time – even though all intelligence sources said there were no Japanese on the Papua side of the

island at that time – nobody could have been sure and therefore the duties were taken quite seriously.

What if you were negligent. Do you recall what the discipline was?

No well I don't recall anybody not doing what he was supposed to do.

At this stage as the Americans start to come, did you meet any? Get to know any in particular?

Not around Port Moresby, no. After I eventually left Port Moresby I went to Balikpapan and got to know quite a few up there and also in the Celebes but I didn't know many in New Guinea.

When you were in New Guinea then, where were you do you recall and what your feeling were when you heard that people were having to go up on the Track, that the Japanese were actually coming? What was to mood?

Well I was at this stage up at this base area camp just up in the foothills and I was there when the convoys were coming up to – bringing men up over the mountains to a place called – or up past Rouna Falls – I'm not sure of the exact name of the place now and a lot of those fellows went up and camped at Koitaki at the rubber plantation for a few days I presume to start to get used to the continual tropical downpours and so on that you got up there more so than you got down on the other side of the mountains and from there on that's where they transported them out to MacDonalds Corner and that's where they started to go up the Track.

Was there a feeling that you were going to get overrun when you heard that the Japanese were coming?

No, I don't think there was – there was no feeling of panic or anything like that. It was the opposite. The attitude was to stop them. When you think about it, after the event, it's a case of God knows how but at that time nobody thought of that. They went up with the intention of doing all they could to put the break on.

Around this time, were all of your duties being taken up with the stretcher and medical duties?

No by this time I was not doing much of that at all I was in the orderly room at the New Guinea Force base camp and I used to spend a lot of time between there and MacDonalds Corner and Captain Kelly had an office out there – now I don't know what they called his place now – it might have been Kelly's Corner I'm not sure, but from there we went a fair way up the Track to where – as far as up as they could go with some vehicles to bring wounded out and that's where the native carriers and some of our own people were carrying them down to there and that's where they were transported then back to hospitals.

(15.00) Before that part of it, with the logistics side, what sort of things were you actually doing?

What at the base camp?

Um.

Oh I did a lot of transfer work there for people coming out of convalescent camps and all that sort of thing. There was a big convalescent camp not far from there where they were sent after they came from hospitals and from the dysentery hospital and so on which wasn't far away



and I had to do the – arrange their transport and do their paperwork and get them back to their own units.

How efficient was the army in those respects? Was it one of those sort of terrible bureaucracies where it was a sort of running joke within the system itself or did things seem to work pretty well?

No I found things worked fairly well. It was a little bit lethargic in the first instance when we got there because even from the colonel down, everything was new to everybody or it appeared that way to me but once we'd been there for six months or so and the air activity and then the infantry activity got well under way, everybody seemed to have a job to do and everybody seemed to be doing it. To me it seemed to be working well like a well oiled machine can work when it's came out of virtually nothing.

Did you have anything to do with the supply side of supplying equipment and clothing and that sort of thing?

Only in as much as I would have to help handle it at the base camp and get it across to MacDonalds Corner where it was sent up the line.

Inevitably in that kind of situation where you're having to provide supplies for large numbers of men you can have things where ... the things be in great abundance that perhaps aren't necessary and great scarcity of other things that mattered. Did you get those sorts of problems?

In most cases the problems you had was a scarcity of everything. In a lot of cases with the stuff needed urgently forward I understand that we didn't handle a lot of that – it went up by what they called the 'biscuit bombers' at the time – they used to drop – push the things out of aeroplanes I think DC3s at the time and people who knew the terrain better than I they'd ride up in the thing and push the things out where they thought that was an appropriate place to drop them.

Was there a sense of anxiety about the lack of supplies particularly in weaponry and ammunition and so on, do you recall, back at base?

There was quite a feeling of that type for a time but then after a time, particularly after the Yanks became involved and more shipping was available, a lot more stuff came in. Also when we first went there, when they first started to bomb Port Moresby the, I can't recall the exact time now but I think there were about half a dozen ships in the harbour, one I can recall a *Macdhui* I can't recall the names of the others but they were blown up and I think they had a lot of supplies on them which would have caused one of the original foul-ups.

Did you see any of the wounded from the *Macdhui*?

No I didn't. No I was up in the 7 Mile 'drome area at that time.

Well from the point when men were first sent up onto the Track – how long before the first wounded found their way back?

Oh I think from memory now about – about two weeks roughly.

Did you see them at that time?

Only a few and most of them were walking.

So how long before they started to come down in appreciable numbers and you got caught up again?

Oh it would be about – about I suppose three or four weeks after – after the first lot came down.

What was the sense – was there a feeling of dismay to find that there was so many and apart from the wounds, many of them physically were suffering too from the conditions.

Oh they were in very bad shape physically. It was very hard on all concerned there and I think that – that the – some of those fellows that came out of it badly wounded and even walking wounded, one wonders how the hell they ever got out of it and yet they were quite cheery and happy and put up with their lot.

You might suppose back at base there'd be a lot of concern to know what the Japanese seemed like and how they shaped up and those sort of terms. Do you recall what your expectations were of the Japanese?

Well the expectations were exactly what you got. They were very dogged and particularly at close quarters and their sniping was apparently very well practised because they were very hard apparently to deal with up there and a lot of cases the stories I got from some of the fellows that were right up at Kokoda and beyond, that they half the time were confronted by a fellow at a distance of a few feet before they realised he was even there.

Did it appear to be rather tougher than was expected?

Very much tougher than was ever expected. See even the bit of training that you could do and what training grounds I saw back in Australia for instance at the jungle training schools at Canungra and so on they were very good but they didn't come anywhere near what it's like when you get into the jungle.

As men were coming down – what would happen. What was the logistics side of the operation you were involved in?

Purely to get them onto transports and get them moving. Get them moving down to Moresby.

Did you have direct contact with the men who were wounded?

Oh in some cases quite a few but mainly just – paper work wasn't worried about – it was mainly a matter of getting them onto vehicles, into ambulances or onto trucks or anything that was moving that was going back down to Seventeen Mile and further down to Moresby to the AGHs.

(20.00) Were native people being employed at this stage to help with the wounded?

Oh yes, yes. Native carriers had been employed – right from the time that the battalion first went up the Track – and they were also carriers and the constabulary was camped not far from the base headquarters where the Lieutenant Searle was, he had commanded a lot of those blokes but once they went up the Track I don't know who actually looked after them up there or took control of them up there. I think mainly senior native carriers would have done that. I did meet one of them in Melbourne – was down here with a constabulary thing from Papua some – oh back in about 1948 or maybe 1950 – I'm not sure of the year now, but I saw him in Melbourne. He was a fellow named Aria but that's as much as I could remember about him but he was to do with carriers and with constabulary at that time. I can remember quite a few

of the fellows that used to work about that camp and that went up the Track but I didn't see – I don't know whether they would have come back and fore at the time because there was that much activity going on and that many people coming and going that I wouldn't be sure what happened to them, whether they came back down there or whether they still you know, went back to their villages or what.

It's a period when the term 'boong' was fairly commonly used and I suppose also when native peoples were generally seen as essentially inferior to the white races. Can you recall how the native peoples were regarded?

Yes they were called 'boongs' and they were treated as second rate citizens until people stopped – Australians – stopped treating them that way and started to realise how important they were to the well being of everybody up there and for what I saw of it after a few months, the people realised that they needed the help of these fellows and changed their attitudes completely from the 'boong' bit.

Well what were the attitudes before – when you say they were treated and second class – in what ways?

Well people would talk to them as though they shouldn't be around, didn't exist and tried to take them down for fruit and so on and offer them cigarettes and they didn't want to give them the cigarettes in exchange for the fruit and so on, it was typical of what one might expect from young people who were probably away for the first time and coming into contact with native people for the first time and I don't think they really realised what they're doing until they come the their senses with it but as I say that didn't take very long.

What about you, did you share the sort of common attitudes of the time. Do you now look back at the period and sort of wonder how you acquired attitudes of the sort that you might have had?

Now I didn't have much of a problem there because – I think that the fact I mentioned earlier on that I spent a lot of time when I was younger around the docks and so on – meeting people from other countries and so on and collecting stamps and matchboxes and things that a young fellow does and talking to people from all over the world that you broaden your outlook a lot and even before I got there I didn't have any of these preconceived ideas about a 'bonng' being inferior to me.

During this time as the Japanese were coming forward and pressure was mounting, the men who were up confronting them were under enormous amount of stress and so on, was the pressure also mounting back at base in terms of the demands and expectations of what you could achieve?

It was when they first went up there but after the 39th Battalion put the brake on them – before they had to start to regroup and pull out of the thing when the 14th Battalion I think it was 2/14th and 2/16th and some of those fellows arrived it took the pressure off and everybody felt very much happier about it.

Were you involved in wound dressing at all at this stage?

No only mainly in getting supplies up to them and dressings and so on but not in actual dressing.

How were the medical supplies at the point where things were pretty thick on the Track?

At that time – at the time we're speaking of – they were good. They were pretty scarce when the fighting first started up there in fact we couldn't get stuff to send up but the times I'm speaking of when they started to come down, things had started to improve as far as supplies were concerned. That was mainly brought about I think once the AGHs arrived, I think it was the 2/6th that might have been the first one in there, but they also brought big medical stores with them and medical stores were set up and so on and consequently a hell of a lot of medical supplies were brought in at that time. I couldn't give you an exact time that that happened but it would be probably – oh I'm guessing now – at about half way through 1942, perhaps going closer to '43.

(25.00) During that earlier period, was there any improvisation. Was it found that some things which weren't available could be sort of substituted with something that could be scrounged from somewhere else?

Well there wasn't much you could scrounge around Port Moresby because the Japs had done a good job of blowing up virtually everything in the town. The Burns Philp stores and so on had all been blown up and there was nothing much could be scrounged from around there. About the only thing that you could scrounge and that was not much good to you was odd articles of clothing or boots or things like that, but not medical supplies.

So how long did you remain in this position of being involved with organising the movement of fellows coming down who were wounded?

Oh I would say about six months in all. Then in – when the 39th Battalion was completely withdrawn and were back at I don't know just the position they were out of Moresby but I think somewhere about twelve mile out, the need for the base area that I was at was drawing to a close and I rejoined the battalion. I was only back there about a month when – or maybe two months – when we came back then to North Queensland and were disbanded.

During the period where you're involved back at base and men were coming down from the front and there had been quite a lot of fighting, was there any sense of hostility towards those who were in the rear. Was there any feeling that people back there had it cushy and any resentment of their role?

No on the contrary I think everybody realised that the bloke along the line was just as important as the bloke – well nearly so – as the bloke up there. Somebody had to help him get out and I think that the feeling was as I saw it anyway, was one of general relief that coming down, finding people that could help them and get them on their way.

What was about the ratio then do you know, that is the number of men who had to be involved in the logistics side to every man on the Track?

No I don't know the figures on that but I would guess that probably it would amount to about probably fifty people to keep one man up there but I'm only guessing at that.

Did you have friends, people you knew well who went up and just never came back?

Oh yes, yes.

Can you recall any instances of saying goodbye to friends and then you realising that they seemed to have been gone a long time or how did you find out about some of those people?

In most cases you didn't find out until eventually when the information got through to the orderly room at the battalion headquarters or even up where I was when their names would go up on the board on routine orders whether they'd been wounded or killed or missing in action or whatever. That would be in most cases the first you'd hear about it unless you happened to run into somebody that you knew who's say to you that – what had happened to given blokes – but outside of that mainly you got it from the routine orders.

Were you ever effected by that or was it a matter of having to come to terms with the notion that there was a war and these things would happen?

I think you'd come to terms with it very quickly and you realise that – like that old show on the TV – *It Could Be You* – I think that's the sort of attitude you take. It's a thing you learn to live with.

When the battalion was disbanded – how did you feel about it?

I felt quite sad really. I thought that for a battalion which had only existed for a short time and to have given a good account of itself and so on I would have thought the military would have had more use for it but apparently their decision was well founded and we disbanded then and went to the 2/2nd Battalion and as far as I could see it was probably the best thing that could have happened at that time because all these units that didn't have a lot of blokes left had to be consolidated somewhere and I suppose that was the best way to do it.

So where did you go from there? Queensland?

I went to – from the 2/2nd Battalion – I was transferred into the army canteen service at Atherton in North Queensland and from there I went to – I went to Balikpapan. There was a landing at Balikpapan in which the – don't ask me how – but the canteen service was in part of the landing and we went over the side of the *Westralia* into the landing barges and went into invade Balikpapan as it were that that side of it is a bit of a joke because the enemy resistance at Balikpapan had been practically wiped out by naval shelling and allied air power and there wasn't much fighting – land fighting done at all and as far as the canteen service was concerned, well I don't think that we'd been much use to them then because the bulk of the people involved there were not trained in any infantry work and the military policemen on duty where the barges were coming in just told us where we had to go and go and set up our stores waiting for the boats to bring supplies in. I stayed there for I don't know now, about six months or longer, running a store and then I was sent to the Celebes to Macassar and I ran a store over there for about another three or four months, maybe six months.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Identification: this is tape G2 recorded with Victor Geisler. This is side A recorded on December 2nd, 1988 and begins in five seconds from now.

When you were going into Balikpapan was your expectation at the time that you would be meeting resistance?

It was and the briefing we got on the ship was to the effect that we would.

How did you feel?

Well having in general not encountered that kind of thing before about going over the side of the ship into a landing barge, we had done a lot of landing barge training in Trinity Bay in

North Queensland with the 2/2nd Battalion and I found that I was just putting to good use what I'd been taught. I'd realised ...

Did you feel nervous, anxious, frightened?

Existed more than anything I think, and once we approached the beaches to me, anyway, having been used to a lot of small arms fire it was quite apparent to me that there wasn't much of it about.

What was the basis of you being used to small arms fire?

Training in the infantry – rifle range training and all that sort of thing, and also around the training schools that they set up in the early part of Port Moresby.

So was there at all a sense of disappointment to get there and find that, well, you really weren't going to be meeting any significant opposition?

No, I don't think disappointment. I was quite content with that and I, having heard and sat under plenty of air raids and so on, I was quickly used to the situation as far as naval shelling and some bombing was concerned, and it didn't worry me at all and prior to going to Balikpapan we spent some time at Morotai which also was quite a lot of Japanese were there but they were apparently contained into one part of the place and there was practically no fighting there except an occasional air raid there, but nothing much.

If the food generally was pretty monotonous and not very good was it a bit of a liability being a canteen member, would you tend to get the micky taken out of you by fellows?

No, because by that time and in particular in those areas, food was more plentiful and far better. The basic rations coming from Australia were the same but in those places local foods could be purchased, the canteen, the type of supplies coming through to the canteen, a lot of it was sold to units as supplementary rations to what was being sent by the military in Australia. The food was one hundred percent better than it had been say back in Port Moresby. Also the supplies of cigarettes and chocolate and all that sort of thing used to come through very regularly and life was considerably better for people than it had been prior to that.

So how long did you spend at Balikpapan?

I think from memory about six months in Balikpapan and probably about six months in the Celebes, I'm not dead sure of that either but around about that time.

Any particular memories of Balikpapan?

Oh Balikpapan had been very badly blown about. The oil refineries they had been blown up with naval shells and bombing. A lot of Japanese pill boxes and gun emplacements had been virtually blown out of the ground. The beaches were covered in oil – even the water – if you went into the sea you would come out with a film of oil all over you because where they'd blown the refineries up the oil was still coming out of the ground of course and had nowhere to go so it was going onto the beaches and into the sea but – and that's where I was in Balikpapan when the Japanese surrender business came through and I had an enormous stack of cased beer inside a compound which was built with arc-mesh and a floodlight over the top of it but the locals of the troops and various other servicemen from near and far seemed to find holes in the back of the arc-mesh and off went the beer.

(5.00) Were there celebrations at that time?

Oh celebrations went on all night I think. A lot of thick heads the next day.

You among them?

I would have had a little drop but I was still trying to control my beer stocks.

What could you possibly do, I mean even if you sort of walk round and found somebody walking out with a crate, what would you be supposed to do?

Well I was supposed to have taken it from him I suppose, but I didn't bother I just went and plugged the holes so that someone didn't get anything out of the same hole.

Was there anybody ever charged or – at that time?

Oh I got that sick of it at one stage there in Borneo that a fellow came digging a hole into the sand to – or into the ground to get into the beer store and I got that sick of telling him to go away that in the finish I – there were two or us lived in this store – and I let him dig a hole and step up into the store and then I took him back to his battalion and told them to talk to him or do something about him. The war had finished and I didn't want to see him charged but apparently they did charge him and I had to go and attend a court martial but the fellow as acquitted. I must say I was glad to see it but the defence was that he didn't break and enter the liquor store which is what they charged him with, the defence proved that he dug in Borneo and stepped in it and because he stepped up into the liquor store, that was coincidence.

Was about recreation generally, what sort of things were people doing during that period?

Mainly once the war had finished there – out of packing cases and so on from the tobacco supplies, we built a Moth class yacht and scoured things from various palces including fabric from the air force and a mast also I think from the air force and we used to do a bit of sailing.

Completely seaworthy?

Oh yes, very good. I sent a message to Melbourne and got a plan sent up in a hurry and that's how we built it and ...

Was yours the main knowledge or were there other people with special skills that helped with that?

Well I don't think that any of us had particularly special skills except perhaps the fellows from the air force who brought the fabric over and glued the fabric on for us to waterproof the thing but outside of that it went very well and lots of other people did all sorts of things of that type. They'd build themselves canoes and anything like that that would give them something to do in their spare time you know.

So what would you do, how far afield would you go? Would you fish would you go exploring?

No, mostly sailing. We used to sail for miles down the mouth of the river – I can't recall the name of the river either now. But we'd sail out to the sea. The sea was very calm around there most times and we'd sail for miles and miles. When we had the spare time – particularly in the evenings – and it would be daylight till probably nine o'clock at night, you could sail till eight-thirty.

Did you ever have any problems where you got caught in a drift or ran out of wind or anything of that sort?

Sometimes you'd run out of wind but fortunately there always appeared to be nice sea breezes in the evenings and we didn't – we had what you call a good time after that.

Was there any provided entertainment – pictures or anything of that sort?

Oh plenty of picture shows, mobile picture shows.

What were you seeing do you recall?

No, I don't. Strangely enough I think they were mostly war films and newsreels. *Fox Movietone News* and that sort of thing and a lot to do with British naval action on the other side of the world. Building of Liberty ships and all these sort of things. These were the things you were living with but you were watching them on the pictures too.

Were there any entertainment groups as such, performance groups?

Yes there were concert parties sent around, Jim Davidson was, I think he was a colonel, was in charge of all those sort of things but quite a lot of people. One fellow I can remember in particular that played with the ABC for a long time, is a fellow named Keith Baker – 'Knuckles' Baker – who was a one-armed trumpet player. Another fellow Ron Terry.

Why 'Knuckles', where did the Knuckles come from?

Because he didn't have any on one hand I think. He had one arm was missing from – prior to the war he'd lost it in an accident – don't ask me how he got into the army, but he got in with one arm. Another fellow named Ron Terry who was a good bass player. He was in a concert party there too and they were all original members of the 39th band. Another fellow named Fisher I think he played with – Bob Fisher played with the ABC too I think – with a very good trombone player.

(10.00) You mentioned before that you first got to playing again back – was it in '43?

In '43 when we went back to – when they refomed the battalion band – we went to 30th Brigade headquarters as the brigade band because there weren't enough musicians in each of the battalions left in that brigade to form a band in each battalion so they took what's left of each one back to brigade headquarters and for a time there I was the bandmaster of that band, then we came back to Australia and then of course, as I said before, it was disbanded. We went to the 2/2nd Battalion where I did mostly orderly room work and administrative work there for the RSM and I played – when I had time – I played with the band and I did the guard changing with the band and so on, the ceremonial work, but in the main my work was administrative. I did also play the piano quite a bit up there with a dance band that they had formed and we used to play at various places around the Atherton Tablelands and also in General Stevens' mess at 6th Division headquarters, also I played in General Blamey's mess at one time and also I played in the Officers Club at Atherton.

Where was the dance band?

Well it was a dance band formed at 16th Brigade headquarters in which was the 2/1st, 2/2nd, 2/3rd Battalions.

And where was that?



In Atherton – well Herberton actually the camp was in North Queensland.

What about at that the time of the surrender, was there any official ceremony that involved playing martial airs or anything?

No, when Japan surrendered that's when I was in Balikpapan. There were no bands or anything there.

So, and then the Celebes, when did that come about?

Well that was after Balikpapan but that was, they had a small garrison force in there. There were a few Americans. That air force had a small Catalina base there and naval supply – or a little naval – a naval supply ship used to come and little naval vessels, Corvettes and that type of ship used to call in and pick their supplies up there.

Was this part of the action to prevent the Indonesian guerillas from claiming independence? Was it in support of the Dutch?

It was in support of the Dutch but I don't know exactly I had nothing to do with any combat troops there except that I had a store which was on the docks and was typical of the dock area of most cities. The police – the native police – the local police and various factions of locals used to fight – mainly during the night and they would climb the flag poles or get the flag down somehow of the Dutch flag and they'd tear all the flag off except the red and they'd haul the red back up the pole and then they'd start shooting and this used to go on night after night and the only time I ever saw anyone get hurt I was opening my store door the next morning – about eight o'clock in the morning – and a little 'wog' I was going to say – a little native – whatever you call him – climbed out from under a culvert and somebody shot him in the arse and he's the only bloke I ever saw get hurt.

Was he badly hurt?

No, fairly superficial wound in one side of his backside. With all the shooting though that used to go on well he's the only bloke I ever saw get hit.

So how long did you stay there?

I think about six months over there.

And then?

Then I went back to Balikpapan in around about January of 1946 I think it would be and then I went back to Melbourne and was 'demobbed'.

What were your expectations, what did you feel you were going to do with war's end?

Well I had worked with Australian glass manufacturers as an office boy prior to the war and then I was working in their accounts section and the order of the day was that these companies would take you back. So I went back to the glass company and worked for a time doing costing in their motor transport section and eventually I left there and became assistant secretary of the old Payne's Bon Marche that used to be a department store in Bourke Street where I stayed for about six years and then I got myself into the hospitality industry where I spent the last thirty-five years or more.

Just going back to the Atherton Tablelands and the dance bands and so on.  
What sort of occasions were they like? What kinds of affairs were they?

Apart from in the generals' messes and officers' messes and that sort of thing, around the various towns and so on where they had local people were mainly organising dances and balls and all that sort of thing and they'd been short of all that sort of thing and short of manpower over the war years that they – our band was a good band – and was in a lot of demand and the military went along with it and we travelled all over the place playing at these things. We had what you'd call today the big band, we had about ten people in it with good instrumentalists, bass players, tenor saxes, alto saxes, trumpets, trombones and so on and we had the real big band sound.

What were you playing?

Piano.

But as far as music was concerned?

Oh, all the big band type music, Tommy Dorsey music, Victor Sylvester music, all that sort of music.

(15.00) What sort of places would you find yourself staying in as you travelled around.  
Would you to go very small little towns outback and that sort of thing?

No, we didn't go on tour as such, we principally transported to the places and brought back again that night, or the early hours of the next morning.

What was the attitude towards – of local people – towards you?

Really popular. Write your own ticket.

As a young man, were there young ladies around that you could now start to go out with and so on or because you were soldiers were you sort of regarded with a bit of suspicion by parents and so on.

No we were welcomed in most places and there was an abundance of all sort of home comforts.

Was it a good life.

A very good life.

Are there any particular episodes that you can recall or things that remain with you from the period?

No, not particularly, they were all good and happy times, even after the war I've been back up there a couple of times and met odd people that I could recall having seen around and all they could ever talk of was the nice happy times that they had when the music was provided.

Were there Americans still around at this point?

There were no Americans up at the Tableland, no.

What about even the possibility of just local young men maybe not being particularly happy about finding their girlfriends dancing with fellows they

didn't know, soldiers and so on, were there ever any fights or that kind of thing?

No, very little, because in the main, like even in the cities, the bulk of the young men in the prime of their lives had all gone away and there was a shortage of – a shortage of manpower as we use the term.

But you were stuck – playing – did that limit your opportunities a bit to get out and about?

No it didn't because – it's the old story – why did she fall for the leader of the band they would wait.

So there were groupies even in those days?

More or less, yes.

I understand at one stage you got the nickname "Basher". How did that come about?

In December – it would be about 1941 I think – just before we left Australia – there was a fight broke out on Christmas Day in a hut at the Darley camp.

Over what, do you remember?

No, I don't know what it started over – I wasn't in the hut – but I walked across to the hut to see what was going on and there were three blokes laying on the floor who'd been out to it and at that precise moment the sergeant major came in the other end of the hut with the guard and I'm the only man standing and I got the credit for putting these blokes down when I wasn't even there when the fight started and the name 'Basher' was handed to me and it stuck to me for the next five or six years that I was in the army and it got me into more trouble than enough because if I was in a situation whether in Australia or out of the country where a blue started, they'd say get 'Basher', send for 'Basher' so half the time I'd finish up in a blue that I wanted no part of and shouldn't have been in.

Tell us about some of those things, some of the fights.

Well mainly they were straight-out fist fights and fortunately I could give a good account of myself but they were fights I wanted to know nothing about, nothing to do with me, and particularly they would start mainly over booze. Either booze that they got what they shouldn't have had or they'd have too much in the pub and then get out and possibly fighting over cards or gambling or whatever and of course if they were in a town it could be fighting over girls and so it went on. But the cry would always go out 'get Basher'.

When you first got that nickname as a result of being the only man standing, did you get charged at all?

No, they didn't charge me but they couldn't work out how I did it. I think the RSM was amazed and that's why the nickname was handed out but he turned the guard around and marched out again.

Having got a nickname like that, it sounds like it could be a liability just like being the fastest gun in the west, there's always somebody who reckons they can beat you. Did you find fellows would want to fight you to see how good you were?

That happened a few times. In particular when we had boxing – battalion boxing – at times and in particular not long after that happened when they started shipboard sports of course I got to nominate for the boxing, I got no way out of it and I was lucky I suppose that I summed this fellow up and I thought to myself now if I don't hit you first and you'll hit me I'll end up in the Pacific so I let a couple of rip roarers go and got out of it, but, very dangerous.

Did you do much boxing?

No not a lot. No I had fortunately done a little bit of it in my early days and whilst I was the office boy at the glass company in Spencer Street I used to do a little bit of preliminary bouts down at the old 'house of stoush' or West Melbourne stadium for which I think we used to get ten bob for three rounders. That's if you won it.

How many did you fight there?

Oh, I think probably about one a week for some months. It was just a general interest in – more in keeping fit than becoming a boxer – because at that time I'd just started rowing with the Melbourne Rowing Club and anything at all I could do to – I think I had a fad about fitness at the time – and anything at all I could do to get fit or keep fit was – it was on.

In the fights out of the ring in the army, did you ever get hurt?

Oh, only the occasional black eye or something but never anything worse.

Did you ever hurt anybody badly that bothered you?

Oh no, only enough to stop him. You know I didn't – I'm not a – not belligerent by nature, if somebody wanted to throw one first well I would let him have it back but there's George Dobson, you might remember George was a trumpet player for donkey years with the ABC – George was a member here and some days he used to come on in and say 'Good-day Basher' and someone said to him 'how did he get that title?' and I heard George say 'well he'd sooner give you a poke in the ear than talk to you'.

(20.00) Did you ever get caught up in any fights with American servicemen?

No. No, the only time we looked like getting into a blue with American servicemen was in Brisbane one time when there was a couple of blokes annoying – as I thought – annoying some women on a street corner. Probably a bit naive on my part but I said to another bloke with me we'd better stop this and we told the Yanks to beat it or else and I think I gave one a poke in the nose and one of these sheilas abused me then for sticking my nose in. (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW.