TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description	Leslie Mervyn (Les) Simmons, 39th Battalion, interviewed by Harry Martin for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45. Discusses Australia; education; religion; economic depression; music; Militia; Australian Imperial Force (AIF)- Militia relations; 39th Battalion; discipline; embarkation; SS Aquitania; health; medical facilities; SS Macdhui; casualties; 14th Field Ambulence; native carriers; Papuan Constabulary; combat conditions; 113 Australian Convalescent Depot. Mentions Isurava, Kokoda Track, Port Moresby.

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Identification: This is an interview with Band Sergeant Les Simmons of the 39th Battalion. The interview was recorded on 4th January, 1989 at Fryerstown and is Tape H1, Side 1.

LES SIMMONS where and when were you born?

I was born in Bendigo on 18 May 1919 to Leslie Edgar John Simmons and my mother. Dad was a cabinet maker and joiner and he worked for G H Sweeney in Bendigo – he served his time there – and after he finished his time he went into the building game as a builder.

How were conditions in those days? How many in the family and so on?

At that time I was the eldest and I had a sister a couple of years after me but at the early stages, from what Dad tells me, it was okay. He had this permanent work at Sweeneys and he seemed to go all right on the building for several years, I think up to 1928 but from then on things got pretty crook and he had to take work in Maldon and I live in Maldon, bought places like that which was quite a distance from Bendigo in those days – transport not being what it is now. We only saw Dad weekends when he came home for the weekend.

When you say things were crook, did you feel poor? Was it a matter of having clothes that were getting patches in them? Were you eating bread and dripping? How were things on that side?

Almost as bad as that but we did see poorer people which made us feel a bit better anyway. We thought we were a bit better off than these other people. I remember other families with the kiddies getting around without shoes or socks and the way they dressed which seemed to make it seems as though they were much worse off than we were. Dad had a motor car which was rare in those days but in the building game he could afford it when he was building but when the depression came he had to put it on blocks and save the cost of the registration.

Do you recall what sort of car it was?

Yes, a '28 model Nash; a sedan.

As far as your schooling was concerned, what kind of schooling did you have?

Primary school, Bendigo Violet Street Primary School, Camp Hill, also known as the Central School in Bendigo. Then to the Bendigo technical school which I left when I was thirteen and I went to the Bendigo School of Mines and did night school there in building construction.

When you were a young person what were your aspirations? What sort of things did you ultimately hope to do?

I do not think I had any aspirations; possibly to be a builder, the same as Dad. I think in those days our parents sort of let us into the professional trade that they thought we should be doing. Friends of mine who were sons of accountants and they were

business people in a commercial world ended up in offices. Other blokes like m'self, they ended up in a trade – plumbing, mechanics, carpenters or whatever.

Was it a religious family?

Not over religious. I attended Sunday School every Sunday and church. Dad and Mum often attended church services but I don't suppose we were what you could call a devout religious family.

With the experience of the depression years did this cause your father to become at all interested in politics or perhaps he may have been before?

No, he never mentioned politics very much. He was a Liberal voter although his father and the rest of our relations on Dad's side were Labor people. I guess because he became a builder and that and he was on the other side he sort of changed and he became a Liberal.

(5.00) As a young person at that time were there any particular issues that stood out that you can recall were ones that people were agitated about or particularly concerned with?

The only thing that I can remember was the White Australia Policy. I think it was Calwell who was behind that and he wanted to keep Australia white under the White Australia Policy. The only other things, earlier, the depression years, were people out on the roads doing 'suso' as we called it for sustenance. People like Dad, for instance, he went gold mining. They had an allowance from the Government for their tools; the pick and shovel. I think there may have been something also contributed towards the petrol – this was before he put the car on the blocks – and a party of us, I was only a kid then around twelve or eleven, would go looking for gold which we did find and this sort of helped with the income.

You were just prospecting rather than working for somebody?

That is right. Just prospecting along the creeks not far out of Bendigo.

Was this pan and dish and that sort of thing?

Yes, with the dish and even as a kid I remember getting them as big as grains of wheat in those days.

Did that change much the circumstances of the family or were these amounts really not large enough?

I do not know what they got an ounce in those days, it wasn't very much. I do not think it helped very much although every shilling in those days possibly did help with keeping the family.

Was there a feeling that maybe you might strike it lucky and get a particularly good find or was it really a matter of just scrounging and expecting that you would only ever get small amounts?

No, we only expected to get small amounts. We never had ideas of finding big nuggets or anything like that.

What about the family sense of identity in those days? Australia then was much more closely tied to Britain. Did you see yourselves as essentially British? Do you recall how the family saw themselves?

Yes, definitely. We felt we were British which brings me forward on in time in the army. I think I filled in a form where it had to have nationality and I put Australian and I began to feel an identity then. This is in the beginning of the war and I was made to alter it to British subject. So I wasn't one of these people agitating to have our nationality changed but I must have been feeling a bit obstreperous or something at the time and I thought I am Australia. That is the first time it ever entered my mind of this between being British and Australian.

During the school years would you have morning assembly, salute the flag, allegiance to the Queen and so on?

Yes. Every Monday we would form up in the quadrangle, the headmaster on the steps of the building and we would sing `God Save the King' and salute the flag. That was our big Monday morning.

One of the things that is impressive when you drive around the countryside here in Victoria is the larger towns and their avenues of honour where there were so many young men went off to the First World War and never returned. Did you grow up with a sense of what the ANZAC tradition meant? Was it something that had any special place either in the family or locally?

Possibly with the family but not so much with me. I knew what ANZAC was about and being a bandsman in my younger days – I used to play at the ANZAC Day turnouts in Bendigo and you would see the chaps in their feathered hats, the emu feather in their slouch hat and on their horses. The war was twenty years gone by at that stage and it just seemed something way back in history to me. But to hear a soldier tell me stories of what happened that made it really interesting and really brought it home but generally it was just a war that had been and it didn't mean very much to me.

When did your musical interest start? It sounds like perhaps it had begun before the war.

It certainly did. I was four years-old. Dad was an Australian champion cornet player, actually it was the soprano, and he taught me. Then I had instruction later on with a local bandmaster in Bendigo, Bob McCaskill.

This was with the cornet?

Yes, with the cornet. I have photos somewhere with me with the instrument at four years old.

(10.00) So when were you a competent musicianist as such that you were able to start playing publicly?

As far as playing publicly it would be with other players in the band and I was doing that around ten years old then because I was not big enough to be in a band no matter

whether I was a good player or not. But I was not confident until around ten or eleven years old.

Do you recall the music of the time? The particular pieces that remain with you?

Yes, all the well known marches which most people know now plus a lot of contest marches which many people don't ... know of. It is only bands who are practising for a contest and the bandsmen involved would know them.

What are the names of some of those?

`Ravens Wood' was a march that the Bendigo Municipal Band played in Sydney during the Australian championships and they won the contest which was quite a feat. That was January 1932. They played Beethoven's works arranged by Owen which was a very hard piece of music and well, the other marches `Caractacus', `New Colonial' which was only an easy march anyway. The old memory is going a bit, in fact ...

What about popular tunes? Were you drawn into playing the popular music at the time?

Yes we were. The very early ones I can't remember but the modern tunes that came out and as I remember late on was *In Your Easter Bonnet, Down in the Mall, Vagabond Lover, Misery Farm,* which was a very old one but it was still popular in my early days.

Particularly apt for the depression years.

That's right, yes. Then, of course, we get to the Forties where we had our war tunes then.

Were you playing at local functions; dances and that type of thing?

Personally, I was in an orchestra, a dance orchestra, there was myself and a pianist, Myra Toomy, and Harry Haines was the drummer. It was his orchestra and we used to play in the Unity Hall in Bendigo at dances every week – I was seventeen then – that was my first introduction to dance playing as from being in a brass band.

Were you travelling around the district playing at different venues?

Yes, we did. After being with Harry Haines I was asked to play with Charlie Neville's orchestra. It was only myself, Charlie Neville on the fiddle, a chap by the name of Kennedy on the drums and a girl on the piano, I just can't remember her name. We used to go to Dingee, Bridgewater, Bendigo, all around the place.

What sort of numbers would you get at some of these functions?

With Neville's orchestra it was 'Gold Mine in the Sky', 'Lambeth Walk' – what were the other numbers there ...

Just whatever was going in the way of dance music at the time.

Yes, that is right. We used to have Chappels orchestrations and they were specially prepared for dance bands. You would join the club and they would send these to you as the new music came out.

Did you have a singer?

No, we didn't.

What about crowds? How many people would turn up at some of these places?

At a place like Bridgewater and Dingee I suppose it would be 100 people in a very small old hall. Very countrified: they would have cream cakes and sandwiches. It was quite a do and everyone enjoyed themselves there. I used to love playing at these. I got seven shillings for the night. They used my car, I used to pick the orchestra up.

What sort of car was that?

A '26 model bull nose Morris. I would collect the orchestra from their various homes, take them to the place where we were playing and then drop them home again. I got seven and six.

Did you ever set out on some wintry nights and get bogged or caught in the rain or arrive at a hall and just find there were just a handful of people or that kind of thing?

No, not in those days. That happens in these times we are in now but in those days people just turned up. There was no other entertainment for them then. They were young and oldies – family affairs – children there and elderly people. That was one of their main sources of entertainment especially in places like Dingee and Bridgewater that didn't have picture theatres or anything.

One might suppose that as a young man playing and travelling around like this to other young people would have looked fairly glamorous. Did this give you a special in with the girls? Were you seen as a man about town?

I don't think so, no. (quietly laughs)

Just how far would you travel to a venue?

I think it was around thirty miles, our perimeter, to the place and thirty miles back.

(15.00) Do you recall when the Prime Minister Mr Menzies then announced that Australia was going to war? Can you recall where you were and your feelings at the time?

I was in Bendigo at the time. We shifted to Melbourne in 1939 just around the beginning of the war. I was living in High Street opposite the Golden Square Fire Station. There is a motel built there now. So that is where I was when I heard the news from Menzies.

Did it mean anything in particular to you? Were you shocked or do you recall how you felt?

I felt terrible because I enjoyed life at that time. I was in the YMCA, I was in the Fire Brigade, I was in bands and associated with the church clubs and I really enjoyed things and I could see everything was going to change overnight. It was a terrible feeling.

What sort of work were you doing?

I was working with Dad building houses in Bendigo.

Had you anything to do with the Militia at that time?

Yes, I was in the Militia when I was seventeen. I went under another chap's name because I was too young to ...

How did that come about? Why did you join the Militia?

Bands again; most of the bandsmen in the 38th Battalian band were friends of mine. I either worked with them, they used to work for my Dad, everyone knew everyone in them days, and the bandmaster, Percy Smith asked me if I would join the band. I had to go under another name, it was Gorge Gardiner. He was another bandsman but I think he did belong to the band but he never turned up so I went under his name. I didn't collect any pay; George Gardiner used to get my pay – military pay.

But why did you join? What was the point to you? Was it just because of the musical opportunities?

Yes it was. It wasn't patriotism or anything in those days. There was no wars then and I loved camping too. I was in the scouts and that was one of my main recreations was camping. The military life appealed to me; the annual camps they used to have and the parades and on top of that was my interest in band work.

Where did you camp?

We camped at Seymour. The biggest camp was at Victoria Park in Ballarat which I remember very well. Actually it was a coincidence that I was back there after coming back from the war in a convalescent unit – I was admitted to a convalescent unit in that same paddock where our tents were in 1938 when I was there with the 38th Battalion.

How was discipline in the camps and so on? What was the nature of the attitude towards the Militia then? Was it different being involved with music?

Well, I suppose it was. As far as the band side goes we were not under such strict discipline as the fellows in the infantry platoons. We could go out and play in the bush somewhere and probably have an hour just sitting down talking to each other as long as we got back to parade the troops again on time and we would do a bit of practice in between. I feel it was a different set-up it would be for me compared to being in a rifle platoon because I was with people who had the same interest as me, the other bandsmen, and I think that made the difference.

How long were you involved before the declaration of war?

Well, I was still with the Militia when war was declared.

How long had you been in the Militia?

Three years. Three years in the Militia and then we were called into camp then for these ninety-day period camps for the universal trainees to train the blokes and they were in the camp for three months and then another lot would come in. So I was still in the Militia when war was declared.

Were you married or engaged or anything?

No, I wasn't. I was going with a girl. I had been going with her for four years. That was the extent of my romances. I didn't knock about much.

Were you planning marriage at that stage? Did you see your life as marriage, children, settling down and that sort of thing?

No, not then.

(20.00) Did you have aspirations to travel overseas with your music?

That was something that we couldn't afford even up to 1939 because things were pretty crook when war was declared. We were only coming out of the depression and that was only for rich people. I remember in Bendigo the local solicitors and people like that there would be something in the social notes in the Bendigo Advertiser where they had gone overseas and would be away for so many months and that was right out of our reach. Just to go to New South Wales to me up to that stage was a big event, it was really something, and going to that band contest in 1932 I felt as though I had crossed into another country. To cross a border, a State border, and I feel that the majority of the people would have felt the same way. A lot of people didn't go out of their own town. Like people living here in Fryerstown, where we are at the moment, only went into Castlemaine possibly once every couple of weeks. They had to go in by cart, the road was rough, and they were self-contained anyway. We had shops; we had everything. We had about fifteen pubs here, and pastry shops, doctors – had the lot – so the people had no need. They were just a well knit community who in most cases all the marriages were between the locals – different to what it is today.

This contest that you referred to in 1932, whereabouts was that?

That was in Sydney.

How many people did you go up there with?

There would have been about twenty-five people in the band.

Did you pay your own way?

Yes. Each member had to pay their own way. I do not know how they did it. In 1928, 1932 I'm sorry, was in the midst of the depression. Some chaps could not afford to go and I might be telling tales out of school here but the band did have a couple of other players there from other bands who went under the names of the fellows they were replacing because our original players just didn't have the money to go. To cover expenses the band held concerts on the way up. We went by cars and they would pull up at places like Goulburn, Wagga Wagga, Albury and give recitals and that sort of helped our expenses.

Was Sydney, seen as a fairly racy place in those days? Did it seem a much bigger, more exciting place to go than, say, Melbourne?

It seemed about the same to me because I only visited Melbourne once a year. We used to come down for holidays and Melbourne and Sydney to me seemed much the same, they were two big cities.

How did the competition go? How did your band fare in that contest?

They did very well. It was Australian championships and they became the Australian champions. This was the Bendigo Municipal Band under Bob McCaskill.

Was there a prize as such?

Yes. I think from memory it was a perpetual shield that went around. I was only twelve at the time and that is only just from what I can remember.

No money as such attached to it?

No, no money but each man got a medal. It had a little cornet on it, a gold medal. I have got them here somewhere.

Was that regarded as really something when you got back? Were the local people impressed by that?

Yep, they were. It got a good write-up in the papers and for a band from a place like Bendigo, which wasn't very big at the time, it was really some achievement for a local band to go over there and compete against Australia's best.

Coming forward then to the declaration of war and then going in for further training was there a different sense about the urgency of the training and so on from what you had experienced previously in the Militia?

Yes, yes there was. I was just going to mention about horse transport and things like that.

No, do.

We had horse transports then, field kitchens which are pulled by horses with the steam coming out from their fires. We had our transport lines and of a night there when all of the transport platoon was in, the horses would all be lined up behind a barricade and it was just, say, going back to what I had read about World War I, we were still in those conditions.

Are we talking about large numbers of horses? Twenty, 100?

There could have been forty or fifty horses, I am not quite sure of the number but there was a lot of horses there. In some cases they would have to have a couple of horses for a general service wagon and they had to have spare horses but I know there were possibly forty or fifty horses in the lines – that's to a battalion.

What about your own training, apart from the musical training did you find that there was a sense that you were being trained to fight?

Well personally, no. I was there to provide the music, keep the band going and instruct them and my feeling was we were there to attend official parades, changing of the guards, playing at the local football grounds when all the brigade would turn out and do march passes. It was the entertainment side and really military music being provided to the unit.

(25.00) Was this also being used for recruiting purposes to sort of arouse a sense of patriotism and so on?

Later on; 1940 that came about. We marched through Melbourne. The best players of our brigade, there were three battalions in a brigade, and each battalion had a band, so each bandmaster picked out his best players to form the composite band and we were taken by military trucks – we got away from the horse lines then – and into Royal Park and we were put up in tents there. Each day we would march through Melbourne with big signs 'Join the AIF now', 'Your country needs you', and things like this. It was a big band; there must have been forty or more members in it. We would start off in the Town Hall, the Melbourne Town Hall and march out of the driveway there, where the major comes out with his car, and we would march up and down the main streets of Melbourne.

Was there a sense of excitement associated with these sorts of marches?

There was, yes. The only thing was we were Militia then and I just felt it was not quite right. We were asking people to join the AIF and we didn't have any Australian badges on them which the AIF had and I personally, possibly the other chaps too, felt it was a little bit out of the ordinary that us 'chockos', as we were called, were asking people to go overseas and join the Militia when we were based in Australia here and had no idea of going overseas, although a lot of the unit eventually did. But at that time we were based here and the Militia was for the defence of Australia on Australia's shores in those days.

When did you first hear that term 'chocko'?

In 1939, I think early in 1940, because our camp was at Mount Martha and the AIF was at Balcombe which is only half a mile from our camp. So there was a mixture of the AIF and the Militia and we used to mix when there was a concert on. There was only one concert put on for all the troops whether they were AIF or Militia and the Militia, and myself again personally, I just felt different to the chaps who had actually signed up to go overseas.

Was there a sense of shame when you say you felt different?

No, not shame. At that time I had not made my mind up whether I would go overseas, mainly because I was thinking of Dad and Mum. Mum wasn't too well and I knew it was going to be a shock for them. I wanted to go but I didn't do anything about it. I just felt different to the other blokes – I wasn't as good as them.

I gather there were occasions where AIF and Militia fellows came to blows over this derogatory term 'chockos'?

Yes, there were quite a few fights especially in the nearby towns when they were on leave and usually it started in the pubs, they had a few too many, but this did happen quite a bit.

Did you get caught up or did your friends get caught up?

No, (chuckles) I didn't seem to be around when it happened. I only heard where some of my mates had been in a fight. But this happened between navy personnel and the army, whether it was Militia or AIF, it was just the different branches of the services and somehow or other they just wanted to fight each other.

Was there a sense of turbulence in the times then as these sorts of things started to develop? Did it seem like the world was somehow running off the rails or something?

I guess it did feel that way. It was a new experience for us, for both the AIF and the Militia, to know that we were in a war situation and ...

END TAPE 1 – SIDE A

START TAPE 1 – SIDE B

Identification: This is Side B of Tape H1, recorded with Band Sergeant Les Simmons of the 39th Battalion, recorded on 4th January, 1989.

You were saying that there was this sense of change in the air.

I think we were reading the news and what we got over the wireless at the time created this atmosphere. We were all part of it now, in camp. Whereas not so long ago we were out doing our usual civilian jobs. The furthest thing from our mind was being involved in a war or uniforms and I think hearing the news and knowing that we were part of it did cause this turbulence as you called it and this sort of atmosphere in the area because most of the people at that time, not all of them, they were in uniform. Later on, of course, if you weren't in uniform you stood out like a pimple on a pumpkin and everyone was in a uniform of some sort of eligible age anyway.

With three years Militia background at the outbreak of war had you gained rank as such?

Yes, I was a private in the Militia in the first three years preceding the war and I was only in camp a couple of weeks and I was promoted to sergeant because I had had band experience and I had been deputy bandmaster of the Golden Square Band which was another band that I was in and which my Dad helped to form. So with my experience they had to have somebody to lead the band, instruct it, and I became a sergeant, it felt like overnight to me.

What did that mean in terms of pay do you recall?

Yes, it went from five bob a day up to ten bob a day.

Presumably the rank then would not pertain just to your musical duties as it were. You would be a sergeant full stop and be seen to have that same sort of responsibility?

Yes. I was a senior sergeant in the battalion actually. The band sergeant in precedence was senior to all other sergeants which was a surprise to me.

When you were promoted then were you briefed as to what it implied as far as discipline was concerned and your own responsibilities, what you should do if men acted out of line or would not carry out an order and so on?

Briefly I was, yes.

What did they say?

Right, you are a sergeant now, Les. You will use the NCO's latrines – whereas before I used the men's – and you will dine in the Sergeant's Mess and it's up to you to keep discipline in the ranks and I think that was just about all there was to it.

(5.00) What was the difference in standard in the latrines to start off with?

From memory the sergeants' had partitions between the toilets because they were only pans in them days and the difference in the mess was pretty great, especially at the beginning of the war. We still had civilian waiters. We used to have to put in some money to pay for their service. We had tablecloths on the table; we had crystal holders to put the sauce bottles in – oh a great difference. But the food, well I suppose the food was cooked better. We had our own cook for the Sergeants' Mess and at that stage – as I say this was early in the piece, this altered after a while – right at the beginning it was a luxury for me.

How did you feel to put the three stripes on your arm? Did it mean anything in particular?

It did. I had responsibilities then and I felt proud too to think, 'Well, I, a sergeant'. But it was an odd feeling because some of them blokes used to work for my Dad, and we worked together that was in the band and, in fact, I knew all of the bandsmen. If they played with the Eagle Hawk Band or the Hopetown Band, they were bandsmen and they were the age where they were called up and so I knew them beforehand and to be a sergeant over them gave me a different feeling to have to say, 'Right, do this and do that'. So I used tact and we were all on really good terms and it worked out all right but it did worry me to think that these fellows, some of them had been mates of mine, we had camped together in the scouts, belonged to the same church, and all of a sudden I was given a rank over them.

Did you find yourself asking them rather than ordering them?

Fifty-fifty I guess. You had to order them because there were officers around. You couldn't be wishy–washing about that but they accepted this situation, the blokes, and I think the way you gave orders was the main thing that you weren't overbearing or anything like that.

Did you ever have anybody react against the notion of you being a sergeant and issuing orders?

No, not at all. I had the fullest cooperation and they were still mates of mine. We used to go on leave together. Some of them used to come to my place and I would stay at their place and we had a good time. The rank didn't make any difference.

> What about a bit higher up; was there a sense of difference or even class difference between captains and high ranking officers and sergeants and lance corporals and so on?

Well, yes. The class distinction started from the NCO's toilets and the Sergeants' Mess and then we had the Officers' Mess, we had the officers' toilets and there was a distinction. That was greater between the men and the NCOs towards the officers above them than it was between the NCOs and the men. We were closer to the level of the other ranks whereas the officers they had a different uniform and their appearance was different. I know there were some who I had even gone to school with who became officers and you had a different feeling when you were talking to them because you had to refer to the lieutenants as `mister' and it was a little bit hard to get used to after knowing them in civilian life but we adapted.

> Was there at all a sense of superiority that the officers regarded themselves, just generally, as a superior type of person to the rank and file?

There may have been slightly but I found them on the whole pretty good and there were only isolated occasions when a couple of them did show their superiority. I called one by his Christian name once, we were talking together away from the men, I had been to night school with him in building construction when I was thirteen and I knew him very well and I happened to refer to him by his Christian name. He said, 'Refer to me as mister will you please'. That set me back on my heels.

> In retrospect, how do you see that? Do you think it was proper or was it really being a bit unnecessarily officious?

Unnecessarily officious, there was no need for it. Especially the understanding we had being friends beforehand and in the situation that it was. If it was in front of the men I would be referring to him as mister and he would refer to me as sergeant which is what I would have expected but he was a little bit different. I think possibly it went to his head a little bit. But he was an isolated case.

(10.00) Did you find some men who might be promoted to sergeant who just essentially were not capable of assuming the responsibility or, as you suggested with this other individual, it went to their heads?

It did go to the heads of some people. One instance there was a platoon sergeant [?] and he would have to call the roll at six o'clock in the morning, we were all mustered outside our tents in platoons and his name would be up close to the top in the book – it was all alphabetical – mine would always come last beginning with S but he would always call his own name out and his rank, Sergeant so-and-so (I won't mention names) and this happened every time. I thought you silly coot, you know you are here and why bring your own name into it but I think it was only to broadcast the fact that he was a sergeant. There might have been a few isolated cases like that but generally, no. They were efficient and pretty good and they had been picked for the jobs they were to do but they were not all on infantry platoons. You had your transport, your

pioneer platoon and MG companies; so they were picked for the particular job they were good at.

> How did your rank in the Militia related to your relationship with regular AIF men? In theory were you a sergeant who could tell privates in the AIF just what to do?

No. You might see this on TV pictures these days but in those days officially I think if it come to something very urgent your rank would count then but you avoided having anything to do with anyone else in another unit. You just confined it to your own unit and mainly to your own platoon or company. I was Acting Company Sergeant Major in the 38th before I transferred to the 39th Battalion and as a company sergeant major I didn't order other companies around. Each one had their own NCOs. If you were on a train or anything like that you just avoided any confrontation and didn't want to use your rank because it was with strangers and other units.

> Do you recall how you felt when it was decided you were going to be moved to Papua New Guinea?

If I can go a little bit back from there. I was made Acting Company Sergeant Major of Headquarter Company of the 38th Battalion. It was a beaut job. When I was bandmaster I had to look after my blokes and then there were platoon sergeants in charge of each platoon but as Company Sergeant Major I had the platoon sergeants calling the rolls. I would tell them I want so many men to do duties, they would have to do that, and I reckon it was a really good job – it was a responsible job. While I was in the office, the orderly room, one day notice came through wanting volunteers to join the 39th Battalion, a newly formed battalion. As I mentioned earlier I wanted to go overseas but I didn't want to upset Mum and Dad at that time, I wanted to wait my time. I thought, 'This is good. I can go over, join the 39th which is going to go out of Australia, in the Militia still. It won't sound so bad.' AIF seemed very ominous, the sound of it. I applied as bandmaster, that was one of the positions that they wanted. I thought that there are not too many bandmasters, they are all old blokes most of them, and I am a pretty young bloke, I'll be pretty right to get the job. So I applied for the job and it wasn't until a couple of months after that that I actually transferred. My unit wouldn't let me go because I was Acting Company Sergeant Major then. All of a sudden, I got word at the last moment to report to Darley to form the 39th Infantry Battalion band.

So that was a really quick decision made by somebody and so I went to Darley in November 1940 and I formed the band then and to do that I had to contact all my mates in different bands which I had been the band sergeant of who had come in for their three month's camp. It was a matter of forming a different band each time these trainees came in and to find out who would go away with me and that is how I formed the band.

> What about your mother, was she concerned when she heard you were to go to Papua New Guinea, or your father for that matter?

Yes, I think they were. But when I knew we were going, all she knew was that we were going. I had broken it that it was going to be a holiday which a lot of us thought it was going to be a great thing to go over there. I sort of softened the news that way.

(15.00) Did you really think it was going to be a holiday?

I suppose I did. It was going to be something different. I had never been on a ship before in me life and I think I was like a lot of other blokes. People say, 'Oh, he's patriotic and he went to fight for his country'. But a lot of us went – it was a great adventure. This to me was going to be an adventure to go on a ship and to leave Australia. So to me it was an adventure. The urgency came when things started to get hot up there and the Japs started to come down. We knew we were fighting for our country then. But I do believe that the majority of the blokes it was a great experience in the first part, to actually go away on a thing like this. It was almost like a Cook's tour being paid by the Government. So that's how I felt anyway. I can't say, 'Yes, I fought for King and Empire', I went there because I was looking forward to leaving Australia and having a great adventure over there.

What about medical training, when did that begin?

Actually in Mount Martha in 1940 when the universal trainees were coming in for their three month camp. We used to do bandaid stressing, stretcher bearing and the doctor would give us lectures on first aid treatment.

How extensive was it? I mean, just how well equipped were you in those terms?

Well, enough to get by, I guess. Our first priority at that time was to provide music and entertainment for the troops and to attend official functions. Stretcher bearing was sort of a second thing then. We weren't very interested in it. We were known as bandsmen and not as stretcher-bearers. We became stretcher-bearers when we put our instruments away and attended an hour's lecture by the doctor or somebody else qualified.

When you were heading off to Sydney then to catch the ship was that a moment of fanfare? Did you have to play instruments at that time or were you all just herded of like cattle or ...

No. (laughs) Our instruments were packed. We didn't see them again for months. We went up in the train and our instruments were put on the Sarpedon which was a cargo boat that went up in our convoy. We went on board *Aquitania*. I had arranged with the CO that our instruments be provided so that we could entertain the troops on the *Aquitania* but somebody made a boo-boo and they were put on this ship which we saw half a mile away from us in the convoy with all our instruments on it. And unfortunately, the band had to do duties in the galley which was well below the waterline on the *Aquitania* in hot, rotten conditions – you could hardly breathe for the heat – and they were complaining to me and I complained to the adjutant and I said I wanted to go up on ack-ack duty to give them a spell from down below, to man the guns and take it in turns. But there was no way. They had to be spud barberers down below and put up with those rotten conditions.

So you were peeling potatoes most of the time?

Yes. They were. I was lucky being a sergeant I was up on A deck and we had civilian waiters, we had silverware – the line's own engraved silverware – and the cabins had fans on the wall, old fashioned electric fans on the bulkheads. Although it was that hot

we used to sleep out on deck. That is where I felt pretty terrible that I was a sergeant and my blokes were down below doing all this work down below in the terrible stinking heat and I always envisaged that if we were attacked that they wouldn't have much chance of getting up, getting out from down below.

Did it cause any resentment that you were enjoying these better conditions?

No, not at all. The men knew the situation and I guess they weren't the only ones. Other ranks also were quartered down below and their sergeants and the officers had the better accommodation. That is where a bit of a distinction came in again, I guess.

If accommodation on the boat left something to be desired, apparently when you arrived in Port Moresby things didn't improve a lot. You were marched to the Seven Mile and then dumped on the aerodrome?

We were in deck shoes on *Aquitania* for the whole of the trip and some of us went aboard on about sixty foot boats which had a Lewis gun mounted aft and the others had to go aboard on the small sloops – I don't know what they were actually called – but the naval base like the Yarra. We had to anchor three mile out from port because of the size of *Aquitania* which is 46,000 tons and we were taken to the wharf in these boats; we were assembled; and then we were marched. We didn't know where we were going. It was dark. The Papuan natives, we referred to them as boongs at that time, were lined up along the road saying, 'You be sorry tapeta, you be sorry'. We were marching in the pitch dark, up hills, down hills and I can tell you our feet were sore because we were wearing boots then after wearing our deck shoes, as we call them – ordinary sandshoes – on the ship. And we hadn't had very much exercise on the ship so it was pretty strenuous. When we arrived at our point at the Seven Mile drome, in the dark, there was no camp there waiting for us and we didn't know where we were – it was just pitch black – so we just laid on the ground. If we'd known where we were laying we'd probably, I don't know, died of fright. There were scorpions and all sorts of crawly things there. But that night we just settled down and laid down in the open.

(20.00) Did this lack of arrangement undermine the confidence in fellows of the army's capacity to administer and, if you like, run a war?

Yes it did. We were not too happy at all. Nothing had been prepared for us and there was a lot of complaints. Nothing could be done about it though. There was strict discipline there, so it wasn't like these days when unions or workers can complain about conditions. We had to take it and everyone bog in. So the band was allocated the task of the pioneer platoon which wasn't correct but had to do it, digging latrines, and I can tell you it was going through solid rock. We had to dig a latrine, probably a trench eight feet long by about three feet wide and six feet deep. And it was hard yakka especially as we weren't prepared, we weren't fit for that sort of work.

I gather the conditions as far as serving food and such and the lack of adequate sanitation led to quite a bit of dysentery and sickness amongst men. Did you fall ill at all?

Ah, I was all right until March, we got there in January and I wrote home – I was just reading one of my letters the other night there where I tell them at home that I am well but most of the unit has got malaria and dysentery – I believe it could have been more

than seventy-five per cent of our unit was laid up with malaria and/or dysentery. There was no precautions taken at that time. We were getting around in shorts and there had been no anti-malarial precautions as far as still water being sprayed or anything like that. That came well after. But we were exposed to flies: millions of flies and millions of mozzies. You walked along and they'd just come up in a cloud around you as you walked from the grass.

At this stage had you got your instruments back? Had you begun to practice again?

No. The instruments were unloaded and then they were put into a store just south of the Seven Mile drome. I think the people's name was Brown that owned the house in peace time and our instruments were put in one of their sheds and were locked there. Our full-time duty was to look after the sick personnel. We had to erect a marquee which was approximately sixty feet long and possibly twenty-five feet wide and that housed around sixty people who were soldiers at the one time who were suffering from dysentery and malaria – mainly dysentery at that stage – and they laid on the ground. We had no proper facility for them. We were meant to be an RAP – a Regimental Aid Post – and Sergeant Bill Auchettl who was the RAP sergeant to the unit, he was in charge of it, I assisted him. We did all we could to help these blokes but some of those blokes, big blokes, there would be six footers and probably around eleven stone went down to about six stone in weight. They were just skeletons. They were so bad they had to sleep at the side of the latrines. They didn't have time to walk fifty or sixty feet where we had dug the latrines without ... well, they would do their business before they arrived there, so they slept there.

I understand you were involved in making representations to try to get beds. What was the difficulty as far as the army was concerned in making beds available?

Well, we weren't a field hospital of any sort. We are an RAP and that is what we were in the records.

(25.00) But you must have found yourself talking to an officer and saying, 'Yes, look that is all very well but here we have got all these men. They are sleeping on the ground.' How would the conversation go?

As it happened Bill and I were really disgusted because it wasn't fair to these blokes lying on the ground like that and we spoke to our MO, he wasn't up there very long, he took ill and was sent back to Australia, and he knew the conditions. He used to come there every now and again and look at the chaps and prescribe things for them and we explained the situation. I saw somebody at [platoon] headquarters but they couldn't do anything about it. They didn't have beds, they weren't on supply to our unit and it seemed like there was no way through officialdom or red tape because we were still a regimental aid post where fellows should have came up to us had APC prescribed or sulphur thalidomide or a dressing fixed on a slight wound or sore and nothing there, probably a stretcher. But we became a field hospital and I knew of some beds at Murray Barracks under the Papuan Infantry Battalion's huts. They were only chain wire, cyclone chain wire – very noisy things when you slept on them – but I am getting ahead of myself. First of all we tried the unit – couldn't do any good – then we went into the ordinary Port Moresby hospital, they were still going as civilian, spoke

to the matron there; they didn't have any spare beds. So, then I thought of these bunks, or beds, under the PIB buildings at Murray Barracks. So Bill and I organised a truck one night and we went in there and we loaded thirty or forty of these beds on. So we started to become more like a hospital – it was more comfort for the blokes. And that is how we got on to the beds.

Before you liberated the beds, so to speak, having spotted them did you make any formal request to see if you could get them?

No way. We knew we wouldn't have got them.

What was the attitude? Was there a sense of concern but they couldn't help or was there a lack of concern, or what was it?

Ah, yes, they did show concern but it didn't go any further than that. I think if the unit could have possibly done it they would've done it but I just think it was red tape mainly that prevented them from giving us any help.

What were men lying on on the ground?

Groundsheet, some of them may have had palliasses but not too many of them.

If men had dysentery and other illnesses how did you cope with changing things and trying to keep clean and so on?

It was pretty hard and it was just a case of ... some of them were too ill to get up. They just had to lay there. And it meant taking them a dish of water and helping to wash the bloke while he was there, just lying down. But in most cases those who could get up and walk helped themselves and did what they could because we were just flat out. At that time the whole band wasn't acting as orderlies at this RAP. They were sent out to the various companies who were scattered around the area and that left possibly about half a dozen of us to do the duties there. We had to have a roster there so that they weren't all on duty at the one time.

What sort of hours were you putting in?

We just seemed to be on duty all the time. Even when we reckoned we had done twelve hours or eight hours and you would write a letter home or even in the middle of the night you would have to get up and attend to somebody, so the times were scattered. There was nothing definite there really. We tried to keep it eight hour on, eight hour off but it didn't exactly work out that way.

Did you seek extra assistance to help?

No. No. We didn't query the procedure or anything. We managed and I am sure our battalion headquarters, well they did, they knew the difficulties that we were working under but we sort of got by all right.

If you were seeing men who were literally wasting away was there a sense that people were being kept there unnecessarily, that there should have been a process for getting them back to Australia sooner than was happening?

Well, not many of those people went back to Australia. There were a few. They eventually got better. Treating them with the proper medicine and they were well enough to return to their lines then. We also treated chaps from the ack-ack battery which was nearby and other people who had shrapnel wounds from the bombings and the ack-ack company on the hills just above our RAP, they didn't have any medical facilities at all other than coming down. So we used to treat these blokes. But we ended up being a field hospital. We even had an admission book that we kept there to know when a person was admitted and when he was discharged which was unusual for an RAP – it just got big.

ENDS OF TAPE 1 – SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2 – SIDE A

> Identification: This is Tape H2, Side 1 of the interview with Band Sergeant Les Simmons recorded on 4th January, 1989 at Fryerstown.

> Tropical ulcers I gather were one of the real problems that began to trouble a lot of men. Just how bad were they?

They were pretty bad. Mainly they were on the legs of the chaps and I have seen them right down to the bone, you can see the bone. Just purple in colour and they were horrible looking things. We were fortunate in having penicillin then; we used to use penicillin powder and place that in the hole – it was a funnel-shaped hole – and put a bandage around it. Thank goodness for penicillin in those days.

> Generally speaking, how were you off for medical supplies? Did you have enough to meet the need at that early stage?

Yes, we had enough to treat the illnesses that we were dealing with. We did. We had enough medical supplies then.

> Apart from illness were you getting cases where fellows might be injured in fights or accidents or that sort of thing?

No. I can't remember anything like that. The only thing, when you talk about accident, some natives who were walking along the track just past our RAP and one of them had blood all over him and it appeared he was in a tent or somewhere and a ten pole had fallen on him and split his head. It was very bad so we did what we could for him. But other than any other accidents I just can't remember accident cases coming in.

> When did you first hear then that the Japanese were now coming and suddenly everything was going to change?

July; we heard of the Japs coming in. That was actually when ... by that time the band has been reformed and we were playing around the different companies then, entertaining, and we had been going for a while and I had the orders, as I mentioned earlier, to give a list of names for the blokes to go over the Kokoda Trail. But it was around July that we knew they were coming because our B Company went north, supplies went by boat, and the chaps went over the Trail. They were our first company to go up round Buna and they were there when the Japs landed. So we knew they were getting close in the islands up above us and we had the Coral Sea battle of course and

all of those happenings. But we knew they were coming down but when they actually landed and we heard they were there, that was in July.

What sort of places had you been playing? Were you playing at the hotel in Port Moresby?

No. (laughs) They were there, the hotel, but the place had been bombed several times and it was out of bounds to troops. Marshal law was declared. All civilians had been evacuated and so troops didn't go into Moresby.

Just going back a bit. From the time that Japan declared war do you recall what the feeling was? Did you think then that you were going to get caught up in things or did it still seem a long way away?

No. It really concerned us. I was worried. Our first order was to dig [?] trenches at Darley and all the light globes were all blacked and blackouts put on the windows. That is the first actual taste of knowing there was war. We were doing drilling and everything but we never had to do anything like this before. So it seemed to be getting closer then.

What about the first air raids then?

Oh, the first air raids. I just forget how many planes it was. It was a moonlight night – they seem to pick the moonlight nights; bomber's moon we used to call it – and we heard the drone of the engines coming over. You could hear the bomb bays, the clicking when they opened them to let the bombs out.

(5.00) What sort of height were they bombing from?

They weren't particularly high because they had no opposition from the ground there. We had no proper anti-aircraft defences there. Our only guns there were manned by our men but there was some part of the gun that was missing, that wasn't there. They couldn't fire them. They only had to go through the actions of following the Japs and being at their posts and they just couldn't fire any shots. 'Cause we had no air force protection then either at that stage. So I couldn't hazard a guess at the height in the air. I can tell you distances at ground level but going upwards ... we could see them very clear anyway even in the moonlight night.

What was the reaction as you realised the bombs were being dropped?

Well, the first thing I thought where is me respirator and my steel helmet because I was always frightened of gas attack.

Why was that? Why were you frightened of gas attack?

Just memories of what I read from the Great War, World War I as it is known now and I just always hated to get caught up in gas. It's something you mightn't even know it is around until it was too late. The other thing, and I think some of the other fellows were worried too, was the dropping of steel pellets from aeroplanes. We had read where they had done this. These are pencil-shaped things, sharp, that used to come down and go through the troops – just go through your head. I used to be worried about things like that. Probably everyone didn't but I did.

How long then before the first casualties started to be noticed and were you beginning to look after some of them?

Our first casualties were ... or the first killed were on *Macdhui* when it was bombed out in the harbour.

Did you see the bombing?

I saw it, yes. It wasn't in sight of the ship because we were seven mile or six and a half mile where our RAP was, but we saw the bombers come over. Twice they did it. From memory it could have been Sunday; the band was going to play at one of the companies and I remember asking Captain Keith Lovett should we play. We'd heard that some of our blokes had been killed and it just seemed so sad to me. I thought, 'God, you can't go round playing music brightening people up when somebody has died'. So that really struck the unit when we heard some of our chaps, they were unloading at the time on *Macdhui*, and Keith Lovett said, 'No, by all means go out and play' but it was a pretty terrible feeling.

Did you actually see the ship being bombed?

No, I didn't. No, it wasn't in sight because we were inland around six miles and all we saw was the bombers going over that did the damage.

When did you see your first casualty?

Well, that's a bit hard to ... it would be soon after the first bombing. Not the one of the *Macdhui* but when they used to bomb the drome and fellows used to come in with shrapnel splinters in their body. We used to have to pick them out with tweezers and dress them. That would be possibly, oh, early June, somewhere around that, but I am not clear on dates without looking up my diaries.

Was it a shock or frightening to see just what weapons of war could do to the human body?

Yep, although we didn't have people coming in with legs blown off or anything like that. To us they weren't that bad that we were over shocked. It was just the thought that here we are treating fellows who are damaged by the enemy up above us now. It's that close. We just had that terrible feeling and we were pulling out Japanese bomb splinters out of these blokes but they weren't that serious. It was bad enough to be painful and they could have become infected if they hadn't been removed and the dressings put on their wounds.

After men then went up to the Kokoda Trail and the wounded started to come back when did the nature of the injuries start to change?

I wasn't at the RAP then when the wounded were coming back. We were going over the Trail and we passed them.

(10.00) When did you first go up?

I went up in July, about the first week of July, I think it was, when we went over the Trail and that is when we passed our B Company coming back – the remnants of them – we passed them on the Trail. They were wounded, they were haggard looking, they

had whiskers, we felt that terrible for them and we were terrible about ourselves. What were we going into? I said Colonel Owen's been killed. I only cut Colonel Owen's hair a week or something ago, just before he went over there. He was killed at Kokoda. People you had spoken to and mates. They said, 'Oh, Maloney is dead. Doc Maloney' and we couldn't believe it. We were really in the war then, at that stage going up to meet the Japs, just by the fact that we were passing our mates coming back who had been pushed out by the Japs and left a lot of their mates behind – dead. It was horrible.

> Before that first encounter with men coming back from the front, I gather men had been told that the Japanese were short, weedy, not particularly well equipped, wearing spectacles and so on. Was there a sense that 'Well, we will get up there and fix them up.'?

We did have that feeling. I suppose it was lessened a bit when we heard from our mates what was happening over there. But we did imaging them to be short blokes and we were superior to them. We were a superior race, I guess we reckoned in them days, and that we could cope with them. But that was the feeling we had. It was altered when we got over there I can tell you.

> I suppose a bullet doesn't make any difference if a man is big or small but in terms of facing an enemy and the reality of this situation must have soon started to dawn. You are not a big person, you are about five foot five?

Yes.

> And relatively light. Was there a special anxiety for you as a smaller person; was that something that concerned you?

No. I was happy about it. (laughs) There were times when I have seen the bushes at the side of me sniped off level, just over my head. I thought if I'd have been a six footer I would have been dead.

> But earlier on, just as you were moving up, was there a worry that you might find some Japanese who was going to be much bigger than you? Was that a concern?

No, I had confidence in my ability and size didn't come into it. That didn't worry me. All I wanted to do was get there and I don't suppose I felt any different to the big blokes.

> At that very first part of the contact where men were coming down, the wounded, how were they coming down? Were any being carried or was it mostly just men getting back as best they could?

No, some were being helped. Fellows with their arms around the others who were assisting them. I didn't see any stretcher cases coming down. It is possible they could have came down before we started over the track. They would have got them out very quick. The natives would have brought them back. But even the fellows who weren't wounded, they looked so sick; they were pale and they were exhausted – completely exhausted. They all looked like sick people to me. It was terrible.

Had there at that early stage already been organised an arrangement for native assistance to carry people down from the Trail?

Not that I know of, not at that stage. All that evolved as time went on. To my memory I can't remember anything being properly organised at that stage. Doctor Vernon was the medical officer over Kokoda at that stage when our first company, B Company, went over there. He was deaf, stone deaf, he would keep working while the bullets were flying around not knowing what was happening. He was a great old bloke. He worked up around the islands prior to the war. That man, I have never heard of anyone like him before or since. An elderly bloke, he was born in the late 1880s and he was a magnificent bloke, and he was still up there when we got there and we had to come back or those of us who were wounded and he treated us at Eora Creek.

As you were going up and you saw men coming back who were wounded, given that you had had first aid training, was there a sense that you were satisfied with the nature of the dressings? Did you feel, 'Good God, these men aren't being properly looked after' or things were about as good as could be expected?

No, they were just as good as could be expected. You couldn't expect the ultimate in the medical work there under those conditions and also knowing that possibly the person who did it wasn't trained in that at all anyway. It could have been another rifleman at the side of his mate and 'course each soldier carried his own field dressing which was to be used for himself only. He wouldn't pull yours out and use it for somebody else and the man next to the wounded bloke would attend to his mate. The quality of the medical work there it was just the best that could be done under the circumstances.

(15.00) As you went up when was the first contact for you?

With the Japs or ...?

Yes.

[Pause] Prior to that we could hear the firing and we were given orders that if we wanted to write a letter home we could do so now and the natives would take them across the ranges to Port Moresby to be posted home. To a lot of us it was our last letter, or their last letter, I am still here thank goodness and we all thought it could be the last time we would have any contact with our relatives and friends at home. I don't know what the others wrote on, we had no writing paper. And I carried toilet paper in me pack, I like to be in a situation, I don't like using gum leaves or anything and that was a fad of mine I had to have toilet paper. And I found room for that and I have got the letter here still. I wrote home on the toilet paper and just folded it up and that arrived home.

What did you say?

It's a funny thing, you want to say everything and you can't. You can't tell them, 'Look, I am going into action now. They're fighting down the valley below us and some of our men are being killed.' You can't say those things. You want to but you can't.

Why? It would be censored or somehow it didn't seem right?

Well, it would be censored I guess but it wouldn't be right to upset the people at home. God, Mum and Dad and other parents, they would be worrying more than we were actually in action. We knew where we were and how things were but they would be imagining the most awful things. So I've read my letter at different times since and it just says, `Don't worry. You may not hear from me for a while but communications are a bit hard now. We can't get letters out so easy, and don't worry and I will contact you later on.' That was the gist of the letter and I think that is probably what most of the chaps wrote.

Did you indicate that you ere now moving into a fighting situation?

No, I didn't.

What were feelings then having written the letter and with that sense that well, maybe this is it? Was there a sense of fear or numbness or ...

Yes, I suppose fear, could be the right word for it, knowing that this is probably the last thing that you do as far as communicating with home and saying things to people you loved at home and not being able to say the things you wanted to say to them. Like when you know somebody is dying or something you like to be able to say, 'Look, I loved you and we have got on well and everything', you couldn't say any of those farewell things. So you had to keep the letter normal and you had pent up feelings of what you were going into then. Your letter was done, that was finished there, so what was ahead of you was not what was happening at home then it was what was in front.

You said you had confidence in yourself and your own ability but at that point was there ever any anxiety for you that perhaps you might fail; you might fail in the eyes of your fellows?

No, I didn't feel that way at all. All I was frightened of that I'd lose an arm or be blinded. I didn't mind losing a leg. I knew people prior to the war who had one leg. They had artificial legs and you wouldn't know the difference and you accepted that. But to lose an arm or an eye, I dreaded it. I dreaded it all the time, that that would happen to me. I had no fear of packing up but later on I was as frightened as hell that I had three stripes and I couldn't show it, because I had other blokes I had to set the example to but I was just as frightened as those blokes.

Were there men in that first encounter circumstance who just couldn't cope?

Yes. We were going out on a patrol to contact another platoon who had been cut off. The Japs were between them and us, and I don't mention names of these fellows or what part they played in the platoon, but one chap was a very big bloke, I envied his physique, but he packed up. I don't blame him, we were all on the verge, I'd say, every one of us. He couldn't control it. He just landed on the ground, he was crying and so he was sent back for treatment. We had to get someone to replace him on his particular weapon, it was an important one. That sort of upset us a little too to see that happen but I don't blame that man for one bit. It is a wonder that we didn't all feel like it. It was a terrible experience.

What were you carrying, again coming back to that first contact, weapons and gear and so on?

I had the 303 Lee Enfield, World War I vintage, 0.38 revolver, and about half a dozen grenades plus a light pack water bottle, bayonet, that was about it.

(20.00) Did you feel encumbered; did you feel anxious that you were carrying too much, or wished you had more, or ...

(Laughs) Carrying a matchbox would have been too much over that Trail at any time. I think our packs and all our equipment must have weighed around sixty pounds. When I pick up something that weight now or even forty pound, I don't know how we did it and that is what we carried over the Trail. And we did, we tried to lighten our packs on the way over, throwing out razor blades, tearing our towels into half and throwing our nugget and brush and all those sorts of things that we thought we might be using – just tossing them out and keeping the bare essentials to lighten our load. But just walking without a load it was an effort and being in action where we had to carry a bandoleer of ammunition, there was a lot of weight in that even. You take half a dozen grenades stuck in your shirt or in your basic pouches and it was pretty heavy especially when you had to make a quick getaway to get out of the one position to another. You felt as though you were loaded with lead.

Where then was the very first point of contact for you?

Well, it was at Isurava and Deniki but we didn't actually see the Japs. The actual first point of contact was down the Kokoda and when A Company was to capture Kokoda and the airfield adjacent to it and to hold it while C and D Companies took another position lower down to either cut off the Japs' retreat or reinforcements coming in from Buna. So our first contact was at Kokoda. There was not much resistance there, thank goodness.

What happened? Does the memory of that moment remain with you?

It sure does, yes.

Day, night, or ... Describe the scene for us. Where were you? What was the circumstance?

In the daytime, went along the Trail and we approached the plateau. The plateau, of course, is north of the Owen Stanley Ranges and it's really a continuance of the Ranges going out onto the plains leading up to Buna, everything is level from the north side of the Ranges to the north seashore up around Buna and Gona. So Kokoda Plateau is actually a tongue of land protruding out – it would be roughly eighty to ninety feet high above the plain around it, the level ground. There was only one approach to it and it was from the southern end, from the mountains where you walk out onto it gradually or there were staircases; one on the west side, that is on the aerodrome side, or the east side. We approached it and attacked it going up these stairs cut out of the rock on the eastern side. It went through a rubber plantation heading towards the end of this tongue, the extreme end of it. And it was at the end of this tongue on the north end of the plateau where the trader's house was and outbuildings and our sort of headquarters were put there originally, when our B Company was there. So these Japs got out and 10 of us were assigned to look after the aerodrome to

make sure the Japs didn't capture that and that would be, could be, almost half a mile away from the plateau, the aerodrome. You could look down onto it from the plateau. The plateau, of course, was steep sides, you couldn't climb up them. There was just a precipice. We went down, 7th Platoon, to the aerodrome and, actually the first things that was done ... yes, we had to make sure the drome was okay and the Japs had gone. Jim Cowey our Company Sergeant Major of A Company had a Very pistol, fired three shots. I think only one of them worked, it was wet and raining and that was to let them know on the plateau that we had the aerodrome. Then 7th Platoon had to stay down there and hold the aerodrome against possible attack. It was getting a bit before lunchtime. We had some M and V cooking on a fire near ...

(25.00) Sorry, M and V?

Meat and vegetables, army issue and we heard firing on the plateau. Sergeant Murray was actually the Platoon Sergeant, Wyn Murray, and we had a conference then: What's happening up there? Anyway this was a couple of days after we took the drome and the plateau. We could tell that the firing was at the southern end of the plateau on the mountain range side because we tried to ascertain how many Japs would be there. It was a bit hard because there was a lot of noise. We thought, 'Well, we are exposed out here; they'll see us'. There was a lot of virgin jungle right up almost to the edge of the aerodrome, it was cut out of this thickly wooded area and we were able to get across the aerodrome quickly and we cut our way – it must have taken a couple of hours just cutting through the jungle – to get down to the southern end of the plateau. We approached the plateau and one of our blokes up top waved his slouch hat and then we had to let them see it was us and not the Japs coming back. So we clambered up there somehow or other – I don't know how we did it – and then we had to take our positions then. We did think of attacking the Japs from the rear. We thought we might be able to bluff them but we only had one Tommy gun and the rest of us had rifles and we had some grenades, so we thought that was a bit risky. We didn't know how many was there but we thought a surprise attack might have helped a bit but we decided against that and we joined the other blokes. There was only about fifty of us all told there, I think, in A Company on the plateau.

Where were you when the first shots actually made you realise one of them might have hit you?

Up on the plateau after we had come up from the aerodrome and I was on the eastern side on the aerodrome side in a funk-hole watching down the escarpment in case they had ladders or managed to climb up the side or come up the stairway on that side.

What do you mean by a funk-hole?

Well it was a hole, we call them funk-holes. They are only about eighteen inches deep, they didn't give much protection, but that is all these were and they were dug by the Japs prior to our retaking the place. We deepened it a bit deeper. It was a couple of feet deep, it would be four feet long, two feet wide and we'd sit there and take it in turns – two of us. Don Daniels was my mate, Lance Corporal Daniels then, and we'd take it in turns to keep awake. I'd read a book, I read `Ship Ashore' (chuckles) which I had found in one of the native huts on the plateau and I read that from beginning to end. As each page I finished it would get wet and it would drop, so it would just drop in the trench so the pages just dropped down as I read the book because ir rained every

afternoon and all night pretty well, it poured raining there. So it was when the Japs actually made their big attack that I felt that my life was really at risk that anyone of us and myself especially was going to cop a bullet because there were bullets flying everywhere.

What time of the day did this occur?

Somewhere around seven o'clock in the evening. We were pretty well out of ammo; we had no food of our own; Corporal Smith, I think he was corporal, there were two Smith brothers and one of them went around to our different funk-holes, our locations on the plateau and brought us cold Japanese rice, unpolished rice as they call it these days. It was shocking but that's all we had to eat. And 'course there's bullets flying around everywhere then and they attacked somewhere around seven o'clock to my memory. It was getting dusk at that stage. It gets dark pretty quick over there and then there was whistles blowing and shouting. It got dark and with the flash of grenades and everything it was just an eerie rotten feeling. There was noise, there was mist – the natural mist from the climate there – and smoke and the smell of cordite and everything and people all rushing around. You would see them one moment when something flashed. It was a rotten feeling and you didn't know whether it was going to end and you knew ... or you didn't know, you thought what's happened to 9th Platoon they are right up against the Japs, up the south end of the plateau and they are right against it – how are they going? No- one knew where his mate was. It was just a muddle. You were brushing Japs. They didn't know who we were or we didn't know who they were because of the dark, the smoke, the mist.

END OF TAPE 2 – SIDE A

START OF TAPE 2 – SIDE B

Identification: This is Side 2 of Tape H2, recorded with Band Sergeant Les Simmons on 4th January, 1989.

When you were saying you were brushing Japanese, when did you first see somebody that you thought was perhaps Japanese?

Probably ten minutes, quarter of an hour after the first attack by the Japs. We could only see them because of the flashes from the weapons and you could mainly distinguish them by the uniforms, because we wore slouch hats. We didn't have steel helmets, we didn't wear them, they were too heavy to wear in the jungle and if you knock them they would just fall anywhere. (That's my hat up there.) So we wore the light slouch hat and I think troops that came up later on may have had steel helmets but we had slouch hats.

When you fired your first shot was the nature of the occasion just so hectic that there was no time to think about anything or was there a thought that somehow now this had made you a soldier as it were?

It was hectic. I think we felt we were soldiers before then (laughs) but I used the revolver then.

Was there a sense that you had now fired a bullet; you were shooting at an enemy, or wasn't there time to think like that?

No. It didn't enter my head. It just happened and you just didn't think about those sorts of things, it was survival then and hoping you were going to get out. As I mentioned I found the revolver the best weapon to use. I am probably a stretcher-bearer and I am carrying weapons which is contrary to the Geneva treaty.

Geneva Convention.

But up there we were outnumbered ten to one, sometimes twenty to one. Prisoners weren't taken and it was every man had to defend himself and had to help to defend the others. So stretcher-bearers were infantrymen too and infantrymen became stretcher-bearers – so that's just to explain me carrying weapons there and as I explained earlier, I was a platoon sergeant and also acting platoon commander, so I was on the fighting side as well and doing two jobs.

In that first encounter where you were under attack at night was there anxiety about where you were shooting, that you might shoot at some of your own men?

Yes. Yes. That was a great concern because people weren't standing still so as you could say, 'Right, I will miss him'. They were just rushing everywhere. I think the confusion extended to the Japanese too, they felt the same as us. So if you did fire you had to make sure you weren't killing one of your own blokes; you had to make sure you had a proper target.

How long did that particular attack go on for?

Oh, that one was, I think, around three hours; that particular one. They had been firing prior to that at us prior to their attack but that lasted, if my memory serves me right, somewhere around three hours.

(5.00) How did it break off? Did you withdraw or they withdrew or ...

Well, I suppose you'd call it withdrawal. We got out. Prior to us getting out, where our battalion headquarters was, there was a big hole in the ground there and I don't know what it was for – history books might mention it – I know some of our blokes were there and they were treating some of the wounded and I always carried some morphia tablets under my hatband (under that hatband of that had there) and these blokes knew I had it and they yelled out to me in all the firing going on to come over quickly. So I rushed over to where they were, they were going towards the centre of this tongue, this escarpment and Johnny Stormont, a mate of mine, he had copped it in the back – it was more than an ordinary rifle bullet – it could have been a higher calibre weapon and he had a hole in his back and he was breathing. You could hear him even with the noise around, you could hear him and see it happening the air coming out of his back.

Sorry, when you say this was dark. How ere you able to see?

With the flashing of the shells and things around. It lit up like daylight at times there and they did have a lamp there, a kerosene lamp in this hole. From memory it seemed like a hole about ten feet square and probably four feet deep but that's just a hazy recollection that I have got there. So I have Johnny the morphia tablet and somebody else gave him a grenade. I had to get back then to my position and I know he was left

there, he was dying, there was no way to get him out under the circumstances and he could have died before his mates left him. He was mortally wounded.

We got orders to meet at the stairs on the westhand side to make our withdrawal and that's what happened there. We had to check off our men and we got down there under cover of dark and we crossed the river – I forget the name of it now – and got into the wooded area where we slept, away from the plateau and out of sight of the Japs.

At that stage how were the wounded being managed?

Anyone that was near somebody that was wounded, that were fairly badly wounded, they just had to bring them up to the spot where we were to meet and lay them down there so that it could be organised for somebody to carry them then. So I think it was every man for himself while that action was taking place. There was nothing you could do for a wounded man at the time because you were just a mixture of Japs and Aussies there and it was a case of defend yourself and see what you could do for the wounded then. But every man was needed. If you went out of action that made a big difference at the time because we were just outnumbered.

At the point where you had withdrawn and the attack had been broken off what then became of the wounded? How were they managed?

They were assisted by their mates, the ones who could walk, and the other ones, improvised stretchers were made for them and they were carried on the stretchers until we got to further behind the lines where they could get treatment at an advanced stretching station. If they were so seriously bad they were taken back of the Trail.

Did you do any stretcher bearing at that time?

No, not at that time. I did, well, a very small bit after when Joe Reilly got killed; he wasn't injured, he was dead. I helped to carry him up to where we buried him at the side of the Trail.

What was the nature of the terrain where you were carrying men through there?

It was terrible because once you left the plateau and started to get back to Deniki and those places you are into the mountains then. It is just impossible to describe how steep it is, it is hard to believe. If you showed somebody locally a hill that is very steep and say, 'The Kokoda Trail was worse than that'. It was almost impassable.
(10.00) I do not know how we climbed up them. In some cases we had to grab onto roots of trees and bushes to go up a slope almost perpendicular and have the Japs firing at you from behind you, scattering the face of that cliff with bullets. That's how bad it was. That was an emergency; we couldn't use the usual track out because they had mortar shells bombing it so we had to go up this very sharp cliff – that was Eora Creek I think, yeah. But the Trail normally, it was just almost an impossibility. We did it but how we did it I do not know. The highest part was 7,000 feet but in all I believe that we walked to a height of 20,000 feet because you went up 3,000 feet and then you come down another 1,000 or 2,000 or more and then you had to go up again. So what could be a sixty mile trip as the crow flies could've been over 100 miles but it wasn't mentioned in miles or measured in miles, it was measured in time: so many days from one spot to the other. You could see one village from the village you were standing in

on a hill. You look across and you see another one, you reckon you could throw a stone there but it would take you two days to get to it and hellishen days. It was just impossible to describe how those blokes carried their packs, but they did.

> Apart from the packs, with carrying stretchers through that sort of terrain where people would be slipping presumably with the wet and ...

That was a worse situation again. The native carriers have got to take the major credit for bringing the stretchers back. Our blokes treated the chaps on site where they were injured, gave them a field bandage and bandaged them up as best they could, and if they were badly injured a couple of blokes would just have to leave their post and get that wounded man back to battalion headquarters where the RAP was and Doctor Shera was our doctor and Doctor Waldron, both Captains. They came up representing the 14th Field Ambulance. They would do what they could at the RAP then they would be sent from there possibly by the native bearers or if there was no native bearers there or carriers our blokes would get them to the next advanced dressing station which would be a good day's walk to get there. Doc. Vernon was at Eora Creek where our main dressing station was there and from there on the doctor would give them emergency treatment and send them back to Moresby, not by aeroplane, not by ambulance or ship, but on a stretcher carried by four blokes up terrain which, without carrying anything, just carrying yourself, seemed an impossibility. How those blokes didn't slide off their stretchers I don't know. But the native carriers they did that job of getting them back and it could be up to ten days walking across that Trail to get back to the nearest casualty clearing station or a general hospital which was around Koitaki.

> Were there accidents where people slipped and fell and the stretchers slipped and men fell off and so on?

I believe there were. I personally didn't see them but I heard people talking about what happened.

> What can you recall about things being said about that type of event?

One event was crossing – it could have been Laloki River – it was a river though, a pretty raging torrent, and in most cases you are stepping on stepping stones which are slimy or on a log that has laid there for probably fifty or sixty years and is slimy. I know one chap that was rolled ... they all went into the drink.

> You were saying on this particular occasion there had been somebody that you know of that had been carried and fallen off into the water?

Yes, I can't remember the name now but nothing serious happened in consequence as far as his wounds or anything go. They all reckoned it was a great joke; they treated it that way. The thing turned out all right. That is just one instance. I think it must have happened quite a bit because it would be impossible to go over that Trail with something like that not happening. We didn't have stretchers there – I didn't see one stretcher while we were in action. Unlike World War I where you had your proper stretcher-bearers with armbands, you had stretchers, an RAP handy, ambulances having access to the lines and things like this – we didn't have any of that there. So stretchers were bush-type ones made of saplings and they used the blankets to lay the patient on. I can't remember seeing anyone with a Red Cross armband. It wouldn't have helped there.

(15.00) The Japs from their history and what our experience was wouldn't have honoured any agreement not to fire on stretcher bearers or hospitals or anything like that. So there were no armbands to distinguish us. When a man was crook, if he was capable of walking and, which in the normal case, under the same circumstances, he would have been put on the ambulance and thought unfit to walk. But, up there, so long as they could make it they were on their own. They didn't have a hospital nearby and it was up to ten days to go from the frontline down to a proper hospital. So where a fellow, within a week or around a week, was known to be able to recover, he stayed there until he was right and went into action again.

> How were men carried up and down the staircase with stretchers? When you look at that it just seems to be almost perpendicular and each step apparently had mud and ... What did they actually do? What was the procedure for getting them down that?

I didn't experience that myself but the only way I can think is that the natives carried them on their shoulders not like us people, we had them hanging at arm's length and walk each side. The natives put the poles on their shoulders – some of them were bare shoulders, some might have some rag or something underneath to stop chaffing – but they carried them on their shoulders. There were four men carrying the stretcher and where they could do it there was eight men to relive on the trip., But those blokes would have lowered them at arm's length coming down the stairs while the extra men would have had to hold onto the patient to stop him from sliding off the stretcher.

> What about the organisation of the stretcher-bearers? Did you have much to do with that side of it?

No. The organising was done by, I am trying to remember the name ... As far as organising goes when we were there it was Captain Doctor McClaren, he was from the 14th Field Ambulance and Captain Waldron who was the other doctor and Bill Auchettl, of course, our RAP sergeant. They were our main medical people who knew how to treat wounds properly. Then we had the band chaps, stretcher-bearers, and a stretcher- bearer in my mind is a man who transports a wounded man from here to there and didn't actually have to do any doctoring or anything like that – there might be an emergency.

> What seemed to be the attitude of the native stretcher-bearers towards the work that they were doing?

They were dedicated. They differed to the carriers that we had first carrying our supplies over; they were good blokes but they were, I suppose you could say, almost forced to carry our supplies over the ranges.

> What do you mean by that when you say 'they were almost forced to.'?

They were allocated jobs. There was a pool formed and that was their job – to come over. They didn't come up and say, 'I want to be a carrier'.

> Were they recruited or where they just rounded up and impressed into service as it were?

A little bit of both I guess. It ended up that they got some system, going where they had a pool of them down south, the Moresby area, Koitaki actually, and everything was done in an orderly fashion then. Stages were made across the ranges where they could stop over night and have a rest and they catered for their medical side of it having medical supplies at these staging depots. But they were, I suppose, partly recruited and partly impressed into that service. They weren't too happy in having to carry our supplies and we had to watch that they didn't decamp which they did in some cases with our packs and things and left the lines which I don't blame them anyway. But they were dedicated. When it come to the bearing of our wounded over that Trail and they had to be dedicated to do it when it was a ten day march over that rotten country. So I'd say their attitude was sympathy for the person they were looking after. They couldn't have been more attentive if they'd had've been Australians doing the stretcher bearing. They were very, very good.

(20.00) In terms of the day the stretcher-bearer might be putting if there were a team that would carry a stretcher and taking it in turns, how many hours, what would be a likely routine?

I didn't have anything to do with that part of it. I can only expect that they would have possibly walked for eight hours and then rested or, if they left in the morning, they would go until just before dark for their next stop. It all depended where the village was that might be able to give them supplies – food – or the time of the day., So they did have regular rest intervals.

What kind of food supplies were available for them?

Yam, taro, sweet potato, ginger; native stuff which ...

Was there army food made available?

Yes, they would have had army food. Most of that was going up to the troops. We didn't even have it at times, we were just living on the native vegetation: roots and grasses. But there would be army supplies at these different villages because it had to be there for our troops going north up to the frontline.

As you had indicated yourself the attitude used to be that the native people were boongs. Then in terms of then the manner in which they were got to do things, what was the relationship?

The term 'boong' wasn't meant in a racist way. It was a friendly term as far as I was concerned, and anyone else. We just knew them as boongs because we had never heard of that term before until we went up there. It was only a natural thing in those days. It was more of a term of endearment, I suppose. Like me calling you a bugger or something; it all depends how you say it, (laughs), but it was never meant to be derogatory. It was like that right through until the end of the war.

Did you get to meet any who had a reasonable command of English?

Reasonable command, but not very good, no.

Was it possible to enter into any sort of discussion about how they lived or how they saw the war and what they made of it?

No, there was very, very few. You would be lucky to meet one fellow there that you could converse in English to. They would just smile back at you when you were talking. There was – I forget how many languages over there. I tried to learn the [Motu?] language and I tried it on the next natives that walked past and they wouldn't know what I was talking about even – it was just simply talk. So there was no way of conversing with them.

> Apart from the stretcher-bearers I gather you were also involved with some Papuan soldiers. There was one in particular, a Lance Corporal Sanopa.

Yes, Sanopa, Sanopa belonged to the ... I think it was a constabulary – the Papuan Constabulary. I remember he wore a black sarong with red piping around the bottom or a red band around the edges of it and he'd be about six foot six – he was a big bloke and a really nice chap too. He was a very loyal bloke to our unit and danger didn't worry him; he sort of welcomed it whereas some of the other Papuans they wouldn't go anywhere near where they could hear any firing or anything which I don't blame them again for. But Sanopa was a great bloke. I went down on three reconnoitring excursions down to Kokoda from Isurava to map the area out before we attacked it and Sanopa was our guide and what we had to do was report or take note of the width of the Trail, how many men it would carry and that could not be seen going along it, any enemy movement and times and things like that and this is where Sanopa was very valuable. He did quite a few pretty heroic things for our unit: leading our companies out through the jungle when they were in trouble with the Japs. Sanopa is dead now, unfortunately, but I was glad to have been able to see him again in 1972.

(25.00) Did he carry a weapon?

No, he didn't carry any weapon.

> Why was that? Was it that it was felt that the Papuans shouldn't be armed?

I am just trying to refresh my memory there. He possibly had a 303, I think he carried a 303 rifle, yes.

> Was the role of the Constabulary then essentially that as to act as guides for the various units?

He is the only one that I ever came up with. l Possibly the rest of the Constabulary acted as guides elsewhere but he was the only ... no, there was another one, a police boy who was one of the traders who joined ANGAU – Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit. He was, well, we just called it his 'boy' then, but he was I suppose his servant, but he used to look after him. He was a police boy. But other than that I didn't see too many actually with us. Sanopa was the main chap that I had contact with personally.

> Did he speak much English?

Yes, he spoke English; not fluent but you could speak to him alright.

> If you were going into areas that you were to check the track were these areas where they may have been a Japanese presence, you would have to exercise particular caution and so on?

Yes.

> So how would you communicate in that circumstance if there was some problem?

Well, Sanopa went forward and he'd probably be fifty paces ahead of our patrol and it was just hand signals. He wore light camouflage – branches in his hair – but other than that he didn't have any other camouflage and he would indicate to us, beckon us or hold us up by hand signals. It was too far to talk to us and the Japs could have heard us anyway so it was all done by signals.

> Did you get caught in any fire fights where he was involved?

I wasn't in the vicinity. This could have happened because Sanopa assisted the unit, in other companies of our unit or other patrols that I wasn't in, and he, I believe, did leave the unit or the patrols out through Japanese lines. But our only fighting when Sanopa was with me was at Kokoda – you could hardly call it a fight because the Japs were getting out anyway and we had no resistance there – but we weren't involved. Our patrol, at the time that I was just talking about, was a reconnaissance patrol and not a fighting patrol.

> Going back to the stretcher-bearers where they were taking people down the track, you would have people, many with very serious wounds and so on, what sort of arrangements were made for providing further temporary treatment along the track to check on the conditions of fellows as they were coming down and so on?

That was improved later on but early in the piece we had our RAP which was Doctor Shera and Doctor Waldron and they were at Battalion headquarters at Isurava so any wounded who were wounded enough to require more treatment than just a first aid dressing were carried or assisted to the RAP where Doctor Shearer would attend to them. One ones who were worse off than that would either have to have assistance form our blokes, either a system with their arm around them if they could walk or carry them to the advanced dressing station where Doctor Vernon was. I am talking about the Kokoda campaign now and around that area. Doctor Vernon did amputations; I watched him doing them there. The serious ones then he treated as well as possible and sent them back to the line or the serious ones, the native bearers would transport them to Koitaki, down to the second line AGH or the casualty clearing station.

> Was there a high rate of loss of men through shock just simply in between the time that they had been injured and getting them to better facilities?

I don't know. I often think about it though because in my mind it was up to ten days' march or walk back to get to the hospital for these very seriously wounded – some of these men would be dying – they had no drips as we know today. You see on the TV after an accident or whatever. We had none of that there. Those fellows just had their

wounds bandaged with their field dressing and possibly morphia and that would be indicated on their bodies somewhere either with pen written on them or a note saying that they had had this ...

START TAPE 3 – SIDE A

> Identification: This is Tape 3H, Side 1 of the interview with Band Sergeant Les Simmons of the 39th Battalion recorded on 4th January, 1989 at Fryerstown.
>
> You said you were wondering about how men survived that ten days' journey down to the base.

A chap that I pulled out — the Japs were advancing at Isurava — his name was Private Bob Nimmo, we had orders to evacuate our position – this was after Kokoda was taken and we retreated up to Deniki and Isurava and the Japs were coming in and we could see them – so we had to get out. I checked all my blokes, I was Acting Platoon Commander then, Acting Lieutenant, and I looked back and I saw Bob Nimmo – he was crying, sitting on his knees – and I knew I couldn't get him out. He was pretty heavily build. So I just caught J D Mackay, he was corporal at the time, just disappearing around the bend – the last of our blokes – and I yelled out, 'JD, give us a hand; it's Nimmo'. We used a lot of surnames there. Anyway JD came back, he didn't have to, he could have not heard me, and we dragged Bob Nimmo out. Just grabbed his arms – his pants were falling off – his buttock had been fairly well blasted off with the mountain gun I would say.

> I gather this is what you might call 'a hot retreat', that the Japanese were very close?

That's right, yeah. Well, they were coming towards us, firing at us.

> How far away were they?

Probably eighty paces away. There were trees and scrub there, not as thick there, it wasn't complete jungle at that spot but it was pretty thick. They were coming in through that at us and firing.

> Were you getting any supporting cover?

No. No, we were the last blokes out.

> Were you trying to fire back at the same time?

No, no, no way. If we would've done that they would've caught us and we – the three of us – would have been killed. We had to just run like hell and we did that. And ...

> When you say 'run like hell', I mean it is fairly dense vegetation and uneven terrain ...

But quite a bit of cleared stuff there. We had cleared the area for our field to fire so we could see the Japs coming up; they had to cross these cleared areas. That is why there were cleared spots. There was dry grass which was slippery and there were drops in the ground, and they could be five feet deep, all of a sudden a bank and we dragged Bob just ran over the top of them and landed the other side just in a heap. Grenades in

our shirts were flying everywhere; we had our plastic pouches and our shirts full of grenades – there were our best defence at the time – and poor old Bob he suffered hell. But we couldn't help it; we just pulled him until we got him out of the firing area and we handed him over then. So he would've been sent back by stretcher. I didn't see him go. We had to just get back to our platoon again then. But I don't know what that was leading to.

I was asking you about the capacity to survive that long trek back.

Oh, yes. Not Bob was an instance. His wound – he had a bad wound – and we had to go from Isurava down to Koitaki. The only way, as I said, wasn't by airlift or anything like that, you had to either walk or be carted by stretcher. I should imagine Bob would have had to walk because he would be considered as a walking wounded. In normal cases he would've been a stretcher case but in those conditions there where it took eight men to take him back, if they were natives, and I don't think that our blokes could have managed carrying stretchers right over that Trail, not used to that type of terrain. But I wouldn't have been surprised if Bob would have had to have walked under his own steam.

(5.00) If men were getting tropical ulcers back even at Port Moresby, what would be the effect on their wounds as they were coming down the Trail?

Tropical ulcers, to my memory, weren't known up in the cooler regions – up in the ranges – like they were in the dust and the heat of Moresby.

It was just dust everywhere there and everything was dry; you had your flies and the mozzies; you had everything that gives this infection to the people whereas there was none of that up in the ranges. It was freezing in the night. It was warmish while you were marching, in fact, we were just a pool of sweat. All our clothes were just soaken. But the conditions there didn't contribute to tropical ulcers in that part there.

What about loss of blood? Were there arrangements for emergency blood supplies – plasma – or ...

None that I know of, no. I think it was a case of tourniquets to stop the blood flow but I didn't see any drips or plasma or anything like that at that stage. Possibly later on when they got better organised they'd have had those sorts of things at the various staging camps that they set up right on the Trail. They set up these medical huts so that the people could be treated better.

What were the expectations if you had a serious wound for the leg or the arm? Was there an expectation that you were going to lose it because of the conditions?

Yep, there was. The risk was great. I was in hospital with malaria and dysentery and I was put into a ward with gangrene patients; that was a terrible thing, the gangrene, it did set in up there. This was mainly what happened once they got south into the hot parts again. The treatment there was to leave the wound to become flyblown, which was easy to do in those situations down there, and then put the plaster of Paris around the wound and the maggots used to clean the dead flesh out. They'd do it better than many surgeons could do it.

> Was that something that was simply learned from experience up there or do you know if there was some appreciation at the advantage of that process before?

I think it has been used in the Arab states that they did things like this: they buried the person's wounded arm or leg or whatever in the sane and just stayed there fore a week and let nature do its course. But I think possibly the doctors, they were inventive there, and they realised that this was the best way of curing the wound.

> What was the hospital itself like during the period where the casualty rate would become fairly high? Were there Australian nurses there at all?

Yes, they came up somewhere around March 1 I think it was. Before they came the fellows used to sit in the dykes – on the toilets – next to our road where our trucks were going passed, all in the open, and think nothing of it. Have a shower in the open. The first truck load of nurses arrived down at the Port there and we got the shock of our lives. Screens went up and things changed then. But the hospitals, the second line AGH I was admitted to, I was in Field Ambulance hospitals as well, but the treatment was excellent under the conditions. They were only marquees, the sides rolled up to let the air through. They would probably hold about eighty or ninety patients. I don't know what the operating theatre was. I had to go into one for peritonitis while I was up there but we had the best of attention in those hospitals. They weren't these sorts of military hospitals you would expect in settled area but they served the purpose alright.

> What about food?

Food was okay. Tinned food, a little bit of fresh stuff they used to get from the native gardens. They'd get it more than what the troops would get it. We live on army issue stuff but in the hospitals there was a little bit of fresh food. I was happy with it anyway; I was happy to have the spell.

> Back on the Kokoda Trail as a stretcher-bearer or somebody who had been trained in aid, in some of those battle situations were three times when the priorities of the wounded would have to take precedence and that would occupy the major part of what you were doing?

There was a time when priority was protecting ourselves, all depending on the type of wound of your mate at the side of you. The other priority would be the wounded man who was badly wounded; he had to have treatment. So you had to risk cutting your fire power down and attend to your mate and get him out. But, if possible, you stayed there and you had to defend the position. 'Cause I mentioned earlier, the situation was different to any conventional warfare where we were short of men, we were short of ammunition, we were short of food getting to us there, no sleeping quarters just sleeping on the ground night after night soaking wet and being outnumbered. So every man had to be able to defend the position and mix up his medical work as well.
(10.00) In positions though were you were effectively acting as a first aid person – it is one thing to have been back at Port Moresby and dealing with minor shrapnel wounds – but did you find yourself in the situation that you would find somebody just so horrifically damaged you would not know where to start – you would not know where to begin?

Yes, that's right. I think even a trained doctor when they saw them would say, 'God, this is a bad one'.

Tell me about some cases that you can recall and what you would do.

Well, Bob Nimmo was one. He had a horrible wound with his buttock shock off. All we did there was after we pulled him out – we couldn't treat him, we just had to grab him and pull him out, no treatment at all and drag him over the ground until we got him to proper treatment. But Sergeant Buchecker, our intelligence sergeant, came in wounded – he was wounded in a similar position from memory – so it is just a case of putting on field dressings and staunching the flow of blood and making it more comfortable and getting him to somebody with more experience. So we were really just patch-up artists.

What if you had a broken arm or broken leg and bones obviously shattered not just fractured?

That is almost beyond a stretcher-bearer but we knew the rudiments of splints – making makeshift splints – and putting the arm in the splint so there couldn't be any movement and that's about all we could do.

But this is at a point where it sounds like now you are making decisions based on acceptance of what was possible but there must have been a stage where in those very first instances you are confronted with a man who is in terrible pain, his arm or leg is just twisted at some terrible angle, surely you would have a sense of uncertainty about whether what you were going to do would even be the right thing, that what you are going to do is going to cause the man immense pain. Did you have that happen?

Yes. Yeah. That's true because we knew our capabilities and we knew the suffering of the bloke when we did something we weren't sure about doing and that it might be wrong what we were doing. So it was just a case ... we didn't have time to think about these things either. When they happened it was really in an emergency. Things are happening all around us other than having a wounded man to look after and actions had to pretty well come instinctive some way or other and act quickly; fix that man up with the skill that we had and it was whatever we could use around to assist us in the way of equipment, like branches and things like that if it happened to be a splint that was needed. That did happen in several cases with chaps there and it's happened with me that I've had that experience because I hadn't had proper medical training. It was only first aid and first aid is only up to a certain point in relieving a man's injury or fixing it.

On that first occasion where you had to take a limb that was broken in half or just shattered and you had to move it into place, how were you able to take hold of it – you would feel the movement – how were you able to do that?

Truthfully, I don't know that I actually held a limb like that. I was there, there was a couple of us, one of the fellows had a bad injury to his leg I think it was and it was a case of watching the patient listening to him to know just what you were doing right to know whether he was in extreme pain when you did something and to ease off doing it

and try some other way. So our first actions was to make sure the man was lying down and in that stage he would have been a stretcher case and not a walking wounded and to try to straighten his leg out some way or other, and how we did I don't know. We just did all we could as just ordinary amateurs and get him on the stretcher and get him as quick as possible to a man with experience – to a doctor.

What about head wounds? Did you have cases where people's skulls where the bone was broken or part of their faces shot away?

No, it was mainly other parts of the body and fortunately there was nothing with a head that I can remember.

If I go to the dentist and he is going to put a needle in and you can feel the needle go into the jaw and so on I can reconcile myself a bit to it because I know that this is a trained man and he knows what he is doing but if you are in a field of action where you have got a person you know has got limited skills would some men get anxious that you were going to do something to them?

I don't think so. Those fellows were pretty sore, pretty hurt, through their injury and I think they were glad to know there somebody was doing something and the thought that that person couldn't do it, I don't think it entered their head. I think they were just glad and they had confidence in the person doing it.

(15.00) You said sometimes you were acting on intuition. Did you find subsequently there were cases where you had taken a certain action and then been able to get reassurance that what you had done was the right thing?

Yes; only through seeing it done by somebody more experienced later on doing something similar to what you had to do and the actions you took was the same as what they have done and you feel 'well, I did the right thing in doing that'. But I think the little medical, or first aid, training we had did sow the seeds somewhat for those sort of things. It would be different if we went there without any experience at all. We knew about bandaging, how to bandage an arm, and the different type of breaks in the arm and the leg, what they were called, what happened and what they looked like. So I think at the back of it all it helped us a lot.

Conversely, did you ever take an action that later you learnt was something that ought not have been done?

No. One thing that ought not to have been done was drag Bob Nimmo like we did without giving him treatment but the circumstances were different there. We had the Japanese at the side of us. So that is something we would not do normally under certain circumstances and we would not have thought of doing that – we'd have treated him.
Johnny Stormont now, at Kokoda, where I have him the morphia. We wouldn't have left a man there to die under normal circumstances. But they were abnormal and I take it he did die because it was his mates job to look after him. I had to get back to my funk-hole, or my area, and I believe he did die before we got out. But they're the sorts of things that are not natural, nor normal, but in these extreme circumstances the situation changes entirely.

Harry Williams, another one of my chaps, he was about thirty feet away from me and he was on his knees eating an army biscuit, a big square thick thing, and the Japs were just coming down towards us firing. I yelled out to him, 'Get down Harry; you'll get killed'. As soon as I yelled it out he got shot in the chest – blood spurted everywhere. So I had to go to him and get his identification disk and his paybook and leave him there. As far as I know he was dead; he couldn't have been otherwise. It was a machine gun burst right across the chest. But you would have gone further and examined further to see whether he was dead. A man of medical experience could have pronounced him but I knew he was dead because of the extent of the injury. They're the sort of the cases which sort of come on. They happen near you, you didn't know what was happening fifteen feet away, you didn't know where your mates were – in what trenches they were in or what was happening there. You were only dealing with what was happening right in your immediate vicinity. So it was a funny war and a strange war. So different to everything else Australian soldiers had ever experienced.

> After that first experience, that first encounter, that you described where you withdrew, the action around Isurava I gather was one that was particularly painful in terms of casualties and to you personally where you had good friends lost.

Yes.

> How did that develop: How did it begin there?

By that do you mean how did the action ...

> Yes, how did the action start that you were caught up in?

Japanese coming around in spots where we didn't expect them like they did on the major front coming over the Owen Stanley Ranges when we were all protecting the coast down in the south and had our backs to them. They would come behind our lines and push through our weak defenses. But it was mainly snipers; they would get up in trees and pick us out, or just random fire because you couldn't see them. They could be 20 paces away and all you would hear is the rustle of the bushes and their voices. So it was random fire.
Captain Jacob, a bonzer bloke, he copped one in the ... oh, I am sorry, he was killed but he was carrying rifles helping some of the wounded blokes by carrying their rifles and one of them dropped to the ground and discharged and caught him in the crutch and killed him. We'd only been having a stand to together, I think it was the night before, and that was a great shock to us.
(20.00) Joe Reilly, the chap I knew well, I was talking to him the night before he was killed down his slit trench at lower Deniki. And he was the chap I was getting a drink of water on the Trail at Isurava and I saw the stretcher coming up and I said who is it. I looked at him and his eyes were glazed and had dirt on them – they were just white cataracts over them – he was just like ivory. And I said, 'It's Joe Reilly'. I was shocked because I had only been talking to him not so long before. So I helped them carry him up to the track. And, we dug a hole, a shallow hole, right on the edge of the track – I could go to that spot today – and we buried him. `Padre' Earl had his robes, he carried them in action, and he was a Roman Catholic – I am a Methodist – but he had that band-thing that they wear at funerals, he put that around him and he carried out a service and there was bullets flying around. We buried Joe there. We put

a small wooden cross out of twigs at the head of the grave.
But these are the sorts of things that happened. Either the fellow was dead, the people dies, or they copped a serious injury. It was sudden death or the other ways, I suppose it is a stupid way to put it but I was people that you couldn't help. The circumstance of their injury was that they were too far gone; it was sudden death for them. It was pretty ruddy terrible.

> Did you ever find yourself in a situation where you thought you were gone, that things were overwhelmed and that you just were not going to get out?

I was wounded at Isurava just before we attacked Kokoda. It is not recorded because, under the situation there little wounds didn't matter much and they had a mountain gun, the Japs, and I copped it in the right heel through the boot. It wasn't much but I put up with it for four days and it became septic then. I even went down on these reccy patrols mapping out the area before we attacked Kokoda and I ended up I had to go to Doctor McLaren. He was 14th Field Ambulance and a nice bloke from South Australia originally. I report to him and he sent me back to Eora Creek.

> What was the nature of the wound? Was it the flesh or was it the sinew or ...

No, flesh – nothing, excepting that it had got worse because it had become septic.

> When you say nothing, I mean the reality is that often relatively superficial wounds can be extremely painful?

Yes, it was painful and I ended up I couldn't wear the boot. I don't know where I got the spare socks – I put spare socks on that foot. I just don't know whether I got it off fellows going back wounded or dead chaps – but anyway I know I had extra socks to make up for the boot and I had to carry the boot. Doctor McLaren sent me back to Eora Creek where Doctor Vernon was with our advanced dressing station and Sergeant Auchettl took me there. We had to walk; it was over a full day's walk back to this first dressing station and then I had to wait my turn there. There were serious cases: amputations going on. He was cutting fingers off on a block of wood – a tree stump – he was a grand old man working under primitive conditions. He treated it with penicillin and I cam back to the lines then and the wound got all right.

> But on the walk down, I mean as you were going, inevitably you would hit branches and roots and things on the ground. It must have been a nightmare.

It was, it was painful. I had a walking stick, a think you made up yourself to help and Bill hold me up as we walked and halfway along the Trail Bill said, 'Stop here, there is a fire on the side of the track', and I said, 'Why' and he said, 'Just a minute' and he raked out some sweet potatoes he had put in there and we had a feed. He had put them in there on his way up to where we were fighting there. He must have been wandering around in his work and here were these sweet potatoes cooking. So we had sweet potato and then continued our journey. But I experienced in a small way what seriously wounded fellows had to put up with only they had to put up with it for days. So it was bad enough for me; it was terrible the climb up those hills and crossing those rivers. I wouldn't want to go through it again and I was only slightly wounded. As I

say, it is not recorded, it was a wound that became infected but if it hadn't become infected no-one would have known about it, it would have got right, and I would have carried on. It wasn't as though I'd had my hand or my foot blown off.

(25.00) There would have been occasions on that return for medical aid where you would have sat down or lied down and you must have felt you just didn't want to get up – you couldn't get up. Did you feel that this was too much for anybody to expect to bear?

That happened in two instances when I was going back with Bill, and without his help I couldn't have made it. The first case was coming across the Trail with our packs. We'd sit down for a rest and how we got to our feet I don't know. So there was two instances like that: once you stopped for a rest you didn't want to get up again and start. You were so stiff, you were so sore. That's what it was like when I was going back for that treatment to see Doctor Vernon.

How long did it take before the wound recovered?

With the penicillin powder on it it was roughly a week and it was pretty right then. That's all it wanted; just proper treatment like that.

During that week then that you were away from the Kokoda Trail did you then begin to get a sense of perspective of what was going on because to that point it was all very keenly focused on your own particular involvement in those individual spots?

Yes, you walked through positions of the other platoons and companies. You got a better idea of the layout of your situation there, which you didn't have very much of even though I was a sergeant. You are sort of dealing with your own little perimeter and you didn't know the full story of what was happening around you. You had an idea C Company was over there somewhere and someone else was somewhere else but you had to walk through them which was not the normal thing to do. Once you were in a position you stayed there, you didn't wander around speaking to your other mates saying, 'Hello' and 'What are you doing here?'. I had a chance of seeing the whole set up right to battalion headquarters. And as you left the scene and the noise: The Japanese mountain guns, our grenades which resounded along that valley there, you have no idea, it just rolled like a clap of thunder each time a grenade went off and you would hear that behind you. It was sort of some relief even of the pain of the injury, it was a relief to be walking away from that for a change. Then the opposite occurred when you were coming back and you were coming back into it again. You started to realise, 'God blimey' you know, again, you wondered whether you were going to come out of it alive.

Did you feel that having been wounded, having at least done your bit, that in any reasonable world you would be allowed to retire?

Well, I don't think with this wound – it's possible – but I didn't treat it as something serious. The only time that I treated it as serious was the fact that I didn't get killed. I was lucky 'cause people next to me were getting killed – only three feet away. And, I was ... Just lost my train of thought there ... No, possibly in other times, other situations, a thing like that would've put you in hospital like in a military army camp at Balcombe or somewhere like that if that had happened.

END TAPE 3 – SIDE A

START TAPE 3 – SIDE B

> Identification: This is Side 2, of Tape 3H recorded on 4th January, 1989 with Les Simmons of the 39th Battalion.
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> As you were getting back again to the front, was it a test of nerves for you? Was there a point where you felt if there was some way that you could possibly avoid it you would go back, or had somehow or other had you resolved it all in your mind?

No. I didn't think that I couldn't go back. I think that what overruled any thoughts like that was the fact that you knew your mates were there and we were outnumbered by so many Japs, as I mentioned for sure ten to one but at times up to twenty to one. We were running out of ammunition and you just had a duty to be there. It wasn't, again, for King and Empire or anything like that. It was your conscience told you you had to be there. The thought did pass through me how heat it would be to be back at Moresby and to have a base job or something like that instead of what we are doing there. But I think every bloke would feel the same as me, that they had to be there, they couldn't leave their mates or do anything that would get them out of that. If you copped a decent wound, I think you'd grin. I've seen that happen there. People get wounded next to me and have said, 'I have copped it Simmo', knowing that they would be getting into a hospital. It was a release but not of their doing. It was forced on them and so they looked on the bright side that they are going to get a spell from action. There was often a case when I wouldn't have cared if I had been wounded enough to have had a spell. But to actually leave them in any way or do something that would evade being in the frontline, I don't think any fellow would have thought of doing that but a wound was one way of a forced release from that horrible mess.

> Is it possible to say that one situation was worse than the other? That is, going into battle for the first time not really quite knowing what to expect except the possibility of being killed or injured or having experienced pain and then knowing what you are going back to – which was the worst?

I'd put the three different situations on a par: our bombings, the Japanese bombs over Port Moresby and over our positions, we were guarding the Seven Mile drome our unit, they were horrible; the next one was our first encounter with the Japs at Kokoda – I didn't think I would survive there because I have seen the bullets just cutting into the trees at the side of me. And I think probably the next one was at Isurava when we'd got out of Kokoda when I got that slight wound, and I am referring to it as a slight one, I don't want to make a big thing of that, and the mountain gun was firing there which we didn't seem to be able to silence.
(5.00) They had heavier armament or equipment than we did and the odds we knew were against us, so I was frightened there and just felt that it could be the last because just what I'd seen was happening around me. I thought, 'I could be the next'. So these are the feelings, these are the three, starting back at base, we were down at the Seven Mile drome. They are three different ... which I would put on a fairly equal footing, although I was not hurt in the bombings but, boy, I was scared – I was scared stiff – it was a horrible thing to go through. I think of these people in England and in

Europe during the war what it must have been to them and how it felt to me. But that was just a different phase of our action there. It was the bombings from overhead and then the actual case of being in the battle itself. They all felt pretty terrible and you thought it was your end.

> You said that on the Kokoda Trail that it was a situation where there to be no prisoners. Was there an order as such given to that effect?

We were told – I don't know what officer told us – one of our officers warned us that prisoners will not be taken by the Japs. They won't take us, it means we have to fight to the death and we were told that they won't be taking prisoners anyway that they don't care if they get killed. We found that out. They just didn't care if they exposed themselves to us or made a noise. They were yelling, blowing bugles around their camp fires, eating their food – their rice – while we were huddling in the cold up above them in the jungle, no hot food, keeping our voices down to a whisper, and frightened that we would give our position away. But they couldn't give a darn; there were so many of them and it was an honour for them to die and we knew that and we knew what we were up against and that made it very frightening to know that you were against people who didn't care if they got killed. Whereas, I wanted to come home: I wanted to get back to Australia and all my mates did. And it's all we wanted was to get back home again. We had a job to do that, we wanted to get home and we didn't want to be killed.

> A couple of fellows told me of situations where there were wounded japanese and because of the circumstances it was felt that they should be finished off. Did you see that happen at all?

No, I didn't see that happen. No, I can honestly say I didn't see that happen. I didn't even hear of it happening.

> Did you actually see any wounded Japanese?

Not wounded, I saw dead Japanese but no wounded ones.

> Or captured?

Yes, I have seen not too many captured Japanese but there was a couple. I am trying to think where it was. It was along the Trail, I am pretty sure up the Kokoda end of the Stanley north end of the Trail. But I didn't have anything to do with them. I saw quite a few dead ones. I saw many live ones and I didn't see any wounded.

> How did you feel by that latter part of the action on the Kokoda Trail towards the Japanese? You had been initially introduced to them as supposedly an inferior ... then the reality of what they are like. But how did you feel towards the enemy at that stage?

Well, as you just mentioned, we thought they were invincible because of their history of coming down into Malaysia and our whole division being captured and what they did to Singapore. So we knew what we were up against although we didn't think they were going to be big blokes and we really still believed that we, us crowd, we would stop them. They caught the others but we will be the ones that are going to stop them coming to Australia. So I think we had that feeling. I think they were an enemy that

we had to fear and we had to admit that they were pretty blooming good after our experience with them. They weren't second rate; they were pretty good. But as far as humans go I didn't have any regard for them because of what they had done, the atrocities, and what people had come down to the hospital that I was in, they had come down from Rabaul and from missions and told us what those Japs did. So I had no good feelings at all for them in that respect but as fighters, they were darn good fighters, there's no doubt about it.

(10.00) By the time reinforcements finally came and you were able to come down off the Trail what sort of physical condition were you in?

Pretty low. We were supposed to have been relived much earlier than we were because we had seen all of the action there – our unit – and when I say there was a battalion there, there wasn't. We had an excellent rear echelon and so it was only the fighting men that went over the Trail. But we were worn out; we were haggard and just really had it. People were sick although they hadn't reported it and they were still fighting on. We knew our food was running low and our ammunition was running low. We were counting on the 2nd, 14th, 16th and 27th – 21st Brigade, I think it was – to come and help us and they didn't arrive when we expected them. We had grenades cleaned – we almost polished them – lying around the side of our funk-holes and our weapons. We were going to had everything over to them after our stint in action and when they did arrive, they came right when the thing was so bad there that we had to stay on and we fought rear guard actions then – the 39th Battalion – on our way out and our retreat from that area. So what we were looking forward to as being relieved and go back for a bit of a spell, it didn't eventuate and we fought all the way back. So it wasn't too good. Our blokes were exactly the same as those first ones I mentioned that we passed coming out of action when we were going into action. We ended up being like them. On our way back we passed some other reinforcements – I don't know what unit they were but they seemed to be all big blokes – and I thought this is when size came into it. I summed them up and I thought, God, I just thought, 'Thank goodness, you fellows will fix them'. They were healthy, fit looking blokes. But we looked like that when we went up too. So what they looked like when they came out I don't know. It was just the difference of seeing the blokes who were going up and the ones coming out.

After you were relieved did you get any leave back to Australia?

Yes, I came back on a flying boat. I was classified medically unfit.

On what basis?

Malaria, dysentery – I had malaria and dysentery; dysentery I had about fifteen times, I had that bad and I had that with malaria at the same time. Then I copped peritonitis – they thought I was going to die – the doctor that operated on me said, 'We thought we had lost you Sarge'. So I had that coupled with the other fevers and the unit came back months before me. I was put into 113 Con Depot [113 Australian Convalescent Depot, AIF] after hospital and then they put me into the Con Depot concern band. They had an orchestra and I am a trumpet player and as somebody with any musical background, whether it be a singer or an actor or not, went through, they grabbed him and they said, 'You are not fit to leave here'. It was a good place to be; it was lovely. So I was in the concert party. I have got their program here in my book there now, one

of the programs. It was a top-notch thing. You'd go to Melbourne and wouldn't see any better. They were all professionals.

What is on the program? Is it handy?

This concert team was 113 Australian Convalescent Depot, AIF, and it was known as Thorp's troupers after Colonel Thorp, he was a major and was promoted a colonel. He was a doctor and, boy, he was a beat bloke. So one of our programs there which we used to have weekly and it was to entertain the navy, the air force, the Americans and the Australians. They had a theatre that was built there made of log poles with a gable roof and it seated 2,000 people – it was a huge thing – and the audience used to sit on logs. But the stage – it was a proper stage – they had their own wardrobe mistress and a ballet master; everyone was a professional in their own right. We used to put this concern on once a week,practise all the week for it. The one in particular that comes to mind is *Eight Belles and some Buoys Nautical Review*. The theatre was called the Eworogo Theatre at Thorpville. There was quite a mixture of items on. We had an overture by the Saltwell Troubadours; an opening chorus by the company *Let's have a Jolly Good Time*; *Jim Flannelfoot Joins the Navy;*– we had a couple of fellows playing the part there – it was a comedy; *Dusty Road* by Private Morrison was another item. There was a lot of little sketches like this and vocal harmonies. Then there was dancing there. We had Lieutenant C W Gladell he was one of the instructors for doing the dancing. The orchestra, which I was a member of, I played first trumpet there, we put on orchestral items and also we played solos ourselves which I was a bit frightened of in them days but we did it. It was just like anyone would see back at home only it was pretty well out in the open and it was all done by the patients of this Con Depot.

(15.00) Are the tunes indicated there that you played?

Yes, I can remember without looking at it I think. sings a tune: *Happy Days are here again.*

Happy Days are here again, is it?

Yes, *Happy Days are here again'* that was one of the pieces and there was *No Business like Show Business*' that was a couple of them. (sings a tune) I can't think of the darn name.

I know the tune too but I can't think of it. Anyway, when you got back to Australia had your parents at that stage known you had been wounded or had been unwell?

Oh Yes, yes, I wrote to them from hospital. I don't know whether I'd told them I'd been in action. I think they'd have to guess by then by the newspapers although they didn't mention our unit, they would have known that I'd been in action and that I'd come out all right. So I wrote as soon as possible from the hospital to let them know I was okay and that I was having a good time at Con Depot. I think I was up there nearly six months longer than our unit. I was supposed to have come back on a hospital ship. I don't know what happened there. I was at Murray Barracks waiting to come back on the ship and then I got word I had to report down to Port Moresby and go on the seaplane ['Corialanus'?] it was called, the big – Qantas Airway it was, flying boat.

Where did it fly to, Darwin, or where?

Townsville.

How long did it take? What were the conditions like in the plane?

Pretty good. It was pretty austere in the plane. It looks like they had used it for carrying troops before. We had access to the pantry. The pilot said, 'Help yourselves boys' and that is where I had some tinned tomatoes – I got stuck into some of them, they were wonderful. Anyway, I just forget how long it took us, possibly from there down to Townsville only a couple of hours flight – two or three hours at the most. They were very slow. We went to our first picture – proper picture – at the Winter Garden, I think they called it. I think that was at Townsville. And we saw Bing Crosby in a Christmas thing, *A White Christmas* – I saw that picture. But I was put in charge of the other people on the plane. There was a mixture: artillery, infantry – they weren't all from my battalion. We were all fellows being invalided out and no arrangements had been made to feed us when we got down to Townsville or to billet us, so I had to rush around looking for somewhere for a feed. So I ended up eating at the local railway station. I marched the blokes up; put them into platoon, and yelled (laughs) orders. So we pulled up at the railway station at the door. I knocked at the door. Somebody opened it, they opened the door, and I marched the fellows in and I made them stand at ease and I said, 'We are reporting here to be fed'. I made it as official as I could because we just couldn't get good anywhere. So we had a good feed there; they couldn't do enough to help us. It was beaut just to see the shores of Australia under the plane again and seeing some motor cars and people walking around after our experience.

When then did you first see your parents again?

I suppose it would be a bit over a week after I lobbed here and I got, from memory, a fortnight's leave – and I was crook on that, it could have only been a week – there wasn't much considering the Americans they were only up there for a few months and they were getting leave and coming down to Australia. We had nowhere to go even on a day off when we were at Moresby, we had nowhere to go. Moresby was out of bounds anyway and we just had to hang around our camps. But it would be roughly a fortnight. I came home and then I got malaria so I ended up in Caulfield Repatriation Hospital in Cooyong Road and Bill Auchettl was in there and about eight or nine of the 39th [Battalion] in the same long ward. It was like a big dormitory and all the beds were side by side. You could look up along the length of it and see all of these beds. From then on I was in and out of hospitals here until I got word that I was being discharged medically unfit.

(20.00) Did your parents come to the hospital?

Yes.

Was that an emotional moment to see your parents again?

No, I was at home a few days before I went into hospital so I'd seen my parents.

When you saw them, did they know you were arriving at that moment?

No, I didn't tell them; it was a surprise. They were surprised and I can tell you it was very emotional. It was just unbelievable to be home there again, to see them and be able to talk to them. Luckily the hospital, Caulfield, the first one I was admitted to was ten minutes walk from home so they were able to come there everyday and visit me.

So you were then discharged after your period in hospital?

No, I went from Caulfield and from there to a Con Depot somewhere ... then I had been discharged from that hospital and I had to report to the Caulfield Racecourse to be sent somewhere else and I got malaria again. Everyone was crowding around me, all the lady personnel in the army and that had never seen anyone with malaria. I was shaking. So I was put into Heildelberg then. I was at Heidelberg and I went from there to Stodington to convalesce there. From Stodington I got malaria again and I ended up at Ballarat Con Depot, Victoria Park, where I had my first military Militia camp. Where that was held in exactly the same spot again. Then from there I applied to form a band there in the convalescent camp and alternatively I applied to engineers for a job as an engineer in the engineers. Both applications went out to those places together. I got a reply the same time from both of them accepting me, so I had to choose. Engineers or be a bandmaster of the Con Depot band. I decided on engineers so I became Military Foreman of Works at Askill House and was in charge of the munition depots around the State and hospitals – the buildings that is – it was quite a good job and then I got word to say that I was being discharged and the report to Royal Park where I was examined and I was kicked out.

I gather there was little understanding in Australia at that time about the sort of role that the 39th Battalion had played?

None at all. There was nothing advertised during our action because of censorship and you couldn't tell your people where you were or what you were doing and your unit. All identification was erased from letters and any equipment. So even the people, the mothers and fathers and relations of the men only had a hazy idea of what we were doing up there and what we did do when we got back because it was not made public and I don't think, even to this day, right through all these years – you could ask school kids or teenagers or even older than teenagers about Kokoda and they'd wonder what you were talking about.

Was it disappointing at the time though to have had that sort of experience and find there was little appreciation as to what was involved or what was done?

No, I don't think so. Our disappointment was up top when we used to see pictures, newsreels, of wharfies going on strike – not only them but other things happening down below here – and what we were putting up with up there used to rile everyone. But they might have had reasons down here, we didn't know, but that did upset us. I think the fact that we were doing what we were doing, we were happy and whether the world knew it or now didn't matter – it didn't worry us and I don't think we even thought about it. But we did think about it when Americans or allied troops were mentioned in actions that we only were in and we would read reports or hear of it about the allied troops and we would think 'What the hell, we are Australians and we were on our own. It was the 39th that did that'. So people had the wrong impression down below here of who was doing the fighting. And a lot of cases where we were in

action the Americans got the credit for it because they seemed to get the headlines. But the little 39th Battalion, who did what they did, and people I'm sure wouldn't believe the hardships and things that we put up with – not just because I was there and it was the 39th – I am proud of it now. I would have given anything to have got out of that unit at one stage but I am proud to have belonged to it and to have been through all that hardship and everything and glad to be home to talk about it.

(25.00) How did you feel then when the 39th Battalion was disbanded?

Terrible. I was still up there when that happened, in New Guinea. I heard about it and I couldn't believe it. I haven't heard any satisfactory reason now through our unit association or anyone why that was done after what we did up there. This would happen to somebody who had acted in disgrace and I feel what they did to us is what would happen to a unit that didn't do the right thing ... we were just, well, in disgrace. I feel that they sort of put us into oblivion as though we didn't exist. Split us up into working parties and to various units that we did not exist as an entity again. We were all just fragments of something that I think was very ... I think right now was famous and a unit proud to belong to. I am really upset about that.

Les, you said there were some things happened that would raise your hair, what do you mean by that?

Well, raise your hair, but probably I won't be able to tell you all of those but there are other interesting things, funny things that happened. This RAP that I mentioned earlier in our talk situated around the six and a half mile as we knew it then, Bill Auchettl, the RAP Sergeant, and myself were out the front of our marquee and a number of natives walked passed along this dirt track not far in front of our RAP tent. They had a stretcher-type thing or a bier – I don't know what you'd call it – a stretcher anyway above their heads and there must have been thirty or forty people – native. So we stopped them and we said, 'What is wrong? Is your friend sick?'. 'Yes, tapeta, sick' and we said, 'What is wrong?' and they said, 'Long time sick, lone time'. So we said, 'Bring him in, we'll have a look at him. Bring him over to the tent and see what we can do' and we discovered he was dead. What they did there, it was their custom to walk around the 'island' as they refer to it, but to talk around the district for days with this dead body before they disposed of it and put it up on a big loft and leave it in the open. That was one strange thing. That was soon after we had arrived there and that was quite something, this custom of the natives. We really thought that the man wanted treatment.
During an air raid the Jap zeros used to come down over the Seven Mile and all our positions adjacent to the drome and they would come at treetop height – you could see the pilot. One morning, around seven o'clock they used to come regular, we had no opposition for them, no fighters there at that time and the chaps, we used to run into the nearest creek for cover and keep the bank between us and the plane if possible. So were all crouched there and one fellow came rushing in at the last moment and somebody said, 'What the so-and-so are you doing here Bluey? You should be back at the cookhouse, don't you mess our food up. You know, you've got no right to be here'. So Bluey was the cook and the fellow sounded fair dinkum but it was really funny the way they said it: the cook shouldn't be there, he should be attending to our meals. That was just another strange thing that happened there. I'd have to think a bit longer to go on with some of these experiences. My mind goes blank now.

I remember putting up a telephone line which was something we didn't have when we were in action over the Kokoda Trail – we had no communication in any way whatsoever – no communication which made it hard but we did have our radio phones, our field phones around Moresby and Seven Mile drome just to the company to battalion headquarters and I was rigging the line up to RAP and I was trying to tie it around a sapling and I was standing on the trunk of a sampling – these saplings are only about three inches in diameter – and this butt I was standing on was what was left of the base of one that I had cut and it was about two foot six, three feet off the ground and it had a sharp point on it. I am standing in my sandshoe with one leg on top of this while it was wobbling underneath me like a pendulum upside down, because my shoes were full of perspiration – they just get full of that up there during the summer – and I slipped and that spike came up between my legs and you can imagine what would have happened if it had gone in the vital spot and it just scarred right in front of my crotch. That made me feel sick for a long while after. Just the thought of being debowelled there and it could have easily happened.

Another time I was up at a rest camp at Koitaki, the Laloki River ran alongside it, and I dived in. There were a number of other people there from various units and I dived in and I stood up but I couldn't stand up because of the current – it was only three or four feet deep but it dragged my legs from under me – and I was swept out into the crocodile infested area. The current dragged me down. I was dragged underwater for about fifteen feet, I just held my breath long enough to get to the top and swim to the still waters and this is where the crocs were. You could hear them ...

END TAPE 3 – SIDE B