TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description	Dr Peter Braithwaite, Captain and Regimental Medical Officer 2/12th Battalion, interviewed by Michael Sprod for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45 Discussing enlistment; work as medical officer in training camps at Brighton and Rutherford; voyage to England; training at Salisbury Plain Army Camp; embarkation for Middle East; regimental aid posts at Tobruk; recovering wounded; treatment of wounded; voyage back to Australia; embarkation for New Guinea; treatment of tropical diseases; relations between officers and other ranks.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

This interview is being recorded for the Australian War Memorial Sound Archive of the Second World War. This is interview number seven concerning the 2/12th Battalion of the 2nd AIF. The recording was made at Sandy Bay in Hobart on the 21st of March 1989. The interviewer is Michael Sprod and I'm talking to Dr Peter Braithwaite formerly Regimental Medical Officer with the 2/12th Battalion.

Dr Braithwaite if we could begin with a short summary of your family background.

Yes. I was born in London, next to Hampstead Heath. My father was a dental traveller, a traveller in dental goods to South Africa and to Australia and New Zealand. My mother was a shorthand typist which was fairly rare in those days and she came from Wellington New Zealand, and met my father in London. He used to come out to Australia and New Zealand as well, and he was a great friend of Peter Dawson, he was also a baritone and they met in the church choir. Anyway, we lived on the edge of Hampstead Heath then we moved to Mussell Hill for a while and my father was posted out to Sydney to set up offices for his firm there and we left on the 20th of June, 1920. We came out on the *Ormond* and we went straight on to Wellington, New Zealand, and stayed with my mother's family while my father set us up in a house in Sydney and we went back and joined him there. I went to school in Mosman, went to North Sydney High School, played rugby union and water polo and graduated in medicine at Sydney University when I left North Sydney. Did a year at Sydney Hospital in 1937 and then I came to Hobart in 1938. And in 1939 they declared war on me, so I was about to go to England to do post-graduate study, well that wasn't any good, so I just went into camp on the 20th October `39, and in due course I went with them – when the 12th Battalion were leaving in December we had a farewell at the Naval and Military and the AQ said `Well do you want to go with them?' and I said `Yes', so I went with them. And they lost me for about two years, didn't know where I was. So that brings us up to the war.

Yes, just a couple of questions about your family background. Was your family a religious family?

Yes. My – they were Church of England, and my father met my mother in a church choir. He was a very good baritone.

Was there any political affiliation in your family?

Yes, Liberal.

Was your father active in politics?

No, no. He wasn't active and neither am I but, you know, there was only one thing for him and that was Liberal. He wouldn't have a bar of the Labor Party.

How about in Britain before he left?

Well I was six and a half when we left there and I wouldn't know what was happening then.

Had your father seen service in the first war?

No, he hadn't.

So there was no military tradition in your family?

No. He was a – he was in a reserved occupation but he – he used to organise the people into the air raid shelters and made sure that it was women and children first, but some of the men didn't agree with it.

At North Sydney High School, were you in cadets there?

No. I wasn't. I was just in sport. As a matter of fact, at the time I was at North Sydney the cadets had been temporarily suspended, so there wasn't really an opportunity. But at Sydney University I was in the Sydney University Regiment.

What did that involve?

Well that involved going to – two camps a year – each of about ten days and mainly learning to take a Vickers gun to bits and put it together again and hit the target more often than anyone else.

So in the 1930s were you aware of the situation in Europe?

Ah, Yes. I was aware but we didn't seem to worry about it very much until when I was down here in `38 and `39, the Superintendent of the Hospital used to come in and talk about it to the residents and he was worried about it, but we didn't seem to worry about it much at all.

What about at University, was there sort of political ferment there, and you would have been there in the depression years I suppose.

That's right, yes.

Was there a lot of radical activity or even right-wing activity?

Oh, yes, there were. No – there was both – there was a labour club and so on. But – just a few people – the main body of us weren't very political at all.

Um, um. I suppose the University was a fairly small place in those days?

Um, I forget. A couple of thousand I think, something like that.

So, at the time of – the war broke out, you're at the hospital here.

Yes.

And did you enlist straight away?

Yes.

Why?

Well, well there were a couple of things that influenced that. I'd – I'd done a year at Sydney Hospital, I'd done two years down here and I was about to get a boat and go to England to do post-graduate study, and then of course they declared war on me, and that wasn't on. So I just went into camp and enlisted. It seemed to me the only thing to do.

Right. Did you – being British by birth – did you, you know, feel a great loyalty towards England?

Oh yes, yes.

How Australian did you feel then?

Pretty Australian.

Pretty Australian. Well, let's take it one step further. How Tasmanian did you feel?

Um, well I didn't really feel all that Tasmanian, I'd only been here for a little less than two years and I think me loyalties were more with Sydney at the time.

You didn't think of going home and enlisting from Sydney?

No, no. No, I went into the DDMS [Deputy Director of Medical Services] office and I said `Right, here I am'. There was a pale face fellow interviewing at the time, he turned out to be a great friend of mine later on, he was a dentist, Russell Lyons. But it was a whole lot of chaos at that time. They hadn't organised what they were going to do with the Australian Army and so as I was interested they called me up and I went into camp at Brighton as the medical officer to the camp and then from there, when they were having a farewell for the 12th Battalion, on about the 8th December, I went to the farewell and the AQ was talking to the CO and they called me over and said `Do you want to go with the 12th?' and I said `Too right I do'. He said `All right, well you go with them and I'll fix it'. So I went with them and the Army lost me for two years. He didn't fix it.

(10.00) He didn't fix it?

No, but I went with them.

Did that cause any trouble?

It didn't cause any trouble. No I waged war. When we got home eventually in I think, mid `42 or something, a fellow in Western Australia said `You were the fellow I've been looking for all the war'.

Right. Now at the outbreak of war were you married or ...

No, I wasn't married, no.

Courting?

Oh yes, courting.

And that didn't, ah, didn't affect your decision?

No, no.

Well in the training camp, you were, before you were with the 12th you were [medical] officer to the whole training camp?

That's it, yes.

How busy were you kept with injuries and illness there?

Well. Oh. Not, well – not really very busy. There were of course the usual epidemics of measles and mumps and so on that they all get when they train together like that. And we had

a, well we had to nurse them under canvas because we didn't have buildings. Everywhere I seemed to go the hospital got built just as I left and that was the case in Brighton. They started to build a camp hospital, it wasn't there before I left.

How about the other camps in New South Wales, Rutherford, Ingleburn?

Oh my God! Rutherford was *terrible*, it was very hot and under canvas, and the medical set-up hadn't arrived yet. I was the only doctor in the camp and we had a little camp hospital with a couple of nurses in it and that was all. And of course everyone was getting all the usual infectious diseases and they were being looked after under canvas under very hot, sweaty conditions.

You went into the army with the rank of captain did you?

Yes. I'd had four years in the Sydney University Regiment as an under-graduate and as soon as I graduated, the beginning of `37, I joined the army medical corp and was made an officer then.

I see, and what did that – was that like in the Militia or?

Well, yes, that's right. I was in – I was in Sydney for a year at Sydney Hospital and I was made a captain. I was given a posting to the 106 Heavy Battery I think it was, and I didn't go into camp with them or see them at all, I was just posted on a bit of paper and then when I came down here I transferred down here and again was given a posting, but again didn't go to camp. So I was in on paper.

Would they have called on you if ....

They would have yes. But at the time, when I came down here, I was put onto the reserve of officers and then when I went to see about enlisting in the AIF they called me up off the reserve and sent me to Brighton, still without a posting until I went with them.

Right. And was the rank of that order usual for doctors?

Yes. That was the – that was the lowest rank for a doctor and for a dentist, the lowest rank was a lieutenant.

Um. How did the dentists feel about that?

Oh they felt alright about it I think.

What were your relationships with the men, ah, at this stage, as recruits?

Oh, very good. See I'd had I'd had four years in the ranks and when we had the first Vickers shoot, I got top by ten marks in the battalion and equal top in the brigade so I think they realised I knew what it was about.

Perhaps, looking ahead a bit and talking about relationships between officers and men in the Australian Army, it's often said to have been more democratic almost than other armies like the British ...

(15.00) Yes. That was so. The um –I think most of our officers had come up through the ranks and we were, you know, just the same as the other ranks. When we went to England, we realised the British officers were quite different and the British soldiers treat us

as the young masters, whereas the Australian Army was more democratic. For example, um, one time in Tobruk the CO was in his slit trench and he saw a convoy going along there and he said to his batman `What's that Nelson?' and Nelson said `May I have your binoculars Sir' so he gave him his binoculars and Nelson peered at this for a while and he handed back the binoculars and he said `Men and materials Sir'. Well you couldn't do that in the British Army.

Now, the time in camp in Sydney, you were granted leave there before going overseas?

Yes. We had about, or no, I had a good time that. Yes. We were given pre-embarkation leave. The 11th Battalion went to West Australia for their leave because they came from the West. The 12th Battalion that I was in, half came from North Queensland and half came from Tasmania and they were given their leaves in the appropriate place. I, however, had a home in Mosman so I went there for my leave, then we all joined up again and we were going to pick up the 11th Battalion in the West as we passed through there. We left in three flights. Ours was the third – the 16th Brigade went first, then the 17th and then the 18th. They had split off when we started to form threes instead of fours, they split a battalion off 16th, 17th and 18th Brigade and formed the 19th Brigade, which were the West Australians. So 16th Brigade went, the 17th Brigade went and picked up the 19th Brigade as they passed Perth in the convoy, and then we got on the *Queen Mary* and started off. We got to Ceylon and we were half way to the Red Sea when the Blitzkrieg began and we were turned around, went round the Cape, and landed in Burwick on the Clyde, just as France fell. So we were stuck on trains and down to Salisbury Plain, mid-way between Andover and Salisbury.

Just before we talk about England, how did your parents react to you going overseas with the army?

Oh, well, you know, they, one was born in New Zealand and one was born in London, and they thought it was a good thing.

Now in Britain, you were on some guard duty down on Salisbury Plain, what were, what were your particular duties in the camp there?

Um, well just being the RMO [Regimental Medical Officer], conducting sick parades in the morning, looking after the people that were sick in lines with the various infectious disease epidemics that they got. They all got the mumps and they all got the measles and that sort of thing.

Were there any training accidents, serious training accidents?

The only accident of that sort was – we had the first casualty of the AIF – a Dornier was on its way home, just about at breakfast time and it flew over us and went up over the hill and flew across the 10th Battalion on the other side and they got it before it reached the coast. But in passing it hit Private Peters in the chin with a ricochet off the armourer's tent pole as he was shaving and it hit a fellow in the 10th Battalion in the groin. Didn't do any much harm to either of them – but that was the rear gunner. The other thing – we did get bombed a lot – you know we lived a moment from the slit trench and we used to spend a bit of time in them when we were being bombed. They were – when they were softening up before the attempted invasion – there was a lot of dive-bombing of all the aerodromes and we were about a mile from Salisbury Plain and used to get the overs or get bombed when they missed the target.

(20.00) Were you, as medical officer, were you also required to do the infantry training?

Well I'd done it already.

But, you know, as in England for example.

Oh yes, well, I marched with them. As a matter of fact when we left Colechester, I marched the battalion out because the CO had to go somewhere, the 2IC had to go somewhere, headquarter company commander had to go somewhere and that left me in front of the column, so I marched them out. And I changed arms for them too, just to show I knew what that was about. Oh yes, I used to go on all the exercises that we had.

What was the morale like in Britain there, were they expecting an invasion any day?

Oh yes, yes. Oh the morale was very good.

Now, when the move came to the Middle East, the situation had improved presumably?

Um, yes I think they decided they weren't going to invade by that time.

Well what were your first impressions of the Middle East?

It smelt.

Someone has told me that the camp that you went into at Alexandria was pretty bad living conditions as well.

Yes, well, it was – it was a dusty hot place – they used to have a kamsin there where you – you couldn't see a foot in front of your eyes when that was on. Once I tried to get to my tent from the officers' mess which was only about fifty yards, and I finished up at the apex of the triangle instead of the other end of the base, in other words ninety degrees out because of this total darkness. And that used to happen now and then.

Right and were there exotic diseases affecting the men?

Well we had all the exotic diseases over by that time I think and so – they had dysentery, that was about all.

Was that because of the food, water?

Yes.

What was your opinion of the army rations, the army diet – I mean medically speaking.

Well, it was alright, nothing wrong. As a matter of fact the favourite of all the troops, after a while, was cold bully beef. Now a lot of noises are made about bully beef but they used to try to cook it, that just messed it up, but cold bully beef was good.

There wasn't a lot of fresh vegetables or anything? I don't suppose there could have been really.

No, no there weren't.

Right, now, Tobruk. You moved up there with the battalion, or you went to Giarabub first, you were just attached to the company that was ....

That's right. I went – the 9th Battalion and Don Company of the 10th and some engineers and signals went. And the RMO to the 10th Battalion was away at malaria school so they sent me with Don Company of the 10th. I'd been to Giarabub .... no, no, that was Giarabub. Well it was mainly going over, it had a nice road up to Mersa Matruh and then you went across miles and miles of dry creeks, bouncing up and down and head hitting the top of the cab so if you wore your tin hat it was alright, it didn't hurt so much, and going up in the most rough things and the amazing thing was how the Tommies – they had big high top-heavy looking Austin ambulances and they could take them down sheer cliffs and get them over there – you could get down, they couldn't get up again though, but it was incredible the conditions going over that desert.

(25.00) Mm, mm. It was a fairly short attack?

Oh yes. It was all over in a day and you know, they just went in and captured the place. The Italians were pretty ready to give up anyway. They didn't like it any more – `Oh Mamma Madonna – it is not us, it is this Hitler'.

The Italians weren't very well regarded by the Australians were they?

No, no, no. They were treacherous. They'd hold both hands up to surrender and they'd have a grenade in one of them and they'd throw it. That sort of thing.

Were the casualties at Giarabub heavy?

Ah, no, they weren't very heavy, no. I forget the precise number. It might have been fifty-six or something like that.

Now, having gone into Tobruk, you've settled down to the daily round of seige. Your RAP [Regimental Aid Post] is it?

Yes ...

Was under the famous fig tree they tell me.

Well, yes. We were in two different sectors at different times. The sector where the fig tree was – when we were in reserve I was at Fort Airente, which only is the name for the junction – there was no fort there – and we were just dug in, in trenches. And the first day we got there we were – we moved about four times in one day before we finally settled down and started to dig in properly. We were dive-bombed a couple of times and gee, you should see the fellows digging in after they've been dive bombed, a lot more strenously than they were doing before. Yes, we were at Airente, dug-in, in trenches; and the RAP, there was a big pit was dug and bit of canvas over it.
At the fig tree I had a cave for the RAP and I found a basin somewhere in the desert and we had the basin up on a couple of ammunition boxes and I was privileged to have the hot wash all over everyday. The only one in the battalion who did.

The living conditions were fairly primitive.

Oh yes, yes, but you know, they're not uncomfortable. I, of course, being the medical officer, I had a stretcher I could sleep on. You could even stand up in this cave. The one next door where we used to keep some patients you couldn't stand up.

Well was the hospital post attacked by dive bombers at all, or stray bombs?

Yes, it was. The hospital of course was in the town; where we were was about eight miles out of it. And yes they bombed it a couple of times. Funnily enough, they only hit one ward and that was the one with the self-inflicted wounds [SIWs] in it! So we didn't mind that much.

Were there a lot of self-inflicted wounds?

Well, there were a few. No, not, not a lot. A couple in our battalion. They used to shoot themselves between the big toe and the next one for some reason, I think because that comes at about the middle of the foot. The trick was that you were cleaning your rifle and you'd accidently on purpose get something that'd accidentally go through the trigger guard and then they'd lift the rifle, butt end up, they'd say `I'm going to clean my rifle'. They lift it up and bang, it would go off. That was the way to do it you see.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

And it was fairly obvious that this had been done on purpose was it?

Oh yes, yes.

So what happened to these blokes?

Well, they got – they were evacuated of course because they had to be operated on in the hospital. They were in a separate self-inflicted wounds ward and I expect they were disciplined back there, but they were out of the battalion, evacuated sick, and I'm not sure how they were dealt with.

Right. How about other sorts of feigned illnesses. Were there such things?

Well there were the two sorts of SIWs. One is – through the foot one, and the grabbing your rifle one, with the finger. Other feigned illnesses?

Were there people reporting sick in order to get out of duty but not ...

Oh well, initially, in camp here before we went anywhere, there'd be these people and we got rid of them. But once we were – once we were in action – ah, there were very very few because they'd already been disciplined and culled and, you know, very soundly how they were expected to behave and they did. Initially of course, you know, as I'd been in the University Regiment as a private, and later a corporal, I knew all these things and soon as we went into camp – I went in in a sports coat, I didn't have a uniform – and sure enough, next morning, there they were trying out the new doctor. `So, yeah constipated? Right. Two number nines swallowed in front of the sergeant' no kidding! So that stopped the constipation allright.

What's a number nine?

A number nine is a very strong purgative pill. One is more than enough, two say, ‘Hello, he seems to have woken up to me'.

Were there many men who suffered severe psychological stress?

The fear of the bombers. Yes ... There wasn't an epidemic but there were a few. They just got bomb-happy and they were useless – or that's, you know, the term we used for it.

Um. Were they then sent back – back down the lines?

Yes. They were sent back and they – oh they would straighten some of them out – but it's a very real thing. It's not very nice being shelled.

Did you do any operating at all in the cave there, or were they all sent back to town?

No. I didn't do any operating. We weren't allowed to. You just did first aid and shot it off back to the hospital.

(5.00) They would have to be sent down at night I suppose?

Well, in Tobruk, when we were in the line, there were two levels. Up a hill 400 yards from the enemy were our C Company. You couldn't go up there during the day. I had to go up at night. But we didn't do any operating; if anything had to be operated on it was evacuated eight miles back to the hospital.

Right. Were ambulances able to drive in the day?

An ambulance, well it was – ambulances could go a certain distance in the day. They might be shot at or something but nevertheless they could do that and then, but they couldn't get right up to the front line. What we did, the stretcher bearers either had to carry them back or you could get a, you could get a Dodge utility and drive it up to within 400 yards of where the enemy were and a utility would just take two stretchers – with the tray down – would just take two stretchers, and it was a very useful way. Otherwise the stretcher bearers had to carry them all the way back. But you could get to within 400 yards, with certain hazards you know, being shot at, but you could do it.

Did you have many injuries, wounds, on your stretcher bearers and other assistants?

One stretcher bearer was shot dead trying to get a wounded fellow through the wire – one night that was, I think. I don't think anyone else got wounded.

Did the general health and fitness of the men deteriorate much over the five months you were there?

Yes. They did, they got desert sores, through lack of proper nutrition it was thought. It was also said that the whole brigade was bomb-happy, that is to say neurosis, and they were all as though they had toxic goitre to a certain extent.

What caused that?

Well, um, fear. You see there wasn't a moment of the day or night, when you weren't liable to be – to be killed. Now, myself, when I was in this cave, I got a badly infected foot and I had to

stay in the cave lying down, for a couple of weeks, and someone was coming up in the ambulance and treating it. And at the end – I forget what I was doing about passing water – but I suppose I was doing it into something – at the end of a couple of weeks when I got pretty right, I went to the entrance of the cave and a few yards over there there was an outside urinal, and it took quite a while before I could pluck up courage to go to it. And when I realised what was happening to people when they, when they were enclosed like this, I used to insist that everyone in every place had to get up and walk around in the open for a period every day, wherever they were, otherwise, you know, that was making them get neurotic.

Mmm. Now when you were evacuated, you went back to Palestine and the men sort of went on leave for the first time in many months. Was there a lot, a lot of hard drinking and womanising?

(10.00) Yes, there was a lot of those things. I think – I don't know how much because I wasn't with them, but undoubtedly there was. Although we only got – we got four cases only of VD on the way to England when they got off at Cape Town for four days and in Palestine, we didn't have very much.

What about drinking?

Well when they were on leave, the fellows would drink and in the mess in Palestine, we didn't drink all that much. But, umm ... no, I don't think so.

You didn't have anyone turning up, you know, with a medical condition largely caused by it?

No, no, no.

Right. You went up to the Turkish border in Syria as well. What was going on up there – not a lot?

Well, we – we were guarding the Turkish frontier from Tripoli to Aleppo and we were strung along the frontier like that. And we were guarding the frontier against Germans coming down through it, to attack Cairo, which had been their intention. But I reckon they thought better of it.

So was it a fairly relaxed time for everyone?

Yes, yes I think so.

Were there a lot of administrative duties attached to your job. How much time did you spend filling in forms and the like?

Not a lot. I had twenty stretcher bearers under me command, as well as my RAP staff, but no, it didn't involve much administration.

How about nurses. Did you – there were none at Tobruk I gather.

There was one, Sergeant McLaggan. The day we got in – we went up in the *Ulster Prince* – and as we were disembarking, all the nurses were coming down to get on the boat to go back to Palestine on it, and the fourth hospital functioned with male orderlies, one of whom was a fellow called McLaggan, who was a corporal at the time, who had topped his year when he graduated nursing, down here, and got the gold medal and so on, so he was pretty good, and trained the orderlies and they did a very good job.

There were quite a number of Australian nurses in the Middle East generally?

Yes, yes.

Um. What – did they do a lot of heavy, well not heavy work, sort of – did they work very hard?

Yeah, they worked pretty hard and there was, one of them was an excellent assistant in the operating theatre. He'd had a lot of experience in that.

Prisoners. Were you responsible for treating prisoners at all?

I only had – I'd one German prisoner only in my RAP – and he'd been shot through the face. He already had a very good German dressing on it and I didn't need to disturb it, I just sent him on and that's – that was all I had to treat there.

You didn't come across any of the Italian prisoners?

Oh, you know, I just saw them going through and complaining bitterly instead of standing up and being arrogant.

Now, it was at that point after Syria where you left the battalion, was it?

Yes.

Would you like to give me a run down of what happened from then on?

Where, in the battalion?

No, no. To you.

(15.00) To me, yes. Well, um, I left them in Aleppo on the Turkish frontier on the – on New Years Eve at the end of `41 and I was posted to the second hospital at El Kantara, as a surgeon. I just joined them in time to get on the USS *Mount Vernon* and come back to Australia. Course there was wireless silence and nobody knew we were coming even. Actually we were going to Java and then Singapore fell and we were in Colombo for eight days while they were waiting to see what they'd do with us, and finally they sent us back to Australia. We were the first back and nobody knew who we were, what we were, planes came out and had a look at us. And we got to Fremantle and we stayed there a day or two while they scratched their heads and wondered what to do about us and then they sent us off to Adelaide. In the meantime they'd talked to one another in Australia and decided what they were going to do with us. We were on this armed merchantman, the *Mount Vernon* and I was with the 2nd AGH [Australian General Hospital] and I was the only person on the ship who had been an RMO, so I got to do `at the battle station ready', that's to say my RAP was ready and I had to man it at dawn and at dusk and report everything's in readiness because they were the times we were likely to be attacked. Otherwise I'd just have general duties on the ship. When we got to Adelaide, the plan was that all the people following were to be fed through the Adelaide oval, so being the only one who had been an RMO – CO of this hospital used to be the commander of the 3rd Field Ambulance in the 18th Brigade, so he put me as RMO to the Adelaide oval and all the rest went off to have a nice time. But after a while they spent all day, every day, doing medical boards. The authorities had changed their plan about putting everyone through the Adelaide oval, so I had eighteen troops at the oval to look after. So it meant that my sick parade in the morning varied from five minutes to five seconds; and I had

bowls at the back, at the grandstand; I had hot showers in the grandstand; I had my batman; I had two different places where I could play squash; I had an Olympic pool right beside me and it was a really good time. I had it for about a month then they sent me off to a surgical school and then to 104 CCS [Casualty Clearing Station] where I spent the rest of the war, one year in the West, one year in North Queensland and a year in Aitape – Wewak.

You did get over to New Guinea?

Yes. We went up there towards the end of 1944 and I think I was a major and I thought I was going to get transport and all sorts of things that majors get. Instead of that I walked over the Torricellis and over the Prince Alexander Range, all the way from Aitape to Wewak, in the series of ... little grass huts, and in the brooks and lots of mud. I got lost once and oh, I was wandering around there completely lost for a long time. I came across a tribe and I sort of somehow communicated with them and they pointed the way I should go. In doing all this I got very hot and I finished up my water and so then I had a drink out of a creek and I got the most *shocking* dose of hook worm. My pills which are normally two percent were over sixty percent. So that wasn't the very best thing to have. They gave me all the terrible things to cure it with, that didn't cure it and then we got our ration of grog and I cured it drinking Smarts gin, I think!

Did you prescribe gin for that condition from then on ...

Oh no, not ordinary gin. It's got to be terrible gin.

(20.00) Oh, I see. New Guinea was pretty bad for diseases as well as the hook worms.

Yes, you couldn't – you couldn't avoid it. See, `Oh I know how you got hook worm, walking around with your boots off' well if you went anywhere in New Guinea, you finished up covered in mud from your head to your feet and that's how you got it. They were everywhere. You couldn't avoid it.

What were the worst problems for the soldiers?

Oh, malaria and dysentery.

Could there have been any more done to keep those away or ...

I don't think so. See, um – see, the problem about malaria was that, well there was an atebrin resistant strain of malaria, up there, and the treatment of malaria is quinine, and the Japs had all that, they'd captured it. So we had to use a synthetic called atebrin, it wasn't any good, but the medical authorities had to insist that it was for some reason or other, I suppose morale. We'd take all this atebrin, we'd go yellow, and we'd get malaria.

And all the medical people knew it was a waste of time?

No, they didn't all know, no. Because the, um – those secrets came out after the war. However Hamilton Fairley who was a, you know, number one physician, he was the protagonist of this, he knew it wasn't any good. But, at least you felt you were being treated.

Yes. How was the Australian medical equipment and so forth, how did it compare to the Americans for example?

Well, an American regimental aid post had enough equipment to take out a couple of gall bladders. Well we didn't. We had – but we had the bare essentials for what you did in a RAP.

You're stopping bleeding and doing dressings, and no more than that. They – they had equipment, much too far forward to enable them safely to do what the equipment was designed to do. We just had the simple, bare essentials, in the forward zones, then casualty clearing stations and hospitals they had a set up for what those things are supposed to do, but you shouldn't be doing it any further forward.

So you think we were probably more efficient?

Yeah.

Did you ever get an inkling of the Japanese medical set-up?

Um ... well, I don't think it was very good because you see, they'd been cut off. They had no re-supply – but I didn't actually see all this. I only saw one Jap, someone had shot him and he's in a tent being guarded. The others were retreating all the time and we were following `em.

Now after the, or well hang on, before we talk about the end of the war, how did the – did the men talk to you about their other commanders, or were you seen as another officer and they couldn't – complaints I mean particularly.

No. Ah, the relations between the officers and the men were very good. They all had, or except for one or two ratbags, they had loyalty and affection for their officers.

Did they treat you differently because you were a doctor as well as an officer?

(25.00) I don't think, because I was a doctor, they treated me differently. They thought I was alright because, see – we were, Tasmania and North Queensland. Tasmania play Australian Rules, North Queensland played rugby league. I played rugby union. So I taught one of our Queensland companies to play rugby union when we were in Alexandria, and then I'd take them down in a truck and we'd play a destroyer or something like that, and then I'd give them leave for the afternoon, we'd all come back in a truck. So I got on well with them, but I think everybody else did. And of course, we was – I think we mentioned that the Australian army's more egalitarian than the British.

I was wondering were you ever, did the men ever see you as someone who they could tell their troubles to?

Yes, yes, yeah.

In a sort of minor psychiatric role, perhaps. Perhaps that's exaggerating. I mean, did they come to see you ...

Yeah, yeah.

Did they do that to the other officers do you think?

I think so. Yeah.

It depended who they got on with I suppose.

Yes.

Okay, now at the end of the war, you were discharged in 1945, you went back to civilian life. You came back here did you?

That's right. I had a – I came straight down here at the end of `45 to surgical registrar at the Royal, and I was surgical registrar for about a year and then surgeon superintendent, and I did that for what, `46, `47 I went to Melbourne to do the first start of my fellowship and got it in `48, and I spent `49 in Melbourne doing chest surgery and came back here at the beginning of 1950 as the chest surgeon.

Right. Had the war hindered your career in any way?

Well, it had done this, that – I don't think it really did. I was all ready to go to England to learn some more surgery and to get me higher qualifications when they declared war on me, so I went to war instead. But I got those qualifications in Australia after the war. I don't think it's hindered me at all. In fact, I made some very good friends who were senior surgeons in Melbourne and had the entree to everything there. So, no, it delayed it a little, that's all, but I don't think it did any harm.

Did you – have you had much involvement with ex-service organisations?

Well, no not intimate involvement with them. I'm – I'm a member of the Rats of Tobruk Association, I'm a member of the 12th Battalion Association and I go to reunions now and then but I don't sort of live for that. I'm not an office bearer or anything.

What about the RSL?

Yeah, the RSL. The RSL, Rats of Tobruk.

How do you see the RSL's sort of public role there, you know their commenting on political issues like immigration recently ...

Well I think that, I think that's part of it. See they – they do represent ex-servicemen and they've got something to say about what happens and what doesn't in the country.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Well, when we went to the surgical school in Melbourne, they were looking for young men who had seen battle casualties, and who was strong enough to walk all over the countryside in New Guinea. And this school, there were Doug Sturrock and Warwick Stenning who finished up as senior orthopaedic surgeons in Sydney, John Lowenthal who became Professor of Surgery in Sydney, Doug Lesley who was senior surgeon at the Melbourne Hospital, and me, who was a thoracic surgeon here. We went in with Orm Smith and Bob Officer as the teachers for a month at the Melbourne and took over half the surgical side of the hospital. So we'd done a bit before, we'd been out of touch and we had this intensive brush up for a month before we were let loose on the soldiery, and that was a very good concept that Orm Smith was behind.

So that sort of thing certainly assisted your further training anyway.

That's right, yes. It took us from being in the field, revision for four weeks intensively, and then out to surgical base hospital[?]

One thing that I had meant to ask about but didn't was, the sort of slang and euphemisms that the soldiers would use for things like bad wounds and death

and things like that, how did they talk about being wounded and the possibility of death?

Well I think when a fellow was killed he was a `kickeroffer'.

I beg your pardon?

A `kickeroffer'. He kicked off. Oh, I just think they said, `he got a hit', was the main thing.

Did – they must have developed defences you know, psychological defences to sort of ward off that sort of thing. Did they just become hardened or?

Yeah, I think they did. Yeah. Well, you see, there was Blue Mansfield on the night of the 3rd of May. He came down, back over the hill with a stupid grin on his face and blood all over it, and someone yelled `Hey Blue, why don't you put on your first field dressing'. He said `I might get hit worse in a minute'. So that's the casual way they dealt with it. Of course it doesn't hurt much if you're being shot. It just feels – I understand – they didn't shoot me, they only split me lip – it feels as though someone's thrown a stone at you, they tell me.

Is that because of shock perhaps, or ...?

No. Well, it's a missile that's moving very fast and it just feels like a thump. Doesn't hurt in particular, at first.

Did you have many cases of men not realising they had been badly wounded when they were?

No, I think they all knew when they were hit.

How about, um, writing home to the relatives of those who had died, was that your job?

No, company commander.

(5.00) Okay, perhaps just to wind up, I wonder f you might like to comment on how the war affected your basic outlook on life, things like religion and politics perhaps, or just general attitudes to life?

... Um .... I don't really know. I suppose I was ... perhaps less nervous about anything that you were supposed to be nervous about. Otherwise it made very little difference, I think.

END OF INTERVIEW