

Australian War Memorial

TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description	Herbert Henry (Smoky) Dawson, 1st Australian Entertainment Unit No 10 Detachment New Guinea, interviewed by Sharon Davis for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archives of Australia in the War of 1939-45 Discussing pre-war entertainment career; enlistment and duties as nursing orderly; posting to 1st Australian Entertainment Unit and contact with Jim Davidson; reasons for entertaining front line troops; embarkation for New Guinea; description of members of the Troubadour Unit and their roles; difficulties of maintaining dual role of soldier and entertainer; show routines; costumes; climate and instruments; affect of father's World War I service on his family; health; female impersonators; post-war employment.

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> One, two, one, two, three, this is an interview with Smoky Dawson, recorded on 4th May, 1989.
>
> Smoky, first of all, before we start, if I can talk to you just a bit about your background before the second world war?

Mmm.

> Where were you born, and what kind of job did you do when you started work, and what kind of schooling did you have? If we can just go through that briefly?

I'll try and be brief. Well first of all I was born in 1913, that's two years before the first world war, and Gallipoli. And my father was in the army medical at the time. And I'll have to skip all the childhood there, but I was born in Collingwood actually, a Collingwood boy. And then when the war broke out they moved down to Warrnambool. You know Warrnambool, down in Victoria? And that's when I first saw the light of day.

My father had been in the entertainment business before then, and used to appear on the theatres as Frederick Parker, and so it was, it seems that I've picked up where he left off. I did have that in me, I always wanted to sing. Wherever I ... even when I was ... you know, I was sad, I was singing even more so. It was a way of sort of getting rid of my steam.

However, after a rather terrifying childhood, and growing up as fast as I could, because I felt that a child's world wasn't a happy one, and the grown-ups seemed to have all the fun, so ... and as for my schooling, yes, I went to a state school. And I had this flare for writing, which seemed to come out of me when I was about eight, when I did an essay on ANZAC, at the Faraday Street School in ... in Victoria, and my work was put on ... on exhibition, at the Exhibition Building, strangely enough, showing what schoolchildren did. Not only in the composition itself, and the way with words, but for my handwriting. And it seems that those two factors have been the very source and - what has now become part of my living today - in writing my songs, and expressing myself, so the latent talents that I had and didn't know has now been fully developed, with the help of Dot, who was a dramatic coach.

My schooling was interrupted, sadly, there, because my father was a casualty at the war at Gallipoli. Recommended for his distinguished bravery and that, and was given the Distinguished Conduct Medal. But it had a terrible effect on our lifestyle, to the fact that, you know, inside ... by the time I was six years old my mother had died, and my brother, who was getting a lot of beatings, ran away from home and was drowned on Christmas Day, out at Eltham. That was my young brother, Ted, and my sister was put into a convent. And I become a sort of little refugee, I was running away from home. Too frightened to go home, because I was ... when my brothers went I was the next in line. And so, you know, although I was the victim of a war, my dad's war, I couldn't very well blame my father for that and ... so I did in ... in time come to love him again and ... knowing that he was a brave man, and it was the war that brought this ... this onto him, and we were the immediate result.

However it sent me into a position where I ... running away, I was finally captured, (laughs), and put into an orphanage. St Vinton's ... St Vincent de Paul Boys' Orphanage, in South Melbourne. Where I had a very, very good schooling, I can assure you.

(5.00) My schooling as such shone from that point, because they brought out in me not only my writing, and ... which I won every year, it was sort of like dux of the school - both that and my compositions - but also in my singing, because they had a band there, they also had a choir, and I became the lead boy soprano of the group. My first song was *Funiculi Funicula*. So I was actually performing on the townhalls all around in South Melbourne, so that you can actually say that at the age of twelve and thirteen I was really singing. And so that was the beginning of my entertainment career.

And then one day I felt I'd had enough of the orphanage, so I 'jumped the rattler'. In other words, I become like the old hoboes on the freight trains. And of course the railway cops, as we know, they were always on the lookout during the great depression for those who were hiding in trucks, and you see them running in all directions the moment the train pulled in at that siding. (Laughs.) I got out, and with about forty others, old hoboes, jumping from under the canvasses, going for your life across the railway tracks, anywhere at all to get away, in case you got locked up.

And I found myself in a place called Benalla. Everybody knows where Benalla is, and not far from there of course, is Glenrowan and Greta and the hang-out - old home - of Ned Kelly. Well I went another direction, I went - from there I went towards - the road from Benalla to Shepparton, a forty-mile road, and I wandered down there, and I was picked up by a man who happened to be a relative of the Kellys. And he gave me a job, and he said, 'Son... ' - I told him I was running away from my father, I didn't say it was an orphanage - and he said, 'Well, from now on, you've got a new family. Welcome to the family.' But being a member of the family it had its drawbacks, you didn't get paid. (Laughs). They all did it for nothing. But I got well-fed.

What were you doing?

Everything, from cutting fence-posts, shearing I had to learn to shear, I couldn't shear of course when I first went there. But I was very quickly growing up to be a man managing my own affairs. Very small, skinny, but trying to do a man's job. I'd struggle with a 112 pound bag of wheat on my back, and legs bending under it, just because the men were doing that. It shows you the great influences that people have on children, so when we see what's happening today, it's the influences. Particularly if you look up to somebody. And here I was looking up to these men, because I was safe with them, they ... it was ... it was the man's world, not a kid's world. And I wanted quickly to grow whiskers on and swear like everybody else.

And that's when I got my name, Smoky, because somebody said, 'Well if you want to smoke and be a man, I'll get ... why not try the old pipe, that's the best.' So they shoved this tobacco in the pipe, and put a piece of horse-hair in the bottom, and lit that up for me, and, well, I was absolutely sick, for nearly two weeks. It was the most horrible experience I've ever had in my life. And I assure you it would knock a lot of people off cigarettes, if they had a bit of horse-hair in their ... (laughs) ... in their cigarettes. So anyway I got my name of Smoky from then.

And from then on, after learning shearing, and throwing wool around the place, and cattle, doing the whole thing that any station man would do, I finally every week there would be a dance down at the old what they called Mechanics' Hall. And there they'd have the dancers,

there'd be something like forty horses and traps - everybody came in horse and carts, because there was no motorcars around - and then the dancing went on to the middle of the night, and they had the old fiddle and the piano, and old carbide lights, and that's when I used to get up and do my song, what I'd learnt in the orphanage.

Song ... mainly Irish songs, there were, *The Sunshine Sailed Away from Killarney*, *Little Brown Cottage*, *Kathleen Ma Borneen*, and all this. *Come Back to Erin*. And I also learned to play the concertina. So I was really performing at a very early age, and you could almost say I was professional, because I was receiving food instead of money. So when people say to me, 'When did you feel ... become an entertainer?', I was an entertainer then, having to stand on my own feet.

And it wasn't until after I'd been there for years, and they decided to give me a holiday, I'd saved up my money, because I had nowhere to spend it, and so I came down to Melbourne, and looked around for a job.

And strangely enough I got a job at a tannery out at Burnleigh, Richmond, the other side of Richmond. Pyrotown they called it. At thirty-five shillings a week, and I was only receiving five shillings a week where I was on the farm, so thirty-five shillings a week! And only forty-eight hours a week to work. You worked Saturdays and everything, but forty-eight hours, and you had the weekend off, it was terrific!

(10.00) So I bought me a suit, at the Leviathan, it was six and six a week, six shillings and sixpence a week, and you had an extra pair of trousers thrown in with it. (Laughs). And then I bought a bicycle, it cost me five shillings a week. So I was fast becoming a ... contained within myself, and being able to look after myself. And after that time - I hadn't been looking around for girls, girls had never come into my area at all, I'd been so interested in life generally and growing up to be a man - and so once I started then in the old tannery, which was rather a smelly job, I can tell you, it took a lot of cleaning up to get the odours out of my hands, I went looking around, on the hunt. (Laughs).

And then I bought this guitar. But it wasn't a Spanish guitar, it was a steel guitar, a Hawaiian guitar. And I ... my brother wanted to do it with me, so that's when we went out, into the early days then, to get some experience in radio, on a station called 3JR Preston, the first of the ham stations. And we'd carry our instruments about five miles on the Sunday morning, because there was no transport at that time. And we'd go on air. And we had to be off air by ten o'clock, because the commercial stations came on at ten. Sunday morning of course in Victoria was all church bells, no sport, nothing like that, it was very churchy, and it was act against God if you did anything like that.

So that's when I had my radio experience, and that's where I first met Dot. Her name was Florence Shears, and she lived over in the other side of Melbourne, and she and her sister used to go over there, and whoever got to the station first, to this radio station, went on air, and you were allowed three minutes each, which was about the length of the song.

> That was in the early thirties, what were you doing in the late thirties, when the war broke out?

Yes, well when the war ... by that time I'd established myself into the same radio stations that Dot got on, that was 3KZ Melbourne, and acquired a sponsor, by the name of Pepsodent, who incidentally kept me there for three years. And Norman Banks was the compere, and Dot used to run the children's section, and we used to do shows out at the Austin Hospital, to raise money for the ... for the polio kids. We started carols by candlelight, we did everything together.

And I ... in this time I said, 'Well this is the girl for me', so I proposed to her, and something like nine years later she said she ... I was worth the investment. And it just happened when war broke out. And I had a big teaching school, teaching instruments, down in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne. And so I said to my wife, 'Well war is here.' I remember Mr Menzies saying, 'England is at war, and Australia's also at war.' Now if you leave it too late, it's just too bad, because you get the worst part of it. The first ones in get the best positions, if you go into the army. I really wanted to go in and be an officer anyway, go right through the military school.

So anyway I went down to the drillhall, and the first thing I - by the way I'd been in a lot of long distance road-races, with Hubert Oppermann, as a cyclist, and these 165 mile non-stop endurance rides really had taken their toll on me. So much that when I went to be insured they told me I had a bumpy heart and wouldn't insure me, my life insurance. So, with this, I thought, 'Maybe they made a mistake', but I went down to the drillhall to be examined, and the doctor asked me to jump up and down half a dozen times, stark naked in the middle of the room. (Laughs). Jump to the ceiling like a kangaroo. (Laughs). And he then he listened in to me to see whether I was still ticking, and he looked he was a very old-fashioned doctor - and he looked at me and went, 'Ooo, you are out of condition. You've got a weak heart.' And that gave me a fright. Now the insurance man ... company had ... doctor had told me I had a bumpy heart. There's a difference between a weak heart and a bumpy heart. So apparently going for the sprints and the long races does something with your heart, and this is what was happening, whether it was enlarging, I don't know. However. He said, 'What do you do?', and I said, 'I entertain.' He said, 'Well go back and keep entertaining.'

So from 1939 up till about '40 I was carrying on entertaining, we were going up to Puckapunyal, putting on concerts for the troops and things. And with Dot, and carrying on my business in Elizabeth Street. And my radio broadcasts from 3KZ Melbourne, which were still sponsored by Pepsodent. And then one day, when the Japanese came into the war, all was in, so I once more went back to the drillhall, and said to them, 'Look, if I couldn't go into a fighting unit, maybe I could go into a non-combatant unit.'

(15.00) So with - here I was with my ingrowing toenails - (laughs), below weight, because out of condition, because entertainers really don't put on much condition do they? One-night stands. And they just I was B2. So they said, 'Well look, we can find a good place for you, and that is down in the army medical.' So I was taken down to a place called Darley, Bacchus Marsh, in Victoria, and I was put through the army medical training. We had the sisters there, we had a hospital where I used to go through, and learnt how to be a nursing orderly and empty all the pans. (Laughs). Run with the food, scrub all the floors, to get discipline. And then I went through and learnt all my theory in the vertebraes, how many knuckles I have. (Laughs). I got my ingrowing toenails fixed up while I was there. And a few other things. And then I learnt the digestive system, the nervous system, and, like my father, I got very

involved with this, and I felt I might even go to be a doctor. And anyway I finished up the - becoming the number one stretcher-bearer for field ambulance.

And we had all our training up around the hills around Darley. Up and down those hills, and they used the Indonesians who were out here at the time to take the part of the Japs, up there in the ... in the trees, with these helmets on, throwing grenades at us, while we're trying to struggle up these hills with a ... a casualty. And generally the casualty, the victim, would be a fourteen-, fifteen-stone guy, and here's little me, a nine-stoner. And I had to be A1, you were supposed to be A1 to go overseas to be a soldier, a footslogger, but you only needed to be B2 to carry this guy. You had to be A1 to do that.

However I did survive that, and I was recommended for promotion, but ... and eventually, just on the eve of me going to New Guinea the ... the OC called me in and he said, 'There's a Major Jim Davidson, do you know him?', I said, 'Yes, he used to be with the ABC.' 'He's just come back from the Middle East with Jim Gerald, the big entertainment unit.' He said, 'He has formed a big contingent in Sydney, which will be called the 1st Australian Army Entertainment Unit', the Japanese had come into the war, our men were tired from the East, and were going straight into action, and one of the biggest things that they needed then was the building of the whole of their morale. And so we ... 'he has commandeered you. Now you don't have to do it, but', he said, 'I advise you to take it. Because I think that your job will be there to much better use.'

Anyway he's a lovely bloke. So I thought it over. He put in for me in other words. So anyway I had a talk over it with my wife when I come home on leave, and I eventually came to I had to report back to here, to Sydney. It was out at Pagewood here in Sydney, where the old Pagewood Studios used to be, where they used to make the films, and that was taken over by the Army Entertainment Unit. 500 strong. There was Grant Taylor, there was Peter Finch, there were all those in the army who had experience in entertaining. A lot of the ... the fellows already in action had entertainers who had gone in prior to that, were always doing that anyway, but still under control. Now the difference between the ... the concert party and the army entertainment units was the fact that your concert party outside it was like a private thing, you know, where you went and entertained troops. And ... and this is what happened in America too, where you had those who came along to entertain the GIs, like Bob Hope, they were all free, they didn't belong to the army, and they got treated pretty well.

They were civilians?

That was the difference, they were civilians. And no doubt they provided a lot. But we were first of all reminded that we were soldiers first. The thing was to send us overseas, here I was a B2, not allowed outside of Australia. You couldn't send anyone, you couldn't be in the AIF, which meant going overseas, unless you were A1. So after doing our training here, bivouac and marching and sentry duty, and going through the gas chambers, and taught all unarmed combat.

This is with the medical unit?

Yes. No, but for ... after this, when we went to Pagewood, we had to go through all this. Because, where we were going, Jim Davidson made sure that we'd be A1. And I don't know, some to this day say that it was to the glorification of Jim, you know, because he was the head

of it all, sending the people out, and he had these, you know, pie in the sky at times ideas of where he wanted to put people.

(20.00) But he knew of me anyway prior to that, because we'd all performed with his bands with the ABC before that. But he was a was a taskmaster.

So the training, the army training was pretty tough in that unit then?

The army training was, we used to have to march for miles and miles. And it ... before we even went away, we were sent up to Queensland, we had all these bivouacs as we called them, with pack, the whole thing, carrying it on our backs, up mountain passes and everywhere, until you're knocked out, completely knocked out. And ... but I was gradually building up. You know, the actual discipline of the life and the regularity of meals, and they fed you well, and many a time I was put in the cookhouse - we all took our job at that - peeling the spuds, handing it out, and setting the tables. There was plenty to eat, everything, while we were in Australia anyway.

So we went through all the schools of hard knocks as it were, with the army. We learnt what it was to be ... have standovers over you. Even among your own people. You found there were people that were in the entertainment world before they went in that were even below you who become over you in the army. You were having somebody like ... that was an amateur performer, that had no ... had no image at all in the theatrical world or what, suddenly become a sergeant over you, and showed ... brought out what he thought ... a little bit of power. And it was then that I realised that ... what war does for people, and once you've become ... in the ... when you became a soldier you were put through a school of hard ... the word I want to find for this is sort of putting you down.

Right.

Like, for argument's sake, the first time I went into camp, this sergeant just called us all up and said, 'You, you, you and you', you know, just not, 'Tom', or 'George'. 'You, you, you and you.' And I'm very timid, and always been polite, you know, and I get all these roughnecks around me, and he said, 'Four to a tent, you, you and you. And you go over there and grab a palliasse', and I said, 'What's a palliasse?' He said, 'A mattress, stupid', and he looked me in the face, and I said, 'Don't you talk to ... (laughs) ... to me like that.' 'Oh, so mummy's little boy.' And I said ... so I almost went, (whispers), 'I hate you. Hate', mouthed it. He said, 'I nearly heard that.' (Laughs). And all these kinds of things. And, 'By the time I've finished with you, your grandmother won't know you.' (Laughs). So he quietened me down.

But they had this kind of thing. Well the entertainment unit of course was much softer, because we all knew each other, but there were people that were, suddenly, for some favour or other by Colonel Jim, you suddenly put people above people.

Tell me a bit more about Jim Davidson?

Jim Davidson was - he's dead and gone now - but even then, when he was alive, there was a lot against him, you know. When the war broke out and he went across to the Middle East, he was not just Jim Davidson, he was Mr Davidson. When he conducted that band at the ABC the band were just little boys doing what they were told, and he talked to those fellows like

they were just kids. Jimmy Gussey, who was the deputy, you know, even he, he was just put down.

Dick Cranburn was a saxophone player, and he used to say to Dick, 'Cranburn.' 'Yes, Mr Davidson?' You didn't say 'Jim', you couldn't say that. 'Right', during the rehearsals, 'would you go down and get the lunch, get my lunch.' And he'd sound away, and he'd say, 'Oh I know what you're waiting for, I'll give it to you when you come back', which he never did. And Dick, you know, with the small amount of money he was getting. And he did this as a sort of a little ... he had a ... he, (laughs), I was going to use the word sadistic. But it was that kind of put-down, to make you squirm. For some reason or other he ... he always had that, and yet he'd be a great one to promote you, but he would take some individual, and just have a bit of fun with it.

Like he did with Kitty Bluett. He did with Kitty, he did the same with her when she was performing, and he used to go and say, 'I want you dressed up, now put these big boots on', they were soldier boots, you know. And she said, 'I don't want to.' 'Put them on, and perform with these boots and do a tap-dance', all this kind of thing, you know.

(25.00) Outside, just to suit his own whim. And then in the end Cranburn, Kitty got a job down at 3DB, Melbourne, and at last, you see, it was the only meal ticket they had, you understand, and Dick rang her up one day, and he said, 'Do you think you might have a talk with Dave Warrall', who was the chief of DB, 'and see if you can get me a job too?' He said, 'I'll die if I stay here. I mean this man is absolutely persecuting me.' So he was able to quit.

Well when he came in - when he took over the Pagewood thing, sitting up in that big office, he had his favourites. Now you'll notice in my ... as I get ... I was a private right through the war, because I refused to change myself, or my philosophies. I was always me. I would never bend to do anyone's whim, for a ... say ... unless I thought it was for the good. And I wasn't a rebel in the sense of the word as a soldier, because I think I performed better than anyone. I was disciplined in army medical, I was disciplined in ... and when we come to the ... to our drill and everything, and right through, I did everything well. But he ... for some reason or other he hooked onto me, though he knew ... knew me pretty well. He'd go down the ranks, and he'd come at the back of me and grab my hat. He says, 'Every time I see you, you still look like a cowboy. Defacing the Queen's uniform', you know. Because I had it tilted like that. And he said, 'No matter how you look ... ', I still looked like a cowboy. And it wasn't the fact I put my hat ... I just had my hat that way anyway. So he used to always look for me.

And yet there were others that ... walking around with half a gaiter on, or .... A fellow called Joe Washington, who was an arranger, was in his tent one day, and he didn't get up for the ... for the parade, this was early in the morning. So they called out, 'Washington, where's Private Washington?', they said, 'He's over in the tent asleep, sir.' 'Get him out here.' Out comes poor Joe, and he's got sandshoes on and one gaiter. 'Washington.' So he marches him up and puts him in front. 'Where are your boots?' 'I don't know.' 'I don't know what?' 'I don't know what either ... I don't know what ... I ... sir.' 'Sir, good. Where's your gaiter?' 'I don't know.' 'Why haven't you got your boots?' 'They hurt me, sir. I didn't ask to be a bloody soldier.' (Laughs). 'I'm an arranger.' 'Well go and arrange yourself now, or I'll put you on guard duty for a week.' (Laughs). So poor Joe would go back to his tent and stay there. He wouldn't come out, he'd

just refuse, they ... they couldn't do anything with him, it was impossible, so Joe never went away to the front. (Laughs).

But me, always try to play well and that, and I finished up copping duties that I wasn't and shouldn't be getting. Now it so happened Jimmy Gussey, when ... when Jim Davidson came back from the Middle East, he'd gone away from the ABC, and Jim Gussey had taken over the baton at the ABC. And we were at Pagewood, you see, so I got a call, we ... when we had our leave of a weekend, no one was allowed leave outside of the state. And here's me, you know, just married, and three days honeymoon, that's all I had, and I had to get out up to Sydney, back to Sydney. And I thought, 'Well I'm not going to see Dot for a while', so I used to jump the train, like I did as a kid. And the only way to get on the train, was to pay ... be paid my own fare. So I bought me a ticket for the weekend, got my leave pass, but it was only just for there, and I knew I had to be back for parade on Monday morning. And this was the Saturday. So, with my experience of jumping trains as a free-loader, only I was a paying guest this time, I came down here to Central, and watched for soldiers either coming down or up. Like they were ... either going in ... what they called 'in transit.' From ... often from a theatre of war, or maybe going home on leave.

Now all these people as they were coming through were all marshalled together, left, right, left, right, by the Provost, and the sergeants with them. What better way is there than to go right with the enemy? So I just keep step with them and march along with them. And I'm put on the train and told what to do. They're on their way down to Melbourne, I knew they were going South. And you see as soon as I fell in line with ... with one of these fellows, I just said to him, 'I'm ... I'm truant.' (Laughs). 'Act Willy' we called it. And he said, 'Here, grab me sack.'

[Recording ends on Side A of Tape One]

Tape 1, Side B.

Yes. Keep going.

Well here we were, marching along there, and so I just fell in step with them, left, right, left, right, and walked along with the army. And straight onto the train, lined up in front of the carriages, and the Provost all around me, just saying, 'Righto there, move over you, right, twenty ... you, you, you and you, carriage one, you, you, you and you ...' So they ... it occurred to me that when they'd get down to the next one, they'd have an odd one, a seat short. (Laughs). There were so many seats for this unit. All going in transit down there to Melbourne. That's Camp Pell, you know, the Camp Pell, the park there in Melbourne? At the back of the hospital isn't it?

So anyway, I get into the carriage, and I'm thinking, 'Well this is pretty right', and all of a sudden I see a lieutenant coming up to the carriage to open the door and get in, and I thought, 'Ah ha, quick.' I jumped down, and I said to three fellows in the next seat, 'Can you hide me, God I'm running ... 'act willy'.' He said, 'Here, lay on the seat.' They lay on the seat and they sat on me. So I'm laying full-length on the seat and these three soldiers sitting over me, and wintertime, with their great-coats, their great-coats over the top of their knees, and I'm nearly smothering at the back of them. And this 'loot', as we called them, lieutenants, he gets the others to move over on the other side facing us, gets out his pocketbook and said, 'Right, now

what's ..what's your unit soldier', and starts taking down the number of personnel. And these three can hardly contain themselves, knowing that I'm suffocating under these three bodies. Think ... and then here's me at the back there, thinking, 'Oh if I ... what'll happen to me, I'll be put down near the dungeon, I'll be shackled, I'll be beheaded.' (Laughs). All sorts of things could happen, 'I'll be court-martialled, I'll be shot.' (Laughs). I was still the timid little boy away from Dottie, and I was doing this all for love. (Laughs). Isn't it? So who would do that for their wives today, go through all that?

The one great advantage of doing that - and by the time he did that and moved on, he didn't come back to say there was one ... there was one over, and apparently it was alright - but at those times we had the two gauges, at Albury you had to change into another train. But there was also a feeding station there, which was very handy, so we all got back, all got on, and were all lined up with our - and got our plates, and we were fed on the station, all the troops were fed. Army feed. So, not bad.

So anyway I get down. And ... now when I got down to, is it Royal Park there, the station at Royal Park in Melbourne?

Yes.

And you turned left to go over to Camp Pell? Right?

Yes.

My wife lived up to the right, you went up there to Munro Street, Gleniron Road. (Laughs). I then had to organise myself so that when I'd be marched off there, and they all turned there to go and turn left and across the railway to go to Camp Pell, I got on the end of the line, so that as we were walking along like that, see? Here we are going in a ... a southerly position, and we're going to turn east, right? And I want to go west. So it was left, right, left, right, and the two sergeants are running on either side of them, and they're running up to the front, and the boys straggling at the back, so as they turned to go left on the last - I turned right and kept walking, holding my tail in, and not looking back, and in the distance I hear, left, right, left, right, left, right. (Laughs). Thank God. And then I ran for the lick of my life. Fast as I could, because I had to organise myself, I only had so many hours left, to get the ... then I had to organise a train to get back, and go through all the torture again, to get back into Sydney again.

Now, you see, with a ticket, I was able to do it and be independent. Because I did have a return. So ... but I had to wait for that group, that when I got back. Because if I didn't, what would really happen, when you got in as a civilian, walked in, dressed up as a soldier, the Provots used to jump into the carriages, any soldier, and ask for your leave pass, and I did, all I had was a leave pass for Sydney, not one for Melbourne. So what had happened, if I'd only known, I never need have bought that ticket. I'd paid for it actually, but you see I got such a taste for it that I continually did this.

(5.00) Now you see the next time I went it meant that I didn't ... I had my pass for there, but as I was put on with a group I didn't need to be worried, because they'd be ... they wouldn't be looking for anything wrong, they thought they were all in one unit. So I got by with it. But coming back on the second trip I suddenly panicked. As we were getting near Central on the

way home - you see, what I did coming back, I went back to the station and then waited for the group to come from Camp L, and as they went in, I marched in with them and did the same thing. Got back into Sydney, marched into Central there. But then I had to get back, because I'd be late back at headquarters, my train didn't get in till late, and I should have been on duty, on parade in the morning, on Monday morning.

So, knowing how Davo would interrogate me, I went to the Sydney Showground, where the army were then, they had all the hospital, and reported sick. And I really was. (Laughs). I was so damn nervous and upset the doctor was going to put me in hospital, because of the very nervous condition ... (laughs), terrible nervous condition I had. And I told him that I was getting all these flutters inside. And what did he put it down as? 'Light duties.' (Laughs). He gave me light duties. And ... because I ... at that time my heart was palpitating, with fear more than anything.

So when I did report, I went straight in, put my thing in, 'Oh, light duties?' The day went on, nothing was said. The following morning, this - a day had gone when anything that would happen would have happened - we were out on parade, and just as they said, 'Break', this is, you know, 'Dismissed', they said, 'Private Dawson, report to Colonel Davidson.' I remember this.

And I walk up, at Pagewood there, come to the door, knock, 'Come in.' And he always had ... he always had a big room. Always ... Davo always had a big room, with an enormous desk, one that you could never get close enough to be intimate. (Laughs). So you were ... but anyway I wasn't invited to sit at the table, I just stood there. And he was looking down. You know these kind of situations where they talk to you without ... and go on with their work, talking, and they leave you standing there sweating it? And I said, 'Here he goes, he's trying his old stunts again.' And I was ready.

And he said to me, 'How was Melbourne?' 'Oh', I said, 'as far as I know it's very well, I'd imagine.' 'And how's Dot?' 'She's fine.' 'Mmm. You enjoyed yourself down there?' I said, 'I always enjoy myself down ... when I'm down there. Yes.' 'Well you won't be going down there for a while, I thought I might call you and let you know, because you'll be moving out of here very shortly. But for the rest of the week I would like you to take guard duty, with no leave for two weeks, and your duties will start from midnight to dawn, every night. And during the day you'll report every hour. You'll report every hour. If you don't we'll be coming after you, and I think you could do with ... I think you could do with about three or four days in the cookhouse, peeling spuds. It might do you a lot of good. Take your mind of thinking about Dot. Alright, you can go now.' That's how he was. See what I mean?

So I went back, and all the others said, 'What did he want?', you know, I told him. Of course the boys all knew. But he knew. No one told him, he just gauged it. but I didn't say, even then that I admitted to it. And I didn't protest, because I didn't want to be a liar. If he'd said to me, 'Did you go down?', I would have said, 'Yes, I did.' He just ... just assumed, and said, 'I bet he did, because if I were him I would have too.'

But here I was jumping trains, and on one occasion going down there, instead of being sat on this time I got up in the luggage-rack up in the top where all the ... the troops' luggage was, and they piled all their luggage on top of me, and I was up in there. The first place they'd look for you in the train, if they'd think there was anyone hiding, which Provots did, was always in

the toilets. Because they'd go and lock them up, see if they were hiding in there, or under seats, but never once on the - under clothes racks.

(10.00) Going back to the entertainment units, how did Davidson decide which entertainment unit detachment you would be in?

Well now this was the whole thing. From then on we went into ... to hard training. He ... one ... first of all he used to to have these great lectures. He just loved to hear himself talk, I think, at times. He used to pay very special attention to people like Peter Finch, who used very nice words at times. In other words, word power. Like he had a lot of admiration for Peter Finch.

And Peter, of course, if you understand, there was a section of that army that never went overseas at all, and that was the orchestral side of things with the big strings, they were back - they did tours here, but never went overseas. And Peter was involved with a lot of other things that kept him here anyway, it wasn't his fault, I suppose. But Davidson often called him in to talk to him, and when Peter would happen to drop a word, he'd say, 'What's that word you used? What did you say then?' And at a future time you'd hear Davidson talking, he'd use this word, do you follow what I mean? It was like that. He'd dwell on what you were saying, and then, 'That's good, that sounds good', he was looking for that kind of thing all the time. He was a psychologist in other words, and trying to psychoanalyse people. Each one become a ... something for him to play around with.

That's the only thing I say as far as the man is concerned that I didn't like, and, you know, as for yibbing and all that, well it's all gone now, but at the time I wasn't pretty happy with him, because I felt that he was victimising me. In other words, what he did, he kept me a private right through, never recommended me for anything, and he put others in my ... in a small detachment of six, he elevated one to ... one to corporal, and the other two he made sergeants over me. He had two sergeants over me that were lesser than me in private life. As entertainers. And when we were put together in our units he said himself, before we went away - and we all had to be ... perform until we had our act together, which ... we had to organise ourselves into a completely self-contained detachment of six performers who could stand on their own feet, carry their rifles, act like soldiers, look after themselves if there was a crisis. They were attached to any division that wanted them, but not the division was not responsible for them. They'd have to fight their way out, if they were caught behind lines, wherever. In other words they couldn't expect help. They had ... they were self-contained.

The groups that you're talking about are the Troubadours aren't they?

Yes, the Troubadours. Some were ... some had a bit bigger ones, others were ... like Waratahs went on trucks. We started off with one. The tour of Australia, that was done with Max Reddy. Max was a comedian in Melbourne in those early days. And Eddie Corderoy used to be with the ... a lot of the ABC boys in the band there. He was a sergeant. Max Reddy was a sergeant, and they were in charge of the operations. And there was another fellow from the St Kilda Barracks, a lieutenant - who had never been in the way of ... never dirtied his hands in his life I don't think, just doing clerical work - they put over the top of us, as OC. Who knew nothing about entertainment, nothing at all about men.

And we did this tour of Australia, going right up to the Atherton Tablelands, with the ... and camped with the 6th Division, and put on shows all round Australia, up to ... just after the bombing of Darwin we were up there, stationed up there for quite some time, and before we were dismissed from that and brought into detachments, into training for overseas. But up till that time, when we weren't told where we were going,

But Jim Davidson had come up with this idea that concert parties, entertainment units had to be ... do something a little bit more than just within Australia or wherever, or at base-camps. They had to be front-line. And it wasn't he, he wasn't the one going into it. The point was he was ... it was something he wanted to prove, 'This is an idea of mine, my men will do this and do that.'

So what we're looking at is foxhole entertainment, right up with them. And, you know ... which was a completely ridiculous idea at the time, because when we were suddenly despatched, and we boarded that old crate, the *Joseph Carrigan*, a 10000 ton merchant ship, and it was the last of the Libertys, they were welded jobs that broke up in heavy seas, I think there were only about two or three left, they ... all the others had gone down, they just buckled up, they were only welded.

(15.00) And crammed on that ship, with so many other units outside of the entertainment, going up to other parts of the island, and not knowing where we were going, it was all blackout, with Japanese submarines anywhere, you didn't know where you were, you couldn't even strike a light for the whole time you were there.

And there were so many people onboard that ship, they crammed us down into two holds, where they used to have ... well cargo goes down into the holds, and this is where the men were. And there was something like about six inches between mattresses, which was very small - palliasses we called them. And on that you had to keep a form of discipline every day.

And these men to be, you imagine, down in the bowels of the ship, with no ladder except that just one - I think it was even rope - to get up to be fed. And when the moment you were fed you came down into your ... and stayed there all day. You were down in it continually, all the trip, right through. And you had, you only had this distance between the ... all these men. There was something like 1600 or 1700 men crammed into these holds. So much that when we got to Cairns, and we were given there was two days leave before we went on to where we didn't know it was going, at a place called Redlynch.

Now Redlynch was a staging camp, where troops coming from north or south, home from the war and that, like a marshalling yard, you checked in there. And we were given our camp, and we were given food, and all told to report back to the ship at so many hours. That was on the Sunday night.

Well when I got down into Cairns, we were walking round the streets,we went to a few dances, and there was always the Red Shield hut there where you could ... the Salvation Army, you could always get a bun and a cup of coffee, and dance around with an AWAS. (Laughs). Had to have a little feminine company. Got very lonely away from your wife. And you'd see them all having a good time, and then the time would be to go back. A lot of the fellows all congregated with me, and they said, 'Hey, I don't know about you, but we're

organising in this, we're not going back on the ship.' Now those on leave had decided they weren't going to report back to Red Lynch.

So I had my colour patch on, which was the Army Entertainment Unit, and they said, 'So there'll probably be a lot of Provots looking for us', and I said, 'Yes. You take off your colour patch, so you'll be ... you can't be identified.' So if he was as serious as that, said, 'Yes.' So every soldier I spoke to said, yes, they were definitely not going back on ship. Had we been a few we'd have been court-martialled. But as it was the whole of the ship rebelled, because of the conditions, crammed, and they were sick and tired of being stood over by, you know, lieutenants and that who were going to give ... make their life a misery for them, on a ship, to where they were going. Bad enough as it was to get there.

S we tore off our colour patches. But some who hadn't got the word were rounded up. And I remember coming up to the corner, marching with a couple of my mates, and all of a sudden around the corner came this big truck, the ... with this jail on it, bars on it, and all these fellows in it, all been rounded up by the Provots. (Laughs.) Taken back to Redlynch camp. One after another. It was almost like the Germans, you know, during the Nazis' regime and ... putting all these people in trucks. And I remember someone saying, 'Smoky, take off your colour patch', 'I've got it off', because the Provots were coming looking.

So anyway we decided we'd better get back to camp. So we got back to camp, and you've never seen such a crowd. There were thousands of them. And they're all in one big mass. The trucks were arriving, but they were just putting them off, and putting them back in the camp. Well there was one thing about it, all of a sudden there was [makes noise of trumpet], the trumpet, 'Attention everybody, assemble. Up there at the main gate.' So we go up there. And here's the OC of the ship, who was an Englishman by the way, and he said, 'Men, I understand your situation, and I have put a report into it, and I must say, in the Middle East, in the times we've had there', he said, 'some of the conditions we had there were bad enough, but this is the worst I've ever seen.

(20.00) The conditions. But I can't help it, it's... , he said, 'I am asking for some relief, but, please, will you help me through with this, I've got ... we've got to go on with it. We'll make your journey as pleasant as we possibly can. And any man who has any complaint can see me at any time on the ship.' He was down in the hold, he had his office there. And he said, 'And I'd ask you, please, will you do this for me.'

They agreed to it, because he was a nice bloke. So we all went back on the ship. But we nearly didn't. It was one time that really had a rebel real rebellion. That was in 1944, I think, or '45, I'm not quite sure. A lot of the soldiers were getting a bit steamed up, you know, and pushed around. And they were sick of being ... you know, it's bad enough having the enemy, but when your own people get on the rampart and ... to start making life bad for you, you know, you've got another war haven't you?

So we started out, and we got to about as far as ... in between Bougainville and New Guinea, I think about that position, was a blackout, and Ron Taylor, known as Grant Taylor, he was on the ship with me, and there was ... it was complete total darkness, blackout, because the slightest light, even like a ... a ... just a match, would have been like a big beacon out in the black of the night for a Japanese submarine to spot you.

Now the ship we were on were run by merchantmen, Americans. And one thing we were told when we got on board, that we could do what we wanted to do, but there were two things that had to be adhered to, and one was that midship was out of bounds. That belonged to the American merchant ship, and any soldier caught in there would be severely dealt with.

Now we had ... the situation was that we ... to be fed, there were so many on deck that they could only let so many up a time on deck, from the hold, to line-up with their mugs, and their panekins, and whatever, and their plates. And formed a line right round the deck of the ship, coming into one part of the ship there, I think it was near the front of the ship, where they had the cookhouse, a cookhouse set up on decks, where they passed you out a few ... the early part was a few dog biscuits, and a bit of celery, onto a plate, pretty meagre at the time. And a wave would hit it, or something would come, and you'd have your plate full of salt-water. You know.

And they used to give you this thing in a tin that you had to open up, and used to say, 'You, you, you and you, divide it up between you.' Well I copped it, I got separated from my mates, and I got caught up with fellows I didn't know at all. Fairly big heavies. And one of their guys was behind me, I was separating him. And when I came up to get my meal, they handed it out to the guy, the fourth bloke from there, to share up with the with his group. Now, 'You, you and you,' and of course I was that ... and when they came they just pushed me to one side and called their own bloke up, 'Hey, go on get ... piss off', you know, they told me.

So I went back then on the queue, they said, 'Get on the queue, soldier.' I said, 'Look that fellow's taken it ... he's got his mate here. I got nothing to eat.' He said, 'Get on the end of the queue.' And this is what ... and I was so mad, I wrote a lot, I was going to put it in a book and what I thought about mateship, and talking about our own blokes, not talking about well, the enemy, nothing like this. (Laughs). I'd better start here. Because I could see this intimidation over me, it took me right back to when I was a kid when I was intimidated. I was pushed down then and I had to fight my way through, and here I was being stood over by these heavies, that in ... see here was a total war, that ... it could have been anyone from Redfern, underworld or anything, you wouldn't know, would you? But they were just self-centred, and bash you up, anything, you know what I mean? In other words, they weren't good blokes that ... that mob that were on the deck with me. And I ... I felt so hostile to it, you know, it was like trying to say the whole of the Australian Army was like that. But that's what I mean, in war you get this kind of thing. The standovers. And this is what war does.

(25.00) So I'd had to go right - by the time I got to the end and came round again there was nothing left. So I went down and made my complaint. I went down to the colonel, and said ... told him that, 'I haven't got anything to eat.' I told him the reason. He said, 'Well we'll soon straighten that out.' So .... And of course, you know, it's like dobbing people in, in the Australian Army. I said, 'Well to hell with that, why should I be intimidated?' But here was this little Herbie again. Well I felt like, 'Smoky, I've got to fight for yourself.' And this business of keeping silent, I went up, he said, 'Any complaints?', and I told him. He said, 'Well there'll be a different system from now on. In fact', he said, 'the way things are it's taking us too long to feed three a day, we're going to cut out the middle meal.' So it came to two meals a day, because we had so many people. By the time they got up on top it was time to eat again.

And then they have the position with the toilets. Where to put the toilets for all these men. And they had this makeshift toilet, with a tinroof at the end of the thing, which emptied into the sea, and it's nothing there to come on your round there, on your queue, waiting to be fed, and to be held up in this traffic-jam, while all these fellows are relieving themselves at the toilet. It was so close. You know, these were the kind of things, you know, you put up with it. They said, 'Well there's worse than that when you get over there.' You know. (Laughs). It was, 'Over there, over there.'

Now these are the fleeting memories of mind. Others either had ... probably had other experiences too. But I look back and they were funny, because ....

But as I was passing from one end of the ship to the other, I'd naturally have to go midship, which ... you'd look through the portholes, and in through these portholes I'd look in and see these fellows sitting down to the table eating bacon and eggs, steak, coffee, and these are the American merchants. And I put my head in the window one day, or night it was, and I said, 'Half your luck mate', and he said, 'Hey soldier, how're you going?', and of course it's a fellow with a guitar. Oh boy. And I said, 'Gee, do you play the guitar?', and he said, 'Yes, I'm singing a song.' And so he said to me, 'Here, you want a coffee?', so he passed me out a cup of coffee out the thing, which I gobbled down, and of course I, 'Can you got one for my mate?', because I'd always want to see my mate had one. And of course they're all looking in there, and the fellow says, 'Hey, I can't feed the whole darn ship. Anyway I'll see you later.'

So next time I came ... every time I came round there, next time he had a thing wrapped up in a piece of paper, it's a little piece of steak. So I'm chewing on this steak. And we struck up, after, you know, a few days out at sea, I got to like this little bloke. He come from the mid-West, he was a real hill-billy. Thurber Byrnes was his name.

Anyway, he said to me one night, looking through the porthole, as we were going around, he said, 'Hey, why don't you just wait till ... wait till a ... for a couple of hours', he said, 'come round the back through the ... through the midship here, the ....', and he said, 'and', he said, 'I'll be on the outside. And come in, have a meal with us.' Because he had a guitar, because I told him I played country music, you know. But it was hill-billy music then.

So, when everything had died down, and all the ... everybody had been fed, and they went back to their respective hovels, I crept up. And I got onto deck, and all I could see were these white seahorses coming in, the big waves, you know, and there was a few soldiers walking along there in the dark, but every now and then you see a ... an officer would come by. The point was that it was so hot during those days that officers never wore shirts with their badge or whatever was on, so you wouldn't know their rank, you wouldn't know whether they were just always in their bare-chest, you know. So you wouldn't know who you were talking to.

So I crept up there, and I eased my way round, and there was Thelma [sic] waiting in the shadows for me, and he whisked me in, opened the door, and I was in. 'Wow', he said to me, 'why don't you stay the night? I've got a spare bunk.' Showers and all in it, for the merchantmen. 'But gee, I'll get shot.' 'No', he said, 'we'll get you out in the morning, get you back in ... down the hold. Nobody's going to know. Anyway', he said, 'we invited you, didn't we?' You know. 'I mean that's different. We've invited you, you're our guest.'

So I got his guitar, and I start singing away my songs, oh and everybody was in it. So anyway I stayed the night. And he put me in this bunk, and he said, 'Look, I'm going to lock you in', he said, 'just because, if you hear anything outside, a commotion, don't take any notice of it, that's just us here, we have a few drinks now and again.' And he said, 'And the boys get a little bit tight on', and he said, 'and now and again there's a few fisticuffs. But you're quite safe here, we'll lock you in.'

So I get up on you know, onto the bunk. And I'm laying back enjoying myself after a lovely meal and a good night. And all of a sudden I hear this tremendous commotion going on outside. Puff, bang, crash, fellows roaring and screeching. It seems that the ....
[Recording ends, Side B, Tapes 1.

Side A, Tape 2.

It was not only carting human cargo - apart from a magazine that had plenty of ammunition for the front, but it also had a catchment of whisky, and it was all going for the officers in the islands. And it was the merchantmen who had put it on. And they knew where it was, and they'd raided the hold, and they'd got drunk on the whisky.

So this fight started. You know, when men get ... there was a rowdy scene going out there, and I started to shake all over, because I thought, 'God, what's going to happen now?' Next thing I hear, bang, bang on the door, and somebody yelled out, 'Smoky, Smoky', and I wouldn't open it, because he told me not to open the door, and so I got down underneath the mattress, in case they came in. And they battered the door down anyway, broke the lock, smashed it in. Delmer [sic] said, 'Sorry mate, we lost the key', he said, 'and I thought you might open it.' And he said, 'Where is he? I left him here.' And I'm underneath this mattress. And ... holding my breath, laying on the wires, and the mattress on top of me, and I heard them, they said, 'Bring him in here', and apparently they had one fellow who was a casualty, and he said, 'He's bleeding in the head', he'd banged his head or somebody had biffed him with a bottle. Hit him with a bottle. So they brought him in and they said, 'Is the doc coming?' They said, 'Yes', and this was ... the doctor was from our army, you know? Like for the ... for the ... down with the officers.

And they said, 'Bring him in here.' And they said, 'For God's sake, where's Smoky?' And I still wouldn't let on. I still wanted to make sure that I'd be safe. I could hear these fellows inside, and going all around me and under, and then they said, 'Here, throw him up here', and I thought, 'Oh they're going to throw him on top of me', so I suddenly emerged. 'What the heck are you doing under there, Smoky?' And I said, 'God I didn't know it was you, Thurber, and I thought, you know, this was somebody else.' And he said, 'Doc, this is Smoky Dawson', and there's a little wizened man across there with just a towel round him. And this was the doctor. He said, 'Smoky Dawson, I remember you, I come from St Kilda.' (Laughs). I said, 'Oh, thank God.' He said, 'Look, Smoky's a guest of ours doc. You won't go telling?' He said, 'Me? I don't know anything about Smoky Dawson, never met him in my life.'

Smoky, getting back to the Troubadour units?

Yes.

> Who else was included in your unit? What was the official name for it, and who was included in it?

It was called, it was actually called, it was number ... we called ourselves The Troubadours, and it was number 10 Detachment. Max and ... now let's see. Ron Blaskett, you know, the ventriloquist? He was one. Ossie Dempsey was another. God I ... we were with the boys the other day too. Doc ... isn't it terrible? You'll have to ... I'll put this on later, the boys' names, but you met one of them at our reunion the other day, I was with him the other night. There were ... they're about the three, and there was another little fellow who played accordion, and he died. He'd picked up a ... some kind of a germ, that killed him in a couple of days. You know, you didn't have to wait for the enemy, you'd could get it just by getting darn sick.

> Now tell me how these Troubadour units worked? The idea was to drop them into a foxhole, was it? Or into a trench?

Yes. Well now foxhole is a term, I use the terminology that was the kind of fighting. Foxholes in the early days, like in the early first world w r, and I suppose for the second too for that matter, yes, we had a front, we had trenches. We all know the common trenches, we know. Layers [sic] from one trench to another, you'd jump over and get into the next trench, and dig in as it were. But jungle warfare was an entirely different thing, so you ... in other words you had a little shovel, I've got it here, it's a trench tool, that you dug in, dug your own little hole, and you got down, and you put a little tent over the top of it. So you'd be down so ... so you were actually in your own little trench. But if it rained of course that filled up with water too. But you were hidden underneath that. In other words ... and you were camouflaged, your tent was fully camouflaged, and from the air. So it ... that's the way you slept when you were in - when you were out in action. A lot of the commanders lived that way of course.

(5.000) Now what they did with us was that they billeted us at headquarters. We arrived in Balikpapan, Borneo. Another mob went up to Brunei. Others went to Bougainville - Horrie Dargie, the mouth-organ player, he went to Bougainville. They were - all the various islands, wherever the war was, that's where they were sent. So our area was the southern end of Borneo. At Balikpapan. And they flew us from Morotai - that was the base they used for the hospital there, the Australian General Hospital, under a big marquee - and they flew us out from there, or sailed off from there. Now the ship that we were on, after we got off at Morotai, it struck a mine off the coast, so I was lucky getting off that wasn't I? A couple killed, but others rescued. They went on to Brunei. And so the old *Joseph Carrigan* was another one of those welded ships that, you know, didn't get through without getting something happened to it.

You know, when you start trying to talk of a war well after it, you start to get hazy for a while. You've got to pull up for a minute and think. I'm trying to think of a couple of things - it's so long, you know - where we went from there.

We landed at Tarakan. Tarakan's another part of Borneo, before you get into Balik. I think some of the bloodiest part of the fighting took part there. A lot of our fellows - not our fellows, but those who'd gone in ahead during the invasion, to drive the Japanese out, paid a heavy price for it.

The airfield was all just rising and falling on the tide. They sort of blocked up all the drainage system. And the ... as you know, on airports there they'd have put down a strip as with that very heavy mesh that interlocked with each other. Well that was all buckled, so when you land in with a plane, you'd just bounce, bounce, bounce. And they sent us off from Morotai, the six of us, in a little Fox.

Douglas Fox?

Douglas, Douglas, yes. Plane. Very light six-seater. And of course very turbulent out there, as you know, because hotter than hot. It doesn't seem no winter at all at in those islands. In fact the seawater at Balikpapan, which went out - the ships had to be about two mile out, the tankers, for the oil that ... it was so far out, you couldn't get in. And the water was just hot all the time, you know, it was like having a hot seabath in it.

And when we landed at Tarakan, we hit this airstrip and we were re-airborne again. And as we come round for the second round, I looked down and there's planes', you know, wreckages all over the place, where those who didn't make it.

So I think, you know, of all these little things happening, and we were so naive of war. You know, here we were coming from Australia. And we're caught up with this kind of thing going on, and not knowing how long the war was going to last, because at that time the atom bomb hadn't dropped. But so that there was conflict all the way, there was this something impending, you didn't know what it was. It was a separation from home. And in particular if you'd had three days honeymoon, wondering what you were doing, and thinking of how you got on that train, and what you did there to go home just to see her for just a few minutes, you know, just stay home an hour, and then go through it all again, and here we were completely separated, by the oceans. And you know how all the other soldiers felt too.

So anyway we arrived in Balikpapan, and just brought up to headquarters, and from then on we were given our itinerary, where we were supposed to go. 'Tomorrow night you'll be at so-and-so unit, you'll be there at Transport, you'll be there at the Engineers, until ...' and the next time was right up at the front, the Milford Highway. We were sent up to a commando post, the 2/3rd Commando Squad.

That was the one. They were only a small group there, holding out. It was just ... you see, it was a war without any front to it, because they could be anywhere, round you, or behind you, you didn't know. And the only way you could tell about any activity, we'd look up and see where the monkeys were. If they were hanging down on their tails making a hell of a noise. So if you know, there was no way that you could get out of things or hide while you get these rotten monkeys. You knew there was some activity over there.

(10.00) But all the time we were there, you know, the war went on, it was still going on, but it was a silent war. You know, there was a very - it wasn't on a continuous front all the time, it was just what they call skirmishes. There was a lot of mopping up as they called it. You'd have the general invasion, the bombardment of the beach, and then driving them back, and then they'd isolate that, and then but there'd be pockets in between. And then they'd have to go up, doing what they called 'the mopping up' operations, which was cat-and-mouse all the way. So, you know, although you don't belong to these things, you suddenly become part of them. So the fact that you were there to entertain didn't disguise the fact that the war was still

going on very real, and there were men still dying. And you had those who worked in what they called the war graves, coming back every day with whatever they could find, bits and pieces of humans. Were it to be a hand or an arm or whatever, that's all they could find. And that's the war grave, that's all would be in it.

And those men, they had all this had a terrible effect on me, because, you know, I'm a recipient somehow, I'm a sucker for people's tragedies, or you know, I become them. I have a real feeling so much for people that I can't, no matter how I dodge it, I'm caught up with it. Anybody that's ... (laughs), for me to counsel people, you know, which I do often, I go through trauma. Because well even today when I hear of a child, you know, suffering from I'm that little child suffering, I go through with him. And ... like I'm living it. And I can't escape it. I'm sort of a receiver of these things, and I take it, and I don't go fantasise it, it's just a reality that's there with me, having had such a terrible childhood myself, that I've always been, you know, emotional, but under control. But I'm soft, I'm a softie. (Laughs). And I've been conned quite a few bit, even in business today. You know, I've lost thousands through having faith in people, then having them fall down on it, and then I have to wipe it out of mind, say, 'Oh well', and then you're almost going to the point of saying, 'Well, I don't trust anybody', and you just can't do that, because that means you don't trust yourself.

So you're saying that this situation in the second world war, this ....

Yes.

... these ... was ... was quite difficult for you to ... to cope with?

Yes well that .... It was difficult for me. I was going through it ... I was going through a ... a trauma ... a trauma myself, just on the suffering of other people, and ... and seeing all this happening, you know, and carnage, and bombardments, and ... everything was ... was to suc a ... was too much for me really that it had its effect on me in the end, when I had a total collapse. But it wasn't before that I picked up ... I got malaria on top of that.

But the constant shows that we put on - and troops loved what we did - we ... we'd just kill ourselves to make them happy, but then we'd have duties to do after that. You know, I couldn't take it, because you'd still find you had to do your army chores, where in civilian life you ... you entertained, and you were treated in the officers' mess, or whatever. Here you went your own ways, you see, and the way Davidson had us situated, he should have made us all with a rank, and to keep us ... our own prestige, you know, so we'd all be level, but he had us to a point where Ron Blaskett, no, and Ossie Dempsie, were in charge of the operations. And we'd come to a camp, and they would go ahead and single out, or find out, who they had to report to, and say, 'We've just arrived, sir', you know, and ... and they'd say, 'Well we're the concert party', 'What concert party?' And you know I felt that I could have made a better job of that. PR-wise. Gone, 'Sir, we have the best concert-party for you', and 'Put it there.' And, you know, they had fellas there that weren't really fully representing our unit to a point of ... our detachment for what it was and the people within it.

And then when it it come that after the show was over they could go off then to the sergeants' mess, and we would go and just eat down with all the privates, you see. So they separated us from - he were a level here, but when it got ... after that, we weren't invited to their mess, we'd go to the ordinary mess.

(15.00)I think that we had just as much fun, but we'd go to a mess entertained by just the old foot-slogger, you know, and probably just enjoy ourselves, but they used to say, 'Why aren't you over with the other guys?' And it wasn't that our fellows did this, it was that Davidson did that. To pull you down. And he kept me like that all that time, because I look back, because I jumped on that train, did that, and he could never whittle me down. I stood there, he could never demoralise me. I become true to myself, which I am to this day. And that's what I put in my book. I've always remained true to myself, and I tell other people, 'Don't be like anybody else, be yourself.'

Tell me about the shows you did, Smoky, what did they consist of?

Well it was - we had a way of doing things, like we all entered in one, we were one for all and all for one. See, I did a sketch, a sort of send-up on the old American hill-billy. Not Australian folk-song. That was out. We set up a little stage, and we also had our costumes that we changed into. And pick up what was that?

What were your costumes like?

We'd dress up like a couple of girls, you know, and then put on eyelashes and all that, (laughs), and we'd form a shana(?). One would play the accordion, and we'd do a gypsy shana(?), and do up, you know, a little ... with all the ... we had this trunk with all these things, we'd do quick changes. And then come out, and I'd dress up then with a big cowboy hat, and I'd dress up with a pair of cowboy chaps that I used to carry with me, my own costume. And I'd do a skit on Texas Dan.

And Texas Dan, a real comedy sort of sketch, all about a real tough fellow from the West. But it had a lot of jokes in it, like he eloped with Calamity Anne. 'Anne, what a calamity, the first time he kissed her he had to ask for his teeth back.' You know. (Laughs.) All in a group, you know. And there were a couple of little shady things, they were troops, you know, that .... And we always had a send-up on Captain Loots in the front, you know.

We had one thing I remember too, and all the boys remember this. He said - always at the concert-parties, in the front you'd always see the officers, they were always in the front seats, and one started, 'One thing I'd like to say to you, you'll always find the high guys right up in the front. Out in the front-line.' Which they were never. (Laughs). 'Always there in the front-line.' (Laughs). And they knew, and they'd 'Ooo', you know, and all the fellows up the back would go, 'Boooo.' And there'd be army medical nurses and all that, and I used to put in a few little things, you know, about ... there was one, for argument's sake, if I might say it, it was about Calamity Anne, and Texas Dan, he come from the Rio Grand. And he eloped with this Calamity Anne, as I was saying, and this girl, anyway he eloped with Calamity Anne, and he commandeered a horse, and he galloped off into the night. And it had been ... he crossed the big sandy desert, and they got into a lot of trouble, because it was two days since they'd both passed water.' (Laughs). And just when they were hinting and giggling, I'd say, 'They were very thirsty.' (Laughs).

So, you know, you had to play it like that. 'And then on the way down we run into Chief Sitting Bull. He seemed to be in a heck of a hurry.' And of course we always had a ... there was always a front man, and he said, 'Why was he in a hurry?' 'Oh', you said, 'too much

bloody cactus.' (Laughs). You know. 'And we run into his brother, Standing Cow, and he was holed up at the ranch.' 'What? What a cattle ranch?' ... no, 'A monkey ranch?', 'No, a cattle ranch. Anyway we ..we caught him over there, and he was running inside ... running inside the house, ducking here and there, and he'd jump into the front room, and then the other one, he'd get into the passage, and then I fired at him', 'And where'd you hit him?' 'Well it wasn't in the front room.' (Laughs).

But boy, that ... and then we had little sketches like one'd ... Stan'd go out amongst the other troops, and interrupt. And I'd put on a top hat and a frock, and come out as an old ... just as an actor. Say, 'Well, well, well, what a big roll-up tonight. The biggest I've ever seen since I left', some little country town in way back there with only six dogs and a cat. 'Yes, I remember those days. I don't suppose any of you who are out there would remember m ', and one ... we'd have this fellow interjecting, saying, 'Yes, I remember you, you old has-been.' 'Oh somebody has opened the tomb.' (Laughs). And, you know, 'Why don't you get off you old has-been.'

(20.00)'That's most unkind of you, son, to speak like that. Why for all you know you may be insulting your own father.' (Laughs). It went on like that, with interruptions, and, 'Oh very, very smart, I'll have you know that I'm a self-made man.' 'Oh, you were? A self-made man, eh? It just shows you the horrors of unskilled labour then, doesn't it?' (Laughs). They were the quickies. And so much that the fellow ... they wanted to con him, tell him to shut up, they put him down there in the audience.

So you did comedy and singing and ... ?

Oh a bit of everything. Comedy, yes, and ... come in and then I'd do, (singing), 'My name is Texas Dan, I come from the Rio Grand, I ride the range, and I fan the breeze, with a spotted horse between my knees', and I'd go (makes noise), do all my sound effects. 'And right or wrong, I do as I please, my name is Texas Dan.'

'I once loved a girl called Anne, and I loved as a good man can. And I believed every word she said, until I found she lied, and then I, bang, shot her dead.' I used to pull out a gun. 'And now there's a price upon my head, but they'll never hang Texas Dan. That price on Texas Dan is open to any man. But I'm warning you all before you try, it's a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye. Because I don't care if I live or die, they'll never catch Texas Dan.'

'For I come from a fighting clan, and I want you to understand, I fear no man that I ever saw, for the forty-four's my only law. And I'll live just as long as I'm quick on the draw.' And I go, quick sketch artist, you know. (Laughs). 'So that's the story of Texas Dan.' But you know, but I'd have a few jokes in between. Yes.

'And when they come knocking on my door, and they look down the barrel of my forty-four', and I'd pull it out and go. Like this.

Look down the barrel?

Yes, and I'd look down the barrel of my forty-four, and I'd pull out these little creatures. 'This darn thing needs a pull-through.' You know, it was really for the army all ... you know, everyday army stuff.

And I'd hit me, (sound of thigh being slapped), as I'd say, 'Well', I'd come out on the, you know ... particularly in the when we played to the air force, which was different, it was all, 'You chaps', you know. And I wore these chaps, and I'd come out, 'Hey, how are you there everybody', (slaps thigh), 'g'dday you chaps.' (Laughs). Looking at me chaps, you know. They were very sharp and they'd catch on. They were so starved for it. They hung on every word you said. And anything about an officer or you know. But t was just fun.

And then of course I'd you know, we had our songs, and then we'd double up, we'd all sing together. One of them would sing, 'Give me some men, some proud stout-hearted men', that one of the Nelson Eddy songs, and we'd all be harmony, as a group. 'Shoulder to shoulder, da da da deda da.' Playing with accordion and then the guitars. And then we'd have a soloist, and then accordion-playing. And then we'd do duets, and then we'd do a shana(?). We'd do a complete show. On our own.

And you had your guitar with you?

Oh yes, but by the time I got to ... by the time I finished in Balikpapan my little Martin was like a little canoe. In the terrible heat and the humidity, it just warped. So the only way I could play it would be to go ... right down at the ... near the end of the guitar. I could play in one key only, and not string it up too high. But they ... the boys didn't seem to care.

And then I managed to, when I got over to Morotai of course the hospital was there, and they had a steam laundry. So they said, one of the fellows said, 'Smoky, I think I'll be able to straighten out your guitar, give it to me, I'll put it in the steamer.' (Laughs). So he put my guitar in the steamer - well you should have seen it when it come out. (Laughs). A bit like Noah's Ark. So my poor little Martin. And I applied, when I come back from the war, to Colonel Davidson, by this time who was congratulating, I mean, and we were all mentioned, what are they called, recommended for decoration for what we had done. And I got some ... reimbursed for another guitar. Thank goodness. It took a long time to get it though.

And I want to say something about this. In recent years, not so very long ago, it was the last of the MBEs and knighthoods given out by the Queen, on the New Year's Honours, and she gave me the MBE. And 2GB asked me on air, to come on air and talk to some of my friends across Australia who would like to speak to me. And the first one to come on air to talk to me was a fellow called Billy Christian, from the 2/3rd Commando Squad. Who was totally incapacitated, you know, wearing dog collar like that.

(25.00) And he said, 'I wanted to say to you how we felt when you were with us.' And he said, 'And hearing you there tonight brings back all those wonderful memories.' And he said, 'I remember after you'd left us, and we all turned around and said, "'To think we had Smoky Dawson right up with us.'" And that made me feel real good. He's dead and gone now, but I ... he had said to me, 'Well we meet ...', they have ... they go on the ... to Garden Island, they used to have their meeting, where we had ours the other night at the Journalists' Club. But Billy Christian, I've had a letter since, from the 2/3rd Commando Association, of which he belonged, and still write to me, about those wonderful days when we were round, which just shows that somebody did appreciate it. But the very fact that we were right there with them.

And I remember on one occasion we were - I was doing my act, and it was getting a little on the dark side, and I said, 'Can you give me a bit of light here?', you know, and they said, 'Do you want your yodel cut off?', because it ... those kind of wars where the Japanese were ... could be anywhere. In fact all of the concert party performers can tell you that they were always watched by the enemy. Up in trees. Because they needed the entertainment just as much as the others.

I'll never forget there in Darwin, during the ... the bombing of Darwin.

Tell me that story about the yodel, you ....

Oh the yodel?

Yes.

Yes, well I was a yodeller too, you see, and that was Billy Christian that yelled out, he said, 'You want to be careful putting the spotlight on you', he said, 'the Japs are just up there, you'll get your yodel cut off.' (Laughs). But anyway I did yodel, and I didn't get it cut off.

Do you still yodel?

Yes, I can still do a bit of a yodel. But not as much.

It would have been noisy in those ... some of those trenches, I gathered, it could be very noisy.

Well it's a sharp sound, you're on high frequencies, aren't you? You know, like when you're walking down the street, have you noticed how loud a young boy's voice is? When they come out of school in the street. It's the resonance, hits you, or a child squeals. It cuts through, doesn't it? And yodelling can do that. You know with a (yodels). I've still got a little bit there. Now and again I put it out, just for fun. I used to be able to yodel to top C once. (Yodels). (Laughs).

I wonder what the Japanese that were listening in thought of that. (Laughs).

Well it's a funny thing, and this - when I say funny thing, it is a scientific fact - music itself is ... is in the word, in the sense, infinite. It is something that ... that can bring peace back, and sanity back, to people. Music has a fantastic way of bringing people back to the common lot, to what we are. And I just think about the world today without it. I don't think we could exist. Can you imagine a world without music?

No, not at all.

I can't.

Tell me, you were talking about what happened to your guitar in the humidity in the tropics, what about your strings? What did you do when your strings broke?

Well, strangely enough, they didn't break, because they were never - when they warp like that, they certainly become rusty, you just clean them up. You know you can ... if you can get your strings and put them in boiling water and boil them you can bring them out to new again. It's the acid from your fingers that corrode. And even today this is what we all do. We use the same old strings for our practice, because they are very expensive today, strings, but those bronze strings we use on our guitars, they go very dull after a while, and they lose their resonance, but if you put them in boiling water, and boil them for about five minutes, then clean them up, and put the meth, they come up and they're resonant again. So we ... you were able to ... to get by with it.

I never, I don't think I ever had a broken string there, all the time that I was using them. I always had a good supply you know, when we went away we never ... didn't have just a few strings. We always had plenty of them. And you had a thing called Quartermaster's Store, where you'd put in for things, what your requirements were, they'd soon get them for you. But even the effect on the accordions, you know, the humidity is ... you know, overnight the fungus would be there all over your clothes, be green with it. Just overnight. You were sort of living in this kind of cottonwool, trying to breathe through it, it was very heavy.

And I'll never forget too another ... one particular part in the early part of the campaign, we were in our tents at one particular place, they put us in tents when we arrived at this particular unit, and the kunai grass, you know, it must be about six or seven feet high, called kunai grass, and they used to put out our washing out on clothes-lines, you know, from tent to tent, like that. And you'd see these big rats run across, big as a cat, running across these ropes. Now they ....

End of Tape 2, Side A.

Begin Tape 2, Side B.

Yes. Well these big rats carried a bug called the ... a typhus. You know, where they acted as a host for them. A lot of animals have that, like wombats also have a tick and certain things. Now each day we had to clean out - we had stretchers off the ground there, because of creepy-creepies. And we were cleaning it out one particular day, and all of a sudden - you always had supposed to wear your gaiters, never take the gaiters off because of the malaria and getting bitten - and he had his gaiters off, and all of a sudden, we pulled up one of the deckboards, a rat ran straight up his pants. And ran up his trouser leg, and got up here. The most delicate portion of his body. And all he went, 'Oh, ah, ha ha, oh', and he grabbed his, clutched his hands round his abdomen with this rat still there, and just jumped in the air hitting it. 'Ho.' Trying to get his breath back. And then went screaming out the tent, raced up past the other line of tents, and everybody after, trying to catch him. He'd nearly gone off his brain. Because he was you can imagine what it'd be like with a rat inside your pants. And it was too frightened to come out too. (Laughs).

And he's running backwards and forwards, and everybody trying to catch him, so somebody had to knock him flat, to grab him. And then of course he soaked he bathed himself, he put soap and disinfectant right over his body. Nearly went out of his mind, because he thought he was going to get typhus. You were supposed to go blind with the typhus. And I ain't never ever telling you that, Dot, about one of the boys getting that rat in his pants? And he jumped about six feet in the air, and he was going, 'Haa ha, oh er, oh ugh ugh, help!' (Laughs).

[Dot speaking] Why didn't he take his pants off? (Laughter).

He couldn't. How would you feel if something run up the leg of your pants? (Laughter). So there's some of the things. And all the boys laughing like anything, but it was a very serious thing. You nearly got out of your mind. It's all these sort of things happening. (Laughter).

Tell me what it was like to perform in the trenches, what the conditions were like, can you describe it to me?

Well actually when we were performing, we didn't actually perform in the trench. You know, we actually set up - this is where we were doing the silly things, this is why they said, 'You could get your yodel cut off.' But we'd be right we'd find a bit of a clearing, and the fellows would be sitting with their backs to the tree, there'd be an army cook over here - this was in jungle.

Mmm.

Boiling up the M & B, dehydrated, oh I was so sick of - they just hated that M & B vegetables, you know, in tins. And potato, cabbage, all that was dehydrated, and it had this horrible taste. And I couldn't eat. This was part of my problem. But anyway they used to cook this up and heat it up in the middle of the road, all these self-contained things you carry with you to cook, and then just take it over in the tin-dish, and the poor commando would be sitting there with his Bren gun back here, and beard about four inches long, you know, hadn't been shaving for days and days. Dishevelled. Hadn't washed. Sitting there tired, and being fed like that.

And we just ... that's how we performed to them. But I'm talking about our detachment, I'm talking about a commando - 2/3rd Commando Squad - which was just there could have been only about twenty in all, that's all. Some less. There was just a few.

You see, they were the main bodies would be elsewhere, you know, they were all over the place. And they had the sigs, you know, with the lines running through, and of course you got lost, you get on that line and follow the way back, or you might find yourself caught out anywhere, because it's so easy to get lost in a jungle. And so that kind of war up there was a kind of a creepy war, and it was intermittent, you know, the skirmishes, and it wasn't constantly. We're talking about the later, the end when the war was coming to an end, and then of course came the big bomb, the one that ended it all. But still the Japanese still fought on, because they didn't know about it. A lot of them had been locked up there and wouldn't come out.

(5.00) You mentioned that you felt that the war affected you, that you were worried about it. What about the other what about the other people that you were working with?

Well I think it all comes down to the person themselves, their whole make-up. Some can carry that. I think my make-up was such that I'd been born with this right from the word. Here I was, a victim of my father's war, you understand, here was my father wounded at Gallipoli. And the tragedy of my whole life, which is no part of the army, but comes into it now, but it is part of the war. Because it was the first world war, and I was a casualty of that,

and that was a terror, because I was always running from fear. You see. Fear, fear of being caught, and, you know, not just beaten up, but maybe eliminated.

Because there was a part - you may have occasion to read my book, my biography, autobiography, where Herbie waits for his father to come home, and he's sitting at the table, and my step-mother is ready to serve the meal, but only when the father comes in. My little brother, Ted, sitting beside me. And it's so vivid, I can hear ... it's been a cold night, been raining, and I can hear this heavy tread. The back gate opening, shutting, and this heavy tread coming nearer, nearer to the door. Knowing that ... and there the door busts open, and there's my father. Big overcoat on. Drunken face. Somebody's hit him over the head with a bottle. And he lurches in, and we're just looking up in fear.

He loved me so much that when he got drunk he'd pick on me first. And of course for me to try and eat, you know, and vegetables. You know, here it was the same, the army was giving me the same, it was a sort of a repetition. And my stepmother would try and engage him in conversation to ... so he ... and of course he'd look straight across at me, and I'd show fear, and of course fear sent him off. I used to be sent straight up to this dog-lead, and he used to belt me with it. And then I started to cry before he even got it, and that infuriated him all the more. And the next thing he'd ... he was coming towards me. And the next thing I knew the table was going. Dishes and plates were crashing everywhere, and I'm trying to get out of my seat, and I'm stuck to the seat, I can hardly move, and the next thing he's got his hands round my throat, and I'm being strangled, and I'm up in the air, like that, and I can see him looking down at me, and then it's ... I'm going down a well and I ... my wind is cut off, and I can't breathe anymore, and I'm dying. He's so, it's only that my stepmother just pulled him off in time, hit him with something, till he dropped me. And I ... now and again I still get this sensation of choking. And so, you know, from that and the beatings and that, but the nearest I've ever had to dying, and I know what it's like, you know, because I ... you know, just go on and on, try and breathe and find, no, you can't get any more air, and it's gone. And then go overseas and you see all that happening again, it's ....

Like a rerun.

It's a rerun of life again. Where the fellows who were with me hadn't had that. They hadn't had that. You know, you can have a hard time in the depression, and be short of food, but to be in torment, to be in fear - I nearly called my book *Run from Fear*, because it took me many, many years before I could do that. And then I become ... when I joined a rodeo after the war, and then I came out, and I was D. When I collapsed, with all the ... with ... with everything, the whole lot. The army, the war, the noise, the thunderstorms, which were just ... the crashing of trees in the jungle, lit up, and then with great monkeys rushing into my tent, and running across my ... pottering here and there. I couldn't take it. Working as I was, and sweating it out, and not eating, because I couldn't eat any more, I couldn't eat dehydrated food.

And I would drink, drink, drink, drink, drink, that's all, I was drinking, chlorinated water, and not the best at that. And the stench of battered oil silos, and gunpowder, you know, mixed up with cordite, you know, is a stench of rotten jungle. And corpses, whatever. And the whole sickening thing that never see your wife again, you know, young bride, to me three days honeymoon. And now and again a letter would trickle through, and 'Dear Honeybunch', (laughs), and I'd pine for home. And I'd think I'm not going to see her.

(10.00) And then as I say I got total collapse. I'm paralysed, paralysed. I can't move, I can't move my legs. And the war was over. And to think I'd ... the whole damn thing, I stand up to it, I give my best while it's on, sweat, sweat, losing so many of my very important mineral salts that leave your body, you know, your whole metabolism drops. And I could have died like that. Because my heart raced erratically, when the diaphragm went, central nervous system, completely, no control of your breathing. Once your diaphragm - the very thing you teach to breathe when you sing. So with the diaphragm gone, and overworked, doing show after show after show after show, and then later when you're not doing anything, just laying down and sweating, and sweating, and the air's that heavy, and you can't ... all you're doing was drinking and not eating. And totally find that you're giving out and giving out - and I always give, I give the very best when I do a job. And the troops loved my work, and I had them laughing, and I'm thrilled with that, the adrenalin's there every night, until it plays out, and there was a kind of a real negative feel. Couldn't even get excited. You know, something like that the batteries going flat. My battery's gone flat. But I didn't read the danger signs then. Had I known I'd have reported earlier.

But I wouldn't go up to - it's no use going up there to the first aid, or the medical, all they give you is an Aspro. It wouldn't matter if you had a cut, they'd give you an Aspro. 'Take this three times a day.' And, is there such a thing as called bludging, you know, you never - I didn't want to be that. Or malingering was a word in the army. The malingerer. And you know, I mean, I knew men that were really sick, and told they were malingerers, and they died. And, you know, and there was all this, you were meant to stand up, and you know, that was still the skinny little kid, and I was playing a big soldier.

I ... and when I left to go away from Yarra Junction, where we had a little cabin, the three day honeymoon we had in Melbourne, and I had to go away, and I didn't know when I'd ever see my wife again, and I had the biggest ... I was like a camel, I had the biggest pack you ever saw, because Dot, trying to make ... give me a comfortable army life, had made me one big pillowslip, that was my sheets. Because when I was up there at Wondecla, with the 6th Division we had a plague of black fleas. Until I had to wrote down to her, because the fellows' backs were just all ... with these rashes and these rotten fleas. And they were just ... had their blankets out in the sun every day, with kerosene. Kerosene your blankets.

So she sent me up some flea powder she'd got from the chemist. And I ... and the chemist said to her, 'For what animal is it, madam?', she said, 'It's my husband.' (Laughs). And so I sprinkled all this over, and ... got naked and powdered myself over with flea powder, not on the fleas. So they wouldn't come near me.

So I had all this kind of - carting this stuff with me. And we had to have stretcher-bearers there. And then I had my respirator, because it didn't rule out the fact that we could have gas. So we took our respirators with us. Army coats. That we had in winter. Going to the islands! And our steel helmets. And our bayonets, which you had all learnt how to go and stick it in somebody's guts. (Laughs). We'd been through all that. You know, old Canungra showed us how to get over fences quick, and be quick, how to ... unarmed combat, how to throw a man here and there, and I'd already had ... in my civilian life I'd been through jujitsu. I'd been through the school of jujitsu. They didn't call it martial arts then. Katsu and other things, the Japanese bringing ... restoring the dead to life. I was in for everything, I wanted to be a magician, I wanted to be everything when I was a kid. And I wanted to be something, and I eventually found my niche.

But the result of being over there, all this was coming back, and here I was with that happening. And then the wars ... all the internment camps suddenly filled up with Japanese, and they were all walking down the road in line. Brought in. And I go and I look down on the line, there's all these Malays and Chinese there, spitting at them. And I suddenly feel - I see the Japs going down there, once they'd used to ... what they did to our fellows, and I suddenly feel sorry for them. And I see them battering them with this as they were going down to the compounds where they once had the people, they were put back in it. And some of our troops there were on guard, had them loading the ships, and you ... down there they'd jab a bayonet in their backside.

(15.00) And then General Milford sent out ... put up memos, you know, 'Any soldier found mistreating a Japanese will be dealt with, despite the fact that they've done some terrible things.' And a lot of, you know, former mates of mine - weren't in mine, but in other units - were beheaded by Japanese. Dug their own grave and .... You know it's all these things come home to you and you ... and you ... it doesn't matter the fact whether you're fighting or not, you're still fighting. You don't have to go running with a gun in your hand, you're just looking round to see where it's coming next. And all this whole thing in such a short time, and I couldn't cope with it. And the next thing I'm ... it's a night off. And we're over at Tarakan. They shifted us from Balikpapan. We did the Gracie Fields show, she arrived, and we were supporting Gracie Fields. Up on the stage.

What was that like?

That was in Balikpapan, it was a wonderful thing there. And there was 20000 troops in the greatest mass of men I've ever seen. There was so many they had the loos, (laughs), which was just a hole in the ground, and they'd fill them in as they went. And over the top of that they'd have the toilets, and they had a tin roof. Some of the fellows couldn't get a view, they all got up on the top of this roof, and Gracie was in the middle of her act, and the whole thing caved through. (Laughter). And it's funny in one sense, but people died in that. Went down into it and drowned in it, or smothered in it. So the humour's there and yet the terrible stark tragedy of troops that fell down from a toilet. So that the casualties there, saved ... got through the war without ..and died in that circumstances, watching an entertainment show. Gee that's, you know, ironic, isn't it? When you come to ... ironic when you think that ... that men ... here's the darn end of the war, they could be going home, and they die like that? Watching an entertainment.

So I ... anyway we shifted us, and we flew out from Balikpapan, and we arrived in Tarakan, back to Tarakan, where I bumped, before, you know, on that plane? And we had to put on several shows then, because ... to contain the troops, because those who came first were then going to ... repatriated. The ship was ... various ones were all pulling in to take them back, all going home. So to dismember them all took a lot of time. So I was one of the last.

We were still there, stuck there, and we were in Tarakan, we were watching a movie with all the others. Sitting up ... I'm sitting up in the front, and all of a sudden everything's going ... I'm seeing double. It's the first sign I had that there was something wrong. And I started to get the shivers, and shake. And the next thing I was starting to shake all over, and I went to get up, and my feet went from under me, and I tried to breathe, and the diaphragm had gone, my whole nervous system had gone. But apart from that, I had malaria. I suddenly vomited,

got cold, they grabbed me, run me ... they didn't have a hospital there, all they had was a casualty clearance station. Just a tent. And they had a few others in there, and they got me in, put me on the table, and I just nearly wobbled off, because every part of my body was just like a jelly. Because once the diaphragm goes there's no control of breathing, and the heart races erratically, so you were high and low, your metabolism got ... and you could die very quickly. So they put me under. And then on top of that I come out in these terrible sweats.

So for five days I didn't know anything. And then I woke up, and next thing I'm onto a little plane, stretcher, couldn't walk. And I remember arriving, seemed a ... as though it was years later, but it was only like within the next day, back at Morotai, and I was in this great marquee, the Australian General Hospital. And in all the beds around me in this ward, all these fellows, I'd look at them, some of them, emaciated, beri-beri, ribs sticking out, these are all those who were coming from Changi Prison. They'd brought over. And I looked at myself, and I looked at my own ribs. I was getting like that too, and yet I ... just in this short time. I was ... my weight had dropped down. I was down to about six and a half stone, you could pick me up like that.

And so I was put on very special fluids, because I couldn't eat, and vitamins. I had to take all these vitamins, and they gradually worked on me. And then somebody brought my guitar in, all the boys come to see me. And there was one fellow next to me, he was in a terrible state, he had half his shoulder blown away, and they put him under to treat him, and they had to give him this, what do you call it? Like ... the drunk's needle, they call it. Penathon [sic], pentathal. You can talk to them, they're hypnotic, you know? They only had that time to get the thing off, you know, and clean him, dress him up. So I used to start to try and make this man feel a bit better, and I started playing, trying to play my guitar to him.

(20.00) And then I used to go along the ward then. And I found I was starting to get ... feel better myself, too, and start to build up. I'm seeing all these poor devils. So you know. And I didn't realise how bad I was, even when I was doing that, but I found I wanted to. And the fellows that ... some of them died, you know, and I'd go up and sing to them, and make me feel good, you know, I was really better off than they were. Some were put in - on the ship going back - in padded cells. Off their head. 'Troppo' they called them.

And the next thing I knew was - right, I had priority to be sent back over them all. Back to Australia, to Heidelberg Hospital, Repat. And they put me on a plane, on a Liberator, which they ... every ... they were American plane, bombers, which was dubbed 'flying missiles'. (Laughs). That's all they called ... referred to them as a 'flying missile.' And it was crammed with twenty-seven people. More than it should accommodate. With all our knapsacks. There were AAMWS, army medical girls, and doctors, all going back. And they put me up in the turret, in the gunner turret, in the front, with a lieutenant, sitting there, and took off on a ... an airstrip, that was ... wasn't considered to be long enough for the Lib. to take off. Too short. And because we had a heavy load on everyone had to get up front to keep the tail up. (Laughs). So I had this feeling on me then, taking off, roaring up, and I'm out in front, all them in a blister at the back, everything's out the back of me, and you're out in this gunner's turret. Flying, and we just took off.

And of course I'm just sick, and it all started to shake again. And I remember, next thing we were right over and I could see the volcano down below me, and the shores of Borneo receding, and then on and on and on and on until, it must have been about midday, and I'd

developed this terrible headache, because there was no air-conditioning, and no pressurisation, as you know, in Libs. Just cold. It was austere, it was just all metal, metal, and of course you're still in the heat. It was cold up where we were and then we arrived in Darwin at middday. Hot! Terribly hot.

And they stopped over there for about three hours, and they bunged me straight into hospital there, put me into the hospital there, until it was ready to take off, which ... it took off ... probably more than three hours. Because we took off around the ... it was getting late in the evening.

And this time they shifted me and put me behind the pilots on the bomb-bay doors. You know, where they open up the ... where the bombs drop out?

Mmm.

Well all those. And you couldn't go, there was no toilet on it or anything, you know, and you had all this flight from there, Darwin to Melbourne. Non-stop. And we got into a tropical storm. Halfway through ... across Australia, in central Australia, and I'll never forget it. And it was just up and down, and I'm soaked. You know, I'm riding, I don't sleep. I'm just watching, and I see all these fellows who were supposed to be going in the plane, all playing poker. And I says, 'Isn't anybody looking after the plane?' They said, 'George is doing it for us.' Pilot, automatic pilot.

Smoky, what do you think that your experience during the war in those units did for your career after the war? Did it have an impact on your career do you think?

Oh it gave me a tremendous confidence. Because when I came back to civvy street, as it was, I just felt I could do anything. And then came the ... the proving of yourself again, too, because I knew that I could go back ... there's 3AW Melbourne, and KZ, all those stations knew me so well. And the ABC would have me back with open arms. I knew I'd always have that. And ... and ... but the experience of being able to be a one-man show, that's what we virtually were. We were all in together, we ... that Troubadour party, we got wonderful write-ups for that. And we were supposed to all be ... in fact, yes, we were decorated for that, but we didn't get it. Colonel Davidson wore it for us. It was for his units. For what they did.

What do you think the best of the entertainment units was, your best time?

(25.00)The best time of the entertainment was before we went away. It was with the ... what they called the 'big L of C'. Victoria. Big L of C they called it, concert party. They referred to it as concert party when we were in Australia, then we become a real detachment when we went overseas. And that was the, going around, putting up the stage, and within Australia, at all the army camps. To those who were coming back, and forward lines, and whatever.

And then it was where you had, you know, quite a big orchestra. You know, you could have this stage with .... We had two female impersonators in there too, by the way. One was Cyril Howe [sic], used to be in Melbourne at ... at 3XY, he performed in this play that went for years called *One Man's Family*, and the other was Cyril Howe, who was with J C Williamson. And they were very, very that way, you know. But they were absolutely marvellous. They

did an act called, 'We're the only girls that Hitler ever loved', with umbrellas. They'd dress up, and they were the real thing. And they had their machines at the back, and when we put the stage went up, we had a marquee that came round the back into dressing-rooms, and they had this big machine, electric machine, power machine, making their frocks, and that's when we did the shanas, the gypsy things and ....

Arch McCurdey was in one of these. I don't know whether he was in that one going up there. I think he was, yes, he was with that. But there were sax-players, trumpet-players, bass, drums, and there was ... [a pause], Bobby Bell was one. Bobby Bell was a a drummer. I've got a few sketches there that I did as a ... for the boys in the ..as we were touring in the army camps, and Katherine, and the bomb at Darwin, all done in pencil. Sketches from wherever I went. And some I did in Balik. too. I put in my book.

But that were the happiest days, they were on the mainland here. And we did one with Gracie Fields before we left here, we did one here. And we did one here for the headquarters, up here in Paddington. That was a big night. And when they come to review our show - each unit did their own - and we did this one, and we got the biggest biggest reaction. And Davidson just - this is the funny part about Jim Davidson - after we we left Pagewood, as each unit was about to go, we all went into the big theatre we had built in there at Pagewood there, with a stage inside, and to be the actual audience, to give them a send-off. And of course all the big heads would come down to see it, as they went off. And we got a tremendous reaction from our own peers, you know, from the other units that were there. And I remember saying one night when we were going away, Davidson got up and said, 'Well, I'm not going to make any ... say anything favourite here. They're all good. But', he said, 'I want to draw your attention that you need ... all need one little thing, that's a bit more personality. Smoky is oozing with it.' You know. But he still kept me private. He still kept me a private.

And I didn't care a darn, you know, because what does it matter? I said, 'The biggest part of your life will be spent in civvy street, because the war's not going to last forever', and those who used to, you know, bully me around me and stand over me, I'd say, 'Why are you putting on all this ...', when I was away from them there was no one at all. I, '... just remember when we resume and go back to our duties, I won't remember you. It's not that I'm going to remember you, I won't remember you, you just won't exist.'

> Just quickly, Smoky, on those female impersonators, were they female impersonators off the stage as well as on?

They were, yes. Oh yes, they were it. (Laughs). And the way they used to go on, they'd go across to some other concert party, when we were in Darwin, performing, who had a female impersonator, and they'd come back and say, 'Oh she's not so-and-so, I don't think she's a patch on us, you know.' And then of course we had these shanas, and they did me up. When they said, 'Come on, Smoky, your turn.' We all had to go down and get our frocks made for us. They were fantastic what - the way they made them up. And ... for these very shanas. Because in between your acts you have a shana. You know what I mean by a shana?

> No, can you explain?

Well it's like the ballet come - the Tivoli come out -the girls who come out in frocks. And the scene, there'd be a scene, a shana is a scene. You set a different scene. There'd be a gypsy scene, and they all come out with tambourines, as dancers you know. And there's a singer, somebody singing in the front, and they have these ... these girls all doing swinging legs and round in circles. There'd be an Irish scene, or it could be ... or it could be a Scotch. But this was ... this was a gypsy. And when they did me up, they said, 'Oh ...', and the wig on, 'she looks like Heady Lamarr.' And there's one guy down there that ... oh, I remember up in Darwin, and it's during the blackout, and of course any time there was an air-raid, of course everything had to shut down, and you all had to run for it.

[Recording ends Tape 2, Side B.]

Being Tape 3, Side A.

I think, as a matter of fact, I'd done my ... no, I had to come next, that's right. Cyril Howe, and John Staller, they were doing their, (sings), 'Oh we're the only girls that Hitler ever loved, da, da deda da.' You know, there was all this kind of thing with umbrellas. They'd written this particular song, they were very good.

Anyway the siren goes, and I'm singing, (sings), 'I'm a happy-go-lucky cowhand, yodelling all the day', with a big spot on me, and the siren goes, you know, for air-raid, and everybody ducks, all run down for cover, you're supposed to go into total blackness, and they keep the spot on me. 'Keep ...', all the troops are yelling out, 'Keep going, Smoky', and I'm singing there, I keep going, not realising the I mean anything could happen. That's when I could have my yodel cut off.

But Cyril was rushing for his life, tripping over in his high-heeled shoes ... (laughs). Trying to find somewhere to hide.

These female impersonators, they were with the units all the time weren't they?

They were all the time, yes. In Darwin, we never had them overseas, but we did on this thing, you know, during the bombing of Darwin.

And how did they get on with the men in the unit?

Oh fantastic. Oh well, you know, the ... I didn't really ... I don't know whether ... how naive I could be, but they were just like that. But, you know, they were soldiers just the same, you know, they'd ... they'd get on army and parade. And Cyril Howe was a charming fellow. There's ... you find a lot of window-dressers like that, they have them in David Jones, you know, doing the windows up, you know. And their whole life's like that. That's ... I don't think they operate completely in the sense true sense of being that.

So the men treated them okay, they were respected them?

Oh yes, they ... they all knew who they were. And they would refer to somebody over in the other camp, and ...'He's on with so-and-so, so-and-so', and 'I'm better than her', as it were. You know. You'd go into this other ... there's an officer rogered them(?!), you know, he'd have got the favours. (Laughs).

Anyhow they dressed me up like Heddie Lamarr, and of course I cop it, I'm going mad, because there's a couple of guys down there in the front there, in one camp there, saying, 'Ooh, if only you mate were to ... you darling, if I could see you later.' (Laughs).

Like Heddy Lamarr, I don't want to look like Heddy Lamarr. We're all kicking up our legs, you know, wouldn't notice from a distance. (Laughs). I must have looked pretty good. He says, 'You're a good sort.' You didn't know what you were in for. You got all sorts of things I can't repeat said to you. (Laughter).

And when Cyril Howe run down there, you know, shrieking. (Laughs). Shrieking, when this alarm went, they're all going, 'This way darling, this way love.' All these fellows. (Laughs). 'Come over here. Come here to me girl, we'll look after you.' Troops. You hear it all down there.

But that's war. You know, it either brings out the best or the worse. But, you know, that's an entertainer's war. And it is a real war too, because, you know, I think in many sense ... in many ways rather, in the true sense of entertainment you do something I suppose that would be better than just waiting for it ... things to happen.

But that's what happened to me. Took me a long while to regain my health. And, as I say, when they shipped me back, and I was five days in Melbourne in the Heidelberg Repat before my wife knew I was home. They didn't even tell her. And then I went out to a convalescent hospital, and I had these bouts of malaria, and then I had the occupational therapy, which was making cabinets. That table there, see that table round there? I made that at the convalescent hospital. That's out of silky oak, and I've never done that in my life before. They showed me how to do it.

It's a beautiful table.

And french polished, I learnt how to do french polishing. And made a wardrobe, and furniture. Made rugs. See that red rug, those two rugs out there?

Yes.

They I made when I was in Repat. I made them out of - had to bring me my own wool, you know, the Red Cross. And eggflips and try and build me up.

And then my wife would come out at the weekend and take me home. But I didn't have the courage to even walk across the road to get on - we had trams or still had trams in Melbourne. But I couldn't go and walk on ... and get on a tram on my own. I had no confidence. Dot would have to come and collect me, and I'd hang onto her arm, just like a kid. And as long as she was there with me and then it took me, oh, nearly six months before I started to really pick up.

(5.00) And I had my first little cutlet, little bit of meat. It took me about an hour to eat it, because my stomach had shrunk. It's like these girls that starve themselves, you know, they get on water. They just shrink. So it's even today I can't eat big meals, I have three or four

small ones. It's the proper way to eat anyway, and it's probably done me good, because I feel pretty healthy these days, except for a bad spine.

But entertainment is still there, and I think the whole basis of it in confidence because when I finally got back and they allowed me out, and I weighed eight and a half stone then, I went back and then I was discharged, and I went back and did some radio shows back on the old ... and then I toured Victoria, around Gippsland, with a concert party. You know, I would say a concert, putting it on in Moe, in theatres, and it all came out, because everybody who was in these units could do more than one thing. Versatile. You could do perform a ballet, do the light, come out, MC the thing, you could take control of it, you could all do it. So we're all the individuals today, those that have survived, like Horrie Dargie, Ron Blaskett, he can still go on there, it gave you that confidence.

And then I met up with this Wild West show, and the thing above all, after suffering the fear of everything like that, to go back and become a knife-thrower and battle-axe thrower at human targets with that confidence. And yet I never had any medical treatment for that, do you know? I was offered medical treatment and refused it. The deep sleep therapies and all that. There was no way. I didn't even take insulin. I said, 'No, I'll beat this myself', which I did, and this is why I'm so strong today, I'll never go back to that, I've got that confidence and it can help others.

> Smoky, on your work overseas, during that time with the entertainment units, you must have seen some of the American acts come and go.

We did. As a ... well as a matter of fact when we were at Balikpapan - we owe a lot to our American cousins, (laughs) - we were based at ... based at a place called Manggar, which was a big the Manggar river there, where ... most of the bombardment and the invasion took place there, so there was lot of broken-dow bridges and ships and boats and things. But there was also where the American base there for the planes, the big bombers. And on Sunday they used to invite us over. And of course we used to have turkey and goodness knows what, and we'd change with them, MM, our old MM & V. The thing we hated, they loved. They were sick of this turkey and chicken. (Laughs).

But, oh no, we saw quite a few of the American shows. And they were brilliant of course. Tommy Dorsey, when they come out there, a lot of the big bands in those days, with comedians. We'd be invited to go and see them. But ....

> They'd get completely different treatment than Australian entertainers wouldn't they?

Oh yes, yes, but they weren't in a sense in army though. They weren't ... you see we were the only country in the world - England even had their army concert party, but on a different basis, because the whole of England was on bombardment, everyone was at the frontline there you see, and getting bombed, weren't they? Those that stayed at home were just as in much danger as across the Channel. So ... but the concert parties there were all people from the theatres that went through it and put up their ... you know, whether they were in London getting bombed or there, it wouldn't matter. But see ... but in this case we were overseas in a foreign country. We were in ... with foreign ... in a foreign country fighting a foreign group. And a fanatical enemy. And to perform under those conditions in jungle, where there's so

many things you could die from than just ... just a bayonet or bombing or whatever. Whether it be just the elements, or terrible storms like this. I used to get terribly frightened with it. Now I don't ... it never worries me now. I've sort of arrived at a very wonderful thing of peace.

But no, the entertainment unit, the Australian Army Entertainment Unit had it tough. They ... and, you know, and you can ask any one of them - we had our ... a reunion the other night where we all showed our own films, and we were all talking about how we ... you know, one minute you'd be standing on a plank, and, bang, you'd just get out in time, next thing is it's gone up. A direct hit. You know, it could have been you. So it could have been anywhere. But the thing is once you get over there, when you've got over there, you know, well all the others are there too, and there's all that strip of water, great oceans, you can't get back, so you make the best of it.

But, yes, we didn't have it easy. And the entertainment units were ... on the whole they were thoroughly enjoyed by all the ... the troops gave us our reward, we made them happy.

And, you know, in some of the units too were some of the officers who knew me in civvy life. One is still alive today, he's ninety. Lyn Core, who was in the first world war, and was also the chief in charge of all the water transport. Anything coming into Darwin harbour during the second world war. And when I was up there he was recording me at his Legionnaire Sound Productions in Melbourne. Lyn Core. And when we went to Darwin he came across to where we were at Larrakeyah, at the military headquarters, where we were billeted. And he looked in the door, and - and they called him the old man, because he's just like a father to everybody, you know, the army didn't ... although he was a major and he finished up as colonel, he was still just a man - and he said to me, 'What happened here?', looking at my shoulders, and I had no badge. No rank. And I said 'Couldn't you do any better than that?', and I said, 'No, not in this unit.' And he said to me, 'Look I'm going to have a talk to your lieutenant, he seems very, very naive doesn't he, Lieutenant Yates?' Just from St Kilda Barracks. This was before we went overseas. He said to me, 'I want you to be a guest of mine.' I said, 'I don't think you'll get him to let me away from the camp.' He said, 'Well I'll try.'

So he went and asked for me, and he eventually got him to say yes, that I could go over. So he sent his - what do you call his helper, his man - to pick me up in the jeep, all my gear, bring my guitar, and we went over to his barracks, right on the top of Darwin there, overlooking the harbour. And they're all officers there, and he made me honorary colonel, so I could be in the office. And he said, 'Now here's your ...', so we ... I said, 'Where do I sleep tonight?', he said, 'Same room as me, mate.' So we go in this big room, it was all covered with metal, everything's metal there, in case of lightning and that. And it was just like old days, talking there. Here he was, he's the big chief, and he said to me, 'You know, I'm going to put in for you, get you out of this rotten concert party, you can be in charge of entertainment and amenities in Darwin.' And he said, 'Would you accept it?' And he said, 'If you want to go to the you can always go to the islands backwards and forwards here, with food and whatever it is. Backwards and forwards to the Bathurst Island.' And he said, 'Any time you want to get leave, there's a plane going down, get you back to see your Dottie.' And I could have taken him up on that. And he said, 'At least you get a lieutenant out of it.' And I went back and I thought it over.

And while I was there General Blamey came up, to do an inspection of the Northern defences. General Blamey. And he said to me, 'Stay. Blamey's coming up, I want to introduce you to him.' So when we got up there I was introduced to Blamey, at a big night ... they put on a big party, and the nurses from the Darwin hospital.... (Laughs). They had me playing. He said, 'He's got a very special song, called *Goodbye Little Darling, Goodbye*.' That Jean Autrey used to sing. And I didn't know that Blamey was one for the girls, you know. So he said to me, 'I'll introduce you', he said, 'and then you start playing', he said.

So, in the middle of the dance, we were all dancing around, and he pulled up, and he said ... so he introduced me, he said, 'This is Honorary Colonel ...', 'Honorary Colonel?', 'Honorary Colonel Smoky Dawson.' 'Oh.' He said, 'He'd like to sing you a special song.' And everybody stood back, all the officers and the army nurses and that. And Blamey sat down, and I, (sings), 'Goodbye little darling, I'm leaving', not realising that ... that he was ... he and his wife, Lady Blamey, were ... apart, he'd play up to the girls. You see.

And he suddenly flushed up. (Laughs). Face went red, as I went on ... on innocent. They put me in. It was part of the entertainment, when I entertained at the barracks up there in Darwin, to General Blamey, the late General Blamey, who was at one time the Commissioner of Police in Victoria, who was caught up with those prostitutes here in the garden. In the Victoria Gardens down there? There was a big case about that. And then later of course he ... with all that going on, and all that business had come up with Frank Hardy's book, *Power without Glory*, in which he was mentioned, all underworld and all that, he was suddenly made Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, and here I am face to face with him, singing this thing.

Because it was Lady Blamey that was coming to me, at a former time when I was up there in hospital at Rocky Creek, I had another bit of a casualty, and she was bringing things for me in to make teddy-bears and all this kind of thing. Very sad lady. Because old Tom was playing up then. But when I suddenly came forward and started singing, *Goodbye Little Darling*, and part of this come over the microphone, and everybody laughing except Tom. (Laughs). There's a bit of history.

[Recording ends Tape 3, Side A: interview ends.]