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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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| Accession number | S00580 |
| Title | (N263868) Stevens, Jack Humphries (Private) |
| Interviewer | Connell, Daniel |
| Place made | Alexandria, NSW |
| Date made | 18 April 1989 |
| Description | <p>Jack Humphries Stevens, 55/53rd Battalion, interviewed by Daniel Connell for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archives of Australia in the War of 1939-45</p> <p>Discussing pre-war employment; call-up for 55th Battalion; army training at Greta Camp; tensions between AIF and Militia recruits; embarkation for Port Moresby; description of bombing of the Macdhui; casualties; Kokoda Trail campaign; lack of training; casualties in the 2/3rd and 55/53rd Battalions at Sanananda; futility of some exercises; contact with American servicemen; the Ey Rifle; health; medical evacuation to Port Moresby; rejoining battalion at Bougainville and description of Torokina Base; transfer of battalion to Rabaul; Japanese prisoners of war; demobilisation; war service.</p> |

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is tape one, side one ... and the interview is with Mr Jack Stevens ...

Stevens.

You're normally called Jack?

Jack, yeah.

Stevens, spelt S-T-E-V-E-N-S. Your address is ...

Alexandria.

Alexandria. What's the postcode?

2015.

2015. And the date is the 18th of April 1989. End of identification.

Right, Jack, if we could just start off going back to your childhood. Could you describe where you grew up?

Here.

Well ...

Well, actually I was born at St Peters. This was my grandfather's place and my grand... - oh my step-grandmother died 1926 - I was just on three years old. My mother and father and brother, we came here to live with my grandfather.

Where's here?

Uh.

Would you say, just put the ...

This house here. 232 Lawrence Street, Alexandria. I've spent practically all my life here.

That's an inner suburb of Sydney.

Inner suburb of Sydney. Uh, I went to school - primary school, Erskineville - near Erskineville Station - and went down to intermediate high school - Clearmont Street, Intermediate High School. Left at the end of third year, which only went to third year.

Right. And your family, what sort of work did your father do?

Father was a fitter and turner, toolmaker.

Where'd he work?

Uh, well he was, uh - I suppose most of his life he worked with Mary Brothers and Thompson in an engineering works. He was foreman there for the large number of years when he retired.

And your religion?

Church of England.

And your politics, if I can ask such a question?

Well ... I suppose I'd be a Labor ...

You know, not now. But we'll ask about that at the end. But, sort of going back to that 1930s period, your family, what were they?

Oh I think they were - probably supported Labor. I know my mother was in the Labor Party for a while, but I don't think my father took much interest in politics. He never seemed to get involved and what he did, I don't know. But I know my mother used to - she was in the Labor - local Labor League for a period of time.

When did you first get interested in the army? ... Or get involved in the army?

I got involved in the army. I was only young, I hadn't turned sixteen when the war started. I was a few weeks off my sixteenth birthday and I took a job shortly after that with a firm of accountants - the second job I had - and two or three of them there were in the CMF, you know the peace time militia, several enlisted immediately. One in the air force and another - you know other ... services - and I suppose I was ... You know their stories, their - they'd come and see us on leave and various things. The old boss there was a first world war bloke who was - knew a terrible lot of the senior officers around the place. I don't know what he was in the first world war but he was - seemed to know colonels and brigadiers and I even met Major-General Bennett there when - before he went to Malaya. He was in to see Rigg and I went to see Rigg for something or other and he introduced me. So I was never interested in joining the army. I'm not that way inclined. I was interested in the air force. I was very keen on aeroplanes and all that sort of thing and ...

Did you try and get into the air force?

Yes.

And what happened?

Uh, unfortunately I was called up for the army ... The Japs entered the war in 1941 and I'd just turned eighteen and they made us - you had to register for National Service at eighteen and because of the state of the war, we were called up almost immediately and I fully intended to join the air force. I put in an application for the air force. When I got a notice to go in I had to go up before the adjutant and he refused. He said the CO would not sanction

anyone leaving. Navy, yes, a senior service, they couldn't stop you. The air force, a junior service, had to get the sanction of your CO.

Right.

I found out later I could have gone to the CO but, you know, being young and innocent I took the adjutant's word for it and a bit of an idiot because the CO was a friend of my ex-boss and he - he'd asked me when I went down on leave once did I want an introduction to this Colonel [Brack Pearlson?]. No, no, I don't want any favours. I'll stand on my own two feet, I always did it that way, so perhaps if I'd have gone up and seen him I might have been in the air force and these things wouldn't have happened.

(5.00) Right. And you said that you were in the CMF before that ...

No, no, no. I ...

Oh you weren't. Some of the people ...

... Some of the people I worked with were and they, you know, they used to feed us stories about what they were doing and so forth and you know, you got quite a rub off. One of the young chaps I worked with he had been in the cadets when he was at school and he knew all the - when there was a march or some parade or something or other - he used to know all the weapons. He was an artillery man and you know, he kept us up-to-date with all the modern terminologies on what was going on. Not that I was interested in joining.

Right. So when you actually went in, it was after the Japanese had come into the war. Was it, um, what early '42 or late '41?

No, no, it was - according to this it was the 30th of December, 1941. I was officially enlisted but we went into camp on the 5th of January '42. Had to report to the drill hall at Forest Lodge and a whole train load of us - several hundred - went to Greta Camp.

Well, could you describe your first day?

Yeah, it was a hell of a day. (Laughs) We left here about eight in the morning, we got on the usual train at Central and there was - the temperature was over the century mark most of the way up. There was no water on the train. We went through several bush fires. We got to Greta - oh it was about mid afternoon, got off, had to walk about a mile from the railway siding to the section of the camp we were in. It was hot, it was dusty, the ... it was the middle of a drought, we got lost in dust clouds and there we were on a parade ground with our tongues hanging out and they addressed us and said, 'Now you're in the army, it will be a full time service', which wasn't a very (laughs) say happy enrolment into the army.

And so what did they do? Once they'd got you, what did they try and do to you?

Oh nothing, no. Actually they were quite good. They assigned us to companies and huts and so forth and turned on pretty good meals, I think bully beef hash or something or other. But I mean, it was - they looked after us. It was - got to give it the due, the unit we went into was

an established unit, the 55th Battalion, and it had been used since the war - beginning of the war for part time - everyone being called up before that, only the three months camp in so many weeks or that during the year. We were the first intake who were full time. So there were officers there, there was a nucleus of NCOs who actually were, on the whole, were very, very understanding; very, very good. They had to be because we went away with them, we fought with them. (laughs) I suppose it had a bit of a bearing on the fact that - but they were, they were a very, very understanding group and we had a, you know, a pretty happy training period.

What sort of training did you have?

Well they'd - they'd - the first thing they did, that same afternoon, was take us round to the Q Store and were issued with rifle and equipment. No clothing, they didn't have enough clothing for us so for the first week or two we marched around in rifles and equipment and our own clothes. I remember one chap there, he had a ten guinea suit on which was a very, very expensive suit in those days and he grizzled every night about, you know, the condition of his suit. (laughs) I didn't have one quite that good, I wasn't quite as well off but you know, we were in our civilian clothing for probably a week or ten days and they put us through the usual elementary training, you know. Like there was marching, drilling and understanding weapons, the various things. You see how it tolls they're going to put a three months course into us in six weeks, so we didn't stop for any day - seven days a week - and it was quite - probably quite solid training. But as I said we - the NCOs we had were very understanding and we didn't work as hard probably as we should have, because of the heat and ... I can remember sitting many times under the shades of trees when we should have been out in the sun doing something.

Right. And so when did the training period ... when did you begin to feel that the training period was coming to an end?

Oh they told us that once we were trained we'd have to go to a battle station as they called it, out on the coast, because at this time no-one knew where the Japs were going, what was going to happen, the whole place was in a bit of a turmoil and so in about six or seven weeks we marched out to a place called Bobs Farm, out on the Stockton Bight and there were, uh, you know the whole unit was deployed along the coastline there with properly assigned duties and so forth. I never knew what we were there for. It was only in recent times that I found out where we were camped had a perfect field of view, but I was back in the scrub and never ... I drove up there several weeks ago and found where our old campsite was and realised we had a perfect view almost up to Port Stephens, that was why we were there, but I was on the rear end and all I saw was scrub and trees and never had any idea why we were stuck (laughs) out in that place.

There wasn't a lot of explanation as - from ...

Oh no, we just holed into a battle station, it was all highly security [sic], they rotated us around and after we spent our time in the scrub we were manning pillboxes on the beach, which was about nineteen miles long and the point where we were, about a hundred yards from where we were down to the water. The pillboxes were made of - oh steel I suppose, I don't think they were bullet proof but they were steel, the dugouts behind them, but we used

to sleep back in the scrub and of a night time do guard duty on these g.... and man them during the day.

(10.00)What were your particular duties? Were you just a private or did you have ...

I was a private all the way through. That time I had a Bren gun. I seemed to get a natural affinity for Bren guns and the first time I picked one up I seemed to be a natural, so naturally I had a Bren gun most of the time. But I was never more than a private. We had a, um, I fail to ... time, we didn't know exactly how long we were there. It was very difficult. We went there some time in early March I would think. I know we were there over Easter and we were there in April because I came home on leave for a couple of days. I - the family worked a little bit of a gimmick to get me down on leave.

What sort of gimmick?

Well, my brother's birthday is the 16th of April, he was in the navy. He was home, uh, they knew they wouldn't release me for a birthday so they wrote - sent me a telegram saying he was getting married (laughs) so the army brought my leave forward a couple of - a week or two and I came down on two days leave to attend ostensibly the wedding but actually it was his birthday - twenty-first birthday.

And so you were there until ...

Well I returned at the end of those couple of days, it about the 18th/19th of April and then the rest of the company came down on leave a few days later and after they returned we returned to Greta, which would have been I've got an idea we were back down there Anzac Day. I remember they allowed the - any first world war blokes to go to the Anzac Day march. I think we probably returned a day or two before Anzac Day. Then we were reinforced by these AIF people - the second reinforcements we'd got, who were very, very upset at coming to a CMF Unit. They were earmarked to go to the Middle East and they were - supposed to be the 10th reinforcements for the 25th Brigade and of course they marched in and found where they were, they were very, very unhappy and refused to wear our colour patch. They didn't have anything against us CMF people, it was the NCR in general. Anyway they settled down eventually and we became quite friendly and there was never any animosity or any problems with them.

Uh, you said it was a Militia unit ...

... Yeah ...

... And there was tension between the AIF and the Militia, wasn't there?

Oh yes.

Could you tell me about that, how you saw it?

Well, it never - I was never involved in anything but apparently there was some areas there was quite a bit of tension but we were at Greta at that time, our whole brigade was there - the whole 14th Brigade. We were part of the 14th Brigade. There was the 36th Battalion, the 3rd

Battalion and we had the artilleries, the 14th Field Regiment, the 14th Field Engineers, ambulance - the whole complete brigade was there, so we were all CMF. We'd received some reinforcements before we went to Bobs Farm - AIF people - but they had been weeded out from the consignment going to the Middle East and we had people who were at the minimum age - it was eighteen and nineteen - and some who in the middle to late thirties. They'd taken the cream out of the middle and we got ... they were quite good people, but I mean ... They didn't have any animosity or anything of that and they just settled in and we were just part of the one unit.

Didn't the AIF have special privileges like 'wet' canteens and ...?

Well, but that - I didn't drink so it didn't worry me anyway, but they did. They had a 'wet' canteen I understand, they were entitled to 'wet' canteen. They wore a ...

... You weren't? ...

... They wore Australia on their shoulders and they had a grey colour patch - a grey background to their colour patch - but that never ... When you're in a unit with everyone else the same as you, it doesn't - doesn't concern you. The only animosity I found at Greta was - at Rutherford was a Light Horse unit and there was lots of fights between the infantry and the Light Horse. For what reason I don't know, but I think you go back to the first world war. We escaped once - from Maitland one night - we (laughs) ...

Well tell me about that?

Well we went into night leave into Maitland. They used to private bus us to drive us from Greta into Maitland and we'd just settled down to have a meal in a cafe. I had three very good friends - excellent friends - and we just started our meal and Denny says, 'Come on, let's get out of here', and we grabbed our hats and we're running before we knew what we were running for. But he'd seen the brawl start, so we went out the back door. There was a bus just trundling up the street, we chased after it and caught the driver saying, 'Well I'm going back to camp', and said, 'so are we'. So we went back to camp. (laughs) Next day we found there were thousands involved in this riot, but we were - as I say, we were chicken, but we were - we kept out of trouble.

Right. So when the time came to - to leave Greta, how were you told, what were you told?

Well we had a - we were told - they had a full brigade parade before General Blamey and we went on parade, full service dress, the whole brigade was there and Sir Thomas Blamey commanded the army and informed us that no troops under his command would leave Australia until they had six days final leave. When the parade was over, we went to the orderly room and we were given a leave pass for two days. They all screamed blue murder, most of the troops, so they changed it to six days leave. That evening we marched down to Greta to get trains. I - my company fortunately was on the first train. We ended up in Sydney on leave. The train behind us only got as far as West Maitland, they switched the engines at the other end and and whipped them up the north coast and they were headed for New Guinea.

(15.00) Why'd they do that?

Well, it turns out now the Battle of the Coral Sea started and obviously they were in a state of panic. If they'd have come and told us that - that - I'd say ninety-nine point nine percent of the blokes would have said, 'Forget the leave, we'll go where the fighting is', but no, they wouldn't take us into confidence. I was on leave, I met my friends in town every day - in the city practically every day, got my six days, reported back and found (laughs) only a handful had gone back. The others - in the end they were picking them up all round Sydney. Uh, anyone with a colour patch was grabbed by the Provosts and whipped off to the *Ingleburn* - the governor ship in the harbour - the ... when we reported back there was only, oh I suppose the unit was a thousand strong then - we had ... we were full strength and we used to have an E Company - a machine gun companies - we were probably about a thousand altogether - and I suppose there was less than 200 of us reported back. We looked at each other in bewilderment and they came and we were called deserters and what have you. And of course everyone objected rather strongly because we had a leave pass which was still current. We'd reported back at the time we were supposed to report back, what had we done wrong? We had no idea. They still never told us why we were - why we were supposed to be doing something wrong. It was incredible. Then our - so the problem arose, what to do with us. So first of all they got a fleet of buses to take us somewhere and they cancelled those, and then they got some trams and they cancelled those, and eventually we ended up on ...

... A tram couldn't take you far?

Well, then they were going to the showground or something like that. Then they took us onto the country railway station and there was a train there without an engine and we waited there till about one a.m. We had to report back at nine p.m. - and there was a lot of relatives that had come down to see us goodbye and there was the singing and the dancing on the platform until one a.m. Eventually we went back to Greta and got back a day late. The acting CO then also informed us that we were deserters and ... (laughs) ... and again we - we protested rather strongly. Then he found out that ... He'd changed his tune and, you know, just sort of sided with us and said, 'Oh, okay, you had a leave pass, you reported back, that's it', and nothing ever done.

So what happened then?

Well then we stayed there for a day or two and they loaded all the stores onto a train and we headed north via the New England line - what do they call it - the Wallangarra Line. Got as far as Wallangarra and we had to trans-ship our stores across to a Queensland train on the other platform, which looked like a toy train to us compared with the New South Wales and we had to move the stores. We had all the ammunition, and we headed off up through Warwick and so forth up to Townsville. Rather an eventful trip because the train we had was a - it was one of their luxury trains, you know, it had sleeping berths and so forth and every time we stopped for a meal we went to the dining rooms where there were table cloths and cutlery and so forth and slept in berths - sleeping berths of a night time. It was quite a - quite a nice trip.

Wasn't all that crowded?

No, not in the compartment I was in. I only had five or six in an eight compartment and we had enough berths, we just We weren't supposed to let the berths down, we didn't have the key for them. We found the point of the bayonet would turn the little - little lock and lower down, had sheets, pillowslips, and we slept rather well and had rather a pleasant journey. It got uh - we went through all the way. We'd never been north before - most of us, I think had never been up there. It was quite eventful going through the towns. Got a bit boring and some of the people fired off a rifle or two at kangaroos and so forth as we went through the country so the officers came and impounded all the rifles and locked them in the toilets. The next thing I saw was the muzzle of a Bren gun pop out of the window and started to blast away (laughs) so they - they came through and felt - I had a Bren gun - and they came through and felt all the Bren guns to see which barrel was hot. What they forgot was each Bren gun has a spare barrel and the man just took the hot one off and put the cold spare barrel on.

Do you know who the man was?

No, I didn't know. It wasn't me. Mine was mounted for ack-ack on the ... The Queensland trains have a - or had a observation platform, like the old American trains and we had - my Bren gun was mounted for ack-ack there in case there was need, so my gun was not fired.

Right.

Quite legally and that.

Right. So you got to Townsville?

Got to Townsville and they ...

... Could you describe Townsville? This is May 1942?

This was May '42. We didn't get into town. We were dropped off at the Cluden Race Course which was, oh, ten-twelve miles out of town and we had to camp there and they told us to dig slit trenches. I don't know if you know the country up there, it's a clay soil. It gets a wet season and a dry season - this was the dry season - and the ground was as hard as reinforced concrete. We managed to scrape a few rudimentary holes. I think we were only there one or two nights and then we went down to the wharf. We never went into Townsville at all and loaded on board the - the *Taroona* to go to Moresby. Didn't see Townsville at all that - that trip.

What was the *Taroona* like?

Beautiful little ship then. She used to run between Melbourne and Launceston and when we travelled on it, again we were one of the - some among the first to go and she had sheets and pillowslips and, you know, in the bunks. You ate in the dining saloon with tablecloths and served on crockery plates and so forth and we had quite a pleasant trip. Except again, my Bren gun was nominated as ack-ack up on the boat deck and we had to man the darn thing up there day and night and the ship was a - never designed for long ocean voyages. She used to go up the river to Launceston and had a very, very shallow draught and it used to roll like nothing in a calm sea.

(20.00) You said Melbourne-Launceston?

Melbourne to Launceston.

That's a fairly rough passage ...

Well it had to go up the river and therefore they - it was a fairly shallow I don't know what it's like going across the Bass Strait but it rolled in the Coral Sea, believe me (laughs). Lots of people were sea ... I've never been seasick, didn't worry me. But there were seasick people hanging over the side right, left and centre.

And you arrived where in Papua and New ...?

We arrived in Moresby on the eve - late in the afternoon or evening of May the 29th and we disembarked, took us out to, uh - several miles out into the scrub it appeared to us. Fortunately there was a - B Company of the 39th Battalion were there, we were going to take over, we were B Company of the 55th. Just as we got there we had a shower of rain. Well our stores were still in the ship naturally so the 39th fellows vacated half the tents - they doubled up - and they let us have the other. There was eleven of us in the tent I was in. The incident happened then that, I suppose, would stand a bit of telling. We were all sitting in the tent, we were all friends, we were all well armed and we were scared stiff we didn't - someone said, 'This must be a country of headhunters and cannibals' and all this sort of thing and we had an Aboriginal with us and he was in - he wasn't in our tent, he was outside, Aloysius, and while we were talking and wondering where we are, what was going on, what was going to happen, this great bare black arm pulled one tent flap aside and a naked body brandishing a - a machete jumped in there with a blood-curdling scream and eleven well-armed soldiers dropped every weapon they had and went out the other end of the tent. (Laughs) Then we heard Aloysius laughing, went back and he just stood laughing (laughs). There was such a crushing out of that tent, who worried about loaded Bren guns, rifles, Tommy guns or what we had. (laughs)

And so, come the dawn, could you describe your camp?

Well we were, you know, it was rather crowded with eleven there but daybreak, we sort of got ourselves sorted out. The 39th fellows moved out and our stores started to arrive - some of them. One of the trucks got bogged overnight because of the - they were earth roads and they were ... slipped off these earthen roads into ditches and so forth and our first task was to go and find the various trucks and unload them so they could be put back on the road.

Right. And over the next few months, what did you do? More training?

No, very little training. The first couple of days there we had an orientation. They took us a few walks around - to have a look around the countryside, then we went into town and started to unload ships. We were camped in the European hospital which I suppose was illegal with red crosses on the roof but Moresby had no civilians then, there was only troops, and we worked ships. We used to alternate, a couple of weeks unloading ships, a couple of weeks out on the - in the hills about ten - oh, five-ten miles out, digging defensive positions and so forth and then we'd get another shift in town. We had no - very little training.

Mmm, were you meeting I mean what were you doing outside of work? What sort of recreation did you have?

Well we didn't have much time off at all because unfortunately we were doing a night shift and the army hates to see you sitting around in daylight, even though we worked all night. We used to start work at midnight and work to eight a.m. Returned to - later on we moved into the Moresby Hotel, which was again, was just a bare shell - and we got back and have breakfast and get cleaned up and then they'd have us doing work parties around the place all day until about four p.m. Yet the blokes who worked dayshift didn't work at night time. We were the - for some unknown reason - the army can't see troops sitting around in daylight doing nothing even if you were - been working all night. So we were getting very little sleep. We were working eight hours on the wharf, coming back, having about an hour's break and then doing various jobs and work parties and so forth around the town until about four p.m. when you'd then sleep until they get you up about eleven to go back on work again. And what with the heat and the fact you were sleeping on bare boards on a thing. There was no curtains, blinds and the fact there was also air raids, you know, and there was a hell of a noise. We were on the main road from the wharf and the trucks used to come there and make a sharp right hand turn and grind up over the hill. Very little sleep was - the only sleep we got was when we used to organise it when we were working. We used to - say the party had ten - we used to let two or three sleep for a couple of hours and sort of rotate it. The only sleep we were getting. You couldn't sleep in the hotel.

(25.00)Right. Um, were you meeting Americans?

Yes, we met a few there. Uh, we got on pretty well with them. Uh ... we didn't really have much They usually drove trucks. They had - Negroes were driving the trucks, they were all engineering units. Few of the others were around. Don't think we had much - we didn't really get involved with them at that point. We were - we were - mostly engineering units were out working on the airstrips and so forth and there was nearly all Australian troops in the town. When you were there you were there for a purpose. You were either digging defensive positions or unloading ships and there wasn't that extra much - you'd meet them around and speak to them but we weren't really closely involved with them. We were later but not at that point.

No. And so you weren't having any breaks ...?

Very little breaks.

No training?

No training.

Um, and you were being - there were air raids going ...

Oh, air raids practically every day and sometimes at night.

Can you describe your first air raid or one that was significant?

Well there was one very significant one, when they sank one of the ships in the harbour that we'd been working on. As a matter of fact if you ever saw that film by Damien Parer ...

Macdhui?

The *Macdhui*, you'll see the stream of troops running up the wharf as the air raid starts. Well if you look hard you'll see a fellow in front, that was probably me, because I was pretty fleet of foot and I was probably first off the wharf (laughs). But we were - you know, we'd worked on the before partly - it was partly unloaded when they bombed it the day before and put one bomb down through the, um, behind the bridge and burst in the dining saloon. We had to go back on that night - it was a mess. The whole of that deck had been splintered. It was a daisy cutter type bomb that burst sideways, caused some damage to the ship and most of it was - it wiped all the cabins, dining saloon - where it hit the floor there was only a mark on the carpet - on the lino. We had to work that night to get the stores off it but some of the bulkheads had been buckled. I worked for some hours in the freezer to get all the food out. You worked knee deep in icewater, you know, like chipping away at all these carcasses of meat and so forth and you had to - you know - it was about half an hour that you had to go up and thaw your legs out. The chaps working in the hold, they had great difficulty because some of the bulkheads and beams had buckled and were forced down onto the cases of food and so forth and it wasn't, you know, just pick 'em up, you had to lever them out and force them out and so we worked there right through - we worked double shift right through the night to try and unload it. They wanted to get away before daybreak. Unfortunately it - it wasn't completely unloaded and we were still working when the air raid started in the morning. So she put out in the bay and was manoeuvring around. We'd cleared off and dived into whatever holes we could and they came over - about eighteen or twenty bombers and really blasted it ...

... Mmm ...

... and she was caught fire - it didn't sink completely but they ran it onto a reef up the upper reaches of the harbour, rammed on a reef and it was just laying on its side, smoked for weeks afterwards. That afternoon for some reason, I went down to our RAP - our medical officer had an RAP in town in one of the houses - for some minor ailment I went down to get treatment and all the survivors were there waiting to be treated. They had all sorts of stories about, you know, what had happened in the raid. One chap had a piece of wood in his hand and I recognised the butt of a Bren gun and he was one of the merchant sailors but he was manning a Bren gun for ack-ack when the bomb hit - or one of the bombs hit - and he was blown over the side and all he had left was this butt of the Bren gun. He doesn't know what happened to the rest of the gun. He never had a scratch on him but he had this butt of the gun he was still holding.

Why was he holding it?

Well, I don't know. It was probably the - he had it in his hand and he just kept it. The old cook was there and they couldn't get a word out of him. He'd fed us during the night. He fed us on baked dinners every few hours during the night to keep us going. He kept going down to the galley in this old - he was in his seventies - he kept feeding us up well and he was there and the doctor couldn't get a word out of him and anyway they asked him was he hurt, was he shocked or anything else then. He said could he do anything for him and he put his hand in his pocket and he pulled out his pipe. It was cut in half by a bomb fragment and he couldn't

have a smoke. The doctor fortunately had a pipe in one of his drawers so he gave it to him, he was quite happy - nothing wrong with him, but it had been in his pocket and this bomb fragment had cut the pipe clean in half in his pocket.

Mmm.

That was his problem, was he couldn't have a smoke. I think there was about an eight of the twenty there of their, um, survivors were there.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

Side two, tape one, Jack Stevens. End of identification.

Um, right so the - the 55th went up into the Owen Stanley's.

Yes.

What - what happened, were there any significant events that you particularly remember before that happened?

Well we were - at one stage when we were not in town - we were out on a valley, which was the same valley the 7 Mile 'Drome was in, so that was seven miles from town, but we were further down towards Bootless Inlet and we copped a rather bad air raid there one day and made it through our then company commander. The valley was all dead kunai grass - very scrubby around Moresby. I don't know if you've ... It's very desolate hole, it didn't get very much of a rainfall and we were there in the very dry period, dusty and dry, anyway, the company commander said to us - each platoon was down in the valley - 'We should build a fire break around our camp otherwise we'd get caught one day in a blaze'. So we all religiously built a fire break around our camp in the grass and the Japs came over several hours later and of course, there were some nice white tents sitting in a black circle in a round valley, and of course we copped a rather heavy raid, which made quite a mess of the camp area. So we had to, you know, think again about ... So our company commander thought his best idea would be to burn a bit more of the grass and it wouldn't be so obvious. So we were in the safety of the company headquarters up on the hill overlooking the valley. We went up there to company headquarters and Jim went down in the truck with a driver and he set light to the grass and got back in the truck, but the grass fire fanned by a - a breeze was faster than the truck and we were cheering the fire on. The fire caught the truck and went past it, it went up through the valley and actually went up to the air field, exploded a lot of petrol dumps, bomb dumps, our own battalion three inch mortar bombs went off for weeks afterwards and our own reserve ammunition dump. Another feature was that it double backed around - came back along the ridge and went through our food supply. We had six weeks tinned food supply and it burnt right through there. It didn't destroy the food but burnt the labels off the tins. For the next several weeks we didn't know what we were eating. You'd pick up a tin, you'd shake it and you'd think, oh this is evidently cheese and that was plum jam and all this sort of thing.

So the company commander's career, um, probably didn't flourish.

(Laughter) Oh, well, well, he was ... he turned out ... he was a good company commander. I was at loggerheads with him. For some reason or other I - I've done this all my life. If I think something's wrong I'll speak out, I don't just sit there and take it and a few times I - (laughter) I had spoken out and we were never the best of friends, but right at the end he was - he had us at Sanananda - he was a pretty good soldier. Although he - he died there - I appreciate that he was a ... probably he had the interests of the company at heart but he just did the wrong things at the wrong time occasionally.

Right. What about discipline? Were there occasional episodes, you know, you being driven into the ground with all this work, occasional episodes where people flared up

... Very rarely actually ...

... no problems in Moresby?

Well, there was one instance I recall, uh, not in our platoon and the chap involved, he was a very good friend of mine when we were in Bougainville. But Jim was - it was very hot and we used to usually dig a hole - there'd be three - one would be resting and one would be picking and one would be shovelling and you'd rotate - and this platoon commander came along - I won't mention his name - and Jim was a big bloke, come from Queensland and he was sitting in the shade see, and the officer was there for a few moments talking you know, and he said, 'Well, how about doin' a bit Jim?' Jim said, 'Oh well, when it's my turn'. He said - 'course this chap was a very, very ... Well he and his brother were - his brother was 21C - are a bit hard to get on with, I suppose would be the easiest way - polite way to say it - and he jumped up and said, 'This is an order, get in the hole and start digging', and Jim said, 'I will when it's my turn', and then this officer said, 'Well, for two pins I'd take me shirt off', he said, 'and have it out with you man-to-man'. So Jim said, 'Good!' So he takes his shirt off and they shape up, then he said, 'If you hit me, you're hitting an officer'. The idea of taking your shirt off was that you didn't have any insignia of rank. 'If you hit me, you know, you're hitting an officer', and Jim dropped his hand, and he said, 'You so-and-so', he said, 'don't ever get in front of me if we go into action'. The fellow walked away. (Laughter) I think he regretted it too.

(5.00) And ...

No, no, no repercussions from that, there was no repercussions.

Right, right.

The reason ... You asked me about, did we - when we were working those long shifts in the town, the situation - the mountain was getting a bit grim, and we saw a few of the casualties coming back and being loaded into the hospital ship, you know, and I - we used to speak to them when they were sitting in the - you know, laying in their stretchers in the ambulance waiting to be loaded on and, you know, some of the harrowing tales from these poor devils and they came to us one day ... we came back to the hotel at eight o'clock, had breakfast, as we had breakfast they told you to get cleaned up, you got cleaned up, got to go on parade. We went on parade out - the street outside the thing, our acting CO came along, gave us a very, very unusual talk which has been spoken about for the last forty years and ...

... tell me about the talk?

Well, the general gist was that we were going into the mountains immediately. There was a special force being created - composite force - our company was part of it and he was a first world war fellow and we knew him as the 'mad major' and every dealings I've had with him, that confirmed my view of him, but he's probably a bloody good soldier, I don't know. Uh, he - he said to us, 'You're going into the mountains, you'll all be killed, none of you will come back and the crows will pick your eyes out when you're dead'. Now whether he was trying to bolster us up or what, I don't know.

What was the reaction?

Well, the reaction was just stunned silence, you know. Anyway, next thing you know, ammunition was issued, got into the trucks and we headed into the mountains. This was after working all night and very little sleep for the last few weeks. We got to the foot of the mountains, not on the main Kokoda Trail. Someone had discovered that there were more than one trail over the mountains and it was decided that they would send a composite force up - we were on the left flank - to cover one of these possible alternate routes the Japs might take if they got around our holding force. All the fighting had been confined to one general track and they realised they were getting closer and closer to Moresby, that the ground was not beyond the realm of possibility that they would fan out and bypass our forward troops and get into Moresby from the rear - or from the rear of the troops - and we were not to know at that point, they also sent a force off on the right flank, which is a story about AIF I'll tell you in a minute.

We, um - we stuck to the - got off the trucks at the foothills. We found the force was commanded by a very, very well-know, a very, very well-regarded colonel. Uh, the force took his name - the Honner Force - uh, he ...

... Honner, spelt how?

H-O-N-N-E-R. He's a very well-known commander of ... I'll show you the story he wrote about the first attack in the desert. He was responsible for a very, very, well-organised offensive effort on Crete, he took over the 39th Battalion in the mountains when they lost their CO, and he did an excellent job. But his name in our unit was not very well-regarded because he - probably it was a forced march but part of the force was the 2/6th Commando Regiment and they were camped in the foothills and all they did was training. They told us, every morning they run up and down mountains and this sort of thing, whereas we were unloading ships and getting no sleep. His force consisted of a squadron of them in the front, then there was a company from the 49th Battalion, a company from the 36th Battalion and a company from the 55th Battalion. Now we were at the rear, and my platoon was the rear of the rear of the rear, and we went - and never once did he change the order of march. Now we were arriving in the bivouac areas at nine and ten o'clock at night to be fired upon by the troops that have been there since about four in the afternoon. We had two days rations when we went out, and we ...

... so to be fired upon. How did they?

Yeah, well they heard us crashing through the jungle and crashing through there and thought it was someone coming and opened up. Wounded one of our blokes one night. So, things got a little bit ... if ever you've been on a - the tailend of a force of about 400 strong going in a single file, you realise that the whole force would stop while the first troops crossed an obstacle such as a fast flowing river or something of that nature, but they would not wait until we crossed, and once they crossed they headed off their same head-long rate. By the time, we at the end, crossed, there was nothing in front of us but daylight and for the rest of the day you would see no one, and in the end, a group of us were separated - lost - and had to - had to return. We couldn't - couldn't find - we had no food, had nowhere to go, didn't know where to go. There was about nine of us came back out of the mountains, you know, as a lost - the lost group.

Were you in that group?

I was in that group.

(10.00) Could you tell me a bit more about that?

Well, we - we got to the point where we couldn't go any further. I mean, we had no food, we were - I was carrying a Bren gun at the time and it got too heavy for me and I collapsed, I just - you feel yourself going and I just fell to the ground, I was quite conscious and couldn't move a muscle, and some chap came along, I don't know who - he could've been Jap for all I knew - 'Was that gun too heavy for you?' and I just nodded so he took the gun and left the Tommy gun. Took the ammunition and left me some magazines and went on. Well the Tommy gun was a bit heav.... a bit lighter so I was able to stagger on a bit further and then my - some of my other mates there - they were all in various stages of distress, you know, thing and we decided, well we couldn't catch up, we had no food. Everytime we come to a bivouac area which might have been a native garden or something, the forward troops had eaten everything that was there, and we found the only way to survive was to take green bananas and various things and roast them in a fire - green paw-paws - and you'd get a bit of food that way. So we decided it was a hopeless episode to be several hours behind the main force with no way we even knew which way they had gone and so decided we would head back. I suppose it wasn't the right thing, it probably wasn't very soldierly, but at least we survived. So we headed back and of course, we had the problem of coming back with some of the fellows that were very sick. One chap - Jim Scrusse was an epileptic and we found him stiff on the side of the road, another fellow 'Sluggo' had ...

... Could you tell me - that was the one you were talking about before?

Yeah.

Tell me about that.

Well, my mate, Ted and I were going along and we found this chap stiff on the side of the track. Well, we stayed with him while we sponged his face with water till he came round and he told us he was an ep.... he was in an epileptic fit, which we knew nothing about - and he said if it ever happened again would we hold his tongue so he wouldn't swallow his tongue. Well it never happened but he was not very - not a very well person. Another one had a - had dysentery so bad that he couldn't wear his trousers because he didn't have time to take his

trousers down, so he was wandering along. We had an old bloke with us, he was one of the AIF blokes - he was a first world war bloke, he was in his fifties - and he'd, in all the training, in all the work we'd done, old Pop had no trouble in keeping up. Hit the mountains, he just packed it up completely, he was a [inaudible] utter old man, you know, he just So his mate was helping him back, it was Jimmy Drane. Jim had - he'd had a fall and apparently he seemed to be not with it all the time. He probably had concussion. Les, our corporal, he had - well I counted thirteen boils on his buttocks at one point - so God knows how many others he had - he was in a bit of a bad way. My mate Denny, he had a tropical ulcer on his leg which must have been painful. Other mate Larry, had a - he's only small - he's still around, I was talking to him on Sunday - he, um - he was physically exhausted. You know, didn't know where he was. Denny walked behind him, put his hand in his back, he takes three or four steps and Denny would push him again, he'd take three or four (laughs) - we got him back anyway. So we staggered back.

And what sort of reception did you get?

Oh not too bad. We got back to the - after much - a few problems with food and so forth. We - we caught a fish one day

In one of the streams?

In the stream. We came down to this stream and Les said to us, 'There must be a ...' The stream took a bend and there was - very fast flowing - but then there was a quiet backwater where - in this bend. He said, 'How many grenades have we got left?' and I had two grenades. They were the only grenades we had. So he said, 'You're the fittest, you chuck a grenade in that pool, we're sure to get a fish there.' So the first grenade I threw hit a submerged rock and bounced in the air, so that wasn't very successful, so we went over and we dropped the grenade in the pool. One fish came up. I don't know what he was, but he was a freshwater fish. I don't know, it was a salmon or something, but he was a huge fish and the trouble was he wasn't dead, he was only stunned.

How big when you say huge?

Well I'd - well, nine of us had a meal off him, so I'd say with - he was oversize - say he was probably nine or ten pound or something like this, but he was a big fish, and as we were watching he was gradually starting to get his life back and so if he got into the main stream we knew we were going to lose him. So we tried to catch him. There was Jimmy Scrusse, grabbed one of those creepers lawyerd vines you used to see Tarzan swinging on, tied it around his waist belt and plunged into the water to try and get him, but we had to pull him out more dead than alive. The fish got into the main stream, but then as he came down there was rapids very shallow, so my mate Ted, and I we raced over there, and we got between him and downstream and we managed to stop him going any further. He was too slimy and slippery to ... but we couldn't pick him up. You know, he kept flappin' around and splashing around. So I got a brainwave. I took a tin hat off and I hit him one blow behind the head, near the gills, that fixed him, so we all had a fish, but how to cook it? We then had a great discussion on what we were going - we had no utensil to cook it in. So Les settled it. He cut it up into nine parts - one part for each of us - and said, 'Suit yourself'. (laughs) I grilled mine on a - over the fire. Most of them boiled it in their mess tins but Les decided he was going to cook his in the old native way, pack it in mud, put it in the coals of the fire, you know, and bake it.

Unfortunately the fire wasn't hot enough ... wouldn't have enough heat in the fire, of course Les was sitting there eating mud covered raw fish. (laughs) I think my grilled fish was probably the best of the lot.

Right. So when you got back ...?

Well we got back to the base - it was the commando camp - they were camped at the foothills. Their CO was a very understanding person. We arrived at lunchtime. They got up from the table and let us have their meal. Uh, he kept us there for a day or two and then he - uh the army won't like me for this - then he said to us, 'Well you're eating me out of house and home, I hope - we're not drawing rations for you', he said, 'I'll give you a truck and take you back to your unit'.

(15.00) So he supplied a truck and we went back to where our battalion headquarters were - in a place called Evans's House. Unfortunately in the time we were away the unit had moved out. People there said to us, 'No they've gone and didn't leave a forwarding address', so the driver didn't know what to do with us. So he took us into Port Moresby and said, 'That's the headquarters over there, they're and fighting the campaign, they'll know where your unit is', and left us. So we went over there - I might add, by this time we were pretty disreputable. We were wearing the same clothes for quite a long time. All we had was our rifles and equipment. We went in and there was a young lieutenant there, we told him the story. We were separated from our unit. He told us he had a list of every unit that was operating, he pulled out the list and told us 'That the 55th Battalion was at a place called Evans's House', which we know they left there a couple of weeks ago. So that's the last address I've got', but he said, 'there's 'sigs' on the other side of the road', he said, 'they're in touch with every unit. Every night they - every unit must put in a situation report to sig bat and they will know where they were last night.' So we went across the road there and the young lieutenant looked up the list and he said, 'Evans's House', and we said, 'No, no, no, that's old'. So he went and got out the previous night's report and said they're at map reference so-and-so and so-and-so, which we said, 'Good where's that?' He said, 'No bloody idea, my map don't cover that reference'. (laughs) So we went out and sat on the kerb and said, 'What do we do now?' Nearby was a major sitting in a jeep with his head buried on the steering column and after a while he straightened up, looked at us - and we looked a disreputable group, you know, there was about a dozen of us by this time, we'd picked up a few other stragglers - and he said, 'What are you boys doing?' We said, 'We're trying to find our unit', and he said 'What is it?' and we told him. He says, 'I've never heard of it, but you're better off than me, I've lost the whole 16th Brigade'. They headed off on the right flank, when they arrived, and they'd gone out of contact and he was in the same problem that we had. So he - he laughed, he said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I find your unit, I'll tell you, you find my unit, you tell me.' We found his unit for him - accidentally. So anyway he drove off, we didn't know what to do. One of us said, he had a friend out in the ASC, which was the food suppliers, we go there at least we'll get a feed so hitched a ride over to - sixteen/seventeen mile out - they took us in. They had hot showers, gave us clean clothes you know, and cleaned us up. The MO treated our various ailments and they said, 'We're taking rations to your unit, day after tomorrow, so you can rest up here and go with the ration truck'. So we did. He only went to the top of the Koitaki Pass - he couldn't go any further with the big three tonner, so he unloaded us there and we set off walking up this track to try and catch up with the unit. Everywhere we asked, 'Oh yes, they moved through here two days ago'. 'No they weren't here.' So the next day we followed about four hours behind them, couldn't catch them. In the end, it was getting late

one afternoon, Les said to us, 'Look', we sat down, he said, 'We're wasting our time going any further, I think we should head back'. Then we heard a truck coming along and he said, 'Let's ask this driver, he'd know ...' It was a short four-wheel drive - short wheel-based four wheel drive - he said, 'If this driver doesn't know,' he said, 'we'll try and hitch a ride with him somewhere.' A truck come round the bend in the road and it's our own company driver, Robby Flood. He said to us, 'What are you doing here?', we said, 'We're trying to find the unit', he said, 'well, turn around, you're sitting outside their front door'. They were just behind the line of bushes we were sitting at. He said, 'I'm bringing the rations up that the others had ...', so we went in there and this Major Tuckerman met us, wanted to know where we'd been and what we'd done and we told him and he called us deserters and so forth and was going to have a real go at us. But, he said, 'Well bed down over there for the night', he said, 'reveille's at six o'clock' and there was a slight bit of a valley, very shallow, and there were three or four tents the other side. We went over there, bedded down for the night after a meal. He said, 'Reveille's at six'. Anyway in the morning we heard him yell 'All out!', you know, and of course we hadn't slept in a tent for some time so were slow coming out and he came over and said, 'If you don't get out', he said, 'I'll shoot the ridge pole out', so we hadn't moved and about five minutes later he fires a Vickers gun over the top of the tents. So we got out, but some of our boys didn't like being fired at, they fired back. We was - we found out later the Vickers gun sergeant had refused to fire on us. They had the Vickers gun covering the main track at battalion headquarters and he told the sergeant to shoot the ridge pole down, the sergeant refused. So he pushed him out of the way and grabbed the Vickers gun and turned it around himself. But the Vickers gun sergeant had locked it on a very high elevation so there was no danger really. But some of our boys had fired back - I didn't fire - they fired back, they didn't really lift the muzzles too high, some of the shots went through. Anyway ...

... went through where?

Eh?

Some of the shots went through where?

Oh, some of the tents. Anyway the major came over and he said to us, 'That got you out of bed', no animosity, you know. (laughs) Anyway he tried - first off he rang brigade, said he wanted us posted as deserters. So someone amongst us, I don't know who he was, he drew up a questionnaire of what we'd been doing, what the exercise consisted of, why we were separated, everyone answered these questions and we handed them in and as soon as he saw them he rang brigade and he said, 'I want that court martial stopped.' He said, 'This is dynamite', and they said, 'You asked for it', and anyway he sent the questionnaire and answer forms over and they dropped it and we heard no more. That was it, it was all finished, finalised.

(20.00) Why'd he drop it?

Eh.

Why'd he drop it?

Oh it was a - I think it was ... it indicted the army into a very, you know, I mean working people twenty-four hours a day, sending them off with no rest and sleep, uh, the order of

march should have been rotated. I mean, we ... everytime we moved in exercise we always rotated the forward troops today were the rear troops tomorrow and everyone got a taste of what it was like to be at the rear and in the front. You know, this was never done and I think there was a - naturally it was a rush exercise but it was very, very poorly executed. So anyway he told us, 'We're going up to Owers' Corner', which was the end of the road. The rest of the battalion was up there and we would, you know, be assigned to some unit, some other unit, because our company was naturally still scattered somewhere around the rest of the Owen Stanley's, so we marched and that's when we met the MO who picked our Jim as being an epileptic and we were assigned to a group right at Owers' Corner, guarding the LFC. We patrolled and so forth.

One of the patrols - there was Les Ison, our corporal, Larry, Ted, Denny and me - that's right the five of us - we had to go out. Someone had found a side track coming into the main track. Didn't know where it came from, where it was going, so we were assigned this day to go out there for an hour's march, set an ambush, stop anyone coming along and come back an hour before dusk. So we went out and set an ambush. Les was pretty good, he set a very ... so it was no good everyone being awake all the time - so a couple were on guard and I was resting and something disturbed me. I was laying there and I suddenly sat up and Les was watching me and he said, 'What disturbed you?' and I said 'I don't know', I said, 'I was dozing off and something disturbed me'. And he said, 'I can't hear, you must have been dreaming'. I sat there and couldn't hear a damn thing, I said, 'No, must have been dreaming'. So I laid down and as soon as I did, I said, 'Put your ear to the ground, Les'. We used to see this in the old cowboy movies, the Indian would put his ear to the ground, well it works. We heard thousands of feet tramping along. So Les whistled the others up and told them to be a bit alert. So a few moments later around the bend - and he had picked a straight stretch of track about a hundred yards long and we were at the of it and had a good field of view straight down the track - and saw the two scouts come around and they come acting very much like scouts should act, you know, leap frogging, coming down and keeping off the track. And when they come a bit closer Les challenged them. (laughs) Of course there was consternation - one of them stayed his ground, the other one scuttled back, he brought up an officer.

Is he Japanese?

No. When they first saw them, we were a bit confused, because we were dressed in khaki shirts and shorts, wearing tin hats, that was the general dress. These fellows had long green uniforms on and head gear we couldn't place. When I first saw the scouts I said to Les, 'They're not our troops'. He said, 'No', he said, 'not Yankee uniforms either', and he said, 'they're certainly not Japanese, but who are they?' We - we were looking at the possibility of perhaps being Dutch troops in the area - there were Dutch, you know, you ran into the Dutch troops occasionally around the place, or air force and so forth - and we Anyway when they got a bit closer because Les challenged them in English and they understood and one of them went back and brought this officer up and the officer came up and he spoke to the other scout for a few minutes and then I suppose the fact that we hadn't fired and the fact that we'd challenged in English made them indicate we were probably friendly - so he was a pretty brave man, he stepped out in the middle of the track and said, 'Show yourself', you know, and Les said, 'Who are you?' He said, 'I'm lieutenant so-and-so from the 2/2nd Battalion', and Les - he said, 'Who are you?' so Les gave me the Tommy gun he had, he said, 'Don't let them get this', you know and he stepped out in the bloody track and they're eyeing each other off from a few yards and he looked at Les in amazement, you know. Les was in khaki shirt and shorts

and tin hat and he had long green What the hell - what they had on their heads was slouch hats with camouflage net over it and you just couldn't pick from a distance, what it actually was. It was just an unusual shape. He eyed Les off and he said, 'What are you doing here?'. Les said, 'I'm stopping anyone coming down the track', and he said, 'You've done that', and he said, 'Where's Nauru?' Now Nauru was a town - village miles back into the mountains. Apparently the 16th Brigade's plan was to go off on the right flank the same as we had on the left flank and they come into Nauru. If the Japs were there, we were to attack them and then cut their force, because they were still advancing and they'd left the same as us, and they'd had the Japs between two forces - the - our forward forces at Imita Ridge and the other ones at Nauru, but of course by this time the Japs had started to retreat. So they were nowhere near Nauru, so while he was talking to us, a runner came up and says, 'Excuse me, sir', he said, 'captain so-and-so wants to what the hold-up is'. He told him he got a problem, anyway the captain came up and he looked at us in astonishment - or he looked at Les in astonishment - we hadn't shown ourselves at that point, and he said, 'Where are you from?', and Les told him and he said, 'What were your orders corporal?', and Les said, 'To stop anyone coming down the track', and he started to laugh. He said, 'You've stopped the 2/2nd Battalion, the 2/1st Battalion, 16th Brigade Headquarters, and the 2/3rd Battalion, you've stopped something like 3,500 men'.

(25.00) He said, 'How many men have you got?', and Les said, 'Stand up fellas', and the four of us stood up and they - we had about four rifles and a Tommy gun and we stopped the whole 16th Brigade dead in its tracks. (laughs) At least I don't think - he said, 'I can guarantee you one thing', he said, 'there are no Japs on this track'. So we said - he said, 'Uh, you lead us back to, you know, where you came from', we said, 'Okay'. So we led them back to the main track at Owers' Corner and they took all that day and the rest of the next day to go through in single file - the whole damn 16th Brigade and we found the Brigade for that major. (laughs) We never found him to tell him.

Right. Um, so after that experience up on the Owen Stanley's, the Kokoda Trail, you then went back to your base?

Yeah, we were up there - the 16th Brigade went up, the 25th Brigade had gone up to reinforce the troops that were up there. They'd relieved the 39th Battalion, our other half the 53rd, which was then disbanded and merged with us after that, uh, and the 21st Brigade, which was the first AIF brigade up there. Our - the 3rd Battalion in our brigade - the ... that was the 3rd Battalion - they stayed on the ridge and they went right through to Gona and they were never - they weren't relieved - they went straight through. They went right over the mountains. Well we were there for some weeks till the fighting - and the Japs fell back and we were - we were guarding the LFC and patrolling, you know, the various tracks and trails and various things around and we went back to - we were relieved and went back to Moresby to regroup. We got back there I suppose in late October - it'll be in there somewhere - and we went right back into Moresby and we dug a few more defensive positions around the place to keep us busy. And then in November we got word we were going to be flown over to Sanananda to - oh, flown over the mountains to take part in the cleaning up the Japs in the - they'd fallen back in these three beachheads, Buna, Gona, and Sanananda. So we were re-equipped with Owen guns - all our Tommy guns were withdrawn - we were re-equipped with Owen guns.

Properly trained with Owen guns?

Never fired a shot. I was the only one that fired a shot out of an Owen gun. We got the first Owen gun in the battalion come to Les and he came down to me one day and said, 'I've got a new gun here', and it was in a cardboard carton unassembled, so we stripped it - the carton, and we put it together, it was a pretty simple gun, and it felt quite good. Then Les got a call up to the company headquarters and he came back very dissatisfied and he said, 'A private's got to have the gun, not an NCO', and he said, 'do you want it?', I said, 'I'd love it'. 'Well you've got to find someone to take your Bren gun off you', and I had a ready made customer there. A bloke who was a - a very - he came in from the carrier platoon that was disbanded and he was very, very keen on automatic weapons, hated rifles, and he wanted to help me clean the Bren gun cause I used to guard that gun jealously. You know, I mean, most Bren gunners did, you wouldn't let anyone fiddle with it particular a bloke who didn't know anything about it. Now he's in the tent and he used to - his mates told me - there was three of them, they came in together - and they told me that he was - his nickname was 'Spanner', he'd muck around, he could fix anything and work on anything, so I showed him how to work the Bren and oh he loved it. About every five minutes in the day he wanted to clean the Bren gun with me. (laughs) So I said to 'Spanner', 'Do you want the Bren gun?' He said, 'Oh I love it', he said, 'I'll take it, but what are you going to do'. I said, 'I got a new one, I got the Owen'. So he took my Bren gun.

Was the Owen better than the Bren?

Well it was lighter, it was manoeuvrable and I could see it was a very simple gun. I mean it was only about ten pound, the other one weighed twenty-six or twenty-seven pound, it was a bit heavy to carry for a little bloke. I was very thin then and so I had a gun and no ammunition. So I carted the thing around while we were doing our work parties and everywhere you went the different troops would say, 'what's that, what you have you got there', you know and you'd see this Owen gun and one of our ex-platoon blokes - when we were in the Owen Stanley's they had called for volunteers to create a pack transport crowd using horses, mules, donkeys, whatever they were and some of our fellas had been left behind, didn't go into the mountains. They might have had minor ailments, they volunteered for this and this Jim Hutton was one of those, he went into it and of course they then become cowboys. They had their felt hats rolled up like sombreros and they were given a .38 to carry rather than a rifle, they had it strapped down on their leg, tied down and had a cartridge belt filled with blasted ammunition and they used to be practising quick on the drawn, you know, all this sort of rot. Jim come to visit us one day and he had this cartridge belt on and I said, 'Where'd you get all the .38s' because .38 pistol ammunition was almost - officers got twelve and that's all they ever saw - 'Where'd you get all the .38s Jim?', he said, 'They're not .38s, they're nine millimetre', and I said, 'What's that?' and he said - you know my gun was a nine millimetre - and he said, 'Oh you put the nine millimetres through the .38s', he says, 'they're almost the same size'. It is, it's just a fraction smaller, but thhe nine millimetre was rimless, the .38s needed a rim on them so they wouldn't go right into the chamber. What they did they tied a bit of cord just in that - in the groove and that I said, 'Can you get me some from the ammunition dump?' and he said, 'Oh you can have all these', so he emptied the cartridge belt, so I had about forty or fifty rounds there, so a friend and myself found a beach - I don't know, we were a couple of hundred yards from the beach - and we fired a few shots out of the Owen gun ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Right. This is tape two of the interview of Jack Stevens. It's side one of tape two.

Right. If you just repeat that last bit. You went down

We went down to the beach after dark that night and - we only had one magazine but we had about forty-fifty round the hilt, thirty-three round the Owen bag - so we fired a few shots, and a burst of two to exhaust the ammunition and just get the feel of the gun. And then of course we heard lights coming on everywhere and voices, what - they thought the invasion started, because they heard a strange gun firing on the waterfront and so we very smartly cleaned the gun and scuttled back to camp and went to bed and never said a word about it. Next morning Les said to me, 'How'd that Owen gun fire?' I said, 'Pretty good', and he said, 'You bugger, I knew it was you firing there last night'. (Laughs) With no more ammunition and no more gun until we got word that we were going to Sanananda, then Owen guns appeared from everywhere and we got three per section and all the ammunition you could carry. Oh well, 250 rounds per gun.

Right. And - but ...

... And no - not one person except me fired that gun until the first day at Sanananda when the attack started and they fired their gun for the first time. They had no idea what it was going to fire like or problems, a bit of - it was a good gun - it was stable, there was no problems with it, and no one had any problems.

Right. So could you describe going over to Sanananda? How did you go up?

Well, we flew over. The word - came word that we were going to be flown over and someone did their homework very well. They did a - the exercise was we were ... DC3 planes would hold, uh, sixteen, plus some stores, the loads were worked out, that every plane had at least one Bren gun, probably two. The stores were worked out that there was a cross section of all that you need. You wouldn't carry all bully beef on one plane, all ammun.... You know, you had cross section of food stuffs, cross section of ammunition, you had grenades, you had .303, nine millimetre, you had the whole - each plane had a load worked out scientifically that would - if that plane ... they didn't say crashed - but if that plane was separated, they gave the people on board a fighting chance of surviving because they had food, they had ammunition. So we went over the airstrip. It probably took us three days to get there. The first day we took off in our plane. We got to the mountains - very heavily clouded the mount.... with cloud - so the plane turned back. The second day we took off again, about six, went over the - over the sign and the plane in front of us ... It was only a narrow grass strip, the plane in front of us crashed on take.... on landing, which wasn't very happy because the other half of our platoon was in that. It hit the ground and undercarriage collapsed and the plane crashed and we were just touching down behind them and the pilot - a very good pilot - he just gunned the engines and we just took off and as we went up we see a plane cracked up on the airstrip which wasn't very, very nice. We went back to Moresby and we had to sleep the night again.

People killed in the crash?

Mmm?

People killed?

No. No one hurt even, not even a scratch. It's one of those - they weren't even strapped in. They were just sitting on aluminium bench seat each side of the plane with stores in the middle. Noone had any - no door on the plane, no - no, uh, seatbelts, nothing to hold onto, no handrail, no nothing and not a person got hurt. Some of them were very scared. Two of them still won't fly today. (laughs)

I can understand that.

I can understand it. Anyway, the third day, we went down to the airstrip again and our plane, the DC3, one of the motors wouldn't start and so they had a standby plane which was a Lockheed - I'm not too - it might have been a Lockheed Lodestar I think, they were using then - and we went ... But we moved the stores into that and as we were getting on, one bloke put his hands ... he said, 'You last four - it will only hold twelve people'. I find out now that was a Qantas plane manned by Qantas pilots - civilians. I found that out from a chap in the air force later. So anyway they left four people behind, so our plane was very fast. It was much faster than the DC3s and we landed ahead of some of the others when we were on our flight.

You were on the group that went or the group that ...?

Yeah, on the group that went. And when we landed this Tom and I, we were unloading the plane - we were two of us in there throwing the stores out. They gave us three minutes to unload the plane. All we had to do was throw the stores out, leave 'em on the ground, everyone else had to take off. As soon as the stuff was unloaded, they all grabbed their weapons and gear and went. I grabbed my Owen gun and gear and then I found our Bren gun was standing forlornly. The Bren gun was one of the blokes left behind - the Bren gun and ammunition (laughs) so Tom had already taken off, so I grabbed the Bren gun and ammunition and I staggered off after him carrying - carrying the damn lot and anyway, Tom was a pretty good bloke. He was a terrific soldier and a terrific person, you know, he looked back and saw me straggling along with all this, so he came back, and the pair of us took it in turns to carry the extra load.

(5.00) But we couldn't catch up with the rest of the company and they used to stop for ten minutes every hour on a march, but we didn't because we were trying to catch up with them. We'd just come in sight of them and their ten minutes were up and off they'd go again. So anyway, the second hour we managed to get there and get them to relieve us of the gun. And the blokes screamed all day because they were going along carting a Bren gun as well as their own weapon. So later in the day, we got the idea of stripping the thing down and each carrying a part. (paper noise) I'm carrying a part on my shoulder.

Mmm. You were just looking at a photograph?

A photograph here, later in the day, and you'll see that various people are carrying parts of a Bren gun, and I've got a bit of it on my shoulder, besides my other weapon.

And so where were you going?

We ended up at the Soputa, twenty - twenty-odd to twenty-two miles I think, we got to this village of Soputa which was on the banks of the Girua River which was about four or five miles from the front line at Sanananda. We stayed overnight at Soputa, poured like hell that night. We all got absolutely saturated. In the morning we - the rest of the blokes caught up with us. They had been brought in by another plane, which landed at the small air strip at Soputa - they didn't have to march as far as we did - and the weapons were all checked. We got our ammunition after lunch - B Company marched the four or five miles up the front line and relieved the 16th Brigade. Our company ...

B Company relieved the 16th Brigade?

Yeah. They - they were just a handful left. We took over from the 2/3rd Battalion. I think my platoon relieved the - relieved one of the battalions. They were very, very glad to see us.

But how - how can a platoon relieve a battalion?

Well we had thirty-eight in the platoon and none of the battalions there were - they were down to about forty or fifty men. You know they were abso.... they'd come all the way over the mountains, they'd a fair bit of fighting and a fair bit of drop outs due to illness and sickness I would believe, they were like us at the end, we only had about sixty in the battalion at the end of the campaign. The wastage is quite solid in conditions like that.

Right. So, um - so what happened then?

Well we were - no one told us we were going to put in an attack in the next ... they sent the 2/3rd fellas. When we relieved them they were very glad to see us and ...

What did they say?

Oh first of all they wanted our felt hats which we were very reluctant to hand over, then they said you won't need it after tomorrow morning because you're putting in an attack the next morning, that was news to us. So anyway they persuaded us to give us - to give them their - our felt hats which we did.

Why did they want your felt hats?

Well, they were being relieved. They were wearing tin hats for the last three months and the felt hat was much lighter, shadier and they were not going to be in the front line any more so they needed the felt hats which they probably wouldn't get issued for some considerable time when they got back to base. Practically every Yank you saw walking 'round there - we didn't worry about our felt hats after the next morning. Practically every Yank you saw walking 'round there was wearing a felt hat. (Laughs) We didn't, we wore the tin hats because we were in the front line but anyway, the company was put into the front line and we said, 'Where are the Japs?' and they said, 'About thirty yards up there', but it was very, very thick jungle. You couldn't see a thing. And ...

How did you move into the front line?

Mmm?

How did you actually move into the front line?

Well, that was rather odd too, because we mar.... we walked up. There was a road in Sanananda - the famous or infamous Sanananda Road - we walked or marched up there and then the company commander, must have had a guide with him, and he said - you know, we'd gone past the battalion headquarters, you know, cook houses and that, and he said, 'Just wait here', and we just flopped down on the road, laying on our haversacks as a normal thing. You lay on your back with your haversack as a sort of a pillow and I looked across and there's a square weapon pit on the side of the road and there's just the head and shoulders of a Yank there with a - one of their Browning .30 calibre machine guns, you know, quite a lot of belting and he was just a few feet from me and I'm laying there and our heads are almost, you know, eye-ball to eye-ball and I said, 'What are you doing?' and he said, 'Guarding the road'. I said, 'From what?' He said, 'From the Japs'. I said, 'Where are they?' He said, 'About forty yards up there'. Well in a split second there wasn't a bloke on the road (laughs) I can tell you. No one had told us we'd reached the front line. (Laughs) Well actually it was a few yards further on but we ... he was a bit exaggerated, it was probably eighty yards from where the - from where he was, but it was not a very nice thing to say laying in the middle of the road. No one said, 'You've reached the front line, there's Japs just up there'. So we hit the side of the road and then the company commander came back and we were allocated the various positions just off the left hand side of the road and the 2/3rd fellas told us we were attacking the next morning, which was news to us. No one had told us.

Could you describe your living conditions? What you'd come to?

Well, they just had a hole dug in the ground. Uh, they weren't very deep because if you dug deep you struck water, so you kept them shallow. It didn't rain that night so we slept fairly dry. The holes didn't have much water in them at that point either. But oh, it was - you know, it was a funny feeling because it was no different from being in the manoeuvres or anything else because - except for one short burst that was fired high late in the afternoon - they must have heard us, you know, the noise of crashing around and someone just fired a burst from a ... and you heard them going over. But it was fairly high but you could tell they were probably just - someone might have just cleared a gun or just We had no idea what was going to happen the next day.

(10.00) Anyway in the morning we were up early. We had a - they gave us a hot breakfast and we had to attack at seven-thirty. The 49th Battalion had arrived at the same time. They were on the right hand side of the road and B Company, we were to move forward in conjunction with them to cover their flank and so at seven-thirty we, ah, had four artillery guns back at Soputa - they put over a bit of a barrage. All that ever did was to let the chaps know that something was happening because they had very well constructed bunkers and the artillery, particularly the, you know, the few numbers we had didn't make much - much impact on their bunkers - and so at seven-thirty we attacked.

Well, let's talk about this in detail, because it's a very important episode. What sort of preparations would go on in the hours immediately before ...?

Well, we had breakfast and then while the artillery had a - you know, laid down a bit of a barrage, we were brought back from the front line positions back to company headquarters,

and I hopped in a hole with a - one of the cooks, [Don Byrne?]. While the, you know, artillery - because artillery is supposed to You know, we're at very close quarters there and it wasn't a thing to stay up and twenty or thirty yards from the Japs while you put down an artillery barrage of twenty-five pounders. So we - we were withdrawn back to, I think, company headquarters, about eighty yards back from our forward positions and I was sharing a hole with the And then we had to - when the word was given - when the barrage lifted we were to move forward from there and of course [inaudible] I didn't go because the first bloke that jumped out was our platoon sergeant and he said, 'Into 'em boys!', and then got shot right between the eyes and fell down dead and that's not very nice on your very first day in action, to see the, you know, a friend and a - someone who had trained you just (claps hands) like that, so I just stayed put in the hole and then Don shook me by the hand and said, 'Best of luck, Jack' and of course I couldn't stay then when he wished me the best of luck, I had to go. I'm not a very brave person. But then again I wasn't going to stay when the rest of them were going, so I went. And so I was a bit lucky, I had an Owen gun which had a long sling, so I had it slung around me shoulder so I could fire it with one hand, because I had to carry a shovel to dig in when we reached our objective. So I'm racing forward, firing the Owen gun in the right hand with the shovel in the left hand and the shovel had a T-piece handle, it caught on a vine, held fast, pulled me off balance. I fell flat on the gun and was winded and I laid there trying to get me breath back and one of these Japanese medium machine guns, the 'Juki Woodpecker' we used to call it, traversed right across the top of me. I didn't know, until I saw all the bushes being suddenly chopped off. You know, chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, there was just nothing, and I realised if I had been standing I'd have been chop, chop - I'd have been chopped off too, but I was laying on the ground trying to get my breath back. So it stopped, I got my breath back and I went up and rejoined the fellas.

What were they doing?

Digging in. They wanted my shovel so I dug a hole very quickly. I'm not a very - one for hard labour but I had five shovel fulls of dirt in the air at the one time before the first [inaudible]. I had a pretty good weapons pit as it turned out. Hopped in, threw the shovel to the others and - we were in groups of three - the other two fellas dug a hole and we settled in and of course then we just carried on the fight for a while.

How - how were you fighting in those conditions?

We were just firing. I mean, we - there was shots coming at us but we didn't know - we couldn't see a damn thing and you know, two or three of the fellows saw them. There was obviously a lot. The 49th had a - the other side, they went right in. They had a - but our - our objective was to move forward, protect their flank so that they had protection on the sides because they were on the right hand side of the road and we were on the left hand side of the road. So we dug our - our holes and flopped in them and just, you know, kept up a bit of fire. I mean, someone would fire, so you'd fire back, you couldn't see them but you could hear them, and you could fire, so we fired back and forth for a while and then 49th - there was a hell of a fight going on over there. They got absolutely annihilated. I think they had about sixty to seventy percent casualties. I have seen the figures but it was pretty - pretty substantial. Then after a while - hard to judge the time - things quietened down. You couldn't get that onslaught forever you know, it sort of - things quietened down, everyone stops shooting, everyone stops to take stock of what's going on and the two fellows and me discovered the hole they had dug was rather small and a bit - so they said to me, 'Chuck the

shovel over, we want to enlarge our hole', and I said - they said, 'Cover us while ...'. They both had rifles, so I just crouched there with the Owen gun while they dug a hole a bit deeper and a bit wider, and not a shot fired, and I said to them, 'Will you cover me while I enlarge my hole'. I realised then that the one I'd dug which I thought was being extravagant was a bit - was a bit tight you know, it was a bit small, and a bit shallow, and it used to be you couldn't move your shoulders so I thought, oh well I'll enlarge this. So I plonked the Owen gun up on the parapet, got the shovel and was crouched over digging - standing in the hole digging - and I always seemed to suffer from a - even now I have a bad back at times - and I developed a crick in the back and you don't make very many mistakes and survive. Well I did.

(15.00)I straightened to relieve my back and a damned Jap in the tree had taken a machine gun up there and he fired a full magazine at me from point blank range. The first I knew, the ground around me exploded. Every bullet that hit kicked up the dirt, you know, about eighteen inches and all I know was, it was just an absolute blast of sound and the ground exploded in this flying dirt and I was deafened from the noi.... the high velocity bullets going close make a real ear-piercing crack - and these were close - and there was just this continual roar and crash and I just - knees buckled and I just flopped in the bottom of the hole. I didn't know if I was dead or what I was. I was just absolutely stunned by the suddenness of it, and the ears were ringing, I had dirt in my eyes, ears, mouth and I was absolutely stunned silly. I didn't know what had happened and as the ears slowly cleared, I heard voices and one bloke said, 'He must have been killed, he was right in the middle of the burst'. The other said, 'He might only be wounded. We'd better go and see if we can help him' and that sort of snapped me out of it and I thought, 'Where's me gun?' I reached up and grabbed the gun which was still on the parapet and one of the voices said, 'Oh, he's alive, he just moved', and I thought, 'They're talking about me'. So I stuck me nose up and 'Mousey' and Jack at the next hole, they were peering across and 'Mousey' had - uh, Jack had crawled across and he was stretched full length between the holes trying to look in and 'Mousey' had him by the ankles, he was going to pull him back if they started shooting again. The chap never fired again, I don't know whether he ran out of ammunition or whether someone else got him or what. Anyway, he said to me, 'Are you hurt?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'You must be.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'You were in the middle of the burst', he said, 'there wasn't one loose shot'. He said, 'The whole thirty shots were ...' It must have been that the gun was vibrating and just sprayed them out, I was right in the middle of the cone as it came down and they said, they just lost sight of me in the spray of dirt and there wasn't one shot that was more than a foot away from me. I never got - never got hit. So, you know, you make mistakes and you - not very often you manage to get out of it. Anyway we were there for most of the day and there was occasional shooting.

One thing happened was that, um, up the road later - we were told there was a meal on and no one had come to relieve us. I don't know why but some of them had a meal during the day, I didn't - but late in the afternoon an army engineer, captain, came wandering up the road, looking at the state of the road and when he got opposite us, 'Mousey' Ball and Jack McMahon said to him, 'We wouldn't go any further Sir', and he said, 'Why?' They said, 'This is - we're the front line. We are it.' He said, 'Oh, the 49th's been through, they've cleaned all the Japs out', and they said, 'Well, there's still Japs shooting at us', and he came over and was crouched there talking to them when our other two companies A and C Company moved up the other side of the road behind the 49th to consolidate what the 49th was reputed to have cleaned out, but they hadn't. They'd bypassed - positions hadn't fired, positions had been overrun and they got absolutely 'stonkered'. There was - you've got no idea, it was absolutely instantaneous, there was a blast of machine gun fire that you would never hear again, and

those two companies were almost annihilated in the one blow and this fellow flopped into the drainage ditch on the side of the road and of course, we fired to try and give them covering fire and, you know, and when it was over all we could hear him say, 'Oh my God, oh my God' and he crawled out of the ditch and he crawled back. He didn't crawl, he was like a snake going back through the mud, you know, on the way back and all we could hear was his voice was that he was going. He was standing in the road a few seconds ... They wouldn't fire at him because they had a trap set and he was standing in full view in the road and no one had fired at him and he was right in the full flight of all the ... I never saw him again and all we could hear was him saying, 'Oh my God', as he was crawling back. (Laughs)

You've been talking about three men. How were you connected with the rest of the platoon and the ...?

Well, the idea was that we were on the ... our position - our job They put - we had ten in the section and we were in groups of three and our three were to keep contact with the road so that the line wouldn't veer away from the road. We were to keep parallel with the road and the others were to take their line from us. So there was 'Mousey' Ball and Jack McMahon right on the edge of the road and there was me and the rest of them when - there was a few feet between me and the next bloke because I didn't see anyone there. I'd hear them, but I couldn't see them because of the nature of the thing. I mean, they were - the rest of the company was scattered out onto the - my left and then some time after that [inaudible] with A and C Company, our platoon runner came up and he said, 'Max', he was our platoon commander, 'he wants you back at platoon headquarters'. So I got out of my nice well-constructed deep hole very reluctantly and I went back with Billy to platoon headquarters which was back about oh, about thirty or forty yards ...

Were you exposed when you were going back?

Yeah. Oh, you used you know, at times you got to - wandered around, anyway I got back there and Max said to me, 'I want you to act as runner while Billy's going away on a mission'. I said, 'What do I do?' He says, 'Just occupy Billy's weapon pit over there and be there if I need you'. So I flopped into Billy's weapon pit, and he didn't have a shovel and he had constructed his weapon pit with his bayonet and his bare hand and it was about three or four inches deep and it was a long, shallow hole to lay in, you know, and I flopped in there and I was in full view of a Japanese sniper. I was laying there, you know, and then crack, he put a shot dead in line with me but six inches short in the front of the - in the ground in the front of the hole. 'Where in the hell did that come from?' Before I could work out the direction on where it came from, he fired again and this time he put it about six inches in the back of the hole and I thought 'God, he's got me bracketed here', you know, 'where's he coming from, where's it coming from', and then before I could do anything he fired again and he got the length right but he was wide.

(20.00) He was on my right and then he fired on the left and I thought, 'He must be able to see me, but he's either playing with me or he's ...' But he fired about ten or twelve shots and each was short or long or wide either side and I don't think he was playing because you don't do that. I mean, if you see a target you hit it, but he must have just been a poor shot or - I don't know. Had me right ...

What were you doing lying there? I would have moved out.

Well, Max said to stay there and you do what you were told, see and I thought the only way I'm going to get him is to sit up and take a shot and as soon as I sit up I was going to expose myself and make him an easy shot and the thought had dawned on me that I must have been deep enough to throw his aim off and I was probably safer staying put than if I were to try and move. So anyway Max yell... I heard Max yelling out and I looked over and the rule was that anyone who was on his feet and moving had to be given every opportunity to get under cover, even if it meant someone in a hole getting out and, you know, and taking cover behind a tree or a bush or something.

Why was that?

Well, the man was a visible target and they could line him up and you had to give him a chance to get into cover, whereas you were not visible and you had to ... You know, if a man was moving on a mission or something and you had to make way for him to give him a chance because they could line up

Musical chairs with a difference.

Eh!

Musical chairs with a difference.

Differently, but unfortunately poor old Billy paid for it because Max yelled out to me to make way for him and I dived out and took cover behind a decent sort of a tree. Billy come running up crouched, took a dive into the hole, the Jap fired again and (claps hands) Billy was killed. So I looked across in amazement. I mean, the fellow fired ten or twelve shots at me and missed me, he takes one shot at a moving target and - and kills him outright. You know, now you - was he a bad shot or was he playing with me, I don't know. I'll never know what But then I heard Max yelling again. I looked over and Max was out of his hole and he was moving his rifle up and down in a - our officers took their insignia off and carried ordinary equipment and rifles so they were undistinguishable, because Japs had a nasty habit of knocking off senior NCOs and officers, so they - instructions were everyone was to use Christian names, no salutes, no medals. (Laughs) They didn't mind, we didn't salute anyway. So anyway, Max was yelling at me, he said, 'Come on, we're moving out', and I said, 'Max, Billy's been hit', and Max turned towards me and the Jap fired again. Instead of getting him right through the head he just cut a furrow across skull. You know, I mean, he turned to look towards me and - and so I ran over to Max to see if I could help him and he got up and he had blood streaming down his head and he said - I said, 'Are you all right?' He said, 'I'm okay, I'll look after Billy'. He said, 'Get after the platoon and tell them - tell Les what's happened', because we lost our sergeant in the morning and Les was the senior corporal. Well, I didn't know but some genius, I suppose for the want of a better word, it was an idiot, had directed that two platoons of B Company were to cross the road to go to the assistance and take the pressure off the survivors of A and C Company. That meant that we had to move across the enemy front, across an open road You know I was just turned nineteen, not a military man and even I would think that would be a futile exercise. Well we suffered quite heavily. So I took off after them and when I got to the side of the road I - the thing is - I don't know, I don't suppose anyone in our group had seen it, but I'd never seen - you can't see bullets but in this instance the fighting had been going on since seven-thirty that morning, it was now about

five-thirty in the afternoon and there was a whole pall of gunsmoke - it was a swampland, there was no breeze and it just sort of hung there - you weren't conscious of it. 'Til you got to the side of the road and the Jap machine guns firing down the road, the bullets were churning through this stuff and it was about eight feet wide and about six feet high and just looked like a solid brick wall - and they were churning through this gunsmoke and nothing would make me go through that. I propped, and I flopped into the drainage ditch there and there was one of our fellows there had been chopped through the thigh and he was putting a - he wasn't bad, I said, you know, 'Can I help you Joe?' He said, 'I'm okay', I said, 'Did the platoon go over there?' He said, 'Some of them made it' and I said, 'I got to go, I've got a message for Les'. He said, 'Well wait a moment or two until they stop to reload', 'course when there's no more targets they stopped, Joe said, 'Go!' and of course I've always said I don't know what the world record was for a standing broad jump, starting from a muddy drainage ditch in full military equipment and boots, but I broke it. I took one gigantic leap and I was over the road and into the jungle the other side before they fired again. It was absolute - anyway I, um, I made it, then I caught up with the crowd and we found out that ... Because Les had - when he was regrouping the other platoon commander was wounded and Les took charge of the two groups - what there was remnants of the two groups - and he was sorting us out because he was much as pleased to see me when I arrived because he'd put me down as a casualty. Anyone that wasn't there was obviously a casualty, and, uh, I think we had about twenty out of the about two platoons that had dug in and spent the night there. So it was one day in a war. Half the time I don't know what I was doing, I was just sort of running here and running there, but I was obviously running fast enough to dodge everything that was thrown at me.

(25.00) You mentioned one of the people in that photograph who saved your life twice at Sanananda?

Oh, Tom. Mmm.

Could you talk about him?

Yeah, well, Tom was a - he was a good soldier. I mean a fighting soldier. He couldn't stand authority, he didn't like - he's like one of these fellas. When we were in the mountains - or when the company was in the mountains - Tom volunteered when they ...

... Tom who?

Tom Watkins his name is.

Could you spell that?

Mmm?

Could you spell that? Could you spell his name?

W-A-T-K-I-N-S. He was at - when the company was on that Honner force and they were somewhere in the mountains and we were across at Owers' Corner somewhere in the mountains, Tom turned up there one day. He'd volunteered to head across the mountains alone, uncharted country, unmapped, he reckoned he knew the general idea of where the main ... He came looking for mail and tobacco for the boys. All he carried was a rifle and a

haversack. They filled it with mail and tobacco and he headed back - he found his way back. He was (laughs) ... Anyway we got to Sanananda. Tom, the very first day should have been killed because the group he was with, the three he was with, two of them were killed, Tom was hit - or he was knocked out - and he rejoined us later - and we asked him what had happened. Well he and his group of three, had got ahead of the rest of us, came under heavy fire. They had a Bren gun, a number two, and Tom had an Owen gun. Well he was knocked out in the burst that killed the other two. When he came around, his Owen gun was gone and he was lying there, but there was also Japs in line with him. They had moved forward and were firing at us and there was about a dozen of them he told me, they had one of them Nambu machine guns, which are very similar to a Bren gun. Where he was lying - he didn't know what happened, he had a hell of a headache - and he was lying there, he could see his two mates were dead, the Bren gun had been destroyed and someone had pinched his Owen gun, so he was unarmed. Now he was in a bit of a quandary. Now Tom is a good thinker and he thought 'Now how am I going to get out of this problem', he didn't panic. So he laid there for a while - the Japs obviously thought he was dead - and he observed what their machine gunner was doing. He'd fire off a magazine, he would lower the butt to the ground, he'd take the magazine off, put it down, put a replacement - lift off the bun [sic] - the butt and keep firing. So Tom reckoned the best time to get going was when he started to lower the butt - he was empty and that's what he did. He didn't have much worry about the riflemen because the Japanese rifle's a long rifle and a bit clumsy for that sort of thing. They did have carbines, but most of them there had the older, you know, rather long ri... and they had a very awkward bolt on them. They had a little dust cover which used to make it very difficult for a - a quick reload. So Tom got up and ran like hell and he got back and someone said to him, 'What happened?' He said, 'I don't know, I was knocked out', and they said, 'Well take your hat off'. He had a tin hat on and the bullet had hit him in the tin hat, penetrated and stayed there. Now, tin hats won't stop bullets, that's been proved many times, but this one must have been a faulty cartridge or it had gone through something, but it was stuck in the hat and he had a hole in his hat and the bullet was still there and the blow on the hat had knocked him out. So Tom, you know, he was really - anyway he ... We had an attack a couple of weeks later and that was a rather disastrous - and I got trapped in front of the machine gun post with an empty Owen gun, I was so close to the gun they were firing - I was beneath their field of fire - and I was trapped there, everyone else around me had been killed or gone and

I just turn this.

Mmm.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B.

Right. This is side two of tape two of the interview with Mr Jack Stevens.

Yes, we had to put an attack in, uh, 19th of December. So the platoon was greatly reduced in strength. There were three platoons and a rifle company, so they decided to disband one platoon, uh, which was ten, and give the personnel between eleven and twelve to give us two reasonable strength platoons. Uh, they were both commanded by sergeants - or Les had been a corporal to start with but he was promoted to sergeant immediately - and we had an objective which was not on the road, it was further round, across a clearing to get to a

particular Japanese strongpost. So the idea was that 11 Platoon was to attack across the clearing, 12 Platoon was to go and give us cover fire and [inaudible] arrangements. You'd never believe that things could happen

First off, 12 Platoon was to go off early - we had no radios, we had no telephones - so the idea was the sound for 11 Platoon to move out was - the signal for 11th Platoon was the sound of 12 Platoon's firing. We knew the sound of the Brens, Owens and rifles and so there'd be no mistake, one person was designated to go to 12 Platoon, wait till they got into position and then report back to when they started firing. I was that person. So off goes 12 Platoon, I left 11 Platoon, saw it out along this particular small track. I go along with them, travelling the rear with their platoon commander, a sergeant, and then he made a mistake. I always thought the Japs had sat in on our briefing because the timing was so beautiful - he turned to me now, he said - oh I was 'Stevo' then, that's all I got in the army I might add. That was my nickname, which was a good thing to know because it's not derogatory like a lot of these people got. He said, 'Righto, Stevo', he said, 'you can - we're almost there. Go back and tell Les to move out as soon as we start shooting'. Now the original arrangement was I went until they got into position. But I mean, there I was, wanted to be back with my own mates anyway, and the sergeant tells me to, you know, to go, so I went. And I went back and just as I got inside of my crowd all hell broke loose from where 12 Platoon were and I stopped and looked back in surprise because I knew there'd been insufficient time for them to complete the march, get themselves into firing position and open up. What had happened is the Japs were [inaudible] there and they walked into a, you know, uh, Japs who shouldn't have been there and they were fighting for their own survival, not giving us covering fire at all. But my crowd, someone heard the shooting, looked up, saw me approaching and they yelled out, 'That's 12 Platoon, there's Stevo, let's go', and off they went. They didn't wait for me to - when I heard that I ran after them yelling them to stop, there was a mistake, you know, to reconsider, but no, they just ignored me and kept going. They probably couldn't hear and they were too fired up and when you ... when an attack starts you get sort of ... I don't know, you get into a - I suppose the adrenalin flows and you - you get involved and that's it. You do things you probably wouldn't dream of doing any other time. What I should have done was run back to the company commander and told him he'd just done his company in, but my mates were there, my place was with them, so I went after them. Now, we had about seventy-five or eighty yards of jungle to negotiate before we reached the clearing. And they were going through there and I'm running after them to catch up and my mate Larry let out a yell and spun around. Larry had been hit in the arm. I said, 'What's up Larry?' He said, 'I've been hit.' I said, 'Where?' and his shirt sleeve was covered in blood, but the fact that he lifted his arm up indicated it wasn't, you know I've seen a bloke's arm blown off with one shot like that, but the fact that he could move it - 'cause Larry, he's got a terrible sense of direction, poor eye sight and he gets lost anywhere. He gets lost in George Street and doesn't know, we know. So he - he said, 'What will I do?' I said, 'Dump your gear, hang onto your gun, and get the hell out of here'. So he undid his waist belt and dropped his gear and he looked at me - and I'll never forget - he looked and he said, 'Which way do I go?' (laughs) So I spun him around and put my hand in his back and I said, 'Go!' and off went Larry.

(5.00) So by this time, the mob he'd got away from had reached the opening, so what I didn't know was Larry was hit again in the leg after I left him, but they weren't shooting at us very ... There were only a few rifle shots coming, there wasn't much, they were luring us out into the open. So I chased after the mob again and I reached the clearing, they were about half way across and magnificent, you know, there they were in extended line, firing from the hip,

heading straight for the enemy and all of a sudden up where 12 Platoon should have been helping us, several Jap machine guns fired down and the whole line just disappeared. They just hit the lot, you know ... Well not hit the lot. There were some weren't hit, they were protected by blokes alongside, but a whole lot went down. That left me on me feet, I'm the only one on me feet. Now ...

What, you were slightly behind them?

I was behind - I was running to catch up - I was, about, oh, ten or twelve yards behind and I don't know why or how, but I just sort of at that point went beserk I suppose. And I couldn't fire until then because the mob in front, so I let out a yell - I don't know what I yelled, I haven't got a clue - opened up and charged ahead. Now what I thought I was going to do, I haven't got a clue. Anyway one of the chaps on the ground fortunately hadn't been hit and 'Darky' heard me yelling and firing and he looked back over his shoulder and he screamed to me, 'Get down you silly bastard', (laughs) you know, and I threw myself down beside Darky just at the same time that the machine gun dead ahead opened up. And I still get shivers. He fired a full magazine at me at point blank range and it went down my back and the shirt was rippling from the air from the splayed bullets, you know, as I hit that ground I mi.... A split second, I just hit the ground. Well then he fired the full magazine at me and as soon as he fired Darky said, 'Let him have it', so he - Darky had realised he'd fired the magazine in one burst. They were supposed to be short of ammunition three weeks ago and everytime they fired they fired a full magazine and we used to fire two or three short bursts. Anyway, Darky upped his rifle and banged away, so I fired a short burst and Darky said, 'Down', and we flattened ourselves and he fired another burst and the damn thing screamed over us again, you know, it was - we were so close that we were beneath it. He was firing out of an aperture in a bunker and we just - pardon - just beneath the field of fire - marginally but just enough. Then Darky realised that and he said, 'He can't hit us, let him have it again'. So for a few moments it was, you know, like a rehearsed exercise. He would fire, we'd lay flat on the ground, he'd stop to reload, we'd fire, then we'd flatten ourselves, this was quite good. Anyway I knew I was getting near the end of the magazine so when we fired there once I kept my finger on the trigger and there was more in the magazine than what I realised. I'd been only firing bursts of two or three where I thought I was firing four or five and it was a longer burst than what I anticipated and emptied the magazine and the gun never replied. I didn't think I could hit it because those little nine millimetre slugs, they had logs like that in the damn bunkers, you know, there was no way. I might have got some in through the aperture and scared the bloke. Anyway he never immediately replied. I knew my gun was empty and I went to get my hand out to my left pouch to get another magazine and Darky yelled out, 'Look out!' That's when I got - if ever you've been absolutely petrified scared, that was then. The gunner had taken the gun off the mounting and he started to fire at us by hitting the ground in front of us - in front of the bunker. When I looked up there were the spurts of earth coming straight at us, you know, he dipped the muzzle and he just come at us, there was no getting under it this time. It seemed like slow motion but I brought me legs together, and I pushed me arms out in front and I buried me face in the ground and that damn burst went past my left - hitting into the ground, ran past my left shoulder, down the left side, past my left leg. Again I was covered in dirt from the splatter, you know, and then I realised when he stopped firing that I was holding my breath. Why I don't know. And I thought, 'My God, I never got hit', and I said, 'Poor Darky, he must have got cut through'. I was hoping that Darky would have been killed if he was hit because he was wounded I would have had to help him and to help him I would have had to expose myself. So I slowly turned and looked at Darky and Darky's laying there

looking at me, you know, and he said, 'How badly hurt are you?' I said, 'I'm all right Darky, it missed me.' He said, 'It must have hit you, it missed me too', and we were practically shoulder to shoulder and the welter between us had hit neither of us and he said, 'We'll give him hell'. So he upped with his rifle and I upped with the gun, and I got them empty, and I put my hand in my pouch and my pouch was empty. Somewhere in my mad dash my loaded magazines had bounced out. I don't know where or why but I - foolishly I'd only ever carried the regulation 250 that you were supposed to carry, which was six magazines - and from there on after I carried loose ammunition and reloaded the empty ones, but you learn.

(10.00) So anyway, I said to Darky, 'Have you seen any of my magazines?' And he was just firing or loading - you know, firing and - so I'm groping around trying to, you know - they must have gone forward if they fell out. I'm laying flat and groping around and then crack, a sniper in a tree put a shot right beside my left hand and I very smartly brought my hand back. I should have realised there must have been a magazine there and he saw me groping for it I suppose. Anyway, Darky kept screaming, he said, 'Keep firing, keep firing!' Anyway the sniper then took a shot at Darky and Darky said, 'Where in the hell did that come from?' I says, 'There's a sniper in the tree.' He said, 'Cover me'. I says, 'I can't', so Darky I've never seen a man go He was absolutely incredible. He worked that rifle bolt like a machine gun. He was firing a couple of shots at the bunker, he'd roll over and snap a shot or two up into the tree and flop down again and he was all the time screaming, 'Keep firing!' I said, 'Darky, my gun's empty. Can you see any magazines?' He never listened to me one and all of a sudden he let out a yell and I said, 'What's happened?', and he said, 'I'm hit'. The bloke got him in the left arm and I said to him, 'Where?' He says, 'I'm hit in the left arm', I says, 'Is it bad?' and he says 'No, but I'm getting out of here'. He said, 'Cover me'. I said, 'I can't, my gun's empty', but he never listened again. He got up and he bolted and of course that's all the machine gun wanted. That left poor Jack Larry in there all by himself, and I thought 'this is not very nice, I got an empty gun, Darky took his rifle with him ...'

Was Darky dead?

Yeah. And um ...

Could you say that?

Oh I heard him falling and I looked back and he was So I thought well all right, Darky's gone, he took his rifle with him unfortunately, he's left me here by myself, what am I going to do now? Well the sniper answered that by firing again - I was wearing shorts - and the bullet just burnt across the skin on my left leg, just above the knee, you know, and I thought 'God he's going to get me, he's a plenty good shot this bloke'. So I thought well, if I lay flat and the machine gun can't get me - they ignored me then because I wasn't - they must have thought they got me another burst, because I wasn't - I hadn't fired since then, so they're not worrying about me. But this bloke is going to keep going until he gets me so I thought next time he fires I'm going to let him think he got me. So I moved ... Next one hit the ground right beside my ribs and it just went crack right beside my ribs so I just gave a bit of a jolt, you know, let me head flop, let the gun go and just laid there, he never fired again so I think I fooled him. He probably cut a notch on his butt and said another Aussie so-and-so hit the dust. So I thought, now here I am, I'm - I've got an empty gun, I've got a machine gun that's got me pinned down, what am I going to do. I thought well, the only thing I could work out - I can't go forward, I can't - you know, attack anyone, I can't go back. As soon as I crawl back they're

going to - I'm going to reach the field of fire. I'll just have to wait until something happened. Well I thought, 12 Platoon was probably in trouble, our platoon was wiped out and doesn't look like we had no reserves, so I looked like I'm going to be on my own devices to get out of here. I used to be a thinker. So I lay there and I thought the only thing to do, I'll just have to bear it and wait until it gets dark and get out then. So I was prepared to wait for the day to

Anyway the day went on and it got harder and harder because I was getting thirsty and I had a full water bottle on me hip and I thought I'm not going to move, I don't know if that bloke's watching me, I'm just going to lay there. Anyway there was a lull for a while and then there was a air raid. The Japs sent over a lot of bombers and - dive bombers and fighters - and our air force was waiting for them. There was a beautiful air battle took place and I couldn't see a damn thing. I saw some of the result. I'd see some black smoke as I was lying down on the horizon. One of the Lightenings dived on a Jap Zero - I could hear the - those Lightenings had a very, very - they were twin-engined - they were very, very, uh, distinctive engine note when they were in a power dive. The Yanks used to say, 'There goes a P-38', you know, and he'd come down in a screaming dive ... The trouble was when he was firing I was getting the backwash. There were bullets and that was hitting the ground all round me. By golly I'm going to get hit by my own bloody planes now, but no, he missed me, fortunately, and he screamed overhead almost at tree-top level. So that subsided and then that poor old Jimmy Scuse he must have either been playing doggo like I was or he was slightly wounded - and as I was laying there, things had been quiet for quite a while, he suddenly jumped up and ran and of course the machine gun just went bang and that was the end of poor old Jim.

So that made me more and more ... I'm going to wait until dark. I'm not going to move while they ... The gun never fired, on occasions there might be a burst fired around but they weren't picking on me and I thought, 'Now I'll just stay quiet, stay as I am and I'll just have to bear it till dark and then I got to - I can't wait until it gets too dark, I'll lose my sense of direction, but I've got to wait and time it perfectly'. I thought it over, I've got to do this. I thought, as long as I could walk, I'll be right. And then - I don't know what time it was - all of a sudden there was a outburst of firing from the machine gun. He opened up in full blast again

The Jap machine gun?

Mmm?

Which machine gun?

The Japanese one out front, and all of a sudden one started to fire off from behind and that gun was even closer than the Jap gun and I thought, 'Oh God, my plan's gone haywire'. They're behind me now, they're firing me from behind. Then it dawned on me it was a Bren gun firing and the worst feature was it was going even closer than the Jap ones. And another bad feature was that I never knew the Bren gun had such a muzzle blast and it was scorching the back of my legs. You know, the muzzle blast was scorching the backs of my legs right up to the bum and I thought, 'Oh God this was ...'

You must have been fairly close?

It were - he was - and he was firing this damn ... I've seen them on the rifle range, they could set a fire about twenty or thirty yards away, you know, on a dry grass and, you know, the uh

.... You don't realise there's such a - you don't see the flames or blasts but there's quite a scorching effect. Anyway, when he - when he was scorching me like that, I had to turn and look and all my resolve of not moving - I just had to turn and look. As soon as I did the Bren gun cut out.

(15.00) It was Tom firing and anyway, he opened up a short time later. He drew the fire away from me. He moved away to one side and engaged the position and the gun engaged him for quite a while and Tom won. You know, he knocked the gun out, then he called out to me, he said, 'Can you walk?' I said, 'I can so-and-so run'. I got up and ran like hell. (laughs) We got back and we flopped down behind a tree and I said, 'How did you get here Tom?' and he said, 'Gilleland - the company commander - at the last moment realised he had no reserves ...', you know, to help if we got into trouble and he withdrew Tom and several others from platoon plus the bloke from company headquarters, you know, there was the orderly room, Paddy Nevin, and the stores and the cooks in uniform and he got a small strategic reserve and Tom was armed with a Bren gun. When they realised we were all in trouble they were trying to assist survivors and anyone who might have needed help and Tom was walking across the back of the clearing when the gun opened up. He thought I was dead. I hadn't moved for so long he thought I was dead and he said, 'I was pretty close to you', and I said, 'You were a damn sight closer than the Jap gun was'. (laughs) So anyway then I found out that he was, um - he got one of the other blokes out the same way, but he ... When he moved off to one side he couldn't get a good sight of the gun so he stood up and he used the gun like a rifle, firing it from the shoulder, you know, so that he could get a better view. He exposed himself, you know, to engage it and so I got back and we picked up - Les had survived, another bloke Frankie Rogers had survived, most of the others had been killed or wounded, and with the few that they had there we - we reported back to the company commander.

And you mentioned there was a second incident?

Mmm. Oh well, indirectly I suppose, some time later the platoon was down to six men and we had no NCOs and our company commander said to us, 'You got to pick a leader amongst yourselves', and so they picked me the other blokes. A bit of a joke because I was the youngest I suppose. So anyway it was late in - late in December. I think it was the 28th, Gilleland said to us, 'Uh, you fellas haven't been out of the front line since the campaign started', - we hadn't - so he said, 'I'll arrange for you to go back to battalion headquarters for forty-eight hours and ...' Course we were doing hour on hour off guard duty and you get into a state of mind where it's a sort of a trance. I mean, your senses are dull so you just go back and get some sleep. So we packed our gear and Tom and I both had an Owen gun and a Bren gun each then. We were in a steady position so you'd have both weapons, so we went back to the battalion headquarters and the other four were in a pretty bad way. They were so sick they could hardly walk. We got back there and the adjutant met us and he said, 'Oh you're the fellows from B Company'. We said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Well, okay, you bed down over here', but he said, 'you're not going to have a spell when you come back here', he said - this was the idea - he said, 'you got to do hour on hour off guard duty all night', and we thought, 'Oh, yes, like hell we will' but we didn't say anything so he walked away and there was a Yankee mortar gun crew there and one of them said to us, he said, 'Are you boys from the front line - are you guys from the front line?', and we said, 'Yes', and he said, 'Oh', he said, 'You bed down with us, we'll do the guard duty. You get a good night's sleep'. So we bedded down with them.

It was during the night all hell broke loose. The Japs sent a raiding party back to get those artillery guns back at Soputa. They got one of two of them, and of course, the next day, they were looking for a - a force to go looking for the Japs and they had a ready-made force in an infantry platoon. But four of them, you know, they could hardly walk, so there was only Tom and myself went and we had, um, four fellas from battalion headquarters. I think it might have been the ack-ack platoon, plus us two, plus a reinforcement officer who arrived the day before and - I won't say who he is, you people have already interviewed him in Canberra - so he plunged into the jungle and said, 'Follow me', so we plunged into the jungle after him and we followed him and I was the only idiot who took his equipment. The others only took - Tom took a couple of extra magazines in his pocket for his Owen gun and the riflemen just had a cloth bandolier tied around their waist plus their rifle. I took my full equipment which I had a water bottle on it and I had spare ammunition. I had all me six magazines plus spare ammunition, plus, by chance I had a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits. After an hour or two, this officer said, 'Any water in that bottle?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Can I have a drink?' or give me a drink or something or other. So I gave - he would have emptied it in one - I grabbed it back after he had a swig and I said, 'Listen that's all we got, between all of us all day', so each had a drink and we plunged on again. He used to perspire, it was pouring out of him, so when lunchtime came, we stopped there for a while and he said, 'Anyone got any beef?' and of course out come this tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits, we ate that. We plunged on again and we come across some interesting things. We come across one of the, um, scenes where the - I think it was one of the 16th Brigade companies had run into a Japanese outpost and they'd had a fire there - a fire fight - quite a fire fight - the jungle hadn't grown. The jungle grows back green in a matter of days. This was absolutely dead still, an area of only about a hundred yards by about fifty yards, where they had fought this post, you know. God knows what it was - what fire had been - you know, what they'd laid down. It was incredible the whole area was just one dead area.

(20.00) So we had a bit of a pillbox there and we realised then that our nine millimetres and our .303s and twenty-five pounders would never penetrate 'em. They were a double row of logs with dirt in between and a couple of layers of logs and dirt on top. I mean you could imagine getting a little nine millimetre slug to go through that. So anyway we had a look at that and we And then late in the afternoon he says, 'Anyone know where we are?' He'd lost all sense of direction and I had lost all sense of direction and the others had lost all - except Tom. Tom, ever reliable, 'I've got a pretty fair idea', he said, so Tom led and I followed him and we went off for quite a period of time and then we stopped for a spell and Tom called me over to one side and he said, 'I'm getting a bit worried'. I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Well, by my reckoning' he said, 'we would have reached the road by now'. That was his aiming point. He said, 'But we haven't. I'm starting to get a bit ...' and I said, 'Were you sure you knew the right direction?' He said, 'Very confident.' I said, 'Well, perhaps the jungle has slowed us up more than, you know. Push on in the same direction for a bit longer.' He said, 'Oh okay, well, I'll do that', and just then we heard the roar of an engine and a jeep passed by about three feet from us. We parted the jungle and he come to the road, dead at right angles, and right where he said the road was, it was three feet from us - he was three feet short, you know. So we hit the road and went back to battalion headquarters. So I suppose if he hadn't have been there, we'd have been wandering in there until doomsday. Because he was absolutely - he had no sense of direction, you know, if you - nothing to give you a guidance. But Tom was pretty good like that and he said to me, 'Now let that be a lesson', and he said, 'if ever you - someone leads, always make sure you keep your own sense of direction', and I used that in good stead later.

And I was able to lead another group out in Bougainville in the same way.

Did you ever take any prisoners?

Uh, not personally. We took a prisoner on north Bougainville, only because he gave himself up and the bloke who was on guard duty let him wander right up to him. We'd made a rather rapid advance late one afternoon. We'd dug a defensive position and we were having our tea and the bloke on guard duty in our platoon, with a Bren gun, he said to Les and - I was talking to our platoon commander - Les was always platoon commander. We started off with an officer, he was our first casualty and Les would take over. I said, 'We're back to normal now, Les will take over again'. Les and I were having a yarn about something or other and I had a mug of tea in me hand and the Owen gun hung around me neck as usual and Lofty called out, 'Les, there's a Jap coming', and we ignored him. I mean, we'd been in action for some six or eight weeks then and anyone who didn't shoot when he saw a Jap was an idiot, you know, and we got to talking about whatever we were doing and he said, 'Les, there's a Jap coming'. Well we had a very crude saying at the time and Les told him what to do with him, you know. Every time you opened your mouth they told you what to do with it, you know, so he told him and there was dead silence for a while and then he said, 'He's still coming'. Les said, without turning around, 'Well shoot the bastard'. Then Lofty said, 'I can't, he's got his hands up'. It was the first time we'd realised that he was fair dinkum (laughs). I dropped me mug of tea and I grabbed the Owen gun and spun it around and there's the poor little innocent Jap, he'd been out foraging for food and we'd made such a rapid advance he come back with a big basket of fruit - unarmed - he had a knife but it was in his belt - and Lofty gets him from that door and he stands up and he jabs a loaded Bren gun in the bloke's chest. Well what's the bloke do but put his hands up and surrender. (laughs) That was the only one we took that I'm aware of.

Mmm. Were there other times when people could have ...

Uh ...

... if they'd have wanted to?

We didn't - we never - very rarely did you get the opportunity to take a prisoner. Uh, usually when we saw them they were very aggressive and they were fighting and they had no chance of - no way you'd ever ... They fought to the end most of the time, they were very, very, fanatical. You know, we struck a bloke when we were in the mountains at Bougainville, before we got to that point - one chap and one of their machine guns, he dug himself in the side of the track to slow up our defence - slow up our advance - and there was one Jap and he fired ... We were the forward company, the platoon and one of the other platoons were and you know, he fired until he ran out of ammunition and they killed him. No way was he going to ... Obviously he was going to fight until he was killed.

Going back to Sanananda, um, you had contact with Americans quite a bit?

Oh yeah.

Could you talk about that a little bit?

Well, my first contact, uh - we had in the army an EY rifle. That was used for firing rifle grenades, which was only the hand grenade with a seven second fuse. I don't know if you've come across these or - and why it was EY I could never find out - I've never found out. Someone told me once it was 'Extra Yoke' but it was reinforced at a couple of points with copper wire that was, you know, just where you hold it.

Now you use it as a normal rifle - it was only an ordinary .303 rifle - you use an ordinary rifle most times. When you wanted to fire grenades from it, uh, you had a grenade - the bloke who carried it, he had this grenade, the discharger cup which clamped on the end of the muzzle. He carried ballistite cartridges which were blanks, but they had about three times the normal charge in them, and he had grenades with seven second fuses instead of four second fuses which had a base plate screwed into them and you screwed the base plate on.

(25.00) You loaded it with the ballistite cartridge, you put the grenade in and pulled the pin out and the cup held the lever, and you put it on the - the butt on the ground and you hit the trigger, off went the grenade and it went off seven seconds later and hopefully you had enough to guide you - you just had to judge it. You know, it was error or - you know, trial and error sort of thing. Well, Les and I were there one day, at Sanananda fairly early in the piece, and they brought one of these up to us and they had a new type of grenade. Now it went off on contact. It had a contact on the nose and had tail fins so the nose - it was like a little mortar bomb - but to fire it from the EY rifle, they had to put a base plate on it, which nullified the effect of the tail fins anyway. Now we - we had three or four of them there one day and we fired 'em and not one of them went off, because when they went through the air they tumbled over. Where a grenade went off by a preset fuse, this had to hit nose first to go off and we sent it back and said it was - you know, it didn't work. It'd be quite good if they could find some way of discharging it without the base plate, but you needed the base plate to get the, you know, the force of gases to push it out of the cup. So anyway, a couple of days later, Les said to me, 'You know how to use that EY rifle?' 'Yeah', I said, 'I was using it with you the other day.' He said, 'Well, I lent one to the Yanks on the other side of the road' - the Yanks were manning the position at the other side of the road - he said, 'and they want someone to come and show them how to use it'. So I said, 'Oh okay'. So I went back, across the road, went up, reported to the army captain - the Yank captain - and I was pretty thin in those days. I was not very fat at all, I was pretty lean, and I said, 'I've come to show you how to use this EY rifle', and he looked at me and he said, 'Can you use it?' I said, 'I was using it a couple of days ago', and he said - he looked at me, you know, in a bit of astonishment, so he sent a runner away and this sergeant came up - and he was a huge man - and he came over and said, 'This Australian's going to show you how to use that rifle.' The sergeant said to me, 'Can you use it?' The captain - he said he's already used it and he looked at me you know, in astonishment and we went across and he had four or five of his fellows there and they were huge blokes and they had - they were all clustered around the damn thing and Les had said, 'Take some extra grenades, ballistite cartridges in case they haven't got enough', and he said, 'This Aussie's going to show us how to use this ...' - I forget what he called it, something, grenade discharger or something - and they looked at me in astonishment and they said, 'Can you use it?', and I said, 'I've already used it', and I thought what's going on here. So I got a grenade, I checked it, it was a seven second fuse, base plate in place, put it in, ballistite cartridge, put it in, then I put the butt on the ground, you held it ... You put the butt on the ground with the trigger guard up, you held that reinforced section where the copper wire was and you hit the trigger with your finger and you kept it out of the way, and off she went. I

was lining it up and he said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm going to fire it'. The sergeant said, 'Don't you fire it from the shoulder?' I said, 'My God, you'd bust your shoulder.' He said, 'Yeah, I know we've three guys in hospital with busted shoulders now.' (laughs) So I fired it and showed them how to use it and they must've thought I had spring steel bloody shoulders or something, you know, to fire the thing. So I went back to Les some time later and he said, 'What was their problem?' I said, 'They tried to fire it from the shoulder.' He said, 'My God, they'll bust their shoulder.' I said, 'They know, they've got three of their guys in hospital with busted shoulders.' (laughs) So whether someone gave it to them without telling them how to use it or whether someone, tongue in the cheek, had said, 'Yeah, you fire it like an ordinary rifle', I'll never know.

The um ... you also - did you have dealings with them up at the front line? Did you ever sort of have ...?

That was the front line.

That was the front line?

Oh yeah, when I saw that Yankee captain, you know, when he sent this runner away to bring the sergeant over, I'm sitting - he had a circular weapon pit with, you know, sandbags, and I'm sitting on the sandbags there and I said, 'What are the snipers like in this area - in this sector?' 'Oh', he said, 'they are active, we lost a man this morning.' I said, 'Where?' He said, 'Sitting on the sandbag where you are', and before he stopped I was in the hole with him. I think he was just trying to indicate to me that don't get careless, you know, there's (laughs) ...

I did have dealings with a Yank sergeant the night I was wounded. I - I'd like to know who he was - I'd like to ... But ...

Well how about I ...

Want another tape?

END TAPE 2, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A.

Right. Identification: This the third tape, third side of the interview with Jack Stevens. End of identification.

Well we just started mentioning when you were wounded. So ...

Oh yes, that's right. Well ... after we did that patrol for those Japs which we never found, fortunately. Six of us against forty odd is not good odds in my opinion, we were told to report back to the - our company, which we did. So ... that was the 29th December, so we kept our same position for a few days and it was the 1st January I was called out and I only had two in the platoon then, Tom and myself, and ...

How many had you started out with?

Oh we had thirty-eight to start with, then we got down - we got about another dozen from 10 Platoon and at that point there was two of us. So the company commander said that we had to do a special job. The special job was that - originally they had the artillery O. Pip flying overhead in a Wirraway - at treetop level. The pilot couldn't always identify where our positions were or the Jap positions were. At one point some weeks earlier, he parked his plane and he came up in his flying gear up to our front line position, and I was one of the chaps that was asked to identify a colour photogr... uh, aerial photographs to see if we could pick out where our positions were and where the Japs were. So we - we couldn't identify from the air - it was bad enough on the ground, but from the air it was just trees - so behind company headquarters there was a bit of a clearing and we worked out that there was company headquarters, our forward positions were here, the Japs were so many yards further on - had to identify the clearing. So the pilot arranged for three or four of us to get mirrors and he was going to go back and get his plane and when he came over we'd flash the mirrors to him, he'd identify the clearing and he could then work out whether So he did and he waved to us and he was right. And then the monsoon rain set in and he couldn't get airborne. So they sent up an artillery O-pip apparently - I didn't know about it ...

Artillery what?

Observation. Observer. He plots the fall of the shells and tells whether to raise or lower them or whatever it may be.

Where did they send him to? How did they ...?

To one of the companies - forward companies. Normally they're off on a flank or they're somewhere on a high hill or something where they can overlook. But in the jungle it was a very, very difficult position. We wouldn't let them go up the tree because the Japs had snipers in the trees ... We originally, this Tom was a volunteer to go up a tree as a sniper, and then they suddenly decided hat no, we have no one in the trees. Anyone moving in the trees are fair game. It doesn't matter if it's one of ours or one of theirs, anyone in the tree was enemy, so we wouldn't let anyone go up the trees. So anyone you saw moving, or heard a movement, you could quite legitimately shoot it without even having to ask questions. So the O. Pip was up there, couldn't work out - couldn't see the fall of shells. I know because I worked with him for forty years later, didn't know - and it was decided that he would go off on the flank so he could get a better field of view. He wasn't going to go alone and needed an escort. So our company was nominated to be the escort, but we only had fourteen in the company and they reckoned that wasn't enough to go off on a ... So we got all the personnel of A Company, which was eight people left, and so we made a party. We left in the - after dark, we went across the road, went out through the Yankee positions, took a great sweep around in the dark, head towards a position, dug in, sent them back to wait for daybreak and when daybreak came we nearly died because we were sitting on top of the Jap positions. (Laughs) About twenty yards from the Jap positions in the open. All the ground around there, you've got no idea, it was like first world war battle field. I mean the battle had been raging two months. There'd been shelling and bombing and blasting and there was not a tree - very few trees standing. There was shell holes, bomb craters, churned up jungle - it was an absolute mess - and we were dug in the middle of it.

Anyway, the Jap bunkers were there, the road was there, and we were just at the side of the road. So we were very quick to pass around, not to disturb the Japs, not to worry them. We

weren't strong enough to withstand any sortie they might make against us. We didn't have enough ammunition to fire - to keep continual fighting.

(5.00) We'd defend ourselves if they attacked but any targets were the property of the ... We took a mortar O. Pip, both mortar and artillery O. Pip and they were to - we were just there to protect them and to protect ourselves if attacked. So we just spent the days - or were to spend the days just lying doggo because you couldn't, uh, stick your nose up. I was sharing the hole with an A Company blokes. Anyway during the day, up went the temperature. Absolutely soared, and I was absolutely out to it. I drank all my water. Phil didn't realise until much later, he gave me his water bottle to carry on for the rest of the day. He told me I was delirious in the afternoon. As soon as it got dark the temperature dropped and I was quite normal again.

Anyway, Phil brought Gilleland over, the company commander, and he looked at me and he said, 'Well if you're as sick as Phil said you were, you'll have to go back', but he said, 'I'm too short-handed to send anyone with you'. And he said, 'You've got a choice. You can stay here with us until we're relieved tomorrow night or you can go back by yourself'. What choice, I'll go back. I mean I've no water. As he said, 'If you get sick again tomorrow we've got nothing to treat you with. You just have to lay there and take it', and laying there for twelve hours with the sun beating into a narrow, shallow hole didn't suit me. So I thought, oh I'll go back. I said, 'How do I find my way back?' 'Oh,' he said, 'follow me', and he turned and walked away, tripped in the dark and ended up sitting waist deep in a muddy shell hole and I said, 'In there?' and he called me a few names. (Laughs) Names as he said, 'Help me out', so I pulled him out. He took me over to his pit and he said - he got on the phone and he telephoned back to BHQ and he said to me, 'Well the arrangement is, you go back and they'll let you rest up tomorrow, treat you if necessary, and you can act as a guide for our relief party tomorrow night'. And one question, 'How do I find my way back?' and he says, 'You'll have to follow the telephone cable.' So he gave me the telephone cable, he said, 'Don't drop it'. He says, 'Lose that, you're - no one will find you because you'll never be able to ...' It was ebony night black, you know. So I said, 'Okay' and then he said, 'Several things. One is', he said, 'the password'. We had a different password every night - at six o'clock every night - 'the password that night was "revelry"'. I'll never forget that word. So 'revelry' was the password. And then he said to me, 'When you're going', he said, 'Oh by the way', he said ... He said, 'Oh, by the way, we don't have any patrols out tonight, so anyone you meet moving around, won't be very friendly.' So off I go. So it was a hell of a journey. I stumbled along in the dark and I tripped on fallen timber and twice the - there were trees that had fallen over the telephone cable and I had to reach over the side and feel for it to make sure I had the right cable and moved on. And once I had come to a point where the Sigs had cut in a new reel - they didn't join it at the end, they joined it about ten feet along. I got - I had the short end. I had to rejoin - work out which way in the dark, which one was what, follow it on and anyway, things started to get a bit better. I was getting out of the churned up area and I was walking along and there was a defined track which was easier to walk on and I'm splosh, splosh, splosh along in the mud, and it was quite good and starting to get a bit confident. And all of a sudden someone pulled the cable and it was jerked out of my hand. At the same time I heard splosh, splosh, splosh, someone coming towards me. I instinctively closed the cable, you know, so I wouldn't lose it and one of the chaps later said I was playing tug-of-war with them, but I wasn't really. I was just trying to hang onto it. And I thought of - 'no one you meet will be very friendly', oh, I'm getting out of here. So I - I took a dive off the track at the same instance a grenade burst at my feet. I heard plop, you know, voomp. I don't know whether I

was blown away or whether I was actually thrown, but I went flying through the air and that was it.

Whose grenade was it?

Japanese. They were following the cable the other way, heard me coming and just dropped a grenade to cover their exit. And so anyway I was laying on the - when I came round there was - a storm had broken and I was saturated and that brought me around, and I'm laying on me back on the ground and I realised that I was numb and I thought ...

Who - who'd found you?

Mmm?

Who had found you?

Who had ...?

Who had found you?

No one, I was there by myself. I was just laying on the ground, all numb and I thought, I'm nice and pleasant here and then a horrible thought, oh I was absolutely petrified. I thought they were sitting around waiting for me to move. As soon as I moved they were going to hit me with a or a bayonet and there was no way you'd make me move. I was absolutely (laughs) ... I lay there, and lay there and I thought, I wonder how badly hurt I am. I mean you don't sit on top of a grenade without getting something and I couldn't work out Someone had told me once before, if you're really badly injured you are numb and you wouldn't feel any pain, and I was numb, so I didn't know if I'd lost legs or arms or what I'd done. So then another thought struck me. How long had I been unconscious. If I'm caught out here in daylight, I'm history, because everything I had was gone - and so anyway I thought, I'd better get out of here. So gradually I worked me fingers and toes and felt myself all over and I couldn't feel a leg missing and I didn't feel any gaping holes anywhere. Me face was odd, I couldn't feel - it was numb and felt real odd, so I thought, well ... and when I felt myself all me equipment was gone and me Owen gun was gone. Now whether I'd thrown them away or whether it was stripped or blown off I don't know. So anyway I was groping around trying to find the Owen gun and I found a big hunk of wood and I thought, well, in the dark, this is as good as anything. If someone comes up I'll hit them with this.

(10.00) I lay there for a bit longer and then I thought to myself, I've got to get out of here, I can't lay here any longer. So I hurled the bit of wood and it hit a tree and I heard a clatter, clatter, clatter, and no a movement and no one I thought, there's no one here, I've got to go, so I rolled over and started to crawl. Now how I ever crawled in the right direction, I don't know, but I crawled and lo and behold I ran into the telephone cable. Now how I knew it was the right one I got no idea, but this'll do me. So I crawled along, just touching it to make sure I was ... I didn't want to And then I got a bit more confident, I got up and started to walk along, feeling it and then another thought struck me. The Yanks were notoriously trigger happy and I was rapidly approaching their positions. And I thought if I come stumbling along here in the dark (laughs) I won't get very much further. So I went very, very cautious and all of a sudden I knew I was in the Yank positions because they were always very careless and all

the time they ate their rations they threw their tins and there were all these ... The thunderstorm was still in the area and there was still lightning occasionally, and there was some white - our tins were very dark, theirs were a, you know ...

... Aluminium?

... Oh not aluminium, but they light anyway, they looked very shiny and bright, you know, and I thought, well, I'm nearly there. So I sneaked along very carefully and sneaked past their first sentry without him seeing me. (Laughs) And all of a sudden there was a flash of lightning and there was a second Yank standing on there, you know, and as soon as I saw him I called out the password and there was dead silence. So I called out the password a second time and all I heard was a click of a safety catch. So I started to swear at him. Called him everything. Called him every name I could think of for not answering me the first time. Then a Yank voice said, 'Come ahead Aussie, it's okay.' And I went up and I said, 'You know I'm Australian'. He said, 'No one (laughs) can swear like that', and he told me what had happened early in the night. A party of Japs were hanging around outside their positions in the dark, calling out, 'Joe I'm over here, Joe, come and get me Joe'. And he said, 'We kept quiet, we didn't say a word'. They must have found the cable and followed it to find out where it went and met me coming the other way. And so ... the fact that they never cut it meant that they'd - they'd scampered in quite a hurry. So anyway, I said to the Yank, 'I'm trying to find my way ...' Cause once I saw them I dropped the cable, and I said, 'I'm trying to find my way back and I had the telephone ...' 'Oh here', and he gave me their cable.

I followed it for a few feet and took a right-hand turn and went into a pit and I ended up on top of the Yankee captain who was asleep. (Laughs) He came up spluttering and I said, 'Sorry Yank, I'm trying to find me way back'. He said, 'Where are you from?' I told him. 'Oh', he said, 'I'll get one my sergeants to show you the way out', and he called out and this sergeant came over and he said, 'Sergeant, show this Australian the way back', and he said, 'No captain, no one leaves here tonight'. He said, 'Sergeant, I told you ...'. He said, 'Captain, that new regiment moved in behind us at dark', he said, 'it's their first night on the line'. He said, 'They'll be trigger-happy'. The Yanks are all so trigger-happy. So he said, 'I'll look after him until daybreak', so he took me over to his pit and I told him I had been hurt but I didn't know how and he put a ground sheet over me and shone a torch and I had a few bits of shrapnel in me face and cut on me head where a piece had knocked me out, you know. So he put a first - a bandage on or something and then he gave me They had sulphanilamide tablets - we never had at the time - we had to take sixteen when you were first wounded and I sat there drinking them and they, um - he had an emergency They used to have an emergency pack of hard, black chocolate. So I nibbled that most of the night and we talked all night about various things. He was the only man left in his company. We talked all night - I don't know his name - I wish I had've enough sense to find out, anyway, daylight happens very quickly up there, you know. One moment it's dark and the next minute - just as daylight - just started to get a little bit light, we heard someone coming, heard the company commander give the password and I heard him say to the sentry, 'Did one of my men come back through here last night?', and the bloke said, 'I've only been on a short time, captain'. He said - he was asking our company commander - our captain - so I heard Gilleland repeat the question and he said, 'Yes, he's with one of my sergeants over there'. I heard - Jim Gilleland came over. Never seen him so - we'd been at loggerheads right through the campaign and he hailed me like a long lost brother, you know, and he was - hoped I was alright, and I said, 'What happened?' He said, 'I rang in and told them you weren't coming early in the night', and

they rang back and said, 'you hadn't arrived' and they'd also decided there was no need for him to He was the last surviving officer of the four rifle companies and we had a couple of reinforcement young blokes there - that was Dan Sly and another bloke, Jim Campbell - and they decided there was no need for him to stay there. He could come back and organise the, uh - help organise the uh, you know, the - the relief. So on the way back he was looking for me until he found me. So then he said to the sergeant, 'Thank you sergeant', he said, 'I'll take him'. 'No', said the sergeant, 'you abandoned him last night. I'll take him back for help.' (Laughs) I suppose Gilleland thought I got another one and so off we go. The sergeant wanted to carry me. I said, 'I'm all right', so he supported me. We were going back along the track a few yards and Gilleland's trotting along behind saying, 'Look I ...'. He said, 'No captain, I'll take him back to the Aid Post. I'll look after him.' So (laughs) we go back along the track, and all of a sudden we came around a bend in this track and we stopped dead. Because sitting up ahead was a Yankee fifty calibre machine gun and a bloke sitting behind there with his fingers on the trigger and a great mall - muzzle staring us in the face, see. The sergeant said very gently, 'Steady buddy', he said, 'we're friendly', and they didn't know there was troops in front of them. He said, 'If you'd have come back last night, you'd have been cut to ribbons'. So he grinned at me, and he said, 'There. That's why he wouldn't come back last night'.

(15.00) So anyway he went through them and they were most staggered to find that there was troops in front of them. So he took me right back to the RAP, and even when we got back there, Gilleland said, 'Ah, it's okay', and he said, 'No, I'll wait until he gets the medical report', so he hung around until the MO came out and looked at me and Gilleland said, 'What's going to happen?', and the Medical Officer said I'll be evacuated and he wandered off to - for a cup of tea or breakfast or something or other. The sergeant stood there for a couple of minutes, so I thanked him and 'That's okay', and he turned and walked away. No idea who he was. Terrific, you know, people you meet and

So anyway Gilleland stood there for a few moments and the RAP sergeant says he's ringing for the ambulance to come and pick me up and he stood there for a little while and then he said, 'You know', he said, 'we had a very fine company'. I said, 'We had a bloody fine company'. He said, 'Yes, I just realise now what a magnificent bunch of people they were', and he says, 'it's all too late. They're nearly all gone', and he turned and walked away. Never saw him again, he died of scrub typhus a few days later.

That was your captain?

He was the captain, mmm. He was dead before I got back to the hospital. I didn't realise, I argued with the bloke he was still alive, but, he'd been to his firing party over his grave, (laughs) anyway the ambulance we had was a - it was a Ford V8 car which the Japs had captured in Singapore and brought down there and were using it and we'd recaptured it and our engineers cut the back out and they used to put a couple of stretchers in from the back. So I was sitting in the front with the driver - only the two of us - he was saying to me, it's beautiful to sit on a nice, well-sprung vehicle after the, you know, six or eight months of army vehicles and we were starting back down the road and we met all - each side of the road were hundreds of hundreds of a new Yank regiment coming up and they all looked at me in amazement because, I mean, I had a beard, I was mud covered, I was blood covered, I was an absolute shambles, you know, and the looks of the faces as we went past, oh, you know, is this what happens to you up here. (Laughs) So we got back to hospital and there were other

casualties arrive and were sitting outside on damn coconut logs and it was raining, they brought us round a cup of tea and a couple of doctors came around, they were walking around to each of them, and mumble, mumble, mumble, and the staff sergeant wrote on a clip board and away they went and then they disappeared, and we're sitting there and I said to the staff sergeant, 'When are we going to get inside out the weather?' He said, 'You're not being admitted'. At that point I thought the only alternative was they were going to send me back. At that point I think I would have got up and run if they'd have said that. I said, 'What's happening?' He said, 'You're going back to Moresby'. I could have kissed him, you know, tough as he was. (Laughs)

Well, just - just before we go onto other things, um, the story of the beard? It relates to your relationship with that character ...

When we came back out of the mountains we lost all our toilet gear, and when we got back to Moresby ...

Could you say that again, because I was talking.

When we were on the patrol in the mountains, we lost all our gear. We just had the weapons and equipment. And when we got back, we were re-equipped with everything but the army didn't have spare razors for us. They were issuing us one razor blade a week, so what we were doing, we were getting our own razor blade, borrowing a razor off someone who might have had a razor and having a shave. Well then, a series of skin rashes developed and the medical officer found out we were borrowing other razors and he said, 'No! If you don't have your own razor you don't shave', and so, even those that had the razor, they all stopped shaving, just in our platoon.

Well that had a couple of funny sequences because we were duty platoon one night and I was on guard on the front gate and the brigadier arrived and there was I, resplendent with a full beard and he came and the driver used to give you a toot on his horn when he was a couple of hundred yards away and bring you to attention, and up the slope and present as he went through. I gave him a beautiful present and he returned the salute and nearly fell out the car, because there was a clean shaven army with one man on guard duty with a beard. So he goes up to the house that he - CO was using as a battalion headquarters and back came the brigadier, the CO, the adjutant and the duty officer. And I snapped to attention, I was going to come to the present and the duty officer said, 'Just stay at attention soldier', and they come and they all looked at me they went away and huddle, huddle, huddle, whisper, whisper, whisper, and the officer came over and he said - duty officer came over - and he said, 'What's the reason for the beard?' I said, 'Medical officer's orders, sir'. Went away and I heard the brigadier say, 'Well, I'll accept that if that's the medical officer's orders', and he said, 'Fall out the guard'. Well there was a corporal and nine or ten others in the tent, and I said, 'Fall out the guard' and they all come out and they've all got beards (laughs) and the brigadier nearly had a heart attack on the spot. (Laughs) He said to the corporal, 'What's the idea of the beards?' He said, 'Medical officer's orders, sir'. He said, 'The whole guard?' and the corporal said, 'The whole platoon'. (Laughs) The brigadier said to the CO, 'Well I accept it was medical officer's orders, but', he said, 'for Gods sake put them somewhere else rather than at the front gate'. So we were relieved and went round guarding the ammunition dump or something.

A little while later we had to review before a General Allen. So our unit learnt by experience. So our platoon was put right at the rear of the parade, so they wouldn't see the beards. They were all there, clean clothes, all clean shaven, the whole battalion was lined up and Brigadier Tu... - Major-General Tubby Allen got up on the platform they'd erected to address us and discovered that he had the sun behind him and we had the sun in our eyes and he said, 'I'm not going to talk to the men who can't see me'. Parade about-turned and he came round the back of the parade and got up on a rock that was there and of course that made our platoon right in front of him and all the time he's addressing us, he's looking down with a quizzical look on his face. Anyhow, when it was over, he couldn't - he came down and he says, 'Okay boys, what's the story?' I said, 'What story, what story?' He said, 'Why has one platoon got beards and the rest of the battalion clean shaven?' (Laughs) We said, 'Medical officer's orders'. He said, 'The whole platoon?' We said, 'Yes.' (Laughs)

(20.00) And he walked away shaking his head. So anyway we had to march past, you know, and they went passed in platoons as we went past, we all gave him an 'eyes right', he returned the salute with a grin from ear to ear. I bet he's still trying to work out why one platoon had beards and the rest of the battalion was clean shaven. So I went to Sanananda with a beard and during the campaign - or towards the end of the campaign - the company commander said to me one day, 'When are you going to shave that beard off?' I think I was the only one left with a beard then and I said, 'I still haven't got a razor.' He said, 'You can borrow mine', and I said, 'That's how it all started'. He said, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'The MO said if we don't have our own razors, don't shave'. He said, 'You trying to imply that I've got a skin disease'. I said, 'No, but ...'. He said, 'Oh you're impossible'. (Laughs) So I kept me beard.

Mmm. Going back to - going into Moresby, could you describe what - what the medical facilities were like in Moresby? What sort of hospital was it?

Well, you know, when I was wounded?

Yes.

Well, I'll tell you a story about this - if you've got time - because when I left Soputa we sat there for a while. They brought us another cup of tea and some biscuits - there were about eight or nine of us - and they brought up a Japanese three-ton truck. I think they built them with square wheels and no springs and we had to get transported back to the air strip on this truck. So they gave us an ammunition case each to sit on. When that truck went along the road and every bump, we vibrated around, and you were passing fellows going this way and that way and you couldn't hold the thing still. We got back about eight or nine miles and this is as far as the truck could go. Well, then they trans-shipped us to jeeps and they didn't have enough jeeps to do the whole journey. I was in a jeep, and there was a stretcher case, a chap with malaria and myself and the driver was a bloke out of my unit who was a very well-known footballer - Bruce Ryan - he played in England after the war. Very good footballer and a very good person. So, we went back to the - uh, he was to take us back, so, part way along the jeep bogged in the mud. We went to get out and he said, 'No, no, that's all right'. He got half a dozen natives to jack - lift it up while he put the chains on it. So away we go, ploughing through the mud and we passed a native with three or four women with baskets of food on them and he had a spear in one hand and a large knife in the other - one of them machetes. We'd just gone past him very slowly in first gear, low reduction, four wheel drive, ploughing through the mud and I heard him shout out and I looked back and he was chasing

after us and waving his knife. And I said to Bruce, 'Go faster, he's after us'. He said, 'I can't go faster'. Anyway the fellow came running up and when he got close we realised he'd taken a basket of fruit from the women and when he got close he threw us the basket of fruit with bananas and paw-paws in it. And then he just waved and - so we munched on these. We got back to the - to the evacuation point and they were in real trouble there. Because of the monsoon rains, the fact that it was only a narrow grass strip, it was muddy, they couldn't get planes in all the time - and they were absolutely overboard with ... So when you came in they gave you a - a number - a serial number - and you had to remember it. I think they wrote it down somewhere - and planes held twenty patients. So when they came in they'd say, one to twenty, twenty-one to forty according to the number of planes. I was way up in the hundreds, so I knew I had a long wait. So we waited there for days for a plane. Every morning you'd go down to the edge of the airstrip and wait for planes to come in - they used to start flying about six-thirty and they used to knock off about ten-thirty or eleven because of the - you know the rain clouds over the mountains. So gradually the - it got to the point where your number was coming up.

One day there - this stretcher case in the tent with us - he'd been shot through the chest and wasn't supposed to sit up, wasn't supposed to walk and he could though. Because one night he dragged me and the other chap back in out of the tent - out of the rain. He asked one of us to go and fill his water bottle. The other fellow went off to fill the water bottle and I was dozing off and the stretcher case said to me - never knew his name - he said to me, 'Eh I think that other fellow might be in trouble'. I said, 'Why?' He says, 'He's been gone an awful long time', he said, 'and I think he might be in trouble'. So I walked out the tent and there he was. He'd collapsed outside. I bent over to pick him up and I collapsed. Now when I came round, I'm on my stretcher and all nicely tucked in with a blanket and everything else and the other fellows lying there, the You know, not the stretcher case, he's lying there on his elbow looking at me, you see, and he says - when I came round - he said, 'Thanks very much for bringing me out of the rain'. I said, 'I didn't bring you out of the rain'. He said - I said, 'Didn't you bring me?' I thought he'd come round and dragged me in. He said, 'No', he said, 'I came round on me bed'. And I said, 'Well who did?', and he said, 'Well, I didn't bring you and you ...' and the stretcher case said, 'Well, you both went to help me', he said, 'the least I could do was drag you in'. Here was a bloke who wasn't supposed to ... dragged us - two of us in out of the rain and put us to bed. Anyway the next day we were - I was down the side of the airstrip and a couple of planes came in and I knew that by my number I had no chance of catching one of these and I went back to the tent very disappointed and the chap said to me - standing next to me - he said to me, 'That all the planes?' I said, 'Yes, only two'. I was very disappointed and I went back to the tent and there were two stretcher bearers there. They're looking at the empty stretcher, they said, 'Where's the fellow that was on this stretcher?' I said, 'I don't know'. The fellow I was talking to was our stretcher ... I'd never seen him on his feet before. He's out on the side of the airstrip. They said, 'Well, if he's not on the stretcher in five minutes, the plane goes without him. It's only taking stretcher cases.' So I raced out, got him and brought him back and laid him on the stretcher and they carried him back to where he was and put him on the plane. (Laughs)

(25.00) But that's what I found through the Australian army. Whenever I was in hospital or anything like that, no one reckoned he was sick enough that he couldn't look after someone else. It was incredible, uh, mateship, or feeling amongst the people. No one reckoned that - he was never confined to bed, he's normally out and go and get a meal, he'd always want to go and help someone else. Anyway, we - another day or two passed and this particular day, no

planes had arrived by about nine-thirty or ten and I went back to the tent and all of a sudden I heard a roar of engines, went out - six glorious DC3s came in and landed. My number came up and I was the last person on the last plane. When I went to get on the plane there were nineteen Yanks and me. Just the way the numbers came up. So being the last plane in, we'd be the first plane off. They had to turn them round. We got airborne and of course those planes had no door on them - only had a bench seat each side which you - no seatbelts and we had a wireless operator in the cabin with us. He was a, um - a Yank and the plane was a KLM plane - ex-KLM plane - they had still had the air hostess cubby hole at the back. And we got airborne and we're climbing to get height to get over the mountains. The wireless operator gets a message, whips his earphones off, runs into the cockpit, comes back, walks the length of the plane and goes to the air hostess cubby hole and comes out with a damn Thompson sub-machine gun and he starts to cock it and load it, and one of the And we're all watching him rather, you know (laughs) keenly, and one of these Yanks says, 'What's up, buddy?' He says, 'There's a flight of enemy Zeros in the area'. He apparently was going to beat them off with a damn Thompson. So anyway - while this is going on the pilot put the plane into a dive - I thought he was going to go back and land, because we could see the air strip below and the other five planes hadn't taken off - they were still there - and all the patients were running madly for the timber. You know, they were told to evacuate, so they got out - they might have been patients, but they moved pretty fast.

So anyway our pilot - I thought he was going to land but he didn't, he came in at treetop level and then headed towards the mountains right down on the trees. And when we got there he tried to come through the mountains. We went up valleys and they were deadends and he banked and came out - oh hairy. Anyway eventually he decided he had to go over, so he climbed up and he went over - but the clouds were closing in all the time. He ran into clouds. We got through and came out over Moresby, it was bright sunshine. We landed, we were the only plane to come in. We landed at the, uh, - what do you call it? - the Four-Mile which was Ward strip. The plane taxied around into another valley where there's a dispersal bay, were met by four or five ambulances - Yankee ambulances - a couple of supply trucks and a tanker, and when we got out, the crew got out to stretch their legs and the co-pilot was an Australian - RAAF bloke - and he said to me, 'You an Australian?' because I was still in shorts and I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'What was the campaign like?' and oh we were chatting there and I said, 'What's an Australian doing flying a Yankee plane?' 'Oh', he said, 'this is a composite squadron', he said, 'whatever pilot's rostered for duty, flies. It could be two Australians tomorrow, it could be two Yanks, it could be anything. So', he said, 'it just happened there was a Yank pilot.' He said, 'And what did you think of the trip over the mountains?' I said, 'It's pretty hairy,' I said, 'But how close were those Zeros?', and he jumped, he said, 'How did you know there were Zeros?' I said, 'The wireless operator told us'. He said, 'The silly bugger ...' (laughs) He said, 'You blokes weren't strapped in and there's no door on the plane, if anyone panicked they could have stepped out'. And he said, 'Oh', he said, 'we were pretty safe'. He said, 'We've got a fighter umbrella up, they wouldn't - they wouldn't lose height to take on one individual lone plane. The whole flight they might have, not one.' And anyway just then the - while we were talking - the plane had been refueled, and filled it with supplies, the ambulance had all departed, bar one and this ambulance driver said, 'Hey you buddy, are you coming with us?' I said, 'No, I'm waiting for an Australian ambulance.' He said, 'Well you have to come with us because as soon as I go the plane's taking off.' So the pilot shook me by the hand and I said, 'Best of luck', so I climbed in the ambulance. We trundled twenty miles out to the Yankee hospital. We go in there and they're just sitting around a big reception area. No one takes any notice of me, a Yankee Red Cross lady come around giving

out cups of coffee. She came to me with the tray and she said, 'Do you like black or white'. I said, 'What? Tea?' She said, 'No, coffee.' I said, 'I'm having a tea', and she looked at me rather oddly, went away and brought a nursing sister over and the nursing sister looked at me for a few minutes and - course I was dressed in shirt and shorts still. She just picked up my meat ticket, which is round your neck with who you were and and what you are and she looked at the unit. She said, 'What outfit is that?' and I told her, 'The 55/5rd Battalion.' She said, 'Is that one of ours?' I said, 'It's certainly not one of the Imperial Japanese Army'. She said, 'Is that one of our United States outfits?' 'No', I said, 'it's an Australian Infantry Battalion', and she said, 'What are you doing here?', and I told her the story about only American ambulances. Oh, panic. She went away and come back with a captain and he looked at me, went through the same rigmarole, and he looked up in the eye and didn't know what to do. Oh, hold on, and he went away. Came back a couple of moments later with a major, and he was quite a nice fellow, and he said, 'The situation is if you had needed urgent treatment we would treat you. If there were no Australian hospitals in the area we would treat you, but', he said, 'neither case applies. We'll have to make other arrangements for you'. So that's fair enough

END TAPE 3, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE B.

Right, this is tape three, side two, Jack Stevens ...

So the - a few moments later an orderly came in and he said, 'Come with me', and I went outside and there was an ambulance - Yankee ambulance - it must have been the same driver - I got in the front with the driver. We trundled twenty miles back to the air strip. He takes me round to the same dispersal bay where he met me but this time nothing in sight, no plane, not a soul anywhere. Of course the driver panics. He's now got an unwanted body on his hands, what's he going to do with him. So he says, 'Hold tight'. So he drove off the airstrip, up an access road, no traffic anywhere and there on the side of the road is one of those great big navy built huts which is a YMCA or a Red Cross hut and he said, 'Wait over there', and he - as soon as I got out he, phhht, he went and left me. So I sat down on a bench seat there and a few minutes later the - there was a Sawyer stove boiling away and there was a trestle table with two tea urns on it. Anyway the YMCA bloke came out a few minutes and he started to make tea. It was getting on towards lunch time and he was going to make - he must have had a lot of visitors. So he goes through the process of putting the tea into the diffusement, pouring the boiling water in it and it'd brew and taking it out, putting milk in one and leaving the other one black, all the time he was whistling and he looked across at me and I must have looked a bit odd because I had a beard, I was - meat ticket and a bandage on me head and mud stained clothes - I must have looked a real sight. Anyway after he finished he came over and he said, 'What are you doing here?' I said, 'Waiting for an ambulance'. (Laughs) Just as if I was waiting at a bus stop, and he said, 'You won't catch an ambulance here', he said, 'how did you get here?' and I told him the story and he said, 'Look, have a cup of tea', he said, 'and I'll see what I can find out.' So he goes in the office and he came back a few minutes later and he's got a couple of - a tin of biscuits with him and he gives me a couple of biscuits and he says, 'You're famous.' I said, 'Why, what do you mean?' He said, 'All the air force and half the army are looking for you'. I said, 'How come?' 'Oh', he said, 'don't worry, help's on the way', and a few moments later an Australian ambulance comes screaming up, driver jumps out, 'Oh, thank God I've found you', he said. I said, 'What's up?' He said, 'They gave me the wrong

dispersal bay' - that was his story. He said, 'When I got there, I waited and waited and waited and no plane arrived and I went back to the control point to find out where the plane had got to, what had happened in the time it had been and gone, so I went to the right bay', he said, 'and there's no one in sight', and he raised the alarm. He thought I was wandering around delirious because it covered square miles of ground that air strip. They had dispersal bays everywhere and they had everyone out searching for me. Then they get word that I'm sitting outside the YMCA hut. So we climb in the ambulance and I said, 'Where are we off to?' He said, '2/9th AGH', so we got trundling up the road and ... the same road I'd been up before. I said, 'Where is this?' and he said, 'We're going to the 2/9th AGH'. So anyway we get up - I say no more and we get to the entrance of the hospital and we go to turn in and I said, 'Where are we?' He said, 'The 2/9th AGH.' I said, 'Oh what's that the other side of the road?' 'That's the Yankee hospital, why?' I said, 'That's where I was about two hours ago.' (Laughs) He stopped the ambulance and he said, 'You mean to say you could have walked across the road', he said, 'they took you twenty miles back and dumped you at the side of the ...' (Laughs) I said, 'Yes'. (still laughing) Amazing, amazing.

Mmm. Mmm.

You see these things happen in M.A.S.H. and that and you'd never believe that it was - it could happen.

Mmm, well M.A.S.H. I think is based on the real thing.

Yeah, so we got back to the - I was admitted to the hospital, I went in there, it was the same thing. One of our sisters came over and she said, 'Oh, where'd you get to?' and I told her, and she stood there and she went hysterical. She just looked at me and said, 'You mean to say you could have walked across the road', and I said, 'Well that's what happened, sister'. (Laughs) And she - she just couldn't (still laughing) she just couldn't - known they could have been so stupid.

Just before we go to Bougainville, um, if you could just sum up for me what happened with the wounds?

Oh, it was not very serious. They - I was admitted to the ward and sister wouldn't let me in the ward until I got cleaned up. She wouldn't let me in her clean beds and ward and put me up into a bathroom with a pair of scissors and couple of cakes of soap and towel and razor and a pair of clean pyjamas, she picked me clothes up with a tong and took them away and they were obviously burnt or something and I got into nice clean pyjamas and nice clean sheets but I was only in there for about - a few days. They dug most of the shrapnel out, except for a couple of little pieces, but some of them worked their way out over the years. There's one little bit left, you can see it occasionally, a bit of a blue mark there, and the malaria never - never flared again and then they sent me down ... they had a field ambulance acting as a convalescent sort of wing for the hospital, and while I was down there they found I had a bit of shrapnel in the eye.

(5.00) The eye kept troubling me so I was in the Went on the sick parade one morning and the, uh - I was very fortunate the full colonel in charge came in to assist. He said, 'I think you've got something there', so he operated and removed it and I've had no trouble, very fortunate. He said, 'What happened?' I said, 'I was hit with shrapnel'. He said, 'That was

absolutely incredible, just embedded in the eye without causing any trouble'. So then I left there after a week or so and went up to the convalescent depot up in Koitaki. When they were admitting us, I collapsed with malaria and they took me off to the - the hospital up there, where I really had a 106 degrees temperature. (Laughs)

Well, coming to Bougainville, um, can you remember actually, sort of arriving on - you know, the day that you arrived? What did it look like when ... You came by ship.

The first approach we had was a cloud of smoke on the horizon and before we ever saw land we saw this cloud of smoke and as we got into the, um ... Empress Augusta Bay, the boat - there was no wharf there - you had to moor out in the bay and be ferried ashore. All we could see was this - up on the ridge of the mountains which formed the backbone of the island was an active volcano with smoke just pouring out of it. So that was our very first view of an active volcano on a island which we were going to spend some time - it wasn't very nice.

What was the base like, Torokina?

Oh it was a - the Yanks had built a very, very, very tight stronghold. It only covered, oh, about thirteen miles by about six miles or so deep. They had airfields and defences and troops, well-laid roads, uh, picture shows - they had everything - open-air picture shows. But, you know, Torokina was absolutely blasted and razed before the invasion. There wasn't very much tall timber or anything around the actual beachhead itself. We were only there for a - several weeks and then my company got detached to another unit to spend a month in the mountains with them. When our own unit went to the mountains we stayed on for another six weeks - so we were two and a half months in the mountains without seeing any Torokina or anything else.

What were you doing in the mountains?

Oh the usual. Patrolling and guarding and ...

Are there any major incidents you remember from that period?

Not - not in the first month we were up there. We were doing a bit of patrol work and a making the track into a 'jeepable' road and things like that. When our own unit came up, we moved up onto the Pearl Ridge, which was the - the furthest most point - and that was - our company was the forward company. Well we had some very, very ... The Japs had the next mountain across and the valley in between was pretty hectic and we had a few clashes in the valley and we went on various patrols where we had clashes but we didn't make any major assaults because they couldn't get supplies up. The, uh - there was no way of getting anything up this first mountain. Only what can be carried by natives - natives were in short supply, the major forces were fighting in the south of the island. They had a couple of brigades involved - we only had one battalion in the mountains - and we had another battalion in the north of the moun.... in the north of the island and our brigade was very, very widely stretched and so our orders were just to actively patrol without pushing any further. So we didn't have any really major engagements - a few ... Oh we lost a couple of fellows in different patrols but there was no real serious clashes. I mean, they were just hit and run affairs with an ambush patrol or a bit of a patrol clash.

Right. Um, so - so it was a fairly quiet - comparatively ...

Comparatively quiet to what we'd been - experienced before, but still in the same area in the front line. Every time you walked out of your dugout - we had dugouts there - every time you walked out you The Japs theoretically could have shot you because they were in plain view on the next mountain across, which was 950 yards. It wasn't very good for active shooting and they'd never shot at us. We used to shoot at them occasionally. We had a Bren gun on fixed lines, we used to occasionally pump shots out, mortars used to put a few shots over occasionally. But they seemed to be quite content just to live and let live. They wouldn't let us dislodge them but they weren't actively, um, concerned about stirring us up.

Do you remember the end of the war?

At the end of the war we were - we had some very clashes in the north of the island, we won't go into at this point, but when the end of the war, we happened to be resting back at Torokina and the first we knew of it - we had no radios thanks to the Brisbane wharfies. They had knocked all our radios off when we were going away. That's a very sore point, but the YMCA chap with us, he had a radio over in the - his recreation hut and one of our chaps, late one night, was over there

No, no, first off - that's right - seven-thirty, he had a speaker relayed out to each company and when the seven - seven-thirty news came on we were listening in - we used to listen to the news, but it was very, very high static and we couldn't understand. All we could hear all the way through was bomb, bomb, this bomb, that bomb, and someone said, 'What in the hell's particular about 'a bomb'. We couldn't work it out, you know, there's millions dropped. We couldn't - there was so much static we couldn't understand what was going on. It was just too indistinct to understand it.

(10.00) That night, one of the chaps was over there, late in the recreation hut and he heard the eleven o'clock news and it was clear and concise and he came running over to the lines screaming out, 'They dropped one bomb and wiped a whole city out'. You know, 'course it woke everyone up. Now we knew what they were talking about - one bomb. 'Cause we didn't understand the implications of it. Then they said a few days later that there was going to be a very, uh, important announcement round about seven this night. So we were all grouped round this speaker and they come over and told us the war was over. The Japs had sued for peace and the war was over. I was very, very relieved and very funny that there were four fellows - three of us - four of us staying there together and there was - we were the only four who were still with the platoon who'd left - who'd been with the platoon when it left Greta. Just a coincidence the four of us were standing together and we were the four, you know, of the original platoon who were still there and, you know, it was just one of those - just happened to be standing together - Frank, Les, Denny and myself.

You went to Rabaul with the other ...?

Yeah.

What was Rabaul like? Was that memorable or not?

Yes, Rabaul had - it also had active volcanoes. Uh, we had some lighter moments there.

Mmm, what are they? We haven't had many lighter moments?

Haven't ya! Oh well ...

Oh we had some, but I mean

Before we went to Rabaul, uh, we were numerically weak. The Japs were numerically strong, they outnumbered us by about five to one or ten to one or something. So what our force did, we barbwired a perimeter around the town and we were in the - behind the barbed wire and the Japs had the rest of the island and they looked after themselves. They had - they were fully armed and they couldn't come inside the perimeter armed. We had work parties coming in each day by the hundreds to build our camps and so forth, but one ... We always kept someone on standby all the time. One day my platoon was patrolling outside the wire - we kept active patrolling, everything - I mean, we were just ... Well first of all, we didn't trust them. The mere fact they just said, 'Right, today we're fighting you, tomorrow we're at peace', we still didn't know what would happen. So we had - we were on patrol this particular day, outside our wire, it was all hilly with little valleys and so forth. We stopped on a bit of a hill to have a 'smoko' - I don't smoke so I was just standing there leaning against a small tree, just gazing into space. The others were all sitting down smoking and all of a sudden I heard tramp, tramp, tramp, and in the va... in the road in the valley about sixty feet below comes a squad of Japs - about thirty-forty Japs, fully armed, rifles at the slope, marching up the road and I stiffened, I lifted my arm and gun, I cocked it and I was taking careful aim. I'd forgotten the war was over. Me mate Denny - 'Steady Jack', he says, 'the war's over', so I just uncocked the gun and very quietly lowered it and passed off without any further - let them march past. (Laughs)

I was there you know, I was just sort of day dreaming and all of a sudden tramp, tramp, tramp, and there was the most beautiful target I'd seen through the war coming towards me and there I was at point blank range with an Owen gun. Why wouldn't I - God knows what would have happened if I'd have opened fire.

Anyway another day there, we were, um ... This Freddy Murphy and myself, we were guard... We were escort for a party that was building our mess hut and we had eighteen in our party, and they were building the mess hut out of bamboo. And anyway, during the morning - we had an interpreter - all the interpreters, the Japanese interpreters were medical men - and we queried it with them and they told us that they had to learn English - to read and write English - because they used American text books and all their medical training was done in English, so they become interpreters. So during the morning, he came to us and told us that they were out of bamboo and they needed more supplies. We said, 'Where are you going to get them'. He said he knew where they could get some good supplies.

What did they want the bamboo for?

Building a mess hut. It was a big, big thick - a beautiful building material - you know, big thick stalks of bamboo. So he went away and he came back with a - a Japanese truck and driver, they'd loaded the eighteen people in the back of the truck. Fred and I were in the - standing up near the cab and the interpreter in the front. So away we went. We went out through the perimeter. We had provosts our side, Japs had provosts the other side, had to

have a work ticket with what you were and everything else, our provosts examined it - the Japs didn't worry - we trundled up the road. Oh we went miles and miles and miles, right out into Japanese country and all I'd done was take an Owen gun and two magazines with me and Fred had done the same, because the war was over, why be fully armed. So anyway, we trundled up the road - we must have gone ten miles, country we'd never seen before. We turned off up the little side road and we came into a - a valley ended in an amphitheatre and the whole ground was - it was obviously a parade ground, it was bar3 of grass, rubbish, weed, it was just plain earth. Absolutely bare and flat and in the middle of it was the most magnificent growth of bamboo. Obviously been planted and cultivated. All around the slope of the hills, were rows and rows and rows of huts and our truck pulled up and the eighteen blokes get out and they start to hack into this bamboo. Within minutes, thousands of Japs poured out of the huts and came down, gesticulating and carrying on and all they did - our blokes just pointed the thumb at us and went on chopping. Obviously they were rival units and they must have envied this bamboo and they were using us as an excuse to chop it down.

(15.00) Fred and I started to get a bit concerned because these - all these thousands of troops started to get a bit - you know, they started to get a bit stroppy and some of the officers came down and they was there and they were carrying on and we didn't know what they were saying. We didn't like the sound of what they - the tone of their voices, so I said, 'Well I think we'll go back to the truck Fred'. So we went back to the truck and we climbed up and I said, 'Well how much ammunition you got?' He said, 'I got two magazines', I said, 'Well I've got two magazines'. That was sixty rounds apiece and I said, 'If the buggers charge us, I said, 'I'll get sixty before I got down, I know that', and he said, 'I think I'll do the same'.

Anyway no one - our mob finished cutting the bamboo down, then they stripped it, left all the leaves and rubbish laying on the ground, loaded the bamboo in the truck and the mob were absolutely outraged, they were absolutely screaming. Then we climbed in the truck and the truck wouldn't start, it had a flat battery. So they got off and they pushed it until it started and we slowly meandered out of that valley and they were all screaming and carrying on and the place was an absolute mess. Anyway we got back to the checkpoint and when the provosts counted we had twenty-one instead of eighteen. And I'd counted twenty-one and the provosts said, 'Oh they all look alike, must have miscounted'. So we got back there and we said to the interpreter, 'We bring any strays back?' He said, 'No, no'. So we get back there and of course when they start work we realised we had three strays. They didn't know what they were doing, they were just standing around and - like lost sheep. We called the interpreter over and we said to him, 'There are three strays, what's the story?' and he said, 'Well that unit had never had any contact with the Australians and they asked us what you were like and we said, oh you're treating us wonderfully.' They were working twelve hours a day and so they came back to look for themselves. (Laughs) So we had three - three extras. Anyway I don't know what happened to them. They marched out that night so we never saw them.

Right.

But Fred and I didn't - didn't like to go on escort parties too far out from our perimeter. We didn't know what they were - going to happen.

Right. What about Papuan New Guineans, did you have much to do with them?

Yes, we had quite a few dealings. We had a, um - when we were in the mountains ... First off you used to see the carriers who'd bring supplies up to various places, and when we were in the mountains at Owers' Corner we went on patrol one day, the same five of us, very good mates, and, uh, someone found a track ... We were - were a day's march out from our position, out of a little village. They called it the 'flea village' and we know why, it was full of fleas, and someone found a track there and no one knew where it came from or where it went, and they'd seen movement on the other side of the river, round about this track, so, we were detailed to go over and follow the track and find out what it was. So we crossed the river, followed the track up, no one in sight and Les said to me, 'I got an idea someone's watching us', and I had a feeling, I was very psychic like this. I could feel eyes, so anyway we came to an area that had been recently cultivated - all the ground was turned over - still no one around and Les said, 'We won't go across the open, we'll skirt around'. We skirted around and when we did a native stepped out in front of us and he was an ex-police boy - a retired police boy he told us - and he was starting a new village with his own family and his sister and his brother-in-law and sister and their family, so anyway we asked him where the track went and he said it didn't go anywhere. It was just the track between their village and the river and we said, 'You seen any strangers around, Japanese'. No, he would report if he had seen any and so while we talking to him ... We were always intrigued by these native police boys. They always wore a leather belt and they always carried .303 rifle - only ten rounds - and they always had a pouch on the belt. We never ever knew what was in the pouch and no one would ever tell us. So my mate, Larry, was sitting on a log there and he kept asking this bloke, 'What do you carry in the pouch?' and of course Larry was very insistent and anyway he found out in a few moments later. The bloke whipped out a pair of handcuffs and handcuffed Larry. They carried little handcuffs in this pouch. (Laughs) And Larry said to him, 'I hope you've got the key'. He said 'No, no, no, key in Port Moresby', but he had the key with him. But they had a sense of humour as much as we did. But we got on very well with them everywhere. They, um - we had police boys with us on Bougainville, they were actually Papuans who came down there for certain reasons and one of them was an absolute ... He was an absolute gem, he did patrol with us, he took us on patrols and he was an absolute - oh he was incredible. He was a - he wasn't supposed to, he was there for another purpose. He used to take our patrols out and - and I patrolled quite a bit with him. We said to him one day - my particular section - there was six of us in the section - and we reckoned we were pretty good and we got on ... We copped more patrols than anyone because we had no one who was clumsy or didn't pull their weight and we copped a lot of patrols that we probably shouldn't have. And this Sunni, when he had to go on patrol he used to always ask for us. And we said to him one day, 'Why will you only patrol with us, Sunni'. He said 'The others sound like a herd of elephants going through the jungle', and we said, 'Oh we're pretty good'. He said, 'Yeah, you sound like one elephant.' (Laughs) Six deflated egos.

(Laughs) So demobilisation, how soon did it come?

Well not as - not soon enough. But we were on Rabaul until, um, February. But up until the end of the year - end of '45 - the Japs had to look after themselves, but they were building compounds for them. They all had to be in the compounds on the 1st January. Until then they were armed and moving around with their weapons and so forth. As soon as the 1st January, they all had to be in the compounds and anyone with a rifle could be shot on sight. Uh, our unit was - took over the compounds on the 1st January. There was about a group of about twenty-odd of us were earmarked, next ones to be - come home to be demobilised. So

we didn't go to the compound. We stayed in our old camp site. But we didn't get away until about the 4th February.

(20.00) We just spent a month in the old camp site just getting to the harbour each day looking for the ship that we knew would arrive one day. So we had an easy life for a month, and then we came back and then we found we got back that they brought us out of the islands but they still - they used a point system and we all had ... We were young when we enlisted and we were singles and therefore we didn't have very many points. The point systems in there, worked out on your age at enlistment, uh, the number of months you've been in the service, double the points for overseas service and you doubled everything if you had a dependant, married or a dependant mother or something. Well being single and not married and very young on enlistment, we didn't have very many points, so we spent a few months in the various base areas around Sydney and didn't get out until the 30th of July. And we had a few disagreements with the - there was a whole group of us - from all units - went to this particular base depot. It was a, um, a reserve stores depot, and they had all the reserve stores for the army - mainly tea. I can tell you some stories about tea but - what's the statute of limitations on crime?

(Laughs) I think it's pretty safe?

Pretty past. We - they insisted we wear their colour patch and of course everyone was proud of their own unit colour patch. I mean, you'd served with it, most of them fought with it and you wanted to keep your own colour patch and so ...

Instead of some sort of stores colour patch?

And they wanted us to wear the reserves - because they'd never left Sydney throughout the war - so, uh, they wouldn't let us go on parade with our colour patches. So I had two puggarees. One with with my own colour patch on it and one with no colour patch which I had removed. So when I went on parade with them I wore the blank colour - the blank puggaree. As soon as we got away I put my own colour patch back on, and I think most of the others did the same, but we wouldn't wear theirs. We - it used to make the RSM very, very annoyed. But we had this - we used to go into the depot at Lilyfield each morning - we were allowed to stay at home - I was in there at seven o'clock or whatever it was, and they took us - they had stores ... Particularly the one I was at, that was at Rosehill - behind the Rosehill Racecourse - great big stores out there and we were taken out by truck, to bring lunch out during the day and they'd bring us back late in the afternoon. You can go back to camp for tea, but I was living at home. So long as you were there on the parade in the morning and there was no questions asked. Most of them - the tram out there in the morning, was filled with troops reporting in for the morning parade, so they could go on - we were just day boys - and this store had tea in it. Chests and chests and chests of tea, plus other foods, and we had a forklift truck there and everything was done by forklift - loaded on by forklift truck - we had to check it on and various things. Anyway our forklift truck driver - I don't know whether he was careless by - or what - but periodically when he was coming to pick up a pallet of tea, the forks would be a bit high and he would run into a chest. Because when the tea spilt out you couldn't see it go to waste. You just fill your great coat pocket or you'd put it into a pillow slip you might have accidentally had in your pocket or something (laughs) ...

Just for such an eventuality.

Because tea was rationed, so we were getting high quality tea and we kept a billy boiling out there all the time. You know, truck drivers used to come in and they were selling a lot of the stuff off to civilians, but other army vehicles used to come in and out the back we had a kerosene bucket boiling all the time and we must have had about three or four morning cups of tea - because we had plenty of tea - and one day there the captain in charge - we very rarely saw him, he had an office there and he used to stay in the office - he came down one day having a cup of tea with us as he always did. We'd say, 'Tea's on', and he come out and have a cup of tea and he said to me one day, 'Gee the cooks are kind to us'. I said, 'How come?' because the cooks are never kind to anyone and he said, 'The amount of tea they send out for us to have all this tea'. And I nearly choked (laughs) because we were knocking it off from the, you know, the damaged chests and he had - he must have been dumb or he was ... He thought the cooks were supplying us all this tea and we kept the billy boiling all the day.

Did you find it hard when - when the time came to leave the army and settle into civilian life, did you find it hard to make the transfer.

Well, not really. I think that - those few months out there browned you off with army life. I mean, when you're with your unit with all your own friends and everything, it was a - you know it was a real comradeship and you knew a lot of people and you had a lot of good times, but that was a little bit of a - it was probably done deliberately so we would be glad to get out and get back and earn a living.

Looking back on it and that - that second world war experience, um, what did it mean to you, for your life?

Well I suppose I was lucky as I survived. I think I was lucky that I experienced it. I was lucky that I got into a unit where I had an enormous amount of friends, comrades, people I'm still friendly with even today, and it was an experience I suppose, you wouldn't want to miss but I wouldn't want it as hard as we had it in the early part. I think we - that was an experience that you should never experience the conditions that were there at Sanananda. The mud, the slush, the casualty rates, the ridiculous attacks we put against bunkers we had no hope of, uh, digging them out, because we only had infantry held weapons. We needed - we needed tanks to blast them or something like that. There was no way we were ever going to dig them out of those bunkers, not with what we were carrying.

END TAPE 3, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW.