



Sponsored by News Limited



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number	S00585
Title	NX155349 (N15544) Elliott, William Archibald (Bill) (Sergeant)
Interviewer	Connell, Daniel
Place made	Mayfield, Newcastle, NSW
Date made	14 June 1989
Description	<p>William Archibald (Bill) Elliott, Sergeant 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; enlistment and training; formation of 53rd Battalion; inadequacy of training period prior to embarkation for New Guinea; arrival in Port Moresby; inadequacy of supplies; bombing of the Macdhui; moving out of Port Moresby and onto Kokoda Trail; first contact with Japanese Forces; death of Colonel Ward and reaction by battalion; battalion morale; withdrawal from Kokoda to Port Moresby; battalion portrayed as 'rabble'; amalgamation with 55th Battalion and new officers; action at Soputa; high casualty rate in battalion; return to Australia; contact with American forces in Townsville; Japanese atrocities; compound duties in Rabaul; demobilisation; post-war employment.</p>

Disclaimer

The Australian War Memorial is not responsible either for the accuracy of matters discussed or opinions expressed by speakers, which are for the reader to judge.

Transcript methodology

Please note that the printed word can never fully convey all the meaning of speech, and may lead to misinterpretation. Readers concerned with the expressive elements of speech should refer to the audio record. It is strongly recommended that readers listen to the sound recording whilst reading the transcript, at least in part, or for critical sections.

Readers of this transcript of interview should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal conversational style that is inherent in oral records. Unless indicated, the names of places and people are as spoken, regardless of whether this is formally correct or not – e.g. ‘world war two’ (as spoken) would not be changed in transcription to ‘second world war’ (the official conflict term).

A few changes or additions may be made by the transcriber or proof-reader. Such changes are usually indicated by square brackets, thus: [] to clearly indicate a difference between the sound record and the transcript. Three dots (...) or a double dash (- -) indicate an unfinished sentence.

Copyright

Copyright in this transcript, and the sound recording from which it was made, is usually owned by the Australian War Memorial, often jointly with the donors. Any request to use of the transcript, outside the purposes of research and study, should be addressed to:

Australian War Memorial
GPO Box 345
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Identification: This is side 1 of tape 1 of the interview with Mr Bill Elliott.

Mr Elliott, if you could just give me your address please?

Mayfield, Newcastle.

Postcode?

2304.

And telephone number?

And the area code's 049.

2304 ...

Sorry, STD. And I'm Daniel Connell and it's 14th June '89. End of identification.

Right. Before the war, where did you grow up?

I was bred and born at home, I've been here all me life.

That's in Newcastle?

Yeah, in Nile Street in this address. So I've been here, what, sixty-nine years now.

And your father, what sort of work did he do?

He was an engineer Morrison and Bebes at Carrington and he retired and he passed a few years after he retired. During my early life I worked at Morrison and Bebes too in the boiler shop labouring and that's when I went to the war.

And where did you go to school?

Mayfield East and Crookshill High School.

And, if you don't mind my asking, what religious group did you grow up with?

Well, actually I grew up with them all. I was christened Methodist but I believed in just one church, like one religion like, you know ... and at school I used to go to a different denomination each week just to see how the other side lived.

Right. Your parents encouraged you to do this?

No, no ... but, we used to turn round and just go down to the Salvation Army of a Sunday, get our threepence like, you know, although we was Methodist it made no difference to us where we went. But that just how our life carried on.

Politics?

Well, being a working man I've always been a Labor man.

And in the years ... when did you leave school, what date?

Well, I left school when I was fourteen years of age. The depression was on, things were pretty tight like, and everybody was out to earn a few bob. So I left high school after me first year. I didn't get me certificate or nothing or that there.

So that would have ... you were born, when?

I was born in 1920 - 25th January.

So ... in 1934, the next five years, what sort of work did you do in the next five years?

Well, I worked at Stuart and Lloyds ... no, before Stuart and Lloyds, I worked at the cooperative store on a fruit cart when I was fourteen years of age and I left there and I went down to Lysaght's and the Lysaght's job was only a go down to the gate and wait and see if they wanted you. You might get one shift one week and two shifts the next week. So you had to take your cut lunch with you and all that there and nine times out of ten you'd come home with it. And, you know, in those days you never wasted nothing, that was your tea.

And come 1939, what were you doing then?

Ah ... 1939, I was labouring at Morrison and Bebes in the boiler shop.

What was your reaction when you heard that war had been declared?

Well, I was disappointed in a way, but you can understand with the news at the time, everybody actually expected it but we didn't appreciate the way things were going on in regards to the English Prime Minister - that's my opinion, I thought he was a bit weak.

So how ... and how do you think the war was going to affect you?

Well, I didn't have any realisations about that because I was in a essential trade like, you know, a essential works there 'cause we were doing a lot of ship work and actually I wasn't worried about it much, I was only nineteen, and of course those times you were having toppest time of your life and as far as the law went and the army went, I had no idea what I was going to do. I just thought I was just going to work along and let things play 'em out themselves.

(5.00) So, when was it that the army first got in contact with you and suggested that they wanted you to be part of them?

Well, I think I'd just turned twenty and I got me call-up papers. In fact, I got my call-up papers inside there still to report into town with me toothbrush, etcetera. And I went into the army there for a ninety-day training. Well, after being there for ninety days I started to get the hang of the job - I didn't mind it - and they asked for people to stay on, like, so I stayed on as an instructor because in that time I'd got me first stripe. And I stopped on and done the ninety-day training camp between Rutherford and Greta.

So you'd become AIF or AMF?

No, AMF, still AMF; we was only doing the militia training, like, you know, not AIF training. Of course, our equipment was substandard like, you know, we never had nothing modern; it was all the old equipment we had and we was training the boys there. They'd do their ninety days and they'd go out and we'd get a fresh batch in and do the same thing again.

How long did that go on for?

Oh, that went on for about twelve months and ... they started to form the 8 Divi. to go to Malaya. A few mates of mine and myself went up to see the CO about putting an application to transfer and me mates were transferred over but being an NCO the colonel, which is Colonel Owens, he said, 'No', he said he wouldn't let the nucleus of his training staff go so he knocked me back. Luck happened in my respect because, you know what happened to the 8 Div. in Malaya, none of me mates came back from there.

So I carried on there for a while and I'm not sure how long after that, but they had to send a certain number of personnel to form the 53rd Battalion and I was one that was sent to Ingleburn, that would be about 1941. I can't tell you exact date, I think it was late in '41.

And how was the 53rd set up? Was it set up as a fairly effective operation or was it a bit of a shambles?

Oh well, the 53rd was set up in this respect that you had people coming in from everywhere, dribs and drabs like, and they were trying to form the nucleus of the battalion and as they'd come in you'd put 'em in different sections - platoons and so forth - to build them up the strength. Of course their training as with normal training, up bright and early, round the blooming paddocks for a gallop before you had a cup of coffee and then breakfast. Then you'd go out and do route marches - or square bashing - and all the time we're getting new chaps in, as you understand like, you know. And ... when was it, oh, around about Christmas time it was - Christmas or the New Year, somewhere around about then - we had a parade and we just got a new batch of chaps in and we had a parade there and all the boys thought it was going to be a leave parade. That's when we was notified we had to go and pack our gear, that we was moving. We wasn't told where we was moving. The next thing we knew we was on board the *Aquitania* in Darling Harbour and half the boys hadn't been issued with rifles or anything like that 'cause they only just got their uniforms.

What, they hadn't had ... hadn't learnt to operate a rifle? Hadn't practised?

No, no, no. On board ship we was doing like rifle instruction on board ship. Stripping rifles down and all that there and showing them bits and pieces and which way ... which the bullet comes out of as the saying goes. (coughs) Pardon me. And as far as parade ground training, you couldn't do much on board which because the ship was pretty crowded like - you didn't

have much deck room - and that's mainly what it consisted of. So I'd say they were pretty rough, they were more or less a mob, they weren't an army. Just a group of fellas together that they were trying to organise into an army.

What about men and the officers: to what degree had they sorted themselves out and to what degree did people respect the officers and what degree do you think the officers were worth it?

Well, the officers in my opinion, they were the same as the boys, they were all just thrown into a heap and they were trying to sort themselves out as much as what we were. A lot of them, I think, were fellas that didn't have much training in the art of being officers, or they'd done their training so long before that they'd been rusty on it and they just came out of civil life like, you know, solicitors and so forth - like professional men - and they were a bit soft on it, some were hard. But they weren't a bad batch. In fact, Colonel Ward, he wasn't a bad old fella, old Colonel Ward, but he was a hard nut.

(10.00) Why do you say that?

Well, if you was wrong, you was wrong. If you was right, he'd see your point of view. But there was no mucking around with him, you couldn't put nothing over him.

What was it like on the *Aquitania*?

Very cramped (laughs) very cramped indeed, like sardines in a tin.

Where did people sleep?

Well, they had bunks or ... yeah, we call 'em bunks, about four high I think it was, in tiers, and we was down below the waterline where we were. Nothing ... bare ... just the bare essentials like the bunks, the deckhand and so forth and all that there. They had a big bathroom with about ten hand basin in it and they used to do about 100 men like, you know, to get up and get washed early you had to get in early. And where the bathroom was on the side where the porthole was and one idiot one day opened the porthole to look at the escort vessel alongside and we nearly got drowned because a wave come up and just washed straight in. (laughed) Now that soon got put a stop to.

What was the food like?

Food ... what I can remember of it, it was food, that was all. There was nothing entertaining about it, you know, just plain army tucker.

And do you remember your arrival?

Yeah, we got there on 2nd January ... yeah, I remember that because all (coughs) ... when we was going up there we struck a bit of rough weather, we didn't know where we was heading, and, of course, we had the ... I think it was the *Hobart* as one of our escorts and she was only about 400 yards off our beam and one minute she was there and the next minute she disappeared in the swell like, you know. And we had a bit of rough weather there and the boys were saying, 'I hope to God we soon get it over where we're going to' because although

we were on the *Aquitania*, still the motion sickness was there with a lot of 'em. It didn't worry me, I didn't get seasick. But we got there on 2nd January and marched up Simpson's Gap.

What was the town like? What's your memory of the town?

Well, it was just like a little fishing village to me, there wasn't much of a town there.

This is Port Moresby?

Port Moresby, yeah. And there was a wharf big enough for one boat to tie up alongside, that's all there was. And you walked off the wharf up to the main street - what they call the main street - it was more like a T-intersection and Burns Philp's on one corner and I think there was a hotel on the other corner, I'm not quite sure now. Another hotel further up the hill on the T-intersection. Funny thing that because you used to get your beer at one hotel and go down to the next one and drink it because they didn't charge for glasses at that hotel. But it was pretty quiet but we didn't see much of the town itself because we were camped out in Simpsons Gap.

How much When you got there what was the ... I understand a lot of the essential stores and supplies for the 53rd Battalion ...

I don't know about that ... (laughs)

Let's talk about it.

As I said, they took us ashore and marched us up round to what we now know as Simpsons Gap, but more or less a dirt track over a saddle between two big hills, and they stopped us there and said, 'Right. This is it. Just sit down'. So we sat down and a few of the meris and boongs come walking past on the road like and all the boys chiacking and so forth, the first time they'd seen 'em, and we were waiting for our gear to come. No gear came. And, of course, we had a lot of men there. To relieve yourself you was looking round for a bush because they had no toilet or nothing, we tried to do the best we could, and come dark we still had nothing and we just had to burrow into the ground as best we could - clear away a few rocks and that to find a place to sleep. And some of the boys up on the side of the hill they kept rolling down the hill all right. They couldn't turn round and dig in deep enough.

What about mosquitoes?

Oh, don't talk about them, no, they were there all the time. It didn't matter where you went in Moresby, mosquitoes were everywhere. I used to think that mosquitoes ... the higher up the hill you got the less mosquitoes you got but that was a furphy. There was just as many on top of the mountain as what there was down in the hollows, in the swamps. It was a natural phenomenon, I reckon, the mosquitoes up there.

How long did it take to get your gear?

Oh about two or three days I think it was before we got our gear off, that was our tents and that there. Then they moved us round to just above the air force, like the Catalina flying base there, and put us in a camp there - we built a camp there. And that's were we operated our town pickets and did a bit of training like, you know. We had to go to town there and police

the town and done a bit of training, as much as we could with the equipment we had, and then eventually they sent one platoon to Napa Napa, that's the other side of the harbour, and our platoon was sent down further down. I just can't think of the name of the place now because I get mixed up with all these names.

(15.00)Not Porebada?

Porebada, yeah. Down to Porobarda. That would be about ... oh, about five, seven mile down the coast to a village down there. And we was there ... oh, quite a while, Porebada. We had a Norm Gallagher, I think it was our lieutenant at the time, and Norm got called back and we got another officer called Shaw. He was about six foot four, raw boned type of joker with a big moustache and I don't think he knew much about soldiering, he was more or less a college cadet I think, by the look of him like. You know, his standards and that and of course the boys were pretty rough and ready. And we had one fella, he wouldn't wear boots, they couldn't get boots to fit him, he come from up at Coffs Harbour - old [Gabber Daley] - and ... he could still fire a rifle though, the same fella. We had quite a good time there.

What about the first bombing raid on Port Moresby which happened at the beginning of February?

Well, we was still in Moresby at the time then and we were just laying up on the hill watching 'em. And where we were, the hill we was on, from the other side of the saddle was the ack-ack battery and we were just laying there with a pair of binoculars like we were (inaudible) and watching the air-raid. But nobody got hurt that night because it was mainly in the water they fell, they was after shipping.

Hit BP's I understand?

Hey?

A bit of action down at BPs?

Yeah. But ... Oh don't kid yourself, the Japs weren't bad bombers. They just had a lot of bad luck, or we had a lot of good luck. But I remember watching them there one day, they come over the harbour and half of the old ... I'm not sure whether it was the *Macdhui* ...

Macdhui.

... or the (*Malata?*), I'm not sure which one it was this day though, but the skipper had got up steam and got moving and you could see him. He'd watch the plane, you could see the bomb drop from them, and that's what the skip was doing and he was watching them and as soon as they let the bomb go, he'd change course. And you could see the string of bombs go right along his original course and he be going the other way. He done a pretty good job that day, but one day the caught up with the *Macdhui*, she's still there. But ...

What about Burns Philp's store, there ...

Oh, there was a funny thing about Burns Philp's store. I was on night picket and anyhow, somebody said, 'Hey' he said 'There's somebody in Burns Philp's store there'. And I said, 'Righto', we go and investigate and we found a window open where they'd got in. So we got

in and we marched around the store, looking around, couldn't see nobody and the next thing - of course, I don't know whether you know much about the old store they used to have, these wooden bins they used to store their flour in bulk like, you know, and sugar and so forth - the next thing this figure dived out of the flour bin and took off - it was a nigger, one on the natives there. One of my mob, he nearly fell over dead. He thought it was a ghost. Just as a white apparition coming out like and going like the bat of hell out the store and we were after him.

And on the bomb ... on the day of the bombing, some of the troops got into Burns Philp, didn't they?

Oh well, that's only hearsay, like, as far as I go. Like I say, I didn't see nothing like up there but I heard a bit about it. They reckon there was some pilfering going on and all that there but, I don't know. Of course, a lot of these things, if you believe everything you hear you're a fool and if you don't listen to some of it you're a bigger fool. (laughs)

Right. So, going on from that, what sort of training were you doing there in Port Moresby getting ready for your future activities?

Actually very little. ... we had very little training at all in regards to ... like manoeuvring round through the area. It was mainly just going out on the rifle range and practise firing and that there and a bit of marching and so forth. But as far as jungle training went, we had no jungle training at all because round Moresby itself it was more like the Australia bush, just round Moresby itself, and it was fairly thin and just like normal country. And of course, as I said before, we was out on our patrols, like standing patrols - about the platoon at Napa Napa, I don't know what they were doing - out at Popondetta (sic) we had, what, three lookouts to maintain and the village and that was mostly our work, our training was just marching along there. In fact, nobody was allowed out within 100 yards, further than 100 yards in the water and one of the boys nearly shot a boong one day. We was up on the hill at the lookout and he seen this shape in the water and he said, 'Hey, look at that', he said, 'A shark' and, of course, he up with his rifle and let go. But lucky he wasn't a good shot because he didn't allow for elevation, that fixed him and the boong came racing in.

(20.00) So, through February/March, anyone reading the newspapers, Rabaul falls in late January, Singapore falls in February. Are you getting a bit worried?

We were, we could see the writing on the wall, it was coming in closer. But we weren't actually that worried much because I don't think they realised like because ... well, we'd been told like, you know, I suppose it's impregnable, they can't get here and all that there. Anybody with a head on his shoulders could see that from island to island is just like walking across stepping stones, you can always get there. And, the Jap, he's no fool and a lot of people thought he was. All the propaganda, a little fellow with a big pair of glasses and a couple of buckteeth. My first Jap was six foot two, Mongolian. (laughs)

We'll come to him a bit later. ... the ... I guess What about the Battle of the Coral Sea, did that make an impact on you?

Well, the Battle of the Coral Sea, it did 'cause we'd all been called back into Moresby at the time and we had a former perimeter and I was allocated round near the native hospital with my gang which was a very dilapidated blooming place, stunk to high heaven. It was built on

stilts out in the water. We were supposed to dig slit trenches there in the rock but it was impossible. You used to have to do the best you could. And we used to see the planes going out and coming back like, you know, you'd count 'em going out and you'd count 'em coming back, see how things were going and we started to realise things are starting to get a bit tougher. Everybody was on their toes then, more so the bombing raids were starting to get more prolific and that and you could see they were getting more serious.

Right. And so when was there the first suggestion that you were going to have to go up into the mountains?

Oh ... I couldn't tell you the date but I had two sections - I was acting platoon sergeant at the time - I had two sections at the old gaoler ... at the gaoler's house at the gaol. And we had our areas dug in round there with triple ... of wire and down below us in the coconut grove we had an American technician section and, of course, for our rations we got a lot of bully beef and a lot of baked beans and things like that. Well, the boys didn't like baked beans. Well in the gaol house we had these shelves, it had a big walk-in pantry, and we had these shelves full of baked beans which we didn't use. We got word one day from the CO to pack our gear, we was moving out, going up to ... Koitaki I think it was, up near Rouna Falls, we were moving up the track. Now, one of the Yanks came up and he said, 'Hey', he said, 'Where are youse going?'. I said, 'Why?'. He said, 'What are you going to do with all those baked beans?', and I said, 'Why, what's it to yah?'. He said, 'Gee, I wouldn't mind having some of them'. I said, 'No', I said, 'I wouldn't mind having one of your trucks either', I said, 'Instead of walking'. He said, 'I'll tell you what' he said, 'I'll get you a truck' he said, 'as long as you give me all your baked beans' he said, 'and throw in can throw in your refrigerator there' - we had a big refrigerator.

You must have had a lot of baked beans?

Oh, there was a lot of baked beans, I don't mind telling yah. So anyhow, he turned up with this truck. Course all the boys had a single lined bedstead each they got from the cells down at the gaol, because there was no wire on them, we just had boards laced across 'em - better than sleeping on the ground. So anyhow, when we got the orders to move, they packed the beds up and everything and put 'em on this truck and away we go and got as far as the battalion, because they're all marching along the road when we come along and old Colonel Ward come along and said, 'And where do you think you're going?'. We said, 'With you, Sir' and he said, 'Well, you're going to walk like the rest of us. You get off that b... truck'. (laughs) Of course he didn't ask us where we got it. And we had to leave all our gear behind, all our ... what we thought was good stuff, and just march like the rest of the boys.

And what was it like? Could you describe, you know, going up the Kokoda Trail?

Well, to start off with, before we got up there ...

You obviously didn't know where you were going?

They embarked us on these trucks and they took us up to the head of the Trail by truck and going up there the road was pretty - I don't mind telling you - pretty rough. There was one part of it there, a hairpin bend overlooking this precipice it was, the truck had to back around to get around it, and you sitting down near the tailgate of the truck when he starts backing and

you're looking over space like, you know, you don't know whether you're going to get there or not.

Anyhow, we got up there and disembarked out of the trucks, then we started walking. We didn't know where we were going, just follow the leader like, you know. And things started getting thicker and it was just a matter of just follow your nose. Pretty hot; pretty steep, I know that much. You soon found out your weak points.

(25.00) And ... well, how long did it take?

Oh, don't ask me that. It took us a couple of days I think it was to march up to where we had to get to. I know we ... over night we just ... where you was on the track, that's where you slept. The next morning you get up and you push further on. I know it was raining half the time and you didn't know whether to curse the rain or bless it for washing the mud off you because it was pretty muddy. See, it wasn't only the ... our boys on the track, there was the carriers using the track too.

I tell you what they frightened the hell out of me one day. Sitting down having a smoke, next thing a hand touched me on the shoulder, it was one of the New Guinea boys come out of the scrub - you can't hear 'em move (laughs) they're pretty good in their own territory.

What did you see of them? Did you see much of them?

The New Guinea boys? Oh, we seen ... like some of the New Guinea infantry were in charge of carriers and that and that's when you'd strike 'em. We never struck 'em as far as platoon strength like there but they were there, you knew they were there because at different times you'd strike one or two of them and you knew that they were about too.

What about the carriers, what did you see of the carriers?

The carriers were pretty bloody good. They were just like anyone else, only a normal man but some of the load they were carrying, I wouldn't like to carry it, and being barefooted, of course, they had more purchase with their toes in the mud and the rest while we had our boots. And, still, they had a hard job carrying it through.

Did you ever ... you know, you wouldn't talk to carriers very much would you, or you would?

No ... Oh, you talk to 'em, you know, 'Good day' and things like that. And I'll never forget one day there we struck this carrier, he was coming back empty like, and, of course the boys had ran out of tobacco by this, and this carrier came along and he pulled out a packet of Craven As, smoking taylor-made cigarettes - we nearly fell over. All the white men and they couldn't get a smoke. Things are a bit tough, I don't mind telling you. (laughs)

You didn't ask him to share them?

We did - 'No understand English'. (laughs)

Yes, I can understand that.

I did try their trade tobacco, the twist, but, I said, tried it, I wouldn't take it off - it was like licorice.

So the How did, you know, your group hold together as you were pressing on to Kokoda?

Oh well, we, as I said, nose to tail because it was only a single-file track actually like, you know, and you just follow one another. When we eventually got up there we were given different areas to defend - like defend - and we were there, I think it was twenty-four hours, and they come and said they wanted a section to go out on the OP over the drome at Kokoda. So we had an officer - I just forget his name now off hand - and myself and about twelve other ranks. Now, in the meantime, just before we went up there, we was issued with a Tommy gun for each platoon and I had the Tommy gun for my platoon ...

Bren guns or Tommy guns?

Tommy - no Bren guns - we had one Lewis gun per platoon, the old round drum magazine. And I found that the weight of the Tommy gun ammunition that they carry, forty-five or bigger, was a bit heavy like, you know. Anyhow, we had to go over this here drome just for spotting like, you know, OP, and we was camped ... oh, you just looked down the valley onto the drome, there was all fog. You could only see it when the fog had lift. I didn't know why the hell we was sitting there because half the time you didn't know whether there was anybody there or what on account of the fog. Anyhow when the fog would lift you'd look over the other ridge and there'd be Japs on the other ridge and they'd wave to you and you'd wave back to them like, you know, they thought it was a great joke.

You did wave to each other?

Yeah. Course they didn't know who we were because, you know, the distance. They probably thought that we were some of them and we thought they were some of ours but they were Japs. Anyway, when we finally did find out they were Japs, the officer-in-charge decided it was time we headed back. But we heard some firing back in our rear - a bit of a skirmish going on ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

COMMENCE TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: Side 2, tape 1 - Bill Elliott.

We heard this skirmish behind us - rifle fire and that, mortar fire - because the mortar fire wasn't ours, we never have any and the officer-in-charge decided to head back to camp. They were coming back along the track from Kokoda and one of the boys, their forward scout, he stopped and pointed ahead and I went ahead and ... because everybody's down in the scrub, and the first thing I seen was a big Mongolian, or I took him to be a Mongolian, he'd be about six foot two, in front of me about fifty yards away on the track.

Could he see you?

Well, put it this way, I don't know whether one of the boys made a noise or I made a noise or what happened but he turned around to have a look, he must have been the last man, and when he did I let him have a burst of the Tommy and dropped him. And then we hit another one who popped up to have a look to see what was going on. Well, the officer decided the best thing to do was to break off down the side of the spur, withdraw down that way, heading back towards our lines and I sat up there and I kept the Tommy gun operating from the top of the hill until there was only two of us left and, of course, then I took off and I mean really took off. There was about a forty-five degree slope and we scrambled down there as best we could, as quick as we could. Got down the bottom, across the creek and up the other side and we done that all day, climb that spur until it come dark and we couldn't go any further, it was pretty thick scrub, and the ... raining. Anyhow, we're just under our ponchos, grouped together, and I was busy - I was the only one that had tobacco left at the time - and I was busy rolling smokes all night for the boys and passed them around. We had nothing to eat. Anyhow, the next morning we eventually found our way back to our own lines and things didn't look to be too good. And there wasn't much information about, what was going on and that. Anyhow, next thing we got word to say we had to move back, to pull out.

Had Colonel Ward been shot?

Oh yes, that was earlier, yeah.

Do you remember hearing ... hearing that the colonel had been shot?

Yeah, I heard that, yeah. And I didn't even know who our CO was at the time then. But ...

What was the reaction among the men when they heard the colonel had been shot?

Well, very sorry because he was a good old man.

Were you also rather worried by what that meant?

Well, everybody knew his number was on the card because up there you could be five yards to a man and not see him and a bullet can travel quick. And either you see a sniper or he sees you, that's it and everybody was worried about snipers. But the old colonel, he didn't seem to worry about it until he got his number like. I was always a believer when your number came up you'll go and the same thing happened up there with fellas that should have been killed that weren't. And as far as Colonel Ward, well, he was just unlucky, he stuck the sniper.

The ... did people sort of talk about what sort of attitude they should have, you know, whether they should be positive or worried or ...

No, the boys seemed to be in good humour. As far as the attitude went, like all army, grumbling about tucker and things like that there and the dirty stinking bloody mosquitoes and you know, what the hell are we sitting here for, why aren't we moving on and all that, that type of thing. But you're going out to obey orders. Anyhow, when we got orders to pull back, nobody knew where to, how far or anything like that and there wasn't many officers about, I know that much.

And anyhow we pulled back till we were stopped - I forget who stopped us - but anyhow we were told to form up like and we were there for a while and the next thing we know we sent around on the right flank. We had to go around on the right flank on the track and move up the spur as far as we could and then forward as far as we could.

Well on this spur there'd be about ... oh, when you stood up on it your hand touched ... you put your hand out you touch the side 'cause the angle of the slope, it was like that. And to get there we had to cross this creek and there's a waterfall and the only way across was this log at the top of the waterfall. You had to just sit on the log and move your way ... inch your way over this log - one side you've got the creek and the other side you've got the waterfall, you ... fell away from you like, you know. Everybody would be jittery getting over there. Anyhow, went this far ... we couldn't up there ... oh, you couldn't get any further, it was like a precipice and it was getting on dark and we was told to stop there for the night. Well, what we done is just dug our bayonets in the ground there and hitched the belt over it and that's it, you stopped there for the night. And we heard firing during the night over on our left and I found out later on, there was supposed to be pincer movement with our boys and some other mob and they got stuck into it and we were stuck where we were, we couldn't get any further. We just had to retreat from where we were, come back from there. Anyhow, when we come back, I just forget exactly what happened now, but there was a lot of turmoil on the track and everybody was moving back and just then the native carriers were coming through with 3" mortars - brand new 3" mortars - still packed in grease and because they were dropping the things on the side of the track and just going back. I said to one of the boys, 'Christ' I said, 'We can't leave these things here'. Anyhow, I grabbed the three inch mortar and put it on me shoulder and I staggered along the track with a three inch mortar like down till I got back as far as I could with it to hand it over to somebody that knew what to do with it. Anyhow, we finally got back as far as we could and I handed over this mortar to an officer and I told him what had happened. He said to put it on the side of the track there, so I put it there.

And then the next thing we knew we was all invited to start walking back towards Moresby. No-one knew why. We heard later on there was supposed to be a rabble and everybody just walked out but that wasn't the case. There was no-one there to give any instructions. There was no officers about. More or less just the NCOs and the boys trying to do the best they could and trying to get as much information they could, which is impossible.

Were people talking about where are the officers?

Yeah they were, they were asking but no-one could give 'em an answer.

What do you think the answer was?

Well, we didn't know. We didn't know ... they got information before us and just took off or whether they'd been called back. It's hard to turn around and find somebody like there because when you're in the jungle like that you more or less ... you're contacted from mouth to mouth - you haven't got a telephone line or nothing like that there, a TV set, to tell you what's going on - and that's just what happened.

And we got back to another camp site and we was told to stack all our rifles there and we was going to march back to Moresby and because the boys were pretty dirty on that because, 'They're our rifles'. And anyhow, we had to do as we were told and we felt like a mob of dingoes coming out without any equipment like, just our haversacks and that, but what else

can you do. When you're told to do a thing you've got to do it because if you don't then they've got you up for insubordination and so forth.

I mean, taking your rifles away, that had pretty heavy meaning did it?

It did; it did. That's what I say, it hurt the boys. But their idea was that they could get other troops up faster and take over our rifles and they'd be travelling lighter and we couldn't understand that because they've got their own gear. We had to carry ours in and we couldn't understand why they'd want them to travel without rifles and just take ours. We felt like lepers actually. It's a feeling that you can't understand. I don't know.

So, when you got back to Moresby, what happened then?

Oh we just When we got back to Moresby we were just put in a camp site and we were reissued with gear and given training. But, as I said, we was treated like lepers and the boys are very hostile on it because we lost a lot of good boys up there and, I don't know, we were just more or less given work detail to do and things like that.

(10.00) And they eventually, they turned round and they sent us up to what they call Ward's Drome, Ward's Strip. We had to go on ack-ack duty there with our Lewis guns. There was Americans up there but they were only engineers like and technicians for the air force. And Ward Strip wasn't operational, it was this new strip they put in. Anyhow, we dug our revetments for our machine gun emplacement and done a real good job of it too, I don't mind telling you. And one day during a raid somebody down the other end of the drome opened up on this plane that was coming in to land. And, of course, we hadn't seen Zeros close up and, of course, the planes we had up there at the time looked like Zeros. Anyhow, when they opened up down the other end, our mob opened up too. The next thing I told them to stop firing, 'It's our own plane'. And when he stopped we raced over and got him and he said, 'Thank God you stopped when you did', he said, 'It was buzzing all round my ears'. Anyhow, we took him back to our section there and we had a bit of a yarn and a cup of tea and all that there and he went back to his depot because his plane was damaged and next thing I know the Yanks come over and said they had to confiscate our gun emplacements and they brought their .5s in then to put in and we were just kicked off the job again.

And in a way, we was lucky because the next night during a bombing raid there they got a direct on our gun pits, they blew all the Yanks up. Different things you see like, you know. I made a few good friends amongst the Yanks like, you know - coloured they were. I found the coloured were better than the whites meself amongst the Yanks as far as friendliness goes.

You got back, there's a bad atmosphere, you get together with those officers who vanished? What about all that?

No, we didn't see many of our officers again. We seemed to get a new batch. Everything seemed to become like renewal. We got some of them. We couldn't get much information because they didn't have much information themselves to give. (coughs) The next thing we know we're amalgamated ... pardon me ... we're amalgamated with the 55th Battalion, just draft into there, they had to make up their strength. But, from there on, the boys of the 55th, they were a bit stand-off at first but then they started to get to know the fellas from the 53rd, we all become one unit and it was a lot better.

So, relationships between men and officers, I mean, the 53rd men had just had a rather bad experience, in the new unit how did it all shape up?

It didn't shape up too bad, although they were still wary, it didn't shape up too bad because I think meself that after being up there and seeing what was going on, they knew there was a hell of a lot of work to be done not only by the officers, by the boys themselves too. And ...

What sort of work?

Oh training like, you know - tactics.

As I understand it ... well, did you spend much time on training and tactics in the new unit?

Not that much, not that much but we still tried like, as best we could because you could only obey what the orders are for the day, you can only turn around and do what they tell you to do and everything they told us to do, we done. And at the same time the NCOs and officers were getting the boys in their spare time to do this or do that like, you know, and we talk over things that should be done and different things, how to lay booby traps, work out ... you know, all different ideas because a lot of it's just initiative. A lot of things is not in the manual that you do.

What sort of new tactics were you working out?

Oh, mainly, like, work on ambush and thing like that because actually the old thin red line style of fighting went out in the jungle. It was more or less man to man and quickest on the draw as the saying goes. And we were working out things: how to try and improve our communication with one another like, you know, signals and that and try and work out how you could work an ambush on a track whereas you couldn't see two feet in front of you as the saying goes because you don't want to shoot your own men. It's very hard that to try and do it. You've got to more or less do a blind ambush or wait until they come right on top of you there on the track and blow 'em from the front. That's the way things used to go.

So, Moresby in the second half particularly of 1942 was changing as a place from that place you saw in January wasn't it?

(15.00) Oh yes, it was getting more congested, there was more troops there and everything. See, when we was first there, as I said, we was all on working party and that, unloading boats and so forth and ... like coolie labour we were and there was no room for training and that like. And while the stores were coming in, there wasn't much going out. This is all being stockpiled and that, making what they call the fortress, I don't know. But that's the way things were.

But when we come back, oh, I don't have much recollection of that there because we went into the 55th and I just can't ... I just can't remember much about the position we were in with the 55th but I know things were pretty quiet as far as we were. We were down in the dumps like, we thought we had a kick in the arse, and we were just put on work detail and that there and you done as you're told. I don't know whether we were walking around prisoners-of-war or what. (laughs)

When ... Come December though, things changed again, didn't they?

Oh yes. We was told we was going to go over ... to be flown over to Buna and, of course, ...

What did you mean Before you get into that, what had you been hearing, had you been hearing much about atrocities for example? Had you seen many Japanese atrocities?

We hadn't seen many Japanese atrocities because most of our contacts were ... wasn't close contacts and we was pulling back so therefore we couldn't see much out there then. It's only the troops that stopped up there that seen the atrocities and the ones that went through afterwards. But, it was only after we got further into it that we heard about these things like, you know. And, of course, you hear a lot of stories and that. You hear about the boys being cut off from the 14th Brigade ... or the 2nd/14th I should say, and things like there, trying to work their way out and hoping to God they get out and so forth. But as far as the atrocities went, we heard there was atrocities but we didn't know what they were. Some of the boys, you know, have no idea but ... that was all it was.

So, you were told you were going to head for Buna. What sort of preparations was there for that?

Oh, just mainly getting your gear together. There was no training; no training at all and, actually speaking, I got all the odds and sods from the company to make a section up - cooks and bottle washers, clerks and you name it. Anyhow, we all went over to the drome and embarked on the planes. One of the battalions was going up besides us, one of their planes didn't make it on take-off. As he was taking off they hit a truck, come across the end of the runway. He didn't lift and, of course, we lost that lot of boys. And, of course, everybody was a bit apprehensive about that, hoping she'd get off the ground. Well, our mob went in a Lockheed Lodestar - remember the old early model passenger planes - and we went up in one of them and going over the gap the pilot seen these three spots up there and he thought they were Zeros and we heard bang. So he us to tree-top height - I don't mind telling you mate, I like two feet on the ground but when you're zooming along at tree-top height over a jungle range it's frightening. Anyhow, we come to Popondetta and he put down at Popondetta and when he put her down the wheel seemed to dig in as he slewed around and the old sergeant-major, as soon as he stopped he said, 'Out. Bail out, bail out'. Course we bailed out and scattered. It was only three of our own planes. He blew a tyre coming over the gap and the pilot panicked, they wasn't Zeros at all.

Then we formed up and met up with the battalion then we were taken up to our defensive positions ... or not actually defensive positions but our starter positions for the attack. We were there for about ... I think it was two days waiting, you know, to move forward while getting organised. And where I had this section of mine, there'd be about ... oh, a thirty yard clearing, just like a street, you know, it looked like a field fire to me which it actually was. But on the other side, just all the trees that fell they stacked up on the side, moved aside, you didn't know what was amongst it and there was one big tree there and you could see this Jap climb up it on these ropes - a little rope ladder they had. One of the boys said, 'Hey, get a load of this joker, it's a bloody sniper'. So, anyhow, he waited until he got up near the top and he dropped him. He said, 'There you're, that'll stop the bugger', he said. And the next thing another fellow started to go up, so the boys decided it was a good game. Don't shoot 'em

halfway down, wait till they get up near the top then belt 'em 'cause they're got longer to fall. If the bullet doesn't kill 'em the fall will.

(20.00)But, we had a Boyes anti-tank rifle issued with ... I don't know why - I don't know whether you know a Boyes anti-tank rifle - the biggest most clumsiest blooming thing you've ever seen, kick like a mule. Anyhow, a Yank come over to me one day and he said, 'Hey' he said, 'Hey buddy, that popgun there you've got' - he called it a popgun - he said, 'I've got a cocksucker' he said 'up there in that tree' he said 'and I can't shift him'. He said, 'He's got sandbags up there', he said 'Can I borrow your popgun' he said 'and I'll shift him with that', and I said, 'Righto'. Now about half an hour later I heard the crack of the anti-tank rifle. As he come back he said, 'That shifted him' he said, 'It blew the sandbags and all out the top of the tree', he was quite happy with it.

So, I mean, you're going into action where? This is Sanananda?

Sanananda at ... No, just out of Buna there at ... what do you call it now, what's the name of this place? Soputa ... between Soputa and Sanananda, yeah up round here, this area here.

Right. So, that action that took place in which a large number of people were killed and wounded all on one day, that was at Sanananda was it?

Yeah, that's the area.

Right. Now, was that before what you're talking about now or ...

No, that after.

Right, okay.

The problem is though we're all lined up to go in, well, when we got word to say we was pushing out at, say, 0800 move forward from the start line. They moved us forward like an extended line, or tried to. Everybody moved forward from their position at the same time and, of course, we went forward when the whistles went and, of course, you can't walk in a straight line, you're going through scrub and that. Anyway, I copped a grenade alongside of me, blew me over on me back amongst all this timber that had been felled. And I got me haversack tangled up and I'm trying to get out and another grenade landed between me arm and me body here and that was ... I didn't know much about it. But when I stood up I was all on me lonesome. I couldn't see anybody and I didn't know where I was and I staggered out. Me arm was useless and I got onto a track somehow - I don't know how I got onto a track - and I seen a fella coming along and I said, 'Any first aid post around?' and he pointed down the track and I went down to a first aid post there and a fella patched me up. He said, 'Right' he said, 'Go back' he said 'to such and such a spot down there' which I eventually found out was getting back towards Soputa and they put us in a tent there - just all the wounded were there. I didn't feel like I was wounded but I just ... I wasn't any good. And the next thing I know they had us on a plane and flew us back to Moresby and put us in hospital. And I found out later on that out of the boys I had there, there was only meself and two others come out of it. And different tale that I heard, it was murder - plain murder. It's all right for these armchair generals to sit there and say, 'Well, move from A to B', they don't know what's between A and B. There's only the man that's on foot that finds out and you find out the hard way.

And you think they should have known what was there?

Oh ... well, put it this way, they had no maps of the area to start with. What map they did have wasn't worth two bob and they get a map and they'd show you, oh, swamp. Yeah, it might be a bit of swamp but they didn't say that the swamp was about twelve foot deep in the jungle and you're trying to move through that kind of stuff and keep contact and keep hidden at the same time like. It's impossible.

They had a few tanks up there early in the piece, they were no good - it wasn't tank country. A lot of Jap tanks, wasn't our tanks. But, they just turn round and had them off the track and in the mud and they couldn't move 'em. But I didn't have much to see about it up there, in fact, I seen very little up there. Only when me mates come back like, you know, I met up with them there and they told me what went on and who got killed and who got wounded, who got done this and that like, you know. It makes you stop and think whether you're lucky or unlucky, to miss out on it all, be lucky to be here.

Anyhow, that's how I put my time in for about a fortnight in the AGH there.

(25.00)The AGH being?

I think it was the 2/12th or something like that, Australian General Hospital ... mmm, the hospital there up at Moresby. It was out of Moresby actually and I got a job one day, the sister come along and said to me, 'How you feeling?', I said, 'All right'. 'Well', she said, 'Here's a razor', she said, 'It's your job to go around and shave the boys that can't shave themselves'. I said, 'How many blades have I got?', she said, 'One'. I said, 'Gees', I said, 'I'll have mine first'. I shaved meself first then I was going around the ward there and low and behold about four beds down from where I was, here's a blooming nip, all bandaged up. I said to someone, 'I'm not shaving this bugger. I'll cut his bloody throat first', you know. 'Oh' she said, 'Don't touch him. Don't touch him' she said, 'He's a prisoner-of-war'. Apparently they found him in the scrub and he had some shrapnel in his shoulder and he'd been laying in it, all maggot eaten and everything, fair dinkum, you could have put a bucket in the hole he had.

We used to spend - those who could get up and walk around - you could sit up on the embankment outside the operating theatre because the walls only six foot high panel and from there up there's mosquito netting and you could see in and watch the operations and that. Great sight, seeing some of the things they do - pulling hunks of steel out of jokers and just dropping it in buckets and that. Just think youse are lucky it's not you they're doing it to.

And so, what were facilities like in the hospital, for example, do you have normal buildings or do you have tents and dirt floors?

Yes, all tents - marquee tents they were.

Dirt floors?

Dirt floors, yeah. Marquee tents. And the sisters were marvellous, they were extra good. And, of course, they all were, even the orderly like, you know, stretcher bearers and that there, they were all ... they were a good mob. No, there's nothing about them, mate.

And what happened from there?

Well, that's when we went back and joined up with the 55th then from there.

What, you're in you're in the 55th now?

Mmm, yeah. I went back into the company like, you know, and we just ...

They were back in Moresby by this time?

We come home on leave and they sent us up to Townsville 'cause we were ... oh, ninety per cent malarial. They had us outside a place called Alligator Creek, it was about twelve mile out from Townsville and I tell you, not too comfortable. But they put us on a vegetarian diet and, of course, the first day we got on this vegetarian diet we thought, 'No bloody way. What do they think we are, rabbits!'. But after you got hungry you started eating it, it wasn't too bad and we was working doing ship loading and unloading like, you know, work details while we was there besides training, general army training and that. A few football matches, of course, our mob was undefeated that made the CO happy because he used to back 'em. (laughs)

As a group, the fact that you'd been through a battle ... a number of battles together, how did that change you - I mean, change you and the group?

Well, we certainly grow a lot and you grow up quick and when you got new replacements then and they only looked to be kids, you know, and you seemed to be twice as old as them. But as far as the boys went there, the camaraderie amongst the boys was good. The officers were good. We had no complaints. And the only complaint I had there, we had a work party on the wharf one night and I was in charge - I had about twenty-two boys - and we was unloading ... or loading this petrol onto this ship - forty-four gallon drums - and the wharf labourers were working up in number one hold and we was down in number three hold and, of course, we was slinging them up four drums at a time. So I said, 'Bugger this. We've got a couple of extra slings, we'll put another two drums on and we'll send up six at a time', which the boys could handle quite easy. After about two hours went by, one of the wharfies come down and he said, 'Listen mate', he said, 'You'll have to steady up on this', he used to quote us so many an hour. I said, 'Get yourself bloody back up there', I said, 'The quote is as many as you can get in as quick as you can get 'em in, mate'. I said, 'There's fellas up there waiting on this stuff', I said, 'It's not bloody on a quota system up there'. Here they are on bloody ... oh, about five pound a bloody day and the boys are on fifty ... ah, five bob a day and working twice as bloody hard as them, it made them a bit hostile to think they were doing it like, you know. I had one joker he was a bit of a simpleton from the work detail there with us and I give him the dixie and half a pound packet of tea and I said, 'Okay, you're the billy boy. When it comes tea-break, you make the billy' and when it come tea-break he made the billy all right, he put the whole half a pound of tea in the dixie. You could have painted the boat with it.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

COMMENCE TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: Second tape, first side. Bill Elliott. End of identification.

Right. So you were mixing with Americans quite a bit I would have thought around there in Townsville?

Oh yes. In fact, I made a few mates there like, you know, different units and we used to go to town there, more or less opposition they were for the girls and so forth and getting into pubs for beer. They seemed to get better treatment than what we did like, you know, but we didn't mind that. We got our share.

So, I mean, the Americans also had a different way when it came to organising things and a lot more machines and things like that didn't they?

Oh, well, put it this way: they were the rich boys; we were the poor boys in everything. It didn't matter wanted, they got. We had to battle for what we got. They got the best positions for their camps and they got the best of equipment. If they wanted transport they got first offer of the transport because they had ... all their own. What we was using was theirs too, so we just had to go without half the time.

Did people resent this?

Yes and no. Like I say, we started off with nothing, so what can you resent about it when somebody else has got it. Only be thankful you can get some of it and often like, you know. Some things they were resented about their ... their meals were better than ours. They seemed to be looked after better than what we were. Different things like ... and not only that, they used to rub it into us and, of course, that didn't go down too well with the boys. However ...

What did they use to say?

Many a barney used to go on like, you know. ... Oh, quite a few things you can't repeat. (laughs) But ... about coming down and looking after our girls while we were away and all that there bloody business like, you know. I know there was a few bare knuckles there, but, that's like everywhere you go. I suppose our boys done the same to the Pommies over in England. (laughs)

How about contact with your family back here? I mean had you ... did you have a regular girlfriend or a fiancée or anything like that when you went away?

Ah ... when I went away I did. I met the wife while I was in Ingleburn before ... while we was forming up the 53rd and we corresponded, you know, quite regularly like. Instead of going home on leave I used to go to her place on leave, naturally, because she lived in Sydney and my family's up here. Of course, I'd come home for a day like, you know, and see Mum and Dad and that but most of my time was spent in Sydney with the wife and ...

The wife-to-be or wife?

Wife-to-be, the wife-to-be ... oh yeah. (laughs) It was quite a while after that before we got married. It was after we come back from the islands, before we went to Bougainville, I got married.

What ... so, in about what date did you get married?

Oh, '40 ... what '43, April '43.

What was it like sort of corresponding as a way of courtship instead of the normal way of meeting people?

Very frustrating, I can tell you that. (laughs) Yeah, you're only talking about your hopes and wishes and so forth and all that there and wishful thinking. 'Cause everybody turns round when mail come in like, everybody's talking about different things or showing photographs and that and so forth. You all seemed to be one family, like you knew one another girlfriends and so forth. And if you're sitting down to write a letter, 'Oh yeah, writing to so and so today?' and so forth. (laughs) It was good when you got mail though.

What about censorship, was that ever a question?

Yes and no. I'd say we all had a fair idea what you could get away with and what you couldn't but ... the wife said that some of the letters there were badly mutilated because some fellas were very, very, very strict in censorship and others were a bit more easier. But, we couldn't see anything wrong with what we were sending down because we had more bloody sense than that to talk too much about it.

And how did you feel about having someone else read, say, personal comments that would be passing?

(5.00) Well, that hurt a lot because most of the censors were your own platoon officers. It had to go to him to be censored before it went through and to think that you had to go through the microscope, as the saying goes, before it got home, it made you think twice about what you're going to write about. And, no, we didn't like it.

Did officers ever comment on what they'd read?

Ah, I can't remember anybody ever commenting about censorship thing because that was a no-no - a very personal private thing that - and I can't remember any officer being accused of divulging anything like, out of censorship. Of course there might have been some cases I don't know of but not in our life.

Right. So, you were in Townsville for how long?

Oh, we were there for quite a while, till we built up our strength and then they bundled us up and they sent us up to Bougainville. We was put on a Liberty ship it was ... I'm just trying to think of the name of it - *White Gull* or something like that, the name of it - took us over to Bougainville. Because being a Yankee ship it was all Yankee tucker and you only got two meals a day because they couldn't cook any more, there was too many men on board ship and the cookhouse was down in the holds of the ship - in the bowels of the ship the old man would say - hot, steamy. They used to have this here pork and apple sauce and all this Yankee type of stuff and, of course, our boys weren't used to it and some of them used to get pretty sick I don't mind telling yah. But the idea on their meals was that their washing up points were forty-four gallon drums cut length-ways in half and you have a hot water and a cold water and you had to wash your dishes up in one and rinse them out in the other. And, of

course, that wasn't too bad when the first ten or twenty went through and then it started to get a bit soupy and that and you get a couple of hundred go through and, of course, a fella with a weak stomach coming up to wash his plate and he takes one look at the wash-up dish and the next thing he's bringing his heart up all over the place - lost his bloody pork and apple sauce. And the only trouble was they used to have an NCO to keep the boys moving, see, because you had to keep moving to get the men through and you wait till the next NCO came up and you'd hand over to him and brother you used to step back quick and so forth, dodging it here and dodging it there, because it was all right for us fellas that had a good stomach but some of these poor buggers they had weak stomachs, I don't mind telling you. Being hot and steamy, you know, it'd turn you off I suppose. The pork's not the best at anytime is it, like that.

So you ... when you arrived in Torokina, what did you find?

Oh, just this island. Just a bare island as far as we found. But we was there for a couple of days and next thing they bundle us up to Pearl Ridge. We went up there, that's a trip and a half too. I think we crossed the creek about seventeen times in about blooming three mile, zig-zagging back and forth across the creek and that was the end of it then. You had to climb up this here ridge to get to the top of the track and then follow the track out. That's where I had a lot of fun there. They thought I was a glider.

How did they think that?

Well, we had to get our jeeps up to the top of the ridge and the only way of doing that was a block and tackle. Put a block up the top or halfway up like, you know, and get the boys on the end of the rope and just pull it up. And I was up there one day and, of course, I got up to the first ... on the first block it was, and I got me back to the block, hand on the rope, and I'm saying, 'Heave' and, of course, they're all down below. 'Heave' I'm saying. Anyhow, the idiot I had watching the steering wheel - 'cause you've got to keep the wheel straight and if they turn, diggin' in there, you let the wheels turn - and the boys are heaving away and the rope broke in the block behind me. Because I've got hold of the rope here and I took off like a glider when the boys heaved. You can imagine about thirty jokers on the rope ... phit ... and all I could see down below me was a heap of rocks and I put me arms up over me head and landed in this heap of rocks. Next thing I woke up in hospital with me arm in plaster, they thought I broke me arm - that was in the RAP - and they sent me back to the hospital to get it fixed up. I gets back there and the old doc took me down for an x-ray there and he couldn't make out why all these black spots was in the x-ray, it was all the shrapnel in me arm and me body and that. But anyhow, he said, 'You're lucky' he said, 'There's no break' and I don't know whether I was lucky or not because the joker that turned around and took the plaster off, he made a bigger mess than what the fall did. I was cut from ear to ear. He used a razor blade to try and cut the plaster off - never had any shears. Anyhow, I only lasted there a couple of days and got back with the boys. Bugger it.

(10.00) And did you got back on top, on Pearl Ridge?

Yeah, oh yeah.

What did you do up there?

Patrol work mainly. A bit of target practice. Because from Pearl Ridge you could see the Japs on the other ridge, like you know. In fact, the New Zealand air force boys used to fly the

dive-bombers up there, these Vultee Vengeance, they used to drop these forty-four gallon drums of TNT - block busters we used to call 'em - and they used to scatter the jungle there for a hundred yards around. And they'd help in their days off, get a rifle off somebody there and a few shots at these Japs and that. They thought it was a holiday. But we used to patrol out from there, go out there and just more or less had a defensive position but it was ... patrol all the time, picking up what we could and all the information we could and prisoners. Although there wasn't many prisoners taken. The New Guinea boys used to see to that or the Bougainville boys they were. They were a vicious mob, they had to carry machetes - they could just chop them to pieces.

One day there this joker, he come down the track to get some water and I heard the water bottles jangling and we were walking up the creek. So we turned round and put an ambush there. Anyhow, they ambushed him - I stood back at the bottom of the creek there watching the rear - and next thing they come back down and they've got army insignias and God knows what and they get in the creek and they're washing the blood off it ... off their trophies, these New Guinea boys.

What did they have?

They had a machete.

Right. But what had they done with the machete?

Well, they killed a Jap but they used to get his insignias, army ... you know, unit patches and things like there, cut 'em off and half the time there'd be blood all over them like, you know, after getting belted up with a machete. And they'd get in the creek and wash 'em off there. 'Good trophy, boss. Good trophy', you know. Not ... they didn't call it trophy but you knew what they was talking about like, you know.

Bilasic.

Yeah. (laughs)

And so were you in action very much? I mean, obviously you were in that scene?

Well ... we're doing a lot of patrol work as I said like, you know, but it was mainly you'd go out and you'd set booby traps along the creek beds of a night. The next morning you had to go and pick 'em up because you didn't want your own boys walking into 'em - the next patrol like, you know. There was other units patrolling the same area too. We come out of there and we went up to ... up through the plantation to ... oh, I just forget the name of the place now. Like Bougainville is like a pear-shaped island. We was down the big end, as the saying goes, to start with and we went up the top end through the plantation and jumped across near Buna Passage and we got ambushed up there - I lost one of my fellas up there. In fact, I had one killed, two wounded and we got out of that. The wife didn't even know I was up there then until she struck one of me mates that got wounded and he had two bullets through the skull, lost half his brain and she struck him in Concord. And she said, 'Gee', she said, 'I'm lucky Bill wasn't with yah' - 'cause I used to write me letters there I was telling her a staging camp in Brisbane. And he said, 'What do you mean, wasn't with me', he said, 'He was in front of me'. It shot my water bottle off and got Dave behind me like, you know, this machine gun.

What actually happened? Just perhaps describe the situation?

Well, we was pushing across, we had to get across to the other side of the island and we were following this track. Because everybody was thinking that the Nips are just about beat like, you know, which they were but they still had a sting in their tail and my platoon's job was being forward platoon for the company, going along, and I had one section out in front. I had me platoon headquarters, that's meself and a couple of others and a section behind me and another one the other side of the track like, you know. We were staggered formation, the old army method of doing things. And, all of a sudden a machine gun opened up down the track. Got me forward scout through the stomach; me second scout got burned across his back as he dropped; Dave was just in a bit of a bend of the track there, he got two through the skull and one in the groin and I just got me water bottle shot off me. I didn't know till an hour after when I went to have a drink and there was nothing there.

Anyhow, we pushed forward - buried our dead - and pushed forward at the track junction there at the coast. There was an old tank there, a Japanese tank, and we just made a standing patrol there because the company had fanned out behind us down along the track.

(15.00) And one day, one of the boys said, 'Hey, get a load of this' he said, 'There's a bloody Jap down there'. And I said, 'Well, drop him', so he dropped him but he didn't kill him and all bloody night he laid there moaning and groaning and Normie King, the other platoon sergeant, he come over and he said, 'Bill, for Christ sake' he said, 'shut him up'. I said, 'Shut him up yourself if you want to'. So Norm said, 'Okay' he said, 'I'll go out and shut him up' he said. Anyhow Norm ... I set the boys word that Norm was out the front and then after a while ... Urr, Urrr. Norm came back, he said, 'The bugger won't whinge tonight' he said. He belted him with his rifle butt and put him out of his misery because he was pretty badly shot up he said. There's nothing you could do for him.

So that's where we used to get all the artillery fire from Buka Passage. The Japs had a gun over there because they had pretty good OP too because every time ...

What's OP?

Observation posts - on our position because every time you'd go for a meal they used to open up on us and we got monkey cunning one day and said, 'Okay, instead of having an evening meal at five-thirty, we'll have it at four-thirty'. He opened up at four-thirty. Yeah. Well, of course, with these Japs there, they used to get around like animals they were, live on the smell of an oil rag, climb trees like monkeys and they could observe a lot of things that we couldn't see. And we come back from there and went to Rabaul and took up duties at Rabaul - compound duties - guarding prisoners-of-war and using them in the work details.

How did you feel when you heard the war had ended?

Very relieved. Sorry for the boys we had to leave behind. I suppose somebody had to stop behind. That's where I struck my first atrocity there in Rabaul with me own eyes ... I seen with me own eyes.

Well, we had a work detail and I was marching up the road and I heard this screaming coming from the woods. Anyhow, I stopped the bloody boys and all the Japs and I said, 'Hold the

men' and a couple of us took off down to where the screaming was and it was three Jap prisoners-of-war had this young native girl in a hut and they raped her, they used cordite on her - you've cordite haven't yah, like spaghetti. They just stuck it in her vagina and set fire to it. So, they didn't last long. We just shot them on the spot. 'Cause we had a few answers for saying why we shot prisoners-of-war like, like everything else red tape, when we explained what happened there, things were dropped.

Most of the people who have talked about the prisoners-of-war after the war described them as very, very docile, but that's different.

They were docile. They ... everyone bowed to you and so forth and, of course, the boys used to have a great habit of getting the top off a beer bottle, taking the cork out of it, put on the epaulette like, press the cork back into it and the Japanese would think they were officers. They come along and they'd salute 'em or the officer-in-charge would give 'em a salute and eyes right business - had a great joke with the boys, saluting beer tops. (laughs)

But, I mean, those three weren't acting like prisoners-of-war, were they?

Well, they'd got out of the compound. Well, I suppose they were acting the call of nature like, you know. Probably hadn't seen a woman for so long and that was it. Thought they got away with it. They didn't know we was around so close and they might have got away if they hadn't been so close. Well, actually, that's what happened. The other fellas will tell you a lot of things about things which they've seen which I can't talk about. It's no use talking about hearsay, you only talk about what you know.

The amount of stuff they had at Rabaul was ... you couldn't understand it. They had tunnels, oh, miles long and either side of the tunnel was stacked up with equipment and technical stuff like valves for radios, light globes and theodolites and all that there, you know. And as far as the tools went, files and all that there, new aeroplane engines and so forth. All they were doing at the finish was loading it onto a barge and them out to sea and just dump them. We wanted to know why they couldn't bring 'em back home. But as the CO explained to us one day, he said, 'Well, you couldn't bring 'em back home and put 'em on the market' he said, 'it would flood the market' and he said, 'Where would we be then?'. He said, 'Nobody would have a job' which is understandable when you come to think of it. If there's no demand, there's no supply is there?

I think you could get around that, but ...

(20.00)(laughs) Oh, we did bring a bit of stuff home with us. I picked up a Jap samurai sword at Moresby ... at Rabaul and brought home. My wife said the other day, 'Get a load of this' she said - I don't know whether you've 'em in the *TV Week*, you get a pamphlet or something, different things and this week they had a samurai sword in at so much a month for twelve months, I think it worked out nearly a thousand dollars. And she said, 'You was going to sell yours' and they were all onto me about selling it. 'No', I said, 'It's a souvenir'. Have you seen 'em?

Oh yeah, I've seen them. So, after that whole business, I mean, how did you ... with the war coming to an end, what was your feeling about those years? Wasted years?

Well, I felt they were wasted. Well, put it this way, it's the prime of my life wasted, say from twenty years of age till like, twenty-five, that's the best time of a man's life, he's only young and I had none of it. Do you know what I mean?

Did you feel ... that campaign in Bougainville, how did you feel about that?
Did you feel it was a reasonable campaign; a necessary campaign?

Unnecessary in my opinion because they had nothing, they weren't going anywhere and they could have left them until they just starved out or start of nucleus of another tribe. But it was all over actually when we got there. We didn't see what the Bougainville battles were like. All we seen was the aftermath of it and brother when those Yanks pour stuff in they pour it in. Pearl Ridge was a bald as a badger, there wasn't a tree left standing.

So, when were you demobilised?

Oh ...

Right. Well, how were you demobilised?

Oh, I went through Sydney Showground where we had to hand in all our equipment and you had to go to various places, like, the medical officer and so forth and the finance officer and all that there. Finally got out and we had ... I think I had thirty-one days' leave owing to me before I got off the payroll, as the saying goes.

What did you do after the war, what sort of work?

Well, after the war I went back to Morrison and Bebes to my old job and I was there for about six months but things had changed while I'd been away and we had a chap married in to the daughter of the owner of the business and he was one of the bosses over there. He was a real no-hoper. And one meal break - lunchtime it was - I ran out of cigarettes - cigarette papers - and I ducked into the canteen to get a packet of cigarette papers just as the whistle blew and he got straight on me hammer not being on me job. So I told him what to do with his bloody job and the next day I went down to Sydney and joined the railway and I've been on the railway ever since. So, I retired 1980 from the railway. Oh, I had quite a good life.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW.