



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is tape one, Jane Fleming interviewing Fred Foxon who served in Darwin with the 2nd Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery and in New Guinea with the 2/1st Field Company. End of Identification.

If we could talk first of all about where you grew up, where you were born, a bit about your family and so on.

Well first of all, I was born in Plumstead, which is a suburb of London and my parents left England in - in about approximately 1926 and we were immigrated in the immigration system and we came to Western Australia. I think we landed at Albany and then my parents were sent to this group settlement which was in the Margaret River group settlement and we were put onto a block down there and needless to say as things didn't go so well and in due course, as with many others, my parents left the sou'west and - and the group settlement and came to Fremantle and there my father worked and so forth. And then the depression came and things took a bad time and we had a large family of about eleven and so ... Work, as I say, work was scarce and so my parents had a hard time and I went to a state school, the Beaconsfield State School, and where I only completed to Grade Six. Used to be standard Six then and owing to the poor conditions of the family, of course, my education finished there and we - or I rather, went and sought employment in various things. I tried quite a few jobs. You understand at that time, not being educated, the opportunities were very limited for the - my type.

Uh, then I - when the war broke out, as soon as possible I turned eighteen I took the opportunity of joining the army which I thought would be good, being a young man and full of glory and all this type of thing, it really thought it would suit me. But when I tried to join the AIF I was told that you had to - you had to be twenty-one and of course that set me back a little bit so I then decided I would join the Militia. And then I went down to the Burt Street Barracks, which is close to where I lived, and I joined up there. I was at the Burt Street Barracks for about two days - or three days maybe - and then I was sent over to Rottnest Island to be Bickley Battery and I joined the 7th Heavy Coastal - Coastal Defence. There I did approximately about eight to nine months of training and that training represented learning all about the 6-inch Mark 11 guns which were there at the time. And we went through all various training and plus did a lot of bull ring work. That was initial learning how to march and the usual rifle drill and so forth and being there for about nine months and being young and there was no life over there at all other than army, I decided that my best ... the first opportunity I would leave Rottnest Island.

(5.00) First of all I volunteered when the time came - I volunteered for the paratroopers but I heard nothing further about that - myself and others did - and so we assumed that that fell through and then the opportunity came. They called for volunteers for this ack-ack unit that was being formed in Fremantle and I applied for that - or volunteered for it - and what happened then, in due course, I was sent back to Burt Street Barracks (coughs) pardon me - and then I was only there about two or three days when the unit left for Darwin. But ...

What made you want to join the paratroopers which was your first choice ...?

Uh, the air force, flying, and you must understand that those times, flying was quite something to a young uneducated fellow and though we knew and we volunteered that you'd have to be something special to get there. But just to get out of Rottnest Island I was quite prepared to volunteer for anything.

In terms of your keenness to join up and so on, did you come from a very patriotic family?

No. Not really patriotic. My father, he spent the first world war in France and also he was a prisoner of war in Germany for, I think about two years. So I - listening to my father I knew about war experiences and so forth and so I wasn't actually blind to what would go on in that particular time.

How much did the - the sort of economic climate and the lack of opportunity and so on add to the sort of patriotic feelings that you had? How much of it was one thing do you think and how much of it was the other?

Oh I think a lot of it - not so much patriotic but I think a lot of it was the - the economic situation. Because as I said we had eleven in our family and eleven in a house that weren't very big then and of course, the sooner we could leave home the less strain it would be on my parents and plus better for - for us.

Had things been different and you could have done what you most would have liked to have done, had you a particular sort of inclination or ambition that you would have liked to have fulfilled?

Yes, I was always very keen on farming, and I always used to go to a friend of mine - a dairy farmer and so forth - so that if money and opportunity would have been available I would have been a farmer.

Can you tell me about when you were in the Militia the sort of training that you got, you know, in a bit more detail? What sorts of things you did, even though you weren't terribly keen on staying on Rottnest for ever? What did you actually do during that period in the way of training?

Well other than learning all the gun drills and so forth and various things like that, you had to do route marches and all the necessary rifle drills and also back to the bull ring style where you learnt to march and first and most of all, learn how to take orders. But as you know, a young fellow joining the army at eighteen, he's - he's not used to rec... getting orders and taken them, so that has to be instilled in him. And this fortunately for me, was instilled prior to going to Darwin. So it may, I feel myself, better - better soldier when I got to Darwin when the actual action started.

So you think overall your training was good and appropriate?

Oh I think the training on Rottnest Island was very good. The sergeant-major we had, Simcock[?], he was a real soldier and even though we, uh, abused him - behind his back of course - he was a great soldier and he was a very smart individual. And I feel that I learnt a lot from just watching him.

And that was really the training you had, because between the time that you enlisted and went to Darwin there was no time for any further training. You didn't have any actual anti-aircraft training at all?

No, I knew absolutely nothing about anti-aircraft. As I said, I was only about two or three days at Burt Street Barracks when I came over from Rottnest where the - the - a lot of the other chappies that were in the unit, they did have ack-ack training of some time. I'm - maybe a couple of months or something, I'm not too sure. They had this, I had nothing. But, um, that came to us. Having the artillery training over - over Rottnest Island, it stood - it stood us in well because our adjustment wasn't that great other than the learning new gun drills.

Can you remember the day that you enlisted, what it was like? Could you put your mind back to the circumstances and the sort of people that were around and the atmosphere at the time?

Yes, the thing that ... I worked at a wool scourer and of course it was only a menial task. Those times it was considered all right and then when I first joined up - I joined at the Burt Street Barracks and there, there was a - a what they call a cad...

(10.00) Anyway there was a group of people that had been trained for ack-ack work and this sort of formed the cadre for the soldiers, and these were permanent soldiers. And these were very smart individuals. They were picked and when you - when I first went in and looked at these guys, I thought, you know, that this is really something, I'll have to watch my step. But I can always remember the first day. You can understand. Being come from a poor family that roast pork for example was a Christmas fare, but the first day was roast pork and the usual trimmings, roast spuds and so forth. And of course this stood out in my mind for a long, long time. Here I was coming from a poor situation, suddenly on an ordinary week day you would get roast pork and to me that was great. I thought this is the army, this will do me.

Can you remember what some of the other people that joined up with you then were, you know, the sort of people that ... The group of other young men that were joining up? The sorts of people they were and the types of backgrounds perhaps that some of them were coming from?

I found that a lot of them were just the ordinary, common working guy. That young fellow, the labourer and so forth. There was a lot of those people because their life before was not too good. Their opportunities weren't great for education is not like it is now, where it's actually essential

now, then it wasn't. So I found there was a lot of guys like myself and but of course, there were also some that you can see the ed... the educated private schools and so forth. But you usually found these sort of separated themselves a little bit and these mostly went on further, in later date, to say schools and so forth and to further their - they'll get their stripes and a lot of others, commission in due course.

To just go back for a moment to when you were on Rottnest Island in the period before you enlisted, when you were in the Militia, if you could just go into a bit more detail about the actual gun drills and so on, because you said that what you went through there, as well as the discipline, and the whole approach, stood you in good stead later.

Well there, we - we - you have a manual and in this manual there would be drills for various phases of - of a shoot or an engagement. You know, if some emergency happened and you had drills to back up systems and all this type of thing. I cannot remember it all, because it was such a long time ago. But we had all these drills and then we had various shoots that would - they would tow a - a drogue behind a boat, out at sea, and you from so far behind the - the towing craft, that when you fired you fired at this and you had all this type of practice. See how close you can get and if you could sink it and so forth. But they - first of all we had a couple of shoots with the - with the 6-inch shell which was about approximately 100 pounds of those times, but then I think they found it was a little bit too costly, so then they used what they called the calibre shoot and that they used to put a smaller barrel inside the existing barrell and used to fire ... Instead of firing a 100 pound projectile you would fire - I forget the exact weight - about three, four, five pound projectile. And this is the way we used to get this training.

Something else that occurred to me when you were talking about employment and the difficulty of employment and so on - people like yourself that actually left a job to enlist - how were the employers about you joining up, were they enthusiastic?

The employ... At the Ganiscott[?] Wool Scourers the manager, Mr King, and I can always remember them, and Mr Price was the foreman, when I told them I was going to join up and so forth, they were full of praise and so forth and they gave me every encouragement in the world. And they also told me that when I left - as soon as I come back out of the army, because you must understand the war was going to be over in six weeks, that I could come straight back there and would have no worries at all about getting employment. I didn't take this opportunity up because, later on in life, as soon as I got out of the army I went back to - to the country.

How did your family feel about you joining up?

Uh, my father, being an ex-soldier and also at - during this second world war, he also joined up in the 10th Garrison again, so he liked the army. Um, to him, he enjoyed it. He only stopped around the metropolitan area where he did garrison duties on the oil tanks and so forth, so he was all right. My mother of course, she had gone through the first world war and she knew the pitfalls better than I did and so she was quite worried and so forth. But in the main she - she accepted my decision and ... I was sorry for her a few times because she did worry a lot.

(15.00) You went off pretty well straight away on what was quite a trip to get to Darwin, didn't you? It wasn't a very straight forward journey up there?

No, we took off and what - we had one bit of good fortune and that was, when we were going from here to Adelaide, they had cancelled a - a civilian train and of course we were very fortunate. We - sitting up in the dining room, you know, getting first class treatment and most of the fellows on the train reckoned that was simply wonderful. But alas, of course, that was only the one first leg and then after we left Adelaide the - we went up by train to Alice - Alice Springs but of course that was the bad point. What they did then, they put flat topped trucks on - on the train and we lived in the back of these trucks and you could imagine the heat and everything going up through the centre in the summer time and water being at a very, very hard - being very scarce to get. Most of them were suffering from thirst and so forth and anyway we finished up having Christmas lunch at Oodnadatta, which is about half way across. Oh well, up to Alice Springs and that consisted I think of something like bully beef and biscuits and it wasn't very good. But being young you know, you can cope with that type of thing.

But eventually we got to Alice Springs and got off the train and I think we put a - three or four days in Alice Springs, just to freshen up a bit and then we took off by truck up the - as it is known now the Sturt Highway. But you must understand that those times it wasn't bituminised like it is now. It was just a rough, gravel road and all the dust being sucked back into the trucks and so forth and it was quite, you know, hard at times. But anyway, we've got to a place, I think it was called Birdum and then they took us off these trucks and we loaded onto the train again. And what they did then, they had cattle trucks and they sort of crowded you into this truck - cattle trucks with the open slats all around and the old train puffing along and with the hot cinders blowing back and coming into the train, and of course, what happened then, it was quite a long time the trip. It was about 300 miles and what would happen then, of course, about nineteen, or twenty, or thirty guys in these cattle trucks, and some had dysentery and other forms of ailments and of course, you couldn't stop the train and so what some ... You know, when the - the chappies got really bad, they had to go up one corner and of course you could understand the unpleasantness of this. But I can always remember arriving in Darwin, all the fellows mooing like cows and baaing like sheep and we were all black from head to foot from this dust and so forth and dirt. So that was our arrival in Darwin.

And at arrival in Darwin they sent us straight to the Larrakeyah Barracks and there we - it was about six weeks before the actual first raid on Darwin. And there we did - just did normal little guard duties and so forth and it was nothing much at all. We went up into the town - Darwin town - then it was a civilian town. It had this Chinatown going and the hotels were open but beer was a very scarce commodity - well alcoholic liquors - and we used to go up into Chinatown and you would get a nice big silver container full of crushed ice with fruit juice in it and being a bit of ice in it, it was cold, it was great up there that time. Because you know, you must understand that was right bang in the middle of summer, and so we did - we filled in our time there. While I was there I went over to the Oval gun station, it was a 3.7 and I put a couple of days in there. But it was only just purely and simply doing little duties, which the normal thing, you know, bit of kitchen duties and little bit of guard duties. And then we - most of the West Australians - or a lot of the Western

Australians I should say, were sent down to the Berrimah and there we joined the 2nd Heavy Anti-Aircraft. Uh, I would say about fifty per cent of us went there, and the other fifty percent were sent down further afield, down to where the airfields are, down around Batchelor, which was quite a few miles outside of Darwin. But for myself, we went to Berrimah and it was there that actually we started real ack-ack gun drill, where I learnt all about it.

Um, coming from - from the heavy coastal 6-inch guns it wasn't that very hard to pick up. But we were there right up to - learning gun drill and doing the usual 'sucker' bashing, you know pushing back the perimeter around the gun site to give us more vision and then it was about the 19th of February, the first raid started.

(20.00) And on this - on this first raid, for my own personal thing I was down about seventy or eighty yards away from the guns. This is about three quarters of an hour before the first raid came on and we heard the naval station, which was situated about 200 metres from where we were. We heard their alarm sound and at the same time we hea... Just prior to that we had seen about fourteen Kittyhawks - that's the P-40 fighter - take off escorting a Liberator bomber out and then afterwards, as I say, the alarm rang and everybody wondered what was going on, so when nothing happened we just assumed it was a normal drill for the navy personnel. But of course, as we were sucker bashing and we looked up and heard these planes and as we looked up the Japs were overhead while we were still sucker bashing. And then our alarm rang and then we went to the guns. [Break in recording.]

We went into action straight away, as soon as we got on the guns and we were sort of put a few shots into the tail-end of the first waves of bombers and so forth. And then these were mostly high level bombers who were coming over and they were mostly attacking the wharf with all the planes - with all the ships in the harbour and so forth and so we sort of, uh, just fired a few shots at them and - not so very many. You must understand that we were very green troops and not being into action before there was quite a number of mistakes made and so forth. One thing particularly - which I'll come to in the next phase of the thing.

So anyway that raid went on and as I said, we didn't fire that very many shots in this and then the second section of the raid came, which was I think, something like a half an hour afterwards, maybe three quarters of an hour afterwards, and this was the low level strafing and dive-bombing planes and this is when it affected us mostly. We went into action again and we were attacked twice by low level plane and he came right down so much that you could look up and you could see this - this Jap smiling over the side of the plane. And some reason or other, I don't know if the Predictor was hit or what, but we took cover and this was a very sad thing and it only happened this once and it never ever happened again because we learnt very quickly and really that - it didn't ... Even though I'm saying now that there was a lot of faults and so forth this battery turned into a very high class standard ack-ack battery, very quickly.

So anyway we were strafed and what would happen there, they - as they were coming down there was a Lewis gun right in the centre of the square, that kept firing at him and so forth and one of the chappies was hit. One was hit through the arm, another one copped a bullet in the - in the leg - or in

the knee rather. And this was brought about by the fact of the - they were still in the pre-war days when everything had to be polished up and even the cement had to be polished but of course we learnt though very quickly, because what would happen, as they would strafe us the bullets would hit the - the floor of the gun pit and would ricochet around and of course, would cause, you know ... The noise, it was enough to frighten you for green troops, and having a chap hit in the knee and so forth, it was certainly a great deal of panic in that one and I - I don't think, upon it myself that it would go down in history as one of the greatest efforts of a gun battery.

The fellows that you were with were mainly, if you were in the 2nd, they were mainly from the eastern states, weren't they?

At Berrimah, there would be mainly from New South Wales. It was a New South Wales unit and we joined those. Now, you see, what happened here was that during the course, after a little time they were building another ack-ack station about three or four - I'll leave it in miles - miles down the track further and we were building this station while we were also in action at Berrimah and working parties used to go down there. But as soon as the Quarantine Station had finished and was in operation, all Western - not all - the majority of Western Australians were transferred to the Quarantine Station and there we stopped for the whole remainder of our tour in Darwin.

(25.00) All told, we had sixty-four raids I think, on Darwin and surrounds and I - I could honestly say that it was - as far as the ack-ack was concerned, was - they put up a, you know, first-class show. Unfortunately the Japs soon learned not to come in too low and they came in high so that the role of the ack-ack mostly was to keep the bombers up.

But getting back to the first raid again, you see, as soon as the raid is finished, we were, as I said, about four miles outside of Darwin. I was one of the crew of about seven, jumped on the back of a truck and we raced straight down to Fannie Bay beach where we filled sandbags and so forth to bring back to stop this ricocheting and that's when we first - then we saw the results of the raid. Of course streaming out of Darwin was hundreds of air force personnel and we were giving lifts to merchant seaman and - who still had their clothes burnt to their skin and pieces of the skin off their arms and so forth and full of oil where they had swam through the oil and the burning stuff on the wharf. So we could see then what had actually happened.

The RAAF aerodrome was on fire and all the hangars were on fire and all the planes that were on the ground were all on fire and/or just shot to pieces. So for young guys who were just turned eighteen they learnt very fast the pitfalls of what can happen and hence - after seeing this, I think most of the guys, when it come to training, they didn't shirk back. They - they really put their whole heart and soul into it and as I said, most - all the ack-ack sites in Darwin were really turned into a first class show.

Where the papers say that people evacuated Darwin and so forth, and that was true, the people did get out and so did a lot of the air force. And they got out because their station was burning, they had no directions, so what - what could they do? But they fa... People do fail to mention that all ack-ack stations in Darwin were all first-class troops and they didn't get out, they stopped there.

Was there much actual panic? Were the people moving in - in a panicky way or were they just moving because they could see no real alternative?

No, there was no panic. I never saw any panic at all. The air force were coming out of the station - coming down the road. They were just ambling down, they - obviously none of them knew where they were going or what they were supposed to do so they were just moving out at their own leisure. I mean, there was no panic and the seamen on the wharf that were coming out through, even though they were burnt, they were coming out of Darwin were still, you know, pretty blasé about it as you might say. They didn't panic or anything. Obviously there was a bit of panic. I never saw it.

Did you see any looting, because that's something else that's been commented on?

I, at Fannie Bay beach, when I went to get the sand I went - there was four or five houses - well you could call them houses there - that were left unoccupied. I did go into one house myself but only because the door was open and so forth, so we went into this house and just to have a look to see if anybody in there. When there wasn't, we came out and closed the door because you can understand that we didn't know how long they were gone. Of the looting I never ever went into Darwin, I never saw it. But I believe it was so. But I never actually saw the looting myself.

Going back to what you said about the lack of real experience of ack-ack manoeuvres before this major raid occurred, the biggest of the raids, how did you feel yourself as you realised what was happening?

Well as I say, it happened before I knew it was going to happen. They were overhead and so therefore you, like ... In the later raids you had warnings, you know, the radar came onto the scene or you had some warning from Melville Island or Bathurst Island as the planes were coming in, so that mostly you were on the guns waiting for them to come. And so therefore you - at odd times you may have had a sort of a twinge. This is in early raids. In later raids you didn't even worry about it, you welcomed it because it was some form of relief but prior, you had some sort of feeling that you - you know, something could happen but it was only small. But in the actual first raid there was no fear or anything because it was happening before you knew it was happening.

How confident did you feel that the men around you and the way they were responding?

Uh, in the first raid, um, you sort of - there was some hesitation about a few guys. Naturally there is but you never had much chance because you never saw them in action. But in later raids I had every confidence in the world ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

This confidence was borne out, you know, in one of the raids - it was the Easter raid when the Japanese had sent over I think, something like about thirty-six bombers and it - on the first salvo, I think it was the Fannie Bay Beach or Macm... Fannie Bay ack-ack site or the McMillan's, even on their first salvo they had brought down three planes just in their first salvo, and to see these three planes coming down, even - it was death as far as for the poor chappie... Jap as you would say now, but when you see these coming down like a Prince of Wales feathered tomb streaming smoke and bearing out and the other one coming straight down, it - like you sort of ... it bears out my opinion of the ack-ack gunners. They were really first class.

How much difficulty or ease was there in settling into the other groups of men. You know when West Australians were transferred into other groups that had come from say New South Wales and Victoria, did everybody get along well together?

Yes, they all got along pretty well together. There was also a little bit of rivalry, you know, Sydney compared with a little town called Perth and ... But that was all good - good fun and in the main they all intermingled very well. I - I can't say of any - any instance that would stand out to make any difference.

You mentioned the ricocheting and the problems of that, but what were the other sorts of things that were done after the first raid and so on to alter the techniques and so on of the gunners? Was there much other modification of the way you did things?

No. You must understand that in Darwin, as far as say extra materials or extra gear, Darwin was a long way away from the central - central place so therefore what you had you had to make do. The only thing is that you had to learn and learn very quickly as what you had you had to utilise it a lot better so that the Predictor crews - that's the command post crews - had to learn to, you know, sort themselves out pretty smartly. The gunners had to learn to just be that little bit faster, that little bit better and this is why, in the training you had to change around on every position. Because you never knew when one chappie would be say, wounded or case may be and then someone else had to take his - take his place. And this - this is why they had what they called trade groups. I was a trade group three which was a layer - gun layer - and my job on the gun was a number four which was a - a fuse setter and that was on the side of the gun and there was a machine which, in my case number four, there was a point in moving al... As the plane was coming in, so this pointer would move to the height - corresponding height - on this, on this dial. So what the number four had to do is judge the speed of the pointer. That is the speed of the plane and he would run his pointer so far ahead and if he knew his gun crew and how good they were or how bad they were he could run it ahead that far, that time that the shell was put into the fuse setter and the chappie pulled the levers to set that particular height on the shell and then it'd be loaded and be fired, he had to judge how long that would take. Be it for example, three seconds, he would judge that and by the time the gun was loaded and the chappie called out 'Ready' the pointers should be dead level and then he would yell out 'Fire' and the - the number one would fire the gun I think it was, and it would go off.

(5.00) And this is all - it comes in drill. You learn this over a period of time and it's funny, that you got a gun crew there, you soon learn the weakness of each individual and so you sort them out

and if that individual's weak in lots of things he would be put, say, an ammunition one or whatever the thing, lay the line or lay the elevation or whatever the case may be. He would be, you know, put into these positions.

When you first got to Darwin, were the guns in - and guns emplacements there? Was everything in position or how much ...?

Yes, the Oval, the Fannie Bay, McMillan's were all in place, the Berrimah ack-ack site was in place, but the Quarantine Station was not. The West Australian guys used to go down and build that in - in work parties ...

Yeah, you mentioned that, but ...

Yes.

That was still in the process of being set up?

Yes.

Mmm.

Yes. That took three or four months I think to get this one operational.

To talk about the guns, you know, what - what you actually had there, if you could go into some detail about the specific guns that you were using and describe them a little?

Yes, well, both Berrimah and ack-a... and the Quarantine Station they had four, 3.7 anti-aircraft guns and they were according to the reading, should reach the height of about 32,000 feet. But I don't know if it was fault of the ammunition or not but they only reached I think, somewhere around the vicinity of about 25,000 feet and this was what I mentioned before, the Japanese used to come in above that and so the ack-ack served their purpose by keeping them up. Also earlier, that they would have say two or three Lewis guns for the light - for the low flying planes and they did go into action in the first raid.

Um, later on at the Quarantine Station, what they had then they also - where I was - they had two Bofors guns that came onto the scene. Um, these never went into action, they were there and at a later date, towards the end, we also got radar, and the last few raids of course, we had amplexes of warning. Sometimes up to three quarters of an hour there. In the guard - in the command post where the warnings used to come through, they used to come through in the colour sequence. Like green would be for example, they were - meaning they were, say, for example, 200 miles away, and then the yellow would come on as it got closer and then when they come in the immediate area they used to get the red. And so the alarm would ring in proportion to how far they were away, so that when you got on the gun, you would be sitting there some ten minutes or so, quarter of an hour and

- and just waiting for them to come. So you had plenty of warning, you knew where - which way they were coming and all relevant details. So it made for efficient gun crews.

Can you go through the sequence of the actual siting, and loading and firing of the - the guns? How - you - you talked about modification of the use of them, you know, to cover certain, um, individual needs and so on ...

Needs, so forth ...

... And certain people's skills, but just to talk about the routine of the - the way in which the guns were used?

Well, first of all there'd be a number one, he should be a sergeant and he used to be in charge of the whole gun crew. And then you used to have, say a layer for line, a layer for elevation. He'd be one, two - the sergeant would be one, and there'd be two for layer for line, three layer for elevation, four would be a fuse setter and then it should go on to the loading crew and I just forget how many ... of the crew, but they used to all form down into these people. And so, mostly - mostly they kept - in action - kept to the same positions. [Break in recording.]

You did say earlier though that, of course, people had to swap around a bit in training because of the obvious circumstances where someone might need to quickly replace another position?

Yes, you - you had to be versatile. That is a must in any army unit because if there was only one person one job and that person was incapacitated then the whole show would fall down. So you had to have a working knowledge of every thing or every position on the gun and this you used to get by training. In later times what they did was, they used to have these Spitfires for example, come up from the air bases further down and they would give us low level flying practice.

(10.00) That means they would shoot in over the top - practically on top of the camouflage nets and shoot in and you had to follow them with gunfire, which is just firing at will at the low stuff. And they may have say, two guns firing at the low flying planes and they would have two guns say firing at the high level stuff or something of this nature. So we used to get a lot of practice by these planes and it used to be very good too because it would keep the chappies on their toes and - and ... This was later on, when getting a little bit stale and there wasn't many raids, you could understand that being locked up out in the bush all this time it used to become very boring and especially - we were there two years and in the first say, year and a half while the raids were on, it was quite okay because there was always something to look forward to and something to do. But in the later period of time when it got down to sort of just drilling, and working, and work parties and so forth the chappies became very bored and some disgruntled and there was a lot of the little incidents that happens, that, you know, was detrimental. But this was only because of boredom.

How did people sort of handle that boredom?

Uh, some - there was two or three guys had to be shipped out. When we first went to the Quarantine Station we had one of the - our officer was Les Watson and he was a gentlemanly type of fellow, but unfortunately for Les he - I don't know whether it was the responsibility got to him or what it was. You must understand he went to a raw ack-ack site which was in the process of being built and he had every worry on his shoulders and anyway, he didn't last too long. Les Watson, he was taken back down south I think and he cracked a bit and there was a - another couple of chappies, also went a little bit round the bend as you might say.

But in the main, um, they took their frustrations out in other ways, you know, playing football and a bit of rugby on the site and so forth, and this is how they did it. You must understand there was about 140 young guys in their twenties and hadn't spoken to a female for practically two years that a lot of them, you know, became ... you know, missing - what they thought they were missing or something - well they were missing something anyway ...

What about the drink? Was that a problem?

Ah, drink, no problem at all. When the drink first came onto the scene - course at the start you couldn't get anything because even food was so short. I mean, I can remember that a lot - about the smallest meal that I had was a half a slice of bread and it used to be a small tin of threepenny paste - paste at that particular time and the drink there was nothing. Ah, but in later days - the early - the later days when the drink first came on you used to have one bottle of beer for - shared with three men and then it got a little bit better down to two, until eventually the happy day came when you got one bottle per man. And that was, you know, excellent and then a bit more food came on the scene and we used to have the little canteen there where - I don't know where they used to get it - they used to get a block of ice, you know, and they used to get tins of pears or for example and put it in the ice and being young fellows you're always hungry, and we used to go and get these cold pears and stuff and eat and ... But beer was always a short commodity, demanded a high price. If you wasn't a drinker you would get three pounds a bottle easy - for a bottle of beer, from the people that wanted it.

That was a bit ...

... I was a non-drinker so it didn't affect me too much.

Bit of a contrast with the roast pork that you remembered from your early enlistment, you know.

Oh yes, between the roast pork and those days there was a lot of - a lot of disappointments in the army. Only disappointments in the fact that I thought everything was going to be rosy glows, you know, and plenty of everything. But oh, I found out that that was not so.

I don't think we actually did get round to the loading, aiming, firing sequence on the guns. If you could just take us through that?

Now what would happen was, the Predictor which was in the command post, they would pick up the planes and what would happen then, they had two - they have a line and elevation on that too, and so all the necessary details would be picked up in the Predictor and fed through to the guns. Now what would happen, there was a pointer on the layer for line which he had to follow, he had to keep his pointer and that pointer in dead - dead level. And exactly the same for the elevation. So the guns were following exactly the same route and height and everything and line, that the Predictor was. And at the same time the Predictor would work out how high the planes were and this would be fed through to the - to the fuse setter on - on each gun. And as I said, this used to give the fuse setter an idea how - how - what the guns actually - what height to set on the shells. And so it would go on and so forth like that. And so prior to that, this would be all fed through to the guns and then the gunners used to be practically ready as soon as the planes came.

(15.00) But then the ammunition crew, they used to get their shells from the magazines on the guns themselves, they'd be all there. And so they would bring the - the shell out of the magazine, put it in the fuse setter and when the fuse - number four on the gun - would yell out 'Set' the chappie on these two levers would pull these levers and this would set the height on the shell. And then it used to be loaded, and the - the ... It used to be taken away from the fuse setter, put in the loading tray and the loading tray operator used to push it over and then it used to be rammed into the - into the barrel. And then the - at the appropriate time when the fu... when the number fours yell out 'Fire' and so they'd pull a lanyard and the actual firing would be done. And then the shell - the cartridge case would shoot out the back and would land onto the floor of the gun pit. And that's the sort of sequence they had. I can't give you the exact sequence, my memory I'm afraid is a little bit hazy. But that's normally what happened. It's a feed through from the Predictor to the guns, and so forth.

You mentioned the - the problem of boredom and, um, stress and so on that set in towards the end, where the very, you know, where there were no raids going on, but before that when there were, sort of increasing gaps and uneven spacings between raids, there must have been a fair level of tension too, having to be on the alert?

No ...

... With a lot of, um, gaps and time in between?

No, I don't think there was any tension whatsoever. The - the ack-ack site that I was on welcomed air raids. But you must understand that we weren't bombed. I mean, when I was at Berrimah, the closest bomb fell - it was about 300 to 400 yards away - you used yards in those times - fell that. But in the Quarantine Station where I did most of my time, there was no bombs falling close. So therefore the raids came as a welcome relief from the normal duties. But you - you also ... When the Japs were taking a bit of a hiding during the day, they came at night time, so that you had to work all day and then you would have to go at say nine o'clock at night - especially on full moon times when they used to send planes around, just running around, and dropping a few bombs here and there - you had to be up all night. And so I can remember eighteen nights straight that we were up all the time and so you never had much sleep and there was a ... fellows who were complaining bitterly about this because next day you had to do the work. I mean, the ack-ack site had to be

maintained and so forth and they reckoned that we should have had time off. But they say, 'No', so you had to work. It didn't kill us but there was a lot of grizzling and groaning, which is normal I would think under those circumstances.

So that when the rain ... the raids tapered off and stopped, that's when the boredom started because we were hearing about different units going back home or getting leave only after twelve months, fifteen months and sixteen months and there we were, two years, still there and no sign of relief or leave as you say. This caused a lot of friction and so that any truck that came onto the site from either Darwin or from headquarters and so forth, the first thing was to get to him and ask him 'What's the ...' to use a common term, 'the good guts'. (Laughs) You know, they sort of - that was the sort of thing which the 'Don R' driver, the fellow who used to come from headquarters with various - bring the officers or the commanding officer down to the captain and so forth, he always was plagued with these enquiries. 'Have you heard anything, have you heard anything.' Until that final day came when they'd - they decided that we would come home in - in batches of fifty-fifty. Half of us go home, I'd say on the 10th of December and then another half would come home on another month or two months afterwards. My name was read out in the second bunch for a start and of course I was very disappointed. But through the process of working, I don't know what happened, suddenly things were changed and I was put on the first batch, which I accepted, with no - no grizzles at all.

And so I came home in the first lot. But the poor coots who - who were left and they were seeing us off, I could always remember their faces until this day, some of them were practically in tears, you know, because they fully expected to come home as a unit and so they I believe they did stop another three months or something.

While you were up there what sort of mail did you get and what happened to your letters out? Were they censored the letters that you sent?

Uh, all letters were censored - all letters were censored. But for the first - after the first raid, you must understand things were pretty chaotic and there was hardly any mail. I don't think I received a letter from home for quite a - I just forget now, a month or two months, three months, I don't know what it was, and so hence, the writing out was only - you could only write out if there was some special thing. You weren't allowed just to write the ordinary letter.

(20.00) Food was so very scarce too. Um, you see, what was happening was that they ... everybody thought that the Japanese were going to land and that was a pretty universal thought, all the way through, so what they did was, as I understand now, is they decided they would draw a line through a place called Adelaide River or down further and so anything north of this Adelaide River - this line - this imaginary line which they had most of the troops sent back to, as far as I could see were just going to ... We run over the top of in due course, 'cause, you understand, if the Japanese had landed we had practically nothing. We had the - the 3.7 guns and I think we had a .303 rifle and we were issued five rounds of ammunition. So you just imagine the five rounds of ammunition, three of those would be sent off in fright and the other two would be - I don't know where they would go, but depending on the shaking of the hand.

But this was the thing, so that it was pretty common knowledge, you know, that we were going to be sacrificed. There's no getting away from that.

How aware were people in the south and over here and so on of the fact that you were really in a war zone, up in Darwin, at the time?

People from south?

People, yeah, in the south of Australia?

I would say they had practically no knowledge. I think on the first raid they - they were a little piece in the paper as I understand it. Of course I wasn't here of course, that there was a little piece saying there was nineteen killed, or something, or just a few killed and there was no mention of the - all the ships that were sunk and - and what happened at the RAAF aerodrome and all the type like that, so they would - I would say they would just be treating it as a fact that it's the first bombs on Australian soil, would cause news. But the actual what happened would be just kept from them.

I was thinking in terms of things like families and so on, where you see your letters are censored and so on, the people knew that there - if they had someone overseas they were likely to be in the middle of ...

... Yes ...

... of really fierce action. But were they aware that if they had family members up in Darwin, they were facing what they were facing?

Well I do believe my mother sent off either a letter or a telegram or something, which I received, I forget now, six weeks, two months afterwards or something, saying how are you, the normal thing which a mother would send to a son or something or as the case may be and I remember receiving that so late and ... But I couldn't write for about I think it was something like two months before she would receive a letter from me. Because I remember when I came home, how she rejoiced when she - her number one son was, you know, all right. Ah, but ... you know, talking on that line, I can always remember a little antidote [sic] came up, you know, that my mother must have somehow - must have knew we were short of food so she made one of these plum puddings in the cloth and sent it up to me. Needless to say, by the time I got it, it had all gone mildew and everything. Of course having no knowledge of the tropics and so forth, so that was a little bit heartbreaking.

If we could just talk about Darwin, the sort of contrast between Darwin as it was when you got there first and the largely still civilian town going on alongside the preparations for defence and the changes in that town over the time that you were there? And the - the sort of concentration of troops when you got there, what were the other groups of

forces up there and how that changed as time went on and the defences were built up after that first raid?

Well when we first got to Darwin, there was the hard core of people, you know, the wharfies and the administrative people. You must understand that Darwin was mostly a - a Commonwealth or government town, and most of the employment was provided by (coughs) pardon - the government and so forth. So that when I arrived there, there was some navy personnel, there was the air force personnel and there were the troops, you know, the army. But not in a great lot that I could see. So for the first six weeks before the raid when I was there, it was a normal town. You went up in the town. As I said, there was a shortage of alcohol and anything, but you could go up in town and get a drink of the soft stuff and so forth.

Now what happened was as the raid approached, or the danger period approached the - what they did was (coughs) pardon me - they evacuated the - evacuated most of the civilians and there was - I believe there was some civilians that wouldn't go. But mostly they got all the women and kiddies out. So that when the actual raid came on there was the wharf lab... the wharf personnel and a few of the business people and so forth but the actual women and children were gone.

(25.00) With the exception, like for example, you heard of the - the post office getting blown up and the Bald family and the whole of the family I believe were - I think nine of them from memory were wiped out and their graves are still at the cemetery down at Adelaide River, which I visited last time and saw them, and all that type of thing. But in the main, they had gone, so that Darwin itself prior to the raid was a pretty lively little town and you could enjoy yourself if you're - if you're in the right circle.

But after the first raid of course, the whole town became a service town. The - all the wharf people left and all the civilians got out - most of them anyway - so it became a - a army, navy and air force town. There was nothing else there and so this - the Kahlin Hospital was still operating and then they built another hospital, the Berrimah Hospital, down further. As a matter of fact, that's when I - I was about eighteen months and I saw this, um, this sister came out. The one time, I don't know why, we had left the Quarantine Station - that's where I was camped - and we were going somewhere on the back of a truck and a raid started. And we jumped off the truck near this Kahlin Hospital with our rifles and just in our - some in underpants and someone with a couple of sort of hankies hanging down and we were going to play a bit of a - you know, a bit of havoc with this plane, 'cause, it would never be, but being young, you're a bit high spirited, and I can remember this sister rushing - rushing out and saying, 'Don't fire, don't fire, this is a hospital, this is a hospital', and then we had to finish up getting back on the truck and you know, missed out on a bit of fun. You know, a chance of expounding [sic] a few - a few rounds. But that was the first while female that I had seen for about eighteen months. Glorious sight. As a matter of fact I thought she was the Queen of Sheba.

So anyway, that was - that was Darwin in those times and then later on as more personnel came up there, Darwin itself became - not so much Darwin, but down further around Adelaide River away and down around the air fields, the troops started to build up there. The infantry started to come in

and other units came in and so it built up slowly over the time. But that took time after the first raid, because you must understand that the road was only a - a gravel road and there was very ... It took a long, long time for it to build up. But Darwin itself, uh, prior to the raid, I think I could have enjoyed it if - if I lived there, but you had to have permanent occupation.

What other troops were up there when you got there? Can you remember?

There was the - in the RAAF, there was the - some Americans in their P-40S, or the Kittyhawk fighter, they were up there. And there was the Wirraways, that was the planes. Our front line planes which was actually only a trainer plane. But there were some Liberator bombers there and then afterwards the Lockheed Hudsons came up there and the - some Flying Fortresses came on the Batchelor strip. They all used to take off, Mitchell bombers, they all used to take off to go out and bomb Koepang and - and Timor and all this type of thing. But that was the air force.

In the navy they had the - it was only a small naval base at the time, and they had the cruisers - not cruisers but storage coming in there for fuel and so forth - but most of those were out to sea most of the time, so I never saw those. But I would think there was some there. Um, all in all, later date I think it turned into a pretty good fortress, Darwin, but prior to that there was a lot of questions that can be asked and should be - or were answered anyway in the finish.

How much after the first raid, how much did the men talk about why there had been no warning, or so little warning in fact?

Uh, for a start, um, we heard nothing at all, because being pretty isolated we heard nothing. But afterwards when little things started to filter back, our biggest question on the Berrimah site, where I was camped at the time, was - why did the Coonawarra Naval Station have their - have their alarm sound at three quarters of an hour before ours and yet we were caught still working while the planes were overhead? Why weren't they - why weren't we at least warned or just a little bit of a warning, or some hint of something, but we never? Even though they were - you read the story in the paper where the people over on Melville Island had radioed back that these planes were overhead, but even if it was only practice, the navy - we could at least have been waiting. If that had been so, if we'd had knowledge of them coming just ten minutes, it would have been a whole new ball game. But the fact was that most of the ack-ack sites were caught, you know, sometimes the gun crews would be doing something or in bed after doing a night duty or something and all this type of thing. It should never have been so, but it happened ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Identification: this is tape 2, Jane Fleming interviewing Fred Foxon, who served in Darwin and in New Guinea. This interview is on the 24th of July, 1989 in Perth.

When did you feel that the threat of invasion was past?

Well, the raids, as you know, came pretty thick and fast for the first start and then gradually the raids started to lengthen in time. Get one - instead of having every day practically you were getting them every few days and then a week and then two weeks and three weeks and it filtered back that they were finding it pretty tough down, you know, down further round Koepang way and so forth and it came to us then that sort of the opportunity they had - they'd missed the opportunity. And more so when the Coral Sea battle was - was heard about and we read about it and we knew then that the chances of - of just an odd raid say, coming down through the islands would be about all. Where before, like in the first raid where these were - had these aircraft carriers - the planes from the first raid came from the aircraft carriers, so therefore the danger was always there. But then afterwards there was no aircraft carriers and what happened then, it was only land bombers coming down from Timor or something like that. But slowly these dwindled out and then it became pretty well known that our role in Darwin would be just about finished.

While you were up there, how much did you have to do with say the Americans and other forces personnel?

Uh, being right in Darwin, or at quarantine where we were, we had no contact with the Americans whatsoever. The Americans I believe were down further in the airfields, like with the bombers and so forth. But as for us, we had very little to do with them whatsoever.

Being isolated to a fair extent and being on your own resources, did you get very close to the other men that you were with? Did you form friendships among yourselves?

Yes, you would find there would be two or three chappies would pal up and they would be harder friends than - you used to make friends. Everybody was a friend of yours but you understand, being such a small community, though it may sound strange, but each gun crew was a little community in a community, if you follow ... Number one gun or number two, three, and four, these chappies would be very close, and then if anything the number one gun would be an arch enemy. Not in the real sense, but there was a lot of rivalry between the guns. Like after one night - one night in particular when they formed a boxed barrage on one raid, and that is each gun - or each battery had to fire in a certain point in the sky and another battery would fire until it made a box. So that the - the idea was that the planes flew into this box and were shot down, but it never happened of course. And I think we had two nights of this and I think we expended too many rounds to - for the Australian Government to - to swallow. But anyway this was a great rivalry. How many rounds did you get away? And each gun was a young comrade - sort of were against one another, and this type of thing.

But it was fun, it was a way of keeping ourselves happy, you know. Because on the sites we used to do this by forming our two-up and all this type of thing - little sporting things.

(5.00) Mmm. And what about other sort of more active sports than two-up? Did you have much time for any, um, physical sports and ...

In the later part, there was boxing came onto the scene. This was in the whole of Darwin area - boxing came on the scene. Football became very strong. Each team - each battery had their own football team, and we had some very good footballers, too, I mean, just mention our own Western Australian, we had Vern Donegan, who was - who played for East Fremantle; and we had Don Wares[?], who played for South Fremantle; and there was quite a few others that were quite good. I mean the football there was of pretty high standard and of course this got a hold of, you know, took a great hold in - in Darwin, specially where the likes of tennis and other sports, hockey or something like that, was non-existent. So football became, you know, quite a thing.

You were in with a lot of guys from New South Wales though?

This was - this is only in the first four months. We - there was no football or anything then because it was very early in the piece and there were raids practically every day and so there was the rivalry used to be mostly, you know, the ... There's Sydney Harbour Bridge, you know, is that still standing or something like that or the 'coat-hanger' type of thing. But when we got down to Western ... down to the Quarantine Station, there was only Western Australian, then a bit of the rivalry started up, you know, 'no hoper' New South Wales people. But, it was mostly fun. When we intermingled it was always good.

Have you stayed friends with some of the men from that time?

Uh, I am now President of the Anti-Aircraft Association in Western Australia and we have been back to Darwin twice since that time. The first one was the fortieth anniversary ... Uh, the first one was just prior to the fortieth anniversary and then we went back again for the fortieth anniversary and I will say this now, the Darwin people and the Mayor of Darwin, they really made us feel welcome and it was great and we anticipate going back for the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Darwin, on the the ninth of February. But the people, you know ... I find all people good if you treat them right.

Have you kept in touch with some of the men from over in the other states as well?

Yes. On this particular Darwin trip we met up some New South Wales personnel and now and then we have them coming over here. They also have an association over in the fourteenth I think it is, over in Sydney. As a matter of fact there's one or ... at least one of our chappies was over there and he - they marched with them and the correspondence between our secretary and their secretary, Mr Len Burrige, it's - it's quite good. Whenever the time comes for any correspondence we correspond with them and ... We find them - when they come over here, if they want to come and join our association or any of our events or functions, you know, they come and we enjoy their company. It's always good to talk about old times.

Have you always marched on ANZAC Day?

I have not always marched on ANZAC Day, but for the last quite a few years I have marched. Uh, for the first few years I didn't march because I live in the country for a start. So that - the trip wasn't

on then and then I went through a period where I didn't bother and became a bit complacent. But in latter years I found that the comradeship and the marching on ANZAC Day, I rather like it now, and I also like the few beers afterwards.

What about the RSL, did you join the RSL?

I joined the RSL first many years ago, and then I fell out of it, because, as I said, I went to the country and so forth. And then in later days I joined the RSL and because we have a lot of meetings and functions and so forth at the ANZAC House in Perth, and well I think if you utilise their facilities I think it's always the right thing to do in joining them. And most of our association has joined the RSL.

Mmm. But your sort of primary loyalty is really to the association?

To the association, yes. We - though in - as our numbers are reduced through old age and sickness and so forth, it looks pretty obvious to me that the whole of the artillery - that's the field companies and twenty-five pounders and those people - will have to join up and - and make it a solid body. Because now the ANZAC Day march is becoming quite long and something has to be done about it.

(10.00) How do you feel that the RSL's been as far as being an organisation for ex-service people, do you think it's been the right sort of organisation and ...?

I feel that they have. I haven't had to call upon them in anything at all. But I know that if you're wanting advice or you want help, all you have to do is go up to the counter and - and they will give you all the advice and so forth. They're probably like any other association or, you know, they're short of money - or their funds are limited - so therefore there's only a limit to what they can do. But I've found that if ever I wanted any advice or help I can get it.

What do you feel about them moving into sort of broader community issues in having a public opinion on other issues such as immigration and so on? You know, there've been, um, in the news on and off for having public stand on other issues that aren't directly perhaps related to ...

... to ...

... the purpose for which they were set up in the beginning?

I feel that the RSL should stick mainly to the job that they are - not paid for, but what they are supposed to do. To look after the well-being of ex-servicemen. Um, you can't be solely isolated because I mean, you'd perish if you did. You must keep a broader view, but to enter into political - the arena, I'm against that because once you enter into that field you are tied up in one section of the - of the politics and your own section which is the - is the return men will be left to fend for

themselves. Um, I think this should be a balance but if anything, leaning towards the ex-servicemen, not going into that controvers... field of controversy.

Mmm. How much have you found that people are interested in what you did in the war, and in the history of the war? You know, from individual personal points of view and has that changed over the years?

I find, maybe it's because I've got a little - a little bit older than the young fellow of today, he's a bit interested now. Where before they said, 'Oh the war's over and that's all about it', but now as the young fellows today, he's more educated, he's better educated and so therefore he can think for himself now, where in latter years, what his parents said was law, but now he can think for himself now and he's got a fair idea. And now they're more tolerant. They can see, uh, what went on and so forth and I - I feel that, um, people are becoming - will accept ANZAC Day, and this is brought out a day, by ANZAC Day, by the crowd that's turning out to witness the - the event.

Was there a lot of interest directly after the war, you know when you first came back and so on? Was there a lot of community interest at that time or did people want to forget about it and get on with being at peace again?

Well, I, as I say, it was about six months after the war, I think it was something like that, that I came back and by the time I came back I found that I was just a number. I mean there was no waving of flags or anything like that for anybody that came back from New Guinea those times. I found that people just wanted to forget and get on with their job now and start a life all of their own again. So, uh, it was like everything else, six years or whatever the war went, it was a long time and people became, especially, became a bit tired - become a bit tiresome, especially in Australia who wasn't affected that very much with the war. I mean in England where the cities were bombed and people suffered a lot, I mean it went on for years that people were still staunch and patriotic.

Did you find that it changed much, say during the '60s, and when the Vietnam war was on, did people's attitude to talking about the war or having been in the army or belonging to the RSL, was it notably different then from ...?

Well unfortunately for the Vietnam - Vietnam war is that - is like the war in Korea. It couldn't be won and so people knew that who was sent up there was just a holding type of thing. So it's like playing a game of football. Unless you go into the game and go for a win people are going to become very bored with it and so these poor fellows that went up there, they were in a no win situation. And so when they came back instead of getting a pat on the back, they were just nothing - there's nothing ever done for these people and they were just considered fools for going up there.

But did that also affect the community's attitude do you think, to the men that had served in the previous, um, in the second world war and even in the first world war, the way the community saw things? Like the RSL and returned service personnel ...

No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I think the people from the first world war - there are very few of them alive now, but I feel that they - the second world war - they're still accepted now. I think the - I think the Korean war and the Vietnam - I don't think it altered people's opinion because the people were more involved as - as a country, a whole country, in the second world war. Where in the - in the Korean and the Vietnam it was sort of volunteers that went up there and that's about all.

(15.00) About the people that were in Darwin, the men and the women that were in Darwin, the ... Afterwards, looking back on it, did they feel - and at the time - did they feel that they'd been sort of left behind? Not left behind, but forgotten in a way because they were in the thick of it and yet they were in an isolated place and so on, and the war as you say, only touched on Australia in a - a marginal way on the actual territory of Australia. Did they feel different?

No. In Darwin itself, during the first period of the war, they thought they were well in it. Course Darwin was going to be invaded and that was the general opinion and so they were, at that time, considered themselves front line. It was only when MacArthur overstepped New Guinea type of thing and just left the Australians there and continued further up in the - in the island hedgehopping then the people in Darwin - or the troops in Darwin thought they were being left behind and just wasting their time.

I mean if those troops in Darwin could have been - could have been plucked out of there say, and put into one of the landings on the islands and so forth, these people would have had a different - different outlook altogether. It's only when you're left to become stale and just do garrison duties. I mean they were young guys, they were only in their twenties and - and they didn't join the army to languish in some place just doing guards and peeling potatoes.

So to follow your career through, when you came back from Darwin and arrived back down here, what did you have, leave straight away, or ...?

When I returned from Darwin I had - I never had any leave for the whole time I was up there, so I had fifty-nine days accrued leave, which I had and enjoyed. And course I hadn't seen my family - parents and so forth - for two years and of course I had a lot of catching up. My youngest sister, for example, who I left as a young toddler was a young girl and that type of thing. So I had a lot of that going, and then after my leave finished I, for some reason or other, I did a stint of going from battery to battery. From Buckland Hill to Parke[?], and to Coogee down at Rockingham, and so forth, and I did about three or four months of that.

How did that feel after where you'd been, you know, going about in that way? Did it feel real?

Well it was great for me because I already just had two years and in addition to that - prior to that - twelve months as you might say over at Rottneest Island where I had no chance of having a young person's fun. Suddenly I'm thrown in a situation where I'm - I'm camped in a - in a city, in a town,

like Perth and Fremantle, so at night time, or on my days off, I could shoot over and do the things I wanted to do or do the things the young people did at those times. And so I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Did some of the fellows go a bit wild when they got back down?

Uh, yes. Yes, we did. A lot of us. I was talking to them at a later date, found that not having any of the opposite sex - not mixing with them so much that they intend to talk more army style than say you - you was to take a lassie out and instead of talking about the niceties or whatever you may have to talk about with them, you found that all your experience was up in Darwin for example, at that particular time. I mean you can come home and say what was happening in Bunbury or what some girl did six months ago or some local event. You found that you were behind the field there. But being young fellows you soon learnt and so it was an enjoyable time anyway. I thoroughly enjoyed it. That was before I was sent away again.

What was the story of that too, how did it come about that you ended up in New Guinea?

Well when we came back all the ack-ack units were disbanded in due course, and so they - you had to fill out a form I think it was or something and giving your choices of what you want to go into. In my particular instance I put in for the Water Transport. I wanted to go into Water Transport. I had some little feeling towards it. Of course Water Transport is a section of the engineers, so I was sent over to New South Wales to a place called Kapooka, just outside of Wagga, and I was supposed to do a fifteen weeks training course there. It's right from the word go, right from the bull ring days, right up to the last one, which was the bridging course.

(20.00) Well I just started - I did the ten weeks over there and I was just - I was very lucky in this Kapooka too because just in fourth week was a time when you used to go down in the dug-out and used to learn all about how to do the land mines and all about explosives and so forth and the week after I'd gone through the fourth week the - the bunker where you had the training blew up and the whole nineteen of the people in this bunker, the young guys in this bunker, were all blown up and were all killed ...

In the training exercise?

In the training exercise, in the bunker, and that was a very sad thing because during the day of the burial there was two semi-trailers with coffins on them and one truck I think, if my memory is correct, just passing by and going to the cemetery and that was a very sad thing. Fortunate for me, in a week prior to that I may have been one of them, but that was my lucky day. But that was the sad things there.

And then I went in, after the ten weeks training there, I went into Wagga and I started to do the bridging school there. I was learning how to build Bailey bridges and so forth across the river, and then I was plucked out of there and sent up to Brisbane. And I was in Brisbane itself for about two or three days and then I was sent out to a place called Logan Village, which is thirty miles out into

the bush, and there there was huts all throughout the bush and I was there for about, I think a week, and this fateful morning came - it was raining like - like the devil - and (interviewer laughs) so we were lined up there - not lined up, just sat around under our capes and that in the rain and that. And then we eventually finished up - that was about four, five o'clock in the morning and about eleven o'clock we eventually finished up boarding the Duntroon in Brisbane Harbour and so we set sail for New Guinea. And I can always remember the leaving there. Going up the Brisbane River was quite nice and I lasted until about three o'clock in the afternoon and I was seasick and when I went up to look for a place to - to, you know, to die, I find there was about 1,200 blokes on the ship or 2,000, or whatever it was and 1,800 of them were - were up there dying too. And so that was the seasickness. But it took us seven days to get up to New Guinea and after the first two days when it was rough, the rest of the time was very pleasant. But it was very crowded and very hot and you got to sort of put your blanket down on the top deck about four o'clock in the afternoon to peg out your place so you could sleep on deck. Otherwise sleeping down in the holds was just suffocating.

And so we - I arrived at Wewak and we went ashore into Wewak. I can always remember having seven days on the ship and you know, becoming a bit soft, and they put us over the side in a barge at Wewak and I can always remember that. You know, you had - you jumped off the ladder onto the barge and you follow with all your gear on and then you had to pick yourself up and move forward and you were standing in this barge for about, oh, I don't know, about an hour or an hour and a quarter or something, just standing there. You couldn't sit down, you couldn't do anything, because they just packed you in standing up. And I can always remember the back of my legs were so sore in that. And we landed on the beach there, and I was happy to land on the beach too and they made us do all our clothing with this fluid called 'Betty', I think they used to call it. And then 'Mary' was another one. They used to have this fluid, you know, one was to stop - you did all the seams of your clothes for scrub tidas [sic] typhus and then the other one is you rub on yourself to keep the mosquitoes off you and so we stood on the beach for a couple of hours and did all this and then we took off then and we had to walk, oh, about five or six hours up through the hills to - to the top of Shiburangu - Mount Shiburangu it was, where this 2/1st Field Company was situated and I can always remember going up there after seven days lying about. It was one of the hardest walks I have ever done in my life. And as we were going up the road the first thing that leapt was we threw our bloomin' steel helmets right over the side of the thing because it was too heavy to carry and of course the old slouch hats was the thing there. And that was my introduction to New Guinea.

And, anyway I was over in New Guinea and I was - one of my jobs was to guard on the bulldozer, because you understand up in the hills there, while he was doing his job, you had to sit about, you know, as far as away as you could and you had to watch him and see he didn't get hurt and also see if nothing was coming up from any other place, you know. At that stage of the game I was very conscious of Japanese because I was a bit green up there and ...

... That takes you ... Sorry for interrupting there, but how - how - um, were you made to feel green? Apart from feeling green yourself, how were you received, you know, when you got up there, by men say, that had been up in that area for a fair while, coming up from Australia?

No worries at all. They just accepted us into the group and that's all about it. Then questions were asked, more not how you felt or anything as who did you see? What is it like down there? How many birds you saw in about the last six months? and all this type of thing.

(25.00) In great detail?

Oh, great detail. Oh, Bob's for sure [sic], yeah, minute detail. And if you were an experienced man of course, you had more to tell. But anyway it was not ... I was up there for a little while and then I had a bit of a mishap. The bulldozer driver had called me back, he had got a - a bit of a log type of thing caught in his tracks and I went down there and while I was up on top of the tracks the old bulldozer lurched and I fell down and top of my foot went on - I don't know where, it was on some part of the track anyway, and so I finished up back at the beach at Wewak for about three or four weeks, I think, or maybe a bit longer than that, with a little big swollen foot. And so I had a - let's put it this way, a very pleasant time in hospital there, because there was a few sisters there and they were white and they spoke English and I have to admit, I did study them a little bit - more than I did study the local news.

But anyway, that came to an end and I had to go back up into the hills again, then. And then I was up there for a while, went on a couple of patrols and did me usual things I had to do and then when the war finished, being engineers, we were one of the last to leave the fields around that area because we had to keep the road open, 'cause they reckoned about a couple of thousand Japanese were coming in from down around the Sepik River and they were going to come in and come up to this island, this Mushu Island where they were keeping them. But of course when they started to come in there wasn't just a couple of thousand, there were thousands of them. I forget now how many, 6,000 or 8,000. So there had to be, you know, the road had to be kept open and all this type of thing for them to come in. So eventually we got back to Wewak and we were camped all along the beaches for miles and miles, all the different units were camped until that lovely day when I thought I was coming home and I boarded the Duntroon again. That was the Duntroon the ship that I went up on (coughs) and so anyway, instead of coming home, unfortunately they took us down as far as Lae and they off-loaded us at Lae and it was a great disappointment for the people that were off-loaded and ... I was in Lae for a little while - for a week or so - and then I was shipped out about another thirty miles out towards the Nadzab Valley I think it was, or something, and I was out there and while I was out there it was over the Christmas period. And we were just lying about and then I found out there was some chappies with only a 121 points or something that were being sent back to Lae to go home, and I had about 152 points at the time, being single, you didn't accumulate many points. A married man of course with kiddies, he got a lot more, and anyway when I approached - a couple of us who were in the same boat as myself, we approached the officer in charge there and told him our story. He said, 'Well you shouldn't be here in the first place.' So anyway, he was a good guy and he shipped us straight back - not shipped us, trucked us straight back to Lae. And we were at Lae in the detail depot there and we were loading, just a work party, loading this old ammunition on this old Liberty ship to come back to Australia in it. And for some reason or other, this ... Every night at six o'clock you used to have to all keep quiet while they read out an airdraft. And this airdraft was mostly compassionate leave fellows and all this type of thing, that were coming back - that would be flown back to Australia. And one night another mate of

mine, he was in the commandos, he was Locky Britton[?] and him and I were lying side by side in the detail depot when his name was - Trooper Britton and Sapper Foxon's name was called out and you had to go down and hand in your rifle and all your gear and believe you me, him and I never hardly breathed for about - till the next morning, till we took off. And I had never been in a plane in my whole life, and we picked up a DC-3, uh, DC-3 Douglas plane I think it was and they flew us - it was an American crew ... I'm sorry, it was an Australian crew, and they flew us - they took us off and I thought oh, terrific, this is a great experience for me. Coming from a poor family and the plane was just something that was unheard of. Anyway they dropped us down at Moresby on the first leg and low and behold, something went wrong and so I was stranded at Moresby and I was there for about five days. And anyway this day came and we were told to be down at four o'clock in the afternoon down to the office there in Moresby and I was going to fly down by Catalina Flying Boat to Rose Bay, Sydney. And believe you me, I was on a high. And anyway, for some reason or other the Catalina, I heard afterwards, had engine trouble and never took off. And so it was another couple of more days and I pick up a Curtiss Commando - it's a type of Douglas plane - and it was American crew and they flew us down to Townsville. And believe you me, when I hit that Townsville, Australia, I kissed the land, you know, I was so pleased to be home.

Even then I ran into trouble. The Burdekin River was up in flood and it took us seven days to get out of Townsville. But eventually I got home and happiness, with the family again.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B.

When you were up at Wewak you mentioned that you went up into the hills for part of that time, what were you involved in there?

Well, you understand, in Wewak there was - they used to have what they called the 'big road'. That used to go up into the hills. It was the only road into the hills and this 2/1st Field Company, which I joined, were up there. And when I got there, there was such a - sort of camps or tents you would say around the top of the brow of this hill. And just prior to me getting there, there was a bit of a battle for the Shiburangu and I believe there was a lot of lives lost, but I never saw any of that, and I can always remember going up there and I was just doing the normal chores which engineers do. You know, putting culverts in and all this type of thing and then one time there I had to go out on a bit of patrol. And I can't remember why I went out and there was about seven or eight of us went out and we went along the - we call them the 'boong pads' or 'boong trails'. That was just a sort of a path cut through the jungle and we went out there this particular day and I was a little bit green up there so, you can understand, that as I was walking along my eyes were over my shoulder and into the bush and everything. So the least little noise that I heard, this was in the day time, so as you know the jungle doesn't move in the day, so I was looking out and I remember coming through and we came to this fast flowing river but before we came to it, I remember we all stopped and ahead of us was these huts and so anyway, we stood there for a while and looked around. Couldn't see any sign of life, so we went down into these huts - left one guy up back further, you know, to keep a watch out and when we got down there we found out that the commandos had just come through

and what happened was, they must have caught these Japs fellows in the camp and because in the kitchen there was two or three of them lying there and must have caught one poor soul, probably having a happy time on the toilet, and he was killed on the toilet and so I think there was about ten or something lying there and then ... So when we left there we still followed this river along and as we were going along so we came to this one patch of about another eight just lying there in different forms of, you know, rotting away as you say, what do you call it? - composition ...

Decomposition, yeah.

Decomposition and so forth and we found quite a lot of them along this trail which obviously they must have tried to get away down there. But as I said, we learnt after that the commandos had gone through. So anyway after doing a big tour around we got a little bit bushed at one stage and didn't like to leave the pad so we found an o.pip line. That was from the twenty-five pounders that were just down below us when we were at Shiburangu there and we followed that back down and we came right back to this artillery place, where they had two or three guns and so from there on we only had about another two or three miles or two miles to walk back to our camp. But that was a little time which I remembered distinctly. As I said, it was my first time I'd been out there so anytime you do something for the first time, it's always a memory and so forth.

(5.00) Did you feel any different if you sort of are a bit between encountering say the Japanese enemy as soldiers on the ground compared with the way that you'd encountered them flying in in planes? Because it's a bit different.

Well, well, see when they're up in the sky you're firing at something. You're firing at a plane, and you're not thinking of the chappie that's sitting behind the wheel or anything like that. And you see you - it's just impersonal. You just fire, if the plane comes down, it comes down, a piece of metal comes down. But of course when you strike the Japanese on the ground, it's a person. So you're not looking at metal or machine. Not that I had a great deal of experience on that line because I just never had it. And thank God I - for that anyway, I mean, I mightn't have been here or I don't know how I would have shaped up. I mean everybody's different. I think I would have gone all right but I'm not too sure. There's always an element of doubt. But I never actually had to go and shoot somebody on the ground, and so I - until that happens the first time no-one knows how they will act.

How strong were the feelings of the people around you towards the enemy? You know, was it very strong ...

... Oh ...

... a matter of survival obviously and wanting to win.

You see what's instilled into you is Japanese brutality and this - I don't know if it's propaganda or what - but that, you know, if you were caught you were going to suffer. And so with this sort of thing instilled in you, most people I think would say, oh it's going to be him or me and then you got

to make sure it's yourself. But as I said, I was never in a situation where I went into action in the jungle itself.

I would imagine that it would have been just like the ack-ack when I was in Darwin, that your first few times you would have been frightened, green, and then after that you become - well you just took it as a job.

How important did you see promotion as being and how important was it to other people that you knew?

Well you must understand, as I said earlier in the tape, I was just come from a common working family, I never had much education and I had little - very little - experience in handling other - other people on account of my youth. And so therefore when I joined the army I had no ambitions to be promoted. I did get one stripe, I passed an exam once and I did get one stripe and I don't know where that would have led, but unfortunately in the later half of the Darwin episode, one night they - when the raids had finished, there was definitely no more raids - and a picture show had come just about a matter of a mile or two from our site, and the pic. show represented a screen put up and you took your own boxes. And so nineteen of us, I can remember distinctly decided that we've had enough, that we were going to watch this picture show. I can always remember it, it was Gene Kelly I think and Judy Garland in For Me and My Gal. I'd seen it three or four times too, but this must have been about the fourth time I'd seen it. So anyway, we shot through.

And we were caught. We came back and we were caught and so the penalty - my penalty was ... (phone rings)

Mmm.

As I said, my penalty was, I lost my stripe and that was the end of the promotion for me. But as I said, I had no aims. In hindsight or looking back now, I was foolish but I lacked experience and I knew that I never had that material at that time. Uh, I have changed since, but that was then. I never had it, never had the experience or the keenness to go on.

What difference when you say you - you thought differently of it since, what difference do you think it could have made?

Oh maturity brings, uh, brings changes in everybody. I mean, once when you left school, when I was young, the education finished, but since later on, you know, you can go and do things afterwards and if you want to, and if you're keen enough and you want to learn any particular thing, you can go and get night school or something like that and you can learn that way. But - but at that particular time I had no thought of it.

But I mean, have you regretted opportunities that the army maybe offered you, that you couldn't make use of?

Oh yes, I've regretted - like that's one of the things I've regretted, not having the education at school level. That was my biggest regret. And the other one was, when I was - when the war had finished I was in Wewak and I realised the war was going to be over, so there was a number of schools, you know, starting to open up, and so I thought - I had no education as I say, so the welding school came up and I thought that this would be the thing for me. Like if I could learn welding and so forth but unfortunately I don't know what happened.

(10.00) I went for about a week and the school just folded up. I don't know - I don't know the reason why, they just said, it's not on any more. And so I feel that if I could have had that two months of - of education as far as welding is concerned, it would have been a great thing for me.

Were there any retraining possibilities when you got back here, you know, because there were some schemes, weren't there?

Yes, there was ... Yes, there was schemes going on. I put in for an interior decorating job. Uh, interior decorating course and I was going to do that and I was accepted and so forth but at that time things changed a bit. I went back into the country again. And so I went down into the country and so I had to forego that course. Um, it was sad in one way that I'd missed it because you never know what the possibilities are - even if you never took it up, you at least had that behind you. But there and again, I went ... I might never have got married.

It was going into the country ...?

Going into the country ...

... that you met your wife?

... that I met the wife and she sort of - and she was a woman with a good eye for a bargain and she saw me so she grabbed me. (Laughs)

Whereabouts in the country did you go?

Oh, I went - it was about sixteen miles into the hills - that's west of Waroona or nine miles from Dwellingup into a timber - into the timber and I put, uh, about six or eight years of something in the timber industry, going through - working in the mill I did. And then I went to become a fireman and then from the fireman I went out in the bush and out in the bush I did a bit of falling and so forth. Right through the industry, and I liked it very much. It suited me but unfortunately the timber industry cut out.

[Break in recording.] The area that I was in, the timber mills closed down because they lost a lot ... had run out of their cutting territory and of course, losing their - losing that they closed down and plus economic situation changed and so I had to leave the timber industry and come back - I came back to the metropolitan area.

And what did you work at after you came back to Perth?

Uh, I bought a taxi and I drove a taxi for about twenty-five years. So - because - I did this because, as I said, I couldn't start anything up myself and this I was free and my own boss and I can work the hours I want to and so that was the reason why I did that.

Overall, do you think that joining up when you did, and your war service and so on, was a disadvantage in your life at that point or an advantage or how do you view it now?

Well it's a disadvantage because I was two years in Darwin. There was no schools where people could learn anything, like a trade or anything, so you were just doing purely and simply on - on the guns and that was all. Where if I had not joined the army, one just never knows what happens. I could have got into a situation where I could learn a trade or - or work somebody where, you know, something may have developed from that. I never ever liked working for anybody else, hence I had the taxi for twenty-five years, even though it's not a great occupation, it at least gave me freedom to work when I wanted and it treated me very well.

What about benefits? Did you take out any home loans or anything? Were there any sort of ex-service benefits that you made use of?

When I came back, you were allowed to borrow if you wished, to build a home, 2,000 ... it was in pounds then, I think it was somewhere round 2,400-2,500 pounds. I just forget what it is from a war service loan and I made use of this. You could borrow it at three and three quarter percent and you took about twenty-five years to pay it off. And of course as the interest rates increased over a period of time, of course, you wouldn't pay it off in any case, being such a small interest. And so I built my first home with this loan and plus my own little bit of capital. So I built the home.

[Break in recording.] Now time's gone by and I'm - when I turned sixty I retired and now I'm on the war - the Veteran Affairs pension and this comes in quite handy because now with my own little bit of savings I can at least now, with the work load taken off you, can sit back now, and I reckon ... I'm now sixty-seven and I find that the last six years has really been great to me because we've been able to go for a few little tours away, the wife and I, and now I can really enjoy it, because I'm still well in health and - and anyway, life's good. Let's look back on life and say well, che sera sera.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW.