



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Title	(Q215367) Shailer, Richard Thomas (Private)
Interviewer	Connell, Daniel
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Description	Richard Thomas Shailer as a private, Volunteer Defence Corps, interviewed by Daniel Connell for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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Identification: Side 1, Tape 1, Interview with Mr Richard Shailer, I'm Daniel Connell and this is the 6th of September 1989. Right. End of identification.

Mr Shailer, if we could just start off, if you could tell me a little bit about your family background. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born on the banks of Plain Creek in a slab hut in 1909. I had a very tragic circumstances in my life. My mother died when I was two. I had a little sister three weeks old when mother died and I had a sister six year old who was taken away to Nambour and she grew up the age of eighteen and we never ever, we never ever saw her. Anyway, we were, me and my little sister were fostered out to foster parents and for about nine years, and I went home at eleven and my father died from Plain Creek fever. In other words, cleaned up the valley at that time, and anyway my brother and sister managed the farm and then later on I had to, when I was old enough, I had to go out to work. I felt I was very lucky I struck people who looked after me for four years and I worked for them of course, and then I went cane cutting for nine years, and I came into the, um, ah, Australian Distillery. I was there for eight years during the war period. That's when I had all the experiences of the war. We were, some of us tried to join the volunteer, tried to join the services, but we were told we were in an essential service.

Just before you get into that, I'd just like to ask a couple of questions. About 1939, how old were you in 1939?

Thirty. Thirty.

Thirty, right. And at that time, what were you doing?

Uh, I was working at the distillery.

Right. What sort of work at the distillery?

I was melting sugar to be converted into power alcohol. Melting sugar from the mill. They were taking it over from the mill and my job was to melt sugar to convert it into power alcohol.

Power alcohol. That was to what? Ethanol to mix with petrol?

Yes, ethanol yes. And it was a protected industry. We were under armed guard. We had to use pass words to get to work.

Right, well before we get into that, in the early years of the war, can you remember, you know, 1940-41, before the Japanese came in?

Yeah, I can remember when the preparations we had to make. That's why I joined the VDC. I was in the VDC for about three years.

Well before we get into that though, you mentioned that you tried to enlist. Where did you try and enlist?

Well, I tried to enlist in the air force. Two or three of us tried to enlist in the air force, and we were to, we had our papers returned 'Essential Service'. We could not leave essential service, and the company stopped us from enlisting anyway. They didn't want to lose us because there was, men were hard to get, and that is when they had the experiences of the war at the distillery.

Right. Um ....

And I joined the Volunteer Defence Corps to do some part, take some part in the war.

Right. Who first of all, who mentioned the VDC to you first of all? How did you hear?

Tony Scougall from the Plain ... manager of the Plain Creek mill. He was the, ah, he was the head of the local VDC - what's it, platoon commander or something - and, ah, he got about thirty of us into the VDC and we used to do plane spotting at night, after shift. Knock off at 12 o'clock, go plane spotting for two hours, and then we used to go beach patrol, walk along the beach at 3 o'clock in the morning and then we used to go on patrols of a weekend. Ah, ...

(5.00) Right. Well, just, if you could tell me a little bit about the training you had at the very beginning when you joined the VDC. What sort of training did they give you?

We had a bit of army work, a bit of drill, drill work, up in the school ground and how to handle a rifle. We were, most, lot of us already knew because we were in the Rifle Club. I was a member of the Rifle Club prior to the war and that is where we learnt to use rifles, and then we used to go on demolition work, preparation for demolition. We had the, ah, the railway bridge ready for demolition should the Japs land, and quite a lot of other things. We were at the distillery the night the bomb were dropped on Townsville.

Right, well could you tell me about that particular night?

That particular night we were working away there and we heard the siren started screamin', the air-raid sirens were screamin' everywhere, and the message come through that there was a bomb dropped on Townsville and the plane was heading south. Well we knew that we were a target. We knew the distillery was a target and we all shot through. We had an air-raid shelter under the place, but we wouldn't stop there. We shot through to the creek and then the 'All Clear' came and the Jap decided to go home apparently. Or go back somewhere. And that's what happened. But it's very exciting I can tell ya.

Right. The sort of training that you were given. You mentioned that you were given army training. What actually were you taught?

Oh, how to handle a rifle and how to throw a live grenade. We were given live grenades in training. Oh, shocking experience I never thought I'd have. And we used to have 3-inch mortar training. We had a mortar gun and we used to have 3-inch mortar training out the rifle range. And rifle shooting of course.

What sort of weapons did you have, here in the VDC in Sarina?

I was, I was doin' a bit of first aid. I had a first aid certificate and they made good use of that. I was more second in charge of the VD... with the first aid. Bill Cameron was my boss, and he was a Captain I think, something like that. I was only a private, but still I had a first aid kit, and that was ... but we didn't, luckily we didn't have to use it.

What sort of things were you trained to do, in the way of first aid?

Oh well, dress wounds and that. We were told, we were taught how to dress wounds. We were taught all that, but, ah, we used to have army training of a weekend.

Did you only meet on weekend?

Ha?

Did you only meet on weekend?

Oh yes, that's all we had time to. We were workin' most of the time. We used to have Sunday mornin' we'd have army training, you know, with the rifles, how to handle a rifle. But we had a lot of ex-soldiers from the first world war in our platoon. They taught us a lot, you know. There's where Ted [inaudible] was, all those fellas, they were men that knew what they were doin', and they taught us.

Did you have manoeuvres very often?

Have what?

Manoeuvres. Go off and ....

Oh yes. We had one manoeuvre I remember we went to Eton, went to Walkerston in a truck. They took us in by truck and they put us off there. We had to go bush. We had to meet at the enemy. Eton was the enemy, and we met 'em half way. Anyway, they annihilated us. Our scout gave us away; we all got shot down. I can remember that as if it was yesterday.

How do you mean the scout gave you away? What did he do?

The scout bobbed up and made himself too prominent, and the enemy just picked him up and then they've had the rest of us. We were all captured. That's in the bush up near Eton.

You also mentioned another manoeuvre down at, I think, [Walloon?] cattle station.

Yeah, Walloon cattle station. They put five Japanese - cardboard Japanese - up in the mangrove, and we attacked them. Anyway when the war was over, the five Japanese were still there. They weren't even hit. (Laughs). Didn't say much for our marksmanship did it! (Laughing again).

Well I mean, when you say you attacked them, could you describe that in a bit more detail, just to get an idea of the tactics that were being used?

The what?

The tactics. If you could describe that in ....

Oh yes. Well, they used to go out in proper army formation. They'd send the scouts out and then they'd follow up with a section of a platoon, and they'd have reinforcements following up and all that, you know. Real army style.

And how would you attack, how did you try and attack those five Japanese?

Live ammunition. We attacked them with live ammunition. We all had guns. I didn't have that one though. That was my rifle club gun.

And what sort of live ammunition did you have?

We had proper .303s, yeah. Proper bullets we had. Not dummies.

(10.00) Right. And also, did you have grenades?

Have what?

Grenades.

Oh yes, we had grenades. We had grenades on two occasions. We had grenades at the rifle range. They put us down in a pit and we had to pull the pin out and throw this grenade. I tell you we weren't too happy about it. We weren't too happy where we were. We weren't proper soldiers and we were throwing grenades. We weren't too happy about it I tell ya.

Did you ever use things like Molotov cocktails?

What's a Molotov cocktail? What's that? It's a ....

You mentioned it earlier. You said that you, I think it was in combination with that Walloon cattle station thing you were ...

Oh yeah. I don't, don't remember too much about Molotov cocktails. You light it to something don't you?

No. It's just that you mentioned it. It's the only reason I brought it up.

Oh I don't remember too much about it. I can't relate too much. It's that long ago. It's a long time since we were on those manoeuvres you know. How long is it?

Oh, it's nearly fifty years.

Yeah, that's right. But that's what happened.

And there were also special events that took place, recruiting campaigns, things like that. Was the VDC in Sarina involved in any of those?

No. We didn't. We didn't, I can't remember us ever meeting in Mackay in a manoeuvre. We met Eton. Eton had a squadron. Ah, oh a platoon I suppose you call it. Ah, we met them and as I say, they captured the lot of us.

What was that? How did they ... that was the time you were just describing when the scout ....

Our scout gave us away. Our scout gave us away and they just surrounded us. I can remember that as if it was yesterday. They made a great joke of it of course. Our soldiering career ended there and then. (Laughing). We were all taken prisoner.

You were also spotting planes I think. Could you tell me about that?

Yes. Spotting planes at night was very interesting. Of a day-time we'd see them going over here. I saw as many as thirty planes in one squadron one day, going to New Guinea, and of a night time we used to have to watch for them and hear them of course, not see them, and we'd have to report to Mackay. At Mackay they had a post recording flights, and we used to, say, ring up the phone there at the post office and say, 'Planes just flying north'. 'How far out to sea?' 'Oh, somewhere along the coast', and that's what went on. We used to report these planes. Day time of course, you'd count them if you could. But there was a lot of planes at night. Lot of the manoeuvres were at night.

Did any occasions when people, you know, left the post unmanned? You were talking about one incident involving a dance hall.

Yeah, I went to a dance one night, and when I come out I rung Mackay and he said, 'What about the two that went over half an hour ago?' while I was in havin' a dance. (Laughs). That's what went on. (Laughing again). It got a bit serious at times though, because you couldn't afford to let planes come through unknown, you know. Specially when the Japs were about to land. They expected the Japs to land down south of Sarina. Yeah. Down at, oh, some beach down here. They expected the Japs to land there. Another incident I can recall, later years when I was surveying cane farms, I saw a lot of white pegs through the bush and I said to the farmer, 'What are these white pegs here?'. He said that the Yanks put them there during the war. That was the planned escape route in case the Japs landed. He said, see there was no, there was an inland road but there was very little coast road. The coast road was only bush road, and that they expected that if the Japs landed they would have to have an escape route. So these pegs up through the scrub - they're probably still there - up through the bush was indicating where they would have to go as an escape route, to get back over the top, get back over the top of the range.

Right. Did they, um, plan the demolition of any bridges in this area?

Yes. We had the, we had Plain Creek Bridge near the distillery, we had it ready for demolition. We did that one Sunday morning. We went out and said where we would have to put all the, all the, ah, explosives. It was ready to go up. It was explained to us how to use the, how to use the, ah, charges and all that, you know. Oh, it was an exciting old time I tell ya.

Well how, just thinking of that demolition, can you remember any of the details about what you were told to do with regard to demolition?

Oh well, actually, I didn't take such a big part in it because I was in the ambulance section, but I watched them do it. They used to put the, ah, side the rails, put the explosives on the side of the rails. The dummies - we were using dummies of course - and that's what we were supposed to do if the Japs had've put proper ones there. We had a, we had a place full of proper ammunition at the mill. We were about the only ones that knew it was there. The mill worker didn't know it was there, but we knew.

The ....

But that's what you had to do in war time.

(15.00) Right. Who did the training? Did you have people coming from ....

Yes, we had an instructor sent up from Brisbane. Strange to say, he was a German instructor, and ....

Been out in Australia a while though.

We were at war with Germany, but yet we had a German instructor, but he was very good. He taught us a lot. I can remember quite well the things what he used to do, that he used to say to us.

What did he say?

We used to call him a 'bloody Hun' but still he was a good, he was a good captain, you know. Oh yeah. Yeah, he taught us just what to, how to defend yourself.

What, can you remember any of the things that he taught you?

Ah, I just can't remember it now, but oh, well how to, how to seek cover and that, you know, how to go to ground and seek cover. All those sort things. And how not to be in a heap, you know, how to spread out, you know, all that, all the essentials of an army we were trained, trained to do.

The sorts of men that were in charge of the VDC. What sort of men were they?

What, the locals? Well, one was the, our platoon commander was the manager of the Mill - Mr Scougall; and then we had [Slip Harrison?] - he was the chief chemist; and we had [Bill Cameron?] - he was a chief ambulanceman here; they're the sort of men that was lookin' after us.

Um, were they, you know, a fairly competent lot? Do you think they selected ....

Oh definitely were, yes. I don't know what would have happened if the Japs landed. I suppose we could have put up some sort of resistance.

The, well could you talk about those men a little bit. Just give me an idea of, you know, what they were like, the men that you've just named. For example, you were in the ambulance corps.

Yes, well they were very, they were all good men, you know. Men that you could rely on. We used to have our fun but we were pretty serious at the same time.

When you say you used to have your fun, what, any particular memories?

Oh well, can imagine throwin' a hand grenade for the first time wasn't altogether a joke, but we used to make that, we used to laugh about it. (Laughs). Oh yes, that's the way it goes. Oh, it was, I was quite surprised when I found this, this discharge. That was, my period of service was from the 26th of April 1942 to the 21st of October 1945. That's about three years or more. Yeah.

Did you ever go away on any training ....

No, I never went out of Mackay district really. Nup. No. We couldn't get away from work. We were workin', oh, we might get one day off a month. That's what we were doin'. All we were gettin'. We had to stay and melt sugar and make power alcohol. I'll never forget it.

Do you remember, after the Japanese came in, did the attitude to the VDC change? Do you remember?

After the what?

After the Japanese came into the war. See, the first couple of years ....

Oh yes, definitely. Oh, there wasn't much activity in the VDC until the Japs come in, because we weren't, we didn't considered to be in danger. But when the Japs come into it, everybody was alert. They said, see they expected them to land on the Queensland coast. Well, there's an illustration with that hospital ship got sunk out here. They weren't too far away. Look what they did in Sydney Harbour. Yeah.

Um, did you, how did you get on with other members of the armed forces? Did you have much to do with the army people or ...?

No, we didn't have much to do with them at all really. They were too busy themselves. When they weren't away training, they were home on leave and we didn't have much to do with them.

Did, um, sometimes was it a bit hard, any wayward members? You know, people who joined up and then lost enthusiasm?

Oh no, I don't think so. I think everybody was keen while they were in the VDC, but still at the same time, they were all happy when the war finished, because God knows what would have happened if the Japs had landed here. We don't know. Our women folk had gone. My wife had gone down to, ah, ah, oh out near Roma somewhere. There was a group, trainloads of people were evacuatin' the place.

At the end of the war, what happened at the end of the war?

Well, we called our gear in. They called our great coats in. They called our blankets in, and we objected to it, but couldn't do anything about it. I said we all like to know what they intended doin' with them. We protested about handing our great coat and our blankets in, but still it was done.

(20.00) And since the war, do you think the VDC has been adequately ....

No, it's just been forgotten about. Just they forgot they had a VDC. Yeah. We give a lot of time for nothing, but it wasn't recognised apart from that certificate that I got. It wasn't recognised at all. It ... and a lot of people contributed to the VDC with their time. I don't say any money, but with time. Not too easy to work till midnight and then get on a bus and go down do beach patrol. But that's what we used to do.

Were you glad you were in the VDC, even though you didn't get recognition?

Oh yes, of course we were. We considered it was some contribution towards the war effort. See, a lot of people here were givin' their services in first aid posts and all that sort of thing. We had a very strong first aid post here, and they had two air-raid shelters in the main street. I can recall the night that the bomb dropped on Townsville. The air-raid siren screamed and screamed, and the people were in the picture show, and they all shot through into the air-raid shelters, and the people with a pram had blocked the doorway up. People couldn't get in because there was prams at the doorway. (Laughs). People often talk about it, 'Remember the night at the air-raid shelter?'. One of those air-raid shelters have been pulled down, but there's one still there in Broad Street. I think they're gonna demolish it. Well that's about the story I can give ya.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1.

NO SIDE 2.