



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Identification: this is tape one of an interview with Captain Ken Forsyth of the 22nd Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery. This interview recorded in Perth by Jane Fleming Panegyres on the 23rd of August 1989. End of identification of tape one.

Did you grow up in Perth?

No, no.

Could you tell me something about your background, you know, your family and where you grew up and your education and so on?

Yeah, well I grew up in Moora and my father - or my parents had a general business in Moora as well as a small farm out at Berkshire Valley. But they had a manager on that.

Where did you get your schooling?

Oh, um, yes, well I went to primary school in Moora and won a scholarship and went to the Geraldton High School for three years. Um, I left school in the end of 1928 and, um, I was - I got a ... here, and then I joined the Bank of Australasia in Moora, in March 1929. Um ....

They were difficult times?

Oh yes, they were depression times, very lucky to have got a job in those days.

I'm just going to have to stop it there for a second. [Break in recording.]

Was the bank in fact you first choice of career? Was that what you preferred to do?

No not really. Um, it wasn't really my choice at all, but then, as I said, jobs were very hard to get and this opportunity came up and my father said, 'That's where you go,' and that's where I went (laughs).

What did you want to be?

Oh, it didn't really worry me one way or the other, no.

But, I mean, what had you wanted to be?

Oh I had - I had originally had ideas of being - of becoming a wool classer. I don't know why, but ... 'cause I think Dalgety's at that time were looking - at least the local representative was - had his eye on me for Dalgety's and I thought well wool classing, you know. But as I said, this job came up, and ....

Mmm. And you father thought that was much more secure at that time?

Well it was a job (laughs).

When did you first undertake any military training? This was as militia training, was it?

When I - when did I first start militia training?

Mmm.

Oh not till many years later in about 1938. In fact when it looked like getting like towards war we thought we better go into militia, which we did. Oh that would be late '38.

Mmm. And where did you undertake that?

Well at the time I was working in the bank at Fremantle and - but boarding in Cottesloe, and that's when I joined the 3rd Field Brigade.

Can you recall the details of the sort of training that you received at ...?

Oh, I was only in it a matter of months. Um, when the war broke out in 1939, we went into camp at Rockingham, straight away - how many weeks was that, about three weeks or something - well October '39 ... yes, and then later in May - no it wasn't, it was June or ... no when was it?

(5.00) Round about January/February 1940 we went to three months camp at - at Naval Base and it was from there that I was asked - or was approached by a Colonel Smith, I think his name was, um, who was apparently forming up this ack-ack business and if I'd transfer into anti-aircraft with you know, a prospect probably of getting commission. So I did so.

How much did you know about the anti-aircraft?

At the time?

Mmm.

Nothing. Not a thing.

So your decision was made just on his request really rather than on preference.

Yeah, well yeah. And it all sounded interesting. A good chance of getting a commission or at least a possibility. There was no guarantee but they said there would be a good - being a new unit and whatnot there was plenty of opportunity. And that's what I did.

Can you just tell me about the other people that were being drawn into the 5th at that time, what sort of group it was? The sorts of backgrounds that people were coming from and so on and where other men were coming from?

No I don't really know much about that sort of thing. I know - I know two - several other fellas like myself all came in from different units and different branches on the same business

of being asked, or selected, to come in and - and form this new unit. Well then, having got that nucleus then they had a recruitment for ordinary gunners, you know. It wouldn't actually - yes, recruitment, 'cause at that time it was still militia and all voluntary, and well then we helped with that too, you know, recruiting gunners.

How did you go about that?

Oh God, I don't know. All I know was, was that I was in the recruiting section down there at the Artillery Barracks and they came in and I put their names down and that was it, that's all I had to do with it (laughs). I didn't go round in the streets trying to (laughs) get them off or anything like that.

No, but, um, how - what were the sorts of - how accurately were the sort of forms filled in and so on when people were applying at a time like that, when the need was there for the men? You know, how fussy were they about things like health records and, um, ages and so on?

Well as far as I can recall there was nothing very particular about it as long as they were normal people.

Mmm, because some people were putting their ages up and so on and ...

Oh no, I think most of these were pretty genuine. There were the odd ones, oh yes, there were odd ones there, fellas that were much older than - than they - they stated they were, but ....

Bit of a blind eye ...?

But not that many no. Oh well yes. As I say this was ... at that stage that was militia and ... and they were obviously in fairly condition otherwise they wouldn't have been accepted in the first place, but, they'd probably be in their thirties.

What sort of undertaking of training went on from there on, once the - the men were recruited into the 5th? How was the training organised, where was the training and who actually trained the men?

The training was in the - the Artillery Barracks there in Burt Street in Fremantle and there was a - a permanent army cadre and they were the instructors on the anti-aircraft. They had some old 3-inch guns ... Well they were the foundation of the anti-aircraft in WA, we were trained by them. I've forgotten how many were in a cadre but - oh I couldn't tell you.

Can you remember details of that actual ...

Dr Lambert would know much more about this because he - he was a part of it.

Mmm. Did - how much, um, training did you have with actual live ammunition at this stage?

Oh ... well I can't recall, but it was very, very little. At the oustide probably two shoots as I can remember.

(10.00) So that's all you would have had before you went off to Darwin?

Yeah, mmm. Yeah.

Can you remember when you found out that you were actually going to Darwin?

Yes.

Or did you know it was Darwin?

No, oh yeah, well the Japanese war broke out on the 7th of December, didn't it, 1941. Only a couple of weeks after that we was told we wwere going to Darwin, and we left here in about the middle of December - no late - late December.

Just a bit before Christmas I think it was.

Yes, we had Christmas Day at Oodnadatta on the side of the train - the railway line (laughs).

How much can you remember of that trip across?

Oh plenty. It was a, I think at that stage that - well that route yeah, was not really properly developed, 'cause don't forget that the war had only just more or less started. I think originally we were intended to go up by boat and it broke down and they put it off until the following day, broke down again, and after two or three days of this, they decided we'd go overland. Okay, so we - cutting a long story short we got to Terowie I think it is, where you change to go onto the Alice Spring [sic] line. We had - from memory I think we had about 300 men, and we were given these rations, butter in ordinary paper wraps, bread just like you buy it in a baker's shop. The temperature would be round about the hundreds. You can imagine just after the train started (laughs) how much of that we had. The butter was [inaudible] within several hours, the bread we got rid of in about twenty-four hours, it was all gone hard.

The train itself had one coach at the back, like a little suburban coach sort of thing, like a tram, and that was for the officers and NCOs and then there was a lot of these flat tops with vehicles on them and that's where the men had to ride in the stinking heat and you can imagine how much gear was lost. It was blowing off and falling off and whatnot on the way up to Alice Springs. I can remember that trip all right. Anyway as I said, we had Christmas Day at Oodnadatta on the side of the road, with a - opening up a tin or two - on the side of the line I mean, and we got to Alice Springs. Um, we went from there to, um, Birdum by road. Um ... we got to Birdum, and then we got - got onto this little narrow gauge railway - from Birdum to Darwin. They were only ordinary, um, cattle trucks with a tarpaulin across the top. I think they'd be used for carrying coal a lot of them because we got covered in coal dust and just before we got into Darwin there was a tropical storm, a couple of the ropes broke on the top of the ... and down came the water and of course we were just streaked.

We landed at Darwin there and no-one knew we were coming. Not a soul, and there we were covered in ... you never saw such a dilapidated looking mob as we were. I remember that trip all right. By gee ... shocking.

Can you remember what Darwin looked like when you arrived?

Not really. It was only a small town then and oh, I'd say - I don't know what the population was, about 4,000 I guess, I don't know. (Coughs) it was only like a small country town.

Still very much a civilian town when you got there?

Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, definitely, yes. Mmm. It was only a civilian .... Oh a lot of people had left of course ... a lot of people had been evacuated long before this but there was still a fair civilian population around.

So things were by and large going on more or less as normal?

As far as I know, yes.

How much did it look as though it had been built up for military purposes at that stage?

Oh I really didn't take that much notice. I mean, you don't go round thinking about these things when you don't - you're just wondering what you're going to do next. And ... we didn't have a great deal to do with the actual town of Darwin itself because most of the boys went straight to Batchelor, an airfield, where I myself went up to Fannie Bay because we had a certain number of personnel that had come from infantry battalions.

(15.00) For example, when we left Fremantle here, I didn't take the whole of the 5th Ack-Ack Battery, only took half, and they made up the other half from infantry blokes, so we had to - I had to go out to Fannie Bay with them while they were trained in anti-aircraft - up to a point. I was only there for a matter weeks and then I went back to my own battery in Batchelor. But, um ...

Were the guns all in place when you arrived there?

Well, the 3.7 guns in Darwin itself were all - all fixed mountings, they were there, yes. But we didn't go to that. We were given these old 3-inch mobile guns. They were very old, out-dated. I wouldn't be surprised if they were 1918, I think the ammunition was 1918 and very antiquated height-finder. So antiquated that I'd never seen one like it before in my life. That was only temporary, we did eventually get a good one. But we were on this - they were mobile guns and therefore they - we'd move - we were protecting airstrips, so that we'd move from one for three weeks and then another one for three weeks and so on. The idea of that of course, I think, was that the Japs follow them back, they wouldn't be there, they'd be on another one, you know, that was the idea I think.

In terms of training the men that had had no experience at all ...

Mmm ...

... of anti-aircraft ...

Mmm ...

... guns and so on, before they came up, that you mentioned being involved in the training of, um, how possible was it to do that in the time there was before the first raid? How much training would they have, in fact, received?

Oh, well, those men that I took there, I don't where they finished up, couldn't tell you. There was already a gun station there at Fannie Bay, 3.7s, and all I really was there was that I was just in charge of those men. As far as training and that was concerned, it was all a matter of - of the gun station commander himself, he had to do it - or his men had to do it, his sergeants and so on. But I was only there as, you know, officer commanding those - those trainees. But the actual training was done on that troop section and I was only there a matter of three weeks or so, from memory.

What are your recollections of the day of the first raid on Darwin?

Well I haven't very many recollections of it all really because I wasn't in Darwin at that time, I was at Batchelor. Uh, we heard there was something going on and we could see the smoke and stuff and I saw these civilians and I think in some cases, um, military personnel, or air force guys, coming down the road. We knew there was something bad going on up there because they were screaming down the road there on these - anything that they could drive was - they were driving. We saw those, but that's all I saw of the first raids. I had nothing to do with the actual bombing part of it.

What sort of stories were coming through after it?

Pardon?

What sort of stories were coming to you afterwards of what had happened?

Oh, I can't remember. Oh, we'd heard that the air force had streamed off the, um, airfield. I'm not talking about the pilots or flyers or anything like that but the air force personnel had - had fled the field. We heard all sorts of rumours like that and apparently a lot of it was true up to a point because we saw some of them going. But I think that having read that book of Hall's and I don't agree entirely with what he says at all. He forgets that these fellas had no protection whatsoever, didn't even have rifles I don't think, and after these raids there was a possibility that there'd be a landing. Now what's a man going to do? Stay there and be taken prisoner or - or shot or is he going to get out of the road? Furthermore apparently they didn't have the leadership, that was the trouble. And I didn't hold it - all this criticism of those fellas at all to any great degree. But anyway ...

(20.00) What about the question of looting, because ...

Pardon?

What about looting? Um, what was said about what was going on in that way?

Nothing that I know of, except that there were orders out of course, that there would be no looting, of course, we've alway had those. But, um ... oh it went on ... no doubt about that, but still, I don't know that there was anything that serious about it. It might have been silver spoons and things like that, you know.

What about using things to make do, where there were shortages of things and so on? Some people have said, that there was more of that than the actual looting, that people made use of things that were not being used any more, that had been left behind and so on to try and improve their conditions?

Well I don't know anything about that. As I said, I wasn't in - in the town so I don't know what looting went on, although I heard there was looting going on and .... I know we - we (laughs) could've been charged with looting because there was a truck that was left along the road and I said, 'We can use this.' So we grabbed it where there was that tall grass and we hid it in there, but then when we heard all about this looting business and the penalties, we put it back on the road again (laughs). But that's about the only thing that we looked like looting and that was abandoned anyway, or appeared to be abandoned. But, no, I can't give you much information on the looting.

What sort of conditions were you living in at this stage up there?

Oh, as far as the 22nd Battery was concerned, they were very, very spartan, I can tell you that. But we didn't have the comforts of the batteries in town because they had huts and things like that. No, we had to live in - in tents and water was brought in forty-four gallon drums from the river and, um, the food was just food. In fact at one stage there when they drew the Brisbane Line I think they called it, we went for a couple of months really just on a bit of buffalo meat, like a bit of buffalo meat and, um, dried apricots and cheese and - tinned cheese - and ... I think they cut off our rations somehow. Oh we got rations but they were only just, you know, and buffalo meat was no good. It wasn't - it was too fresh and it gave all the men the diarrhoea.

Mmm. Was there much other illness up there in your outfit?

No, no, not - not as far as we were concerned. No, there's no real bout of illnesses.

What about dengue fever and things like that?

Well at Fannie Bay there was a certain amount of that - that was before the raids - but there wasn't the mosquitoes down around, um, Batchelor that there was up there so we didn't get dengue fever. Not that I recall anyway.

For how long were you at Batchelor?

Oh, I can't remember now ... oh - oh I would say about six months but at that time I was a troop commander. That means that I had a couple of guns and forty or fifty men and we would - go to a position here to protect a particular air strip. Be there about three weeks and then we'd move onto another air strip. So I was moving around all the time. Every three or four weeks, which means, every time we had to dig emplacements for the guns and God only knows what. I tell you what, we - they worked hard, the men, they didn't have much chance to get too bored because they had work to do all the time. But they didn't have much ac... any action.

How much interaction was there between your men and say the air force personnel, whom they were protecting and, um, the airfield, on the airfield ....

Interaction, what do you mean by interaction?

You know, socially, how much did they have with one another?

Oh, none at all, none at all because when you're protecting the airfield or the guns, they don't have them on the airfield, you gotta get the planes before they get to the airfield so you - you're a few miles away from them. So you had no contact, and you can't - you couldn't leave your guns, you're just ...

You're stuck on the whole - virtually the ...

Oh the whole time ...

... on your gun site the whole time?

That's quite right. That was one of the problems, you see, there was no recreation or anything like that.

(25.00) How much was that problem made worse by the - the gaps between the raids and so on, where you had to be more or less on standby all the time, but there were long periods eventually between the raids?

Very long wait because we didn't get many raids out there at all. Not at that stage anyway and ... later on we went to Hughes Field, that was much closer up. They had 3.7s there and that's when I became battery captain and had two or three raids there. But as far as Batchelor was concerned, at that time anyway, I can't remember any - any raids. Certainly didn't go into action at that - in ... I might have once. But, um ....

What can you remember of raids at Hughes? You say there was more action there, what ...?

Well I say more action - there wasn't that much. We didn't go into action either there because the air force had superiority and by this time we had early warning so they were up and you can't fire on your own planes. Um, but I can remember a couple of raids there. On one occasion when I happened to be out on the - on the - in the - on the toilet (laughs). I mean, I could hear the bombs dropping and at this stage I was in as battery captain there but I wasn't

on the guns and I thought, God, if the bombs are dropping, well then the guns must firing. I wasn't worried about the bombs because they were falling, but I thought there's a [inaudible] could be coming down, you see and I rushed round looking for my steel helmet and couldn't find it and I said, 'Oh damn this', - I didn't run I was walking, I didn't want to appear to be panicking - got in the slit trench and one of the blokes tapped me on the shoulder and he said, 'What's that for sir?' and I had - I had a bucket ... I couldn't find me helmet so I grabbed the bucket, I thought that'll do, anything that'd stop this metal from coming down. That's the only thing I can remember on the raid there.

Can you remember any night raids in which you were involved?

Yeah, I can remember one night raid. But there again we couldn't fire because there was a fella - we didn't have radar at that stage and oh, we could've put up a barrage I suppose, but one of the planes was up - some pilot, I've forgotten his name now - and well he was up there fiddling around so I thought, knock a few down and he didn't get anywhere of course. There again, you've got to bear in mind, that when you're talking about raids, we weren't experienced in the raids because they were on the airfield and we're away from the airfield.

How effective, when you could use them, were the guns against aircraft?

Well, we didn't - as I said, we very rarely had to use them. Not the 3.7 - the 3-inch rather - the 3-inch, they would've been useless anyway because after the first raids they were all high level raids and these old guns of ours, from memory, I think their maximum ceiling was about 20,000 feet and they usually bombed about 25,000 and so it wouldn't have been very effective at all, not in long ra... high bombing raids.

I'll just turn the tape over.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

What sort of effect do you think having the guns and, um, using them as you did had on morale, if any?

Well I think that the mere fact of - of firing the guns was good for morale rather than sitting there doing nothing.

How much of a problem did boredom and, um, all this sort of waiting and so on have?

Well, there was definitely boredom there's no doubt about that. But I'll say this for the troops, they were very good troops and their morale was good. It was only because they were good troops that - that they could cope with the boredom I think. Mind you, as I said, although they weren't in action they were working hard, they were always - we were always on the move - or my mob were anyway - and always diggings holes (laughs) or doing something.

Mmm, and having to set up camp again.

Yes. That's right.

What about facilities and so on at the camps? They must have been fairly primitive I suppose.

Oh they were, very primitive. Oh ... there weren't any facilities. Only what you made yourself.

Mmm. What sort of arrangements did you make ... as far as, you know, showers, toilets, stuff like that? Well bathing of any sort.

Well as far as my troop was concerned we just had to use buckets and - and when - well we collared an old bath from somewhere and used to use that. There were no showers, not - not at round Batchelor, no.

Mmm.

When we got to Hughes Field ... as far as my position was concerned we took over from an American camp - an old American camp - and there was a shower there, see. Facilities were a bit better there and there were a couple of, what you might call sheds I suppose they were .... They really had - had no sides, but they had a whats-a-name, you know. Like a big pavillion sort of thing.

Did you have anything to do with the Americans while you were up there at any stage?

Yes. Briefly, on a couple of occasions. I had occasions to go to their airfields for something or the other and I'd meet a few fellas there. Yes.

What sort of impression?

Oh I found them quite good and also, um, very generous and ... I had nothing against the Americans.

The civilian population, by and large, moved out, but what about Aboriginal people around the area, were there any still remaining in the sort of round about Darwin area?

Oh I suppose so, but I didn't see too many.

Mmm.

Didn't see many at all. See we were in the bush, we weren't in the - the town.

Well I was thinking even, you know, if they'd moved back out into the bush from nearer into the town.

No, I didn't see.

Nobody about.

Mmm.

How did the men cope with the boredom? What sorts of things did they do to cheer themselves up and keep themselves going?

Oh just as normal facilities as then. I don't know, they played cards I suppose and if you had a bit of time off or something you'd go wandering in the bush and some of them went prospecting and - well hoping to - and things like that, you know. But other than that there was nothing else to do.

(5.00) What about mail coming in and out? How much was there, how regular was it?

Oh that was quite reasonable, quite reasonable.

It was censored the mail that was going out ...

Yes.

Wasn't it?

Yes.

Was that a responsibility of yours?

Yes.

Was that time consuming?

Oh not really. No it wouldn't take long. Actually I think we were a bit over zealous on occasions. We could - cut out a lot of stuff that could have stayed in really, but you know, you're conscientious at that time. Thinking back on it and the way we used to strip some of the letters, we should never have done it, but still.

Did that upset the men?

I - I suppose it would have annoyed them, I don't know. Noone ever mentioned it, but I guess their friends and relatives down here would have written back and said half your letter was gone, so I suppose that would probably said stupid so-and-so's (laughs).

As time went one apparently, more and more information was coming back with civilians and so on as they moved back down of what was actually happening in Darwin, so, um, there was a sort of ...

Giving us information?

Yeah, information getting back down to people at home of what was actually happening while at the same time the censorship was going on of the letters. People have mentioned that it was rather ironic in some ways, the censorship, compared with what information was actually leaking back because there was not very much restriction on civilian movement to and from the area. Is that so?

Well I wouldn't really know because as I said, my fellas had nothing to write about as far as the raid was concerned so therefore there was nothing I could censor in that.

Mmm, they wouldn't have had much ...

So what the fellas in Darwin were writing and what they were being censored I wouldn't know.

There wouldn't be much to write about at all, let alone to be censored in - where you were?

Not really. But in those days of course, there was always the fifth columnists around the corner or something or other, you know, so everybody got very, very conscientious I suppose and we'll strike this out and strike that out. The Japs probably knew more about it than we did anyway.

At what stage did you feel that the threat of invasion was past?

Was past?

Mmm.

Oh ... I - that's hard to say really. I - I think a matter of a few months after the first raids.

How did your responsibilities change, um, over the period you were up there because, you know, with your promotion and so on and with the moves that you made, um, how diff... different say were your duties later on from earlier? That's a very general question but ....

Yes. Well I suppose as I said, I was a troop commander before, on the guns, and then when I went to Hughes Field I became battery captain, well that put you in more or less on the administrative side.

Did you enjoy that change or did you ...

Not really.

Prefer the other ...?

I preferred the other (laughs).

At what stage did you find out that you were leaving Darwin and can you remember the details of that?

No. What do you mean, what stage did I find out?

Well how - how soon before you left Darwin did you know you were actually going to leave?

Oh a matter of days I think. You just sort of [inaudible] you're off, bang.

And what happened after you left Darwin? You came back here ....

Oh I came back - we came back here to Fremantle, yes.

Mmm. How did you travel back compared with going over?

Well the same way.

But - some people came back by ship ....

No we came back the same way - back through Alice Springs and ... but it was better organised by this time of course.

And then did you have leave when you got back to Perth?

Oh yes, we all got leave. Only a week or two or something like that. And from there ....

Can you remember your leave now, can you remember ...?

No.

The change after coming back from being stuck up there for so long, what it was like to be back here? What sort of changes you saw in Perth and so on?

Oh I couldn't see a great deal of changes, um, really. Um, just normal leave that's .... Mind you all damn glad to be home of course. But, um ....

How aware were - did you find the people had been here?

Pardon?

(10.00) How aware did you find the people here had been of what had been going on in Darwin?

Because a lot of the information was blocked out at the beginning?

Well you got to remember this was well over twelve months after that. I don't think it was even discussed as I can remember anyway, to any extent. But, um, I don't - I had a couple of weeks leave home when we got back here but then I was sent over to Garden Island for a period. We were putting in some 3.7-inch guns over there.

And what were you - what happened from there on, what were your movements after that?

Well after a couple of months over there I came back and I was OC of the 29th Battery at, um, Buckland Hill.

How as that constituted and what were their responsibilities? That was coastal protection.

No it was anti-aircraft.

Yeah anti-aircraft, but, um, protecting the Western Australian ...

Protecting the harbour ...

Harbour - um, the Fremantle Harbour ...

Harbour, yes.

and the coast. Was there any feeling that there was still a danger of, um, raiders down as far as Perth by that stage?

Well there's always a - always the danger they can come off aircraft carriers. As a matter of fact, those raids from Darwin were off aircraft carriers. I don't think there was any real - real thought there would be, but there was always the possibility. At one stage we did have a red alert but nothing came of it of course.

And where did you move after Buckland Hill?

Um ... I think I went to a school of artillery in Sydney and after that I was fiddled around from place to place and .... The war was getting close to being over then.

Why did you go to that sc... the artillery school?

I didn't get a definite - I got a definite posting to the 153rd Regiment I think it was, in Merauke but I didn't get there and the war ended before I got there and that was the end of that.

What was the background to your going to that artillery school? Um, why did you go over to that?

I suppose they had nothing else to do with me. It was a senior officers' course actually. I'd been to artillery schools before but it was a senior officers' course but as far - I don't know really why.

Mmm, I was wondering what they were intending to do, you know, with you after that?

Wouldn't have a clue. But I think it might - I wouldn't have a clue what the idea of that was. I wasn't the only one of course. There was a lot of them there and um, probably something to do I suppose (laughs).

How difficult did you find it to go back to civillian life after the war finished?

Oh not hard, I don't think.

Did you go straight back into ...

The bank yeah ...

... the bank? Mmm.

No I had no problems there.

Mmm. Did you join a - any ex-service organisations straight after the war?

I joined the RSL in 1943 when we came back from Darwin. I've forgotten when I did join it. It was during the war anyway I joined the RSL, mmm. But that's the only one.

Have you remained a member of the RSL?

Yes, still - still there, yeah.

Do you think it's by and large, been a good organisation in terms of representing the needs
of ....?

Oh I think so yes.

... interests?

Oh definitely, yeah. Oh yes, I think they do a lot of good work and on top of that I think they also keep a good eye on the defences of Australia.

How do you view your war service now after you ... is it something you look back on with interest and enthusiasm or was it a break in your life that was a nuisance?

Oh, it's hard to say. I - I wouldn't say it was a nuisance. I mean there was a war on and you had to do what was required. The only think I can say, I was disappointed on the fact that, um - I'm not talking about myself, but as far as our men and that were concerned, they were highly trained and they didn't have an opportunity to be used to their fullest extent.

Mmm. Were you sorry not to go overseas?

Yes, yeah. But, um ....

(15.00) What do you think, that was bad organisation in terms of the ....?

I don't know what the reason was. Oh well I think - we weren't the only ones in this position of course, but um - but um, I didn't get a posting overseas until it was too damn late.

And a waste of the - you feel there was a considerable waste of good training and good men in ...?

Yeah, although of course they didn't know that there weren't going to be more raids or - although it should have been pretty obvious at times when the air force .... Once they got control the anti-aircraft really was not necessary. Not necessary, that's the wrong word - was not going to be used to any extent once the air force had superiority, which they did have, oh I would say six months after the first raids.

How much have you kept in touch with other people from the anti-aircraft batteries?

Well as far as my own units were concerned, every year, at least, with the reunions.

Mmm. You been involved in actually organising those?

Yeah, mmm.

Mmm. You felt it was a very worthwhile thing to do, to keep having ...

Oh yes ...

... gatherings of these people?

Well when we first came back [Break in recording.] Well as - when the war was over, we were having a - a reunion. That was a battery reunion which went on two or three years. But it wasn't a regular thing, you know, it might have been this year and then it might be a couple of years later and so on. But I went to Kalgoorlie in the bank in 1951 and I was away for nearly ten years, various places around the country. Came back - when was it - yes, 1959 and the reunions had faded out. Well a friend of mine and also a fellow soldier, Fred Lambert, and I decided to reorganise the reunions which we did. And that took a bit of arranging because we only had a few names to start with and we had to go through phone books and find out from this fella if he knew where so-and-so was and so on, and we finished up - I

think it was 1974 from memory - yeah, round about that, we had the first reunion, forty-four fellas turned up. Since then that has grown up to round about sixty or seventy, but there was about 150 or 200 names on the - on the record. Um, then I ran that reunion right up until 1987 and then by this time they were running social affairs and visits and so on. In fact they made two - two return trips to Darwin I think. But I - it reached the stage now where I was getting a bit old and tired, so I handed it over to de Grussa and he's now the secretary and I very rarely attend the social side of it, only the reunions.

Do you feel the reunions are more important than ...?

Well that is really what I - I'm concerned with. Not - not a group of six or seven ... twenty or thirty fellas going away with their wives and things like that, you know, on these things. That's very nice, that's very good, but it's not what I want. I want to meet all the fellows at a reunion - no ladies (laughs).

You really feel that it should be kept separate?

Oh, only for the reunion, not the other.

Yes.

Oh no, nothing wrong with that.

No, but from the reunion point of view it should be the men only?

Just the - yeah.

What do you see as the value of those reunions and those chances to get together?

Oh well, you have - the value is obvious. When you're maintaining contact with your - with your old mates and that's the only opportunity that you would ever get to see them, wouldn't it. I mean you don't go round seeing them individually but if you can get them all together, it's ....

Were the friendships from those times very strong because of the experiences you went through together ...?

Yes very much so, very much. And particularly I think, living in the conditions that we were and in such confined, um, groups, you know, that it obviously would become very close. Oh yes, they're very close these blokes.

(20.00) Have you kept many records of your war time years, you know, photographs, and other sort of memorabilia from then?

I haven't got - I've only got some photos that I took earlier in the piece but that's about all.

You were saying something about giving, um, a photo or two to the Darwin Museum?

Oh yes, yes, oh well, yes I've given them whatever I had in the way of photos and manning details, you know, gun manning detail and, um - um magazine *Walkabout* or whatever it was - which had all the photos of the - of that overland trip from Terowie to Darwin. You know, Devils Marbles and all those sort of things and Adelaide River, they've got all that up there, mmm.

You've got photos there not only of the men around the camp and so on and various incidents in daily life, but um, some photos of the guns as well that you had there. These were the ones that you said were very antiquated.

Mmm.

What sort of backup did you have to those guns, if any?

Well there again, the equipment was antiquated. We had - for low flying aircraft our protection was a Vickers machine-gun which must have been about a 1918 model but we did get an improvement on that. Just after, I think it might have been after the first raids, the Americans started to arrive up in Darwin and they'd fled from the Philippines and about, I suppose it was six to eight of these Americans turned up at my gun-site and um, apparently they'd been at - in Buffalo in America before they came out, you know, in the middle of winter, snow and ice, sent to the Philippines. No sooner got there and they had to get out, landed down in Darwin and they'd lost contact with their regiment. They were just wandering around, but they had a .50-calibre machine-gun which is just the thing for light aircraft and I said, 'Well this - this'll do me, you can stay with us.' So they stayed with us for several weeks, but when they did arrive they'd arrived in - in these heavy dungarees and whatnot, you know. They were as white as lillies and they stripped off and I warned them, I said, 'Now look, this is not the middle of winter, this is the middle of the wet season, you'll get burnt like tomatoes.' But oh no, they didn't - boy they did, they got burnt all right. But they were very nice fellows and they stayed with us for several weeks as I said, we had this gun, and they used to mess with us but they had their tent several yards away, or - not several yards - quite a ... a hundred yards or so away from us and they used to come down to our - our place to meal. Well one day, the boys killed a snake up there, tied it onto a string, hid in the bushes and waited for the Americans coming down the track. And down they came, you know, talking away and jabbering away there and the boys threw the snake across and started to pull it across the - the path. Well you've seen a cat get up in the air when it gets a fright, these Yanks all of a sudden, they spotted it and boy they went six feet off the ground after ... (laughs). That was just one of the little incidents that, you know, happened, but they were good fellows. Eventually they did find contact with the regiment and we didn't see them again. But they were good men.

You mentioned earlier that you had contact on a few occasions with the Americans, just little incidents and so on?

Yes. Um, well these are contacts, not really anything to do with the army, but little incidences occurred. On one occasion there, one night, about one o'clock in the morning, we heard - Fred and I heard this bang bang bang, so we got up and we went out - we weren't wearing shirts of course - and here was two Americans in - in a jeep and they were pretty full. Apparently prior to getting there, one of their Boeings had come in badly shot up and it crashed, killing a couple of you know, the crew. And from what I understand, they wanted to land on an Australian airfield but for some reason or other they couldn't, I don't know what it was, and this had made them pretty sore.

(25.00) So the first thing this American said to me was something about the bloody Australians, you know, our blokes would have been alive now if they had've been allowed to land and so it went on and finally I told him to get moving. Whereupon one of the Yanks pulled his revolver - I said, 'Get moving or I'll call the guard.' He said, 'Bring out your bloody Australian guard,' he said, 'I'll shoot the bastard,' and he said, 'in fact I think I'll shoot you.' (Laughs). And he drew his revolver - I don't think he would have shot me but he drew his revolver anyway and Fred knocked his hand down and at this stage of the game the other fellow, who was a big Swede, had more sense and wasn't quite as full, he said, 'Don't worry about it,' he said, 'I'll handle him.' And fortunately he took charge of him and away they went. But that was one of the little incidents where I nearly got shot by an American (laughs).

There was another occasion too when - this girl turned up - turned up at the site. I think she was a half-caste - father was an Abo and the mother I think was white - but she was in a bit of distress. She said this American he come up there pretty full and was bothering them, you know and could we do anything about it. So I took Sergeant Johnson with me and we went up through all this jungly sort of stuff up to where the - where they lived which was some considerable distance away and there was this American again and there he was there brandishing a revolver around the place and threatening them and .... So we got rid of him anyway. But, um, when I went to the American air base later on and complained about him, no-one seemed to be very interested in taking any action so that was the end of that. Couldn't have identified him anyway. But that was a couple of occasions when I had with the Yanks, but they .... That's not the general attitude. The general attitude I had with the Yanks was very very good, they were just individuals.

You mentioned the Americans being pretty drunk on that - well on both those occasions - was there any opportunity where your men could get drunk?

Oh yes. They used to make their own. Oh, my word. One - they used to get the peelings off the potatoes. Now what did they have in that. They'd boil these up or something, they had tan boot polish, um, what's that's mosquito oil ...?

What like the Kokoda Trail stuff?

No. Citronella is it?

Oh citronella, yes.

Citronella, they made up with this concoction, yeah, gawd. But I tell you what, it only happened once or twice, they didn't do it any more. We got onto that, but yeah, they made their own alcoholic brew (laughs).

But rations, you know, legitimate rations were very short as far as beer?

Beer concerned. There weren't any beer rations at all. I think only - the only occasion I can remember is getting one - one lot of beer - one cask of beer which gave us all about one or two glasses of beer and of course we all had these and we had to kid ourselves that we were full (laughs), which we did, but we weren't by any means of course. But it was just the mere fact of having a couple of beers poured, you know, this is an occasion.

You didn't get any entertainers coming through or anything like that?

No, occasional picture show, very rarely, went twice if that.

Too far away from everything?

Yes, and on top of that we can't leave the guns either, you know, for any length of time. But they did - some of the boys did go and - but only as I said, the whole time I was there I can only remember two picture shows. But we weren't up in Darwin, we were out in the - circling around the airfields.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW.