

Australian War Memorial

TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Side 1, Tape 1 of the interview with Mr Eric Perry. I'm Daniel Connell and this is 4th September 1989. End of identification.

Right. Mr Perry, let's just talk about the situation at the beginning of the war. How would you describe your personal situation in 1939? What were you doing?

I was farming. I was at Tekawoi about four miles from here. And ....

What sort of farming?

Sugar. And I .... It was no surprise to me. We all knew it was coming. I mean, the way things were going about.

But just to get a bit more of an idea of your personal situation. How old were you? Were you married?

Oh, yes, married, with two children. I was thirty-nine, I think, exactly, when the war started because I went in and enlisted but they wouldn't accept me because I was in a reserved occupation, so .... But I was tied up in it for quite a long time, just the same. To the best of my knowledge .... I was a warden out there of that area. I was taken to get first aid degrees or one thing and another.

What, this was before the war or during ...?

No, during the war. I was made warden, you see, in that area. I don't know why, whether it was ... the characteristics of those times.

And, well, just looking at the situation before the war - what sort of background did you have? You just said that you were a sugar farmer. What other sort of training or skills or background? For example were you a mechanic - were you good at that sort of thing or ...?

Oh, I was in sugar all my life. My father was a pioneer and as a young man I travelled a lot. I worked .... I sewered Colac in Victoria. I worked in the sewer at Colac also Box Hill and Malvern. Then .... My wife's a Sydney girl so naturally I was in Sydney quite a bit. But .... I was storekeeping in Sydney which I didn't like so I didn't stop there very long. Then we had a residential in Sydney which I didn't like very much either so we didn't stop there very long, so I came back to .... I knew - the only thing I knew properly was sugar cane. And at that time Australian Estates was selling up all their property which was only a few mile out, here. So I bought a block of that I was there then till '63. My son wanted to get married so I was ready to give him half. You can take farm over half of all you can make. So that's the way it went on for a long time. The farm was mine but he was getting half the property but .... My solicitor, accountant, bank manager, et cetera said 'For God's sake, you had better do something because ... for the son. If he dies or you die just when the cane needs to be harvested, he'll be paying probate for the rest of his life.' See at that time probate was very,

very high. So I saw I had better do something about it. But I still maintained most of the interest in there. Bit by bit, bit by bit I dropped till I said, 'You can have the lot'.

> What was the name of ...? Could you spell that estate you mentioned that was broken up, that your farm was part of?

Australian - A U S T R A L I A N - Australian.

> Oh, sorry. No I didn't hear properly. Yes, Australian, yes, I assume the transcriber and myself can spell 'Australian'.

I'm not sure if they call it Australian Sugar Estates or just Australian Estates. But it was one of the two, anyway.

> Right. In those .... That first year or so, what impact, if any, did the war make on Mackay, you know, during 1940? How did it affect Mackay?

Terribly, in my book. I mean, we had .... You couldn't buy a .... You couldn't go and buy a bottle of beer. You couldn't buy lollies for your kids. You couldn't do anything at all. The 'Yanks' just purely and simply took what they could get out of it, that's all about it. Nobody else had anything at all.

> But that's a bit later. I was just wondering, at the very beginning of the war, was there much change. When war first started in 1939, did things change much then?

(5.00) Yes, they .... Somebody's idea - God knows who it was - what they call the three Cs - Civil Construction Company - I think, the three Cs stood for. They took all your men. They didn't knock on your door or anything [inaudible] ... these jobs, were the ones they'd do. They started calling them up and putting them in the army and all sorts of rackets. I mean exactly when - what particular time it started I don't .... But later in the year ...

> [inaudible]

Labour was no good for you, once the war started. I mean, labour was something unprocurable almost.

> Where did you first hear about the VDC?

I think almost at the start of the war. My dad was in it. I think he said, 'You'd better come and join', which I did. I don't think the war was on very long then at all. Because it was long before the Coral Sea Battle and that was very early in the war.

> What sort of men were involved at the very beginning? What sort of men organised the VDC in Mackay?

Oh, oh, first world war veterans. But they were men without any ability, in my opinion. I can recall quite well, the old - our CC said, he said, 'You done that [inaudible] almost as if you are being shot'. I said, 'Of course, by crikey, shoot the lot myself and I wouldn't need anybody else comin' like that'. [inaudible] ... bounced straight onto the post. I mean, because when

you're born in the bush like I am you shoot wallabies you learn a bit about how you go around things. You don't just walk into it. What he was asking me to do was make sure everybody was killed - there wouldn't have been a soul left. That's all about it. But he didn't have any ability himself, I mean ....

These are the old veterans. I mean, what sort of names were they called then?

Same as in the army, as far as I know, captains, lieutenants and things like that.

No, I was just thinking of slogans like *The Old and the Bold* and *Dad's Army*. I was just wondering there were some phrases like that.

VDC was all they were ever called - VDC, Volunteer Defence Corps.

So, at that .... In the very beginning, you know, back before the Japanese came into the war, what was the whole purpose of the VDC? What were they going to do?

Don't ask me. I never ever found that out. It was a mystery to me. Only you felt you should, that's all.

What did they tell you that they were going to do? What did they say they were going to do?

Oh, they said they were going to .... They, somehow .... For some strange reason Mackay was always where they were going to land - I don't know why. But even books written - I got a book here somewhere written quite certain that Mackay was where they would come. Why, I would not know but they .... Good harbour and everything here for it. But who the hell is going to oppose them. They gave me a rifle that wouldn't shoot.

So, okay, your father asked you to join up very early on in the war.

Yeah.

And .... What sort of things - when you first joined up - what sort of things did you do when you joined up?

Marched. We learnt to march, step in time, that's about all. I don't think, honestly, in my opinion, it was worth two bob. I mean. But talking about going in and fighting for Australia - most of us were too old. My dad be damn near eighty then and he was only one of them - there were a couple of young fellows - reasonably young men in reserved occupations that's all. The rest were too old, don't you think. Some veterans of the first world war, so ....

So, how often would you meet?

Wednesdays and Sat... weekends.

Wednesdays and the weekends.

Yes.

And what - just for half a day on the weekend?

Well it would all depend when you got back from .... You see they might take you out to the army to do something and something else, so by the time you got back, you see. Sometimes be two o'clock when you got home. Sometimes it'd be more, sometimes be earlier. But I don't think we learnt anything.

Okay, you didn't learn anything but what did you actually do?

Oh, march, and then .... Some of these, supposed to be learning how to get around the enemy and such forth. But they weren't advising us at all, they were advising us to go straight into them. I mean, I reckon they'd have everybody killed in half an hour for all they taught us.

Did the .... I mean, you mentioned your father, he was a sugar farmer. But the other men who were involved in the ....

They were nearly all sugar men.

Nearly all sugar men?

Yeah.

Right. What - they were foremen or farmers?

Farmers, farm owners, yeah.

And your father encouraged you to join, but what about other people? Why did they join up?

Oh, they just thought they should, that's all. I had one man working for me - they let him stop with me - and he joined too, but he was a comparatively young man. But he's dead, too, now. But I think he was the only young man in it. I think all the rest were, you know, up in years. The organisation, you know .... I believe in organisation, properly. The chap they put in charge of our section. He joined that day and he didn't have a clue but they made him leader. I mean, that's how much organisation there was in it. I can remember quite well, I had to tell him what to do. I was next to him - explained everything to him.

Why did they select him as leader?

Nobody knows. We couldn't find out.

(10.00) Who selected him?

Probably, the - I can't think of the fellow who was in charge of us, now. I was trying to think of him this morning - his name - but I can't think. But he'd never done anything good for himself in life but he went to the first world war - probably never seen a 'Jap'. [laughs]

In retrospect, you obviously don't think it was very worthwhile. How did you feel at the time? What did you say at the time?

Well, I try .... I always - all my life - put everything I got into everything I do. I was disgusted with it. I mean .... And I had that much work to do. I mean, I never stopped Saturday and Sunday, only meal times. I had to work at that time and I wasn't the only one - every farmer had to work every daylight hour there were. But the organisation, in my opinion, was pitiful and .... I remember Ben Hogan, he was a first world war man, he was one - I think he was in charge of the camp at that time, I'm not sure. He said, 'My God'. I can remember him saying that. 'You're badly trained here', he said, 'I went through and nobody challenged me'. That was pretty good and candid, wasn't it?

> Would people around town - say some young bloke didn't .... He was in a reserved occupation - had a bit of time on his hands and he didn't join up. Would he face pressure, would he be pressured by people around town to join up?

Not to my knowledge. He could have been, but not to my knowledge. Because, you see, it wasn't that long before they started calling them up, well then anybody, of course, was ... [inaudible] just had to go. All young probably, but that's all about it.

> There were quite a lot of Italians in north Queensland. Were there Italians around Mackay?

Oh, yes.

> What happened with them?

They were in it as far as I know. They .... We ...

> Just wait for that train. The Italians that were here, in 1940, when Italy came into the war, was there much talk about their being a danger - a security problem for the Italians?

Not to my knowledge, no.

> Right.

Some of them. I'd rather .... I had a German - one of my best friends was an Italian. One of my best friends .... I mean they were all English to the backbone even though the German fellow, he lived through the first world war in Germany as a boy. But he - he was definitely in sympathy with England, not Germany.

> I'm not suggesting that they weren't loyal to Australia, but I was just wondering what people thought of them. Did everyone think the same thing - all the public?

I don't think many, not all, there was one outstanding one. I recall a German chap at that particular time I - we played bowls together and I made him a friend because, I mean, some of the .... Being a German [inaudible] It wasn't long - he was liked as well as anybody else but ...

Right ...

... and the Italians were all the same. Nobody .... Because Italians down here were very definitely English. There's no doubt about that. They were as sour as hell that England - that Italy ever went to the war. They said, 'They don't know [inaudible]. They won't want to fight. And they didn't, either, I don't think. Because nobody can tell me that a lot of the fights on the western desert were the Italians fault. They didn't make any attempt at all. And when they went into Italy, they had trouble getting into it so .... Their sympathy was definitely with England and the family evidently must have been - except most of the young ones, of course. They were different ....

So. The Italians wouldn't have been called up in many cases, though some of them were interned, I think.

A few, yes, but .... Oh, yeah, one man interned in Mackay - he was a German, but I think it was something done for the spite - I don't think there was any other reason for it. I feel quite certain that nobody knew the reason. I knew him quite well. I didn't know him then but I got to know him quite well.

There wasn't any talk of the VDC being used to protect Mackay against, you know, aliens.

Oh, yes. On two or three occasions certainly we looked like we'd be in action within a fortnight. Two or three occasions ... but it was the Coral Sea Battle, of course. There wasn't much interest in it then. They reckoned that we were safe then, I mean, because they had no navy there.

You mentioned marching as something that you did a lot of. But you must have done some other things as well as marching.

Well there was no equipment to do much with - see the rifles were useless and there was no such thing as transport you had to use somebody else's trucks or something - made it pretty useless but .... I still think the important thing was your knowledge of the district, that's what they wanted, you see. All those fellows knew - like I'd know anywhere out of Mackay that they wanted to go to or I could tell them the shortest way to get to there and how, things like that. That's the type of thing they wanted mostly from the VDC. But ....

(15.00) What did you do - on those Wednesdays and on weekends - what did you do as well as march? I mean, apart from that, what else did you do?

Well, they'd take us down to defend the aerodrome, I'd say was one thing, and I recall this particular time I was observer. I mean, my God, I can't think who it was. It could have been ... [inaudible] ... captain, I think, but I can't even be certain of that. And he said to me, 'You seemed to know exactly where they all were'. I said. 'Well remember I was born in the bush'. I said, 'I watch for the horses, I watch where the birds are'. I said, 'I see a bird flying over there, well, somebody's there. I see a horse looking that way, I know quite well he's over there'. I said, 'No need [inaudible] ....' Because when they come in - the mob clip [?] I told them exactly when they were all coming and they were just standing there waiting for them, so ..... [inaudible]. It was not my training with them, it was my bush knowledge.

Right. And who were you with, another section of the VDC?

Yeah, but you see they were all small sections. There weren't many - but let me see .... I don't know how many sections would be in Mackay, but I mean .... Well, as I said, there was another section out where I lived. That was known as the ...

Racecourse.

... could have been the racecourse section, yeah.

What was your section called?

I don't know. It could be in here - buggered if I can find it in here somewhere. [ruffling of papers]. [inaudible] ... the date was 15.4.42 until 21.10.45. The day we were discharged from the Corps. The date 22.6.46 - excellent record - senior [inaudible]. I can't see it there, anywhere. But, we were put in the army in the 52nd Battalion, 42nd Battalion [inaudible] ....

Right, right. The .... So you do a lot of marching and you didn't have many weapons in the early stages.

None at all. They were useless. We had them but they were useless.

Well, what sort of weapons did you have?

Oh some of the .... I think they originally got them from the .... You see, there was compulsory training some years ago. I think they were [inaudible] from them. God knows how old they were - but they couldn't shoot straight because we were all pretty good shots. Using them, you couldn't hit the bloody target, let alone the bull-eye - they were useless.

People didn't tend to bring their own guns?

No, we never got [inaudible] any part of the war, I don't think ...

No, no.

... not to my knowledge - practically certain they weren't. If they did, I didn't [inaudible]

No, No. So, and what about uniforms? Did you have uniforms?

Yes, yes. They were all right uniforms - boots ....

Did you ride horses much, or always march?

Always march, or in trucks. Sometimes .... To me, I could not see any worth - any use for them whatever. They took us all out to Eton once. We had to march back. Now what the hell are you going to learn about the war in that. But sort of things like that - I mean - sheer waste of time. We happened to have a fellow by the name of McDougall - he was in there, I think. He went to CSIRO, he become a doctor of ... on rats .... He made a life study of rats and he got a doctorate out of it, anyway. I mean, they took him at the CSIRO. I don't know what happened to him - probably dead though - he'd be dead, I mean he'd be eighty years old

now if he was alive. But .... All the others I can think of are dead, I don't think of any alive ones. All I can think of - they're all dead now. Because that's forty years ago and, you know, most of the men were forty then.

And in 1942, I see that you joined in April, 1942. What was the factor that made you join at that time?

Oh, my Dad said .... At that time you looked upon - that you should do it, you see. So, I thought .... Well, there was a lot of other things too. I was tied up in the Co-operative Society here for about eleven years. I had done thirteen years cane - member of the cane suppliers committee. Trips to Brisbane and back for representing the sugar and a lot of other things like that, so you got to know that many people - well, its sort of expected of you, anyway.

And .... You weren't very impressed with what was happening, did you used to say at the time that it wasn't a very good show? Did you criticise it at the time?

Oh, I criticised it every time. I remember, I remember a chap said to me, 'Did you learn anything today, Perry?' I said, 'No, I bloody well lost a bit'. Because I thought it was a stupid way they were doing things down there. That's the trick that I was telling you about - watching - supposed to be guarding the aerodrome down there. Anybody there born in the bush with any sense at all knew exactly where everybody is because, you see, horses always gaze around at anything moving - birds always fly when you come close to them - especially crows. Crows are good too, they follow them on - know exactly where they are.

(20.00) What about ...? You mentioned you were very busy but somehow or other you did find time to attend the VDC meetings.

Oh, yes. It was [inaudible]. Sunday mornings, of course I'm there, and Wednesday nights. It was night time so you weren't really wasting any time, but you .... They would probably give you a lecture of something, or how to dismantle a rifle. But we haven't got any rifles to dismantle, anyhow. So you were learning nothing. They had a gun or two to show you. But you didn't use it and you're supposed to know exactly what he was telling you. I mean it was rather a waste - a sheer waste of time. Luckily, I was, at that time, I had a very retentive memory. [inaudible] 'You smokin' a pipe,' he said, 'What are they called?' and I told him and he looked very surprised. But I had a pretty good memory for anything like that in days gone by - explain anything to me I could remember it very quick. But I don't know what we were supposed to learn by it. You had one yourself it would be something. But you haven't got one.

Right. And did that change after a while? Did you eventually get decent rifles?

No. But, I never had one, anyhow. They improved a bit, I think, but certainly weren't army issues - that's for certain.

Just in that time, April, sort of, May '42 you mentioned there was another - there was a special call-up about then.

Yes. I remember it quite well. Every .... We all - everyone was called up - everyone that passed in was immediately called in to the 42nd Division - that was the division we were in. I don't know the number, had a copy of it somewhere, but I don't know what it is. At that time they distinctly said that we expect you to be in action within a fortnight, that's .... And I remember saying, 'What the hell are we going to fight with?' I had no rifle worth two bob.

Apart from those, once, twice a week, type meetings, did you go away for camps?

No, we never .... I don't ever recall them asking anybody that. I don't think so.

Did you learn anything about demolition, sabotage, anything like that?

Oh, a little bit about you know - you could make explosives go off, watch a rifle fire, but we all knew that anyhow. When you're born in the bush and that sort of thing - how to start a fire and all that sort of thing. But we all knew that sort of thing - you'd been doing it all your life. But the people were supposed to be teaching us did not have the knowledge to - that's all it was about. You know. Some old time warrior that fought through the first world war then they may have been able to tell you something. But you've got to remember in my opinion the good soldiers never come back. They were all killed there crawling over the ranges ...

Owen Stanley.

Owen Stanley Range. I had a cousin there. Because he was a sergeant in the charge force. Sergeants they never come back. He was the type, you see, he wouldn't let any bugger boss him. All the good soldiers, don't know what happened to them or nearly all of them. You get an odd one but it must be only an odd one.

How did the blokes in the VDC - how did they feel about these soldiers who came back and were supposed to be their instructors? Did they treat them with derision?

I don't think so. But you had so little contact. You see, you go there, supposed to - I think it was nine o'clock on a Sunday morning, I can't be certain. Immediately you were there you were sent somewhere, you see, your division, I mean, or section it would be. I mean. There's not many men there - but I thought there were about nine to a section or something like that. Well that's the last you probably see of your boss - he doesn't come at all. He might stop back at headquarters but nobody knew what ....

What sort of emergency procedures existed? Say there was a surprise Japanese landing. What sort of emergency procedures was there, because obviously you couldn't let everybody know by letter? So how would you - what would you do if the Japanese had landed?

I don't know how they were going to expect you to get that around. But they were that close it wouldn't take long to let your section know. But they would say, 'What the hell are we going to do when we got there?' That's the part that always used to worry me.

Did people talk about that at the time?

Oh, a lot about it. Oh, a lot left, they wouldn't go for the same reasons .... What's the good of going there ... just dropped out of it.

Did you ever feel inclined to leave? I mean, given all the other pressures on your life.

Oh, well, I missed a few, sometimes I couldn't get there. That's about all it. I had too much work to do myself and I just couldn't go that's all there was about it. But, no, I don't think so. I was quite happy to go to the war.

(25.00) I know a lot more now than I did then. I mean, to me, I looked upon that whole war as just sheer waste of effort, on everybody's side, because they achieved nothing. I'm not a war man at all, now. I mean, I did have a little bit of respect for it once, but .... Being over there, being amongst them - the people - what they want to kill them for, they're quite a good people. I can't see any reason why you should kill 'em.

This is Japanese?

Oh, I like them. I rather like the Japanese [inaudible] ... in my experience. Germans I found a bit different - French, I didn't like, that's all about that. I don't why they worry about the bloody French as far as I'm concerned you can shoot them all. They go on strike there, even for a meal. Cooks go on strike or something, anyhow, you had to go and get your own, that's all, I mean. Well, I didn't like the French at all - they are no friend of mine.

Just wait for the train.

Did people round about - were they sceptical about the VDC? Did people say why do you bother to be part of the VDC, people who were outside the VDC?

No, not to my knowledge. Just all accepted that it was a part and parcel of life. But as the war went on, of course, the VDC dwindled and dwindled there wasn't much left by the time the war finished - they weren't turning up because I think they had no doubt we were going to win the war in the end. So most of them had more or less dropped out, and would only go once in a while then.

Were they under pressure? Were they under much pressure to attend, attend regularly?

No, it didn't seem to worry them, No, didn't seem to worry them - just not go at all - there was no more about it. They could - they weren't paying you anything - you weren't getting anything out of it. Even if you wanted a meal, you had to take it with you. There was no such thing as supplying it, you see.

Did you have much contact with people in other armed forces, you know, the army and things like that? Did you meet them very much?

Oh, occasionally. Yes. They treated us as equals - that part of it was all right. They felt sorry for you because you had nothing to do and were [inaudible] ....

What about the Americans? Did you have much contact with the Americans?

No. None at all hardly. Well, they weren't very popular in Mackay.

Why is that?

They just didn't like them. I mean, they took charge of the town. I recall quite well an evening in [inaudible] I happened to be in town - up the wrong side of the street. The police were trying to do - there was no way in the world they would take any notice of the police. That's why we [inaudible] .... And went down there and took all the grog out of all of the shops in Mackay. They just commanded it - didn't sell it - they commanded it. Hotels - everything. Yankees used to come out to my place a bit, too, I didn't like them. Because .... I don't like them any more now and I've been with the buggers plenty. I like their women - the women are nice - good people but they always seemed to be so much ahead of you, that was the impression they give you. I remember a south American - he was a vet. He was an American, must have had a big business, I think he had sixty staff on he said, 'Now', he said, 'The American government is paying me a damn sight more than I can make - just to advise them'. But he was a nice guy. The great majority of them are, I think. They don't even mix as much - more or less seem to be individuals. I've been in America about three times, I think. I just don't like it. Never much because you only land there, you see. Your plane lands in America - sometimes a couple of days, I just don't like it, anyhow.

But how did they fit in around Mackay? Where did they have their bases, around Mackay?

There used to be a hotel, used to - was originally known as *The Woodgers* [?} Hotel, but its been burnt down since they were there. That was their base but they just took over - they wandered everywhere. I mean ... [inaudible]. If your watch wouldn't go, don't go going to the jewellers with it because the Yanks had them tied up. No good you taking it to them.

There was quite a lot of antagonism towards them.

They didn't like them. I don't think they showed very much of it but they didn't like them, that was all about it. There was an odd one, nice fella. Couple come down to my place, you know, just to know what farming was like but the great majority, er, they had no respect for women, no respect for kids. I mean taking kids when they were twelve out and having sex with them all bloody night. No good the parents saying anything, nobody was going to take any notice of them. I remember one ambulance man telling me about it. He said, 'I was tied up ...', you know, he said,'... once they come back ...', he said, '... kids twelve, six bloody Yanks had them all night'. Trouble was, no use complaining, they weren't going to live here.

That was a strong feeling amongst the townfolk that the police wouldn't act, say, if a rape like that ...

I don't think they had any power. See the Yanks were too strong for them, I don't think they had any power. I don't know ... this ambulance man, he said, 'I felt so sorry for the father. I mean .... it was all bloody night', he said, '... and they come back and ....

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

Identification: Side 2, Tape 1. Mr Eric Perry.
End of identification.

Sorry. And the father, he was .... What did he say when ...

I don't want to repeat what the ambulance man told me. By that time I was doing a course in ambulance, see, so he was telling me about it, you know - how pathetic it is. Poor bugger having an affair on his door. See you couldn't get a chocolate. If a girl wanted chocolate tell her to get it from a Yank. They had it all. I know my two kids would have liked a few but, I mean, they never got any.

How many Americans were there around Mackay?

I don't know. They used to come down every fortnight and spend down here, but how many all told - Gawd, I wouldn't know. But I'm pretty sure it was about 800 here a fortnight - R and R and they take ... [inaudible] ... and one thing and another .... But its great thing when they give you hay rides. They had an old cart with a lot of grass in it up there and, of course, always had plenty of bloody girls, I mean, they had plenty of money so where you get money you always get girls. They were never short of them.

And these 800 troops where would they come - they'd come to Mackay?

New Guinea.

Oh, they'd come down from New Guinea. And what, they'd come just to the town?

Yes, come by plane. They had special planes. One went down over here. I seen it go down. I was feeding my horses out here and I was pretty sure the plane was going to come down but I didn't - couldn't see it or hear it but I seen in the paper next day that it come down all right. But that Sunday before that, that was Monday morning that happened, the Sunday -they were flying around my place, these planes - they weren't fit to go up. But they sent it up just the same, poor buggers. One man survived, he was drunk, drunk and asleep on the floor and he survived. All the rest died - got killed. But ....

So the VDC didn't combine at all with the Americans. Didn't get involved in ...

Not to my knowledge. No.

... any sort of guard duty or anything like that.

We were never involved in it, anyway. My section, anyway.

I mean, the fact that Queensland had become a major base with all these troops coming in, did that change what the VDC was going to be for. What it was all about?

I don't think so. I just sometimes wonder - think it was like *Dad's Army* in England. Just something originated and kept going. They certainly would have been handy for knowledge of the district, I mean, no worry about that part of it. They could tell them any part of the district they wanted to - how to get there and quickest. And all that sort of thing. Apart from that I doubt they would have been very much use. Because, see, what's the use of giving me a submachine gun. I wouldn't know how to use it.

You didn't have any training, at all, for that?

We had miles of walking around and that sort of training. But my rifle wasn't any good and I don't think any of the others were any good either. And ...

You didn't try and change it?

No, nothing to change with because we had to shoot on the range and my rifle wouldn't even go off, let alone shoot. Oh, you'd get your mate's - both of us use one rifle, but wouldn't have been very handy in the war, though, would it?

The .... After 1943, when you mentioned how members - quite a lot of members - stopped coming along ...

Yes, that's quite so, they did too. They'd come periodically, of course. I wasn't very regular myself, towards the end, because what the hell was the good of going. Because at that time, in my opinion, there was no doubt we were going to win the war - why take the little bit of time you got, because .... It was scandalous what they were doing to labour. There was miles - there was plenty of labour but they wanted to see their time up in the three Cs and one thing and another. Labour - imagine working in the three Cs here and just getting paid. It was terrible, I mean, all going to - administration of the war .... The war administration, in my opinion, must have been .... Ever since history began it was a disgrace, I mean, the way they run it.

(5.00) The Civil Construction Corps, did you see much of their work?

Never seen any of it. Used to take them out of the way mainly and mostly work in the west. I think as far as I know. But they didn't work - wasn't any blooming work at all. They were just there for - just in case they warned us, sort of thing. And they couldn't work anyhow, they were too damned old, a lot of them - to get a job out of them.

The .... What happened - those blokes who dropped out of the VDC - what would happen to them, anything at all? Would they get a letter or what would happen?

No. I think just a .... I never heard any complaints. I used to miss quite a few because, as I say, I knew it was useless there and I had work to do. I had to take three teams of horses down the paddock and work them all myself. I had a marvellous dog then. She drives team horses as well as me men. [inaudible]. You couldn't go cutting two or three thousand tons of cane on your own. I mean, you're not doing it on the easy. See they wouldn't give you tractors. If you did, they'd take it off you.

The end of the war. When the end of the war came, what did they do with the VDC?

I just give you the [inaudible].

That's the Certificate of Discharge?

Mm.

What about all your equipment, and things like that?

Oh they had them back, not that you had much. I mean, you never bought your rifle home with you. All you had were the clothes you had on. Some took of them back, some didn't. They didn't care whether you did or not, anyway. 'Course my dad never took his back. He said, 'Oh, bugger them'. He said, 'Not worth taking back anyway'. He had no intentions of worrying about it. I think a lot done that.

Did you have any vehicles of your own towards the end.

No, no. Only Michelmores was the big firm in Mackay in those days - Fields was another pretty big firm. They'd get their trucks [inaudible]. Mostly the driver wasn't even in the VDC, anyway.

No, I don't think it was anything to be proud of, at all. That's my feeling of it, anyway. My life's been a lot of things, been right through the bowling club, there. I'm the patron, now. The Co-operative and one thing another I was very, very experienced because I always take things seriously. I reckon, probably, when I went and credited the bowling club, down there, it wasn't .... Weren't getting too many - much fees took, but I stopped that pretty quick. I reckon you can't [inaudible]. You've got to be determined about it. And have enough guts to tell them so, too.

How do you think it should have been organised? What do you think should have been done?

Well, I think they should have got .... If they were ... possible to get, men that had some knowledge of how to run men. For example, I used the bowling club a while ago, here. We had a hell of a job down there with the president - they had no experience in handling men. They were all just employees themselves and they go in there and they just don't know how to handle men. With the result that they're not that much good. But I've handled men all me life, it was no problem to me. I think I could have run the VDC twenty times better than they did.

And you used to tell them this?

I used to tell them so, too, yeah. They can't - they wanted learning. I can recall one instant, he had them jumping off a log. And he said to me, he said, 'Go on you haven't jumped off,' and I had no bloomin' intention of jumping off either. I said, ' You could hurt your back very badly there'. I said, 'That's a ten or twelve foot drop, that'. He didn't jump off it, of course.

So. At the end of the war, when you got your Certificate of Discharge, any more mention of the VDC? What eventually happened?

Well, my eyes were very bad because I'd been burning oil ever since I was a child. I said - that's one thing I said then. I was called up twice during the war. And I said - the last one, 'I'm interested', but that some silly bugger's idea to do that or was it done by the army? He couldn't answer it. I still resent the ... even today. I mean, the army's got every right to but some of the colonels are supposed to .... They take these jobs on themselves. I resent that very much. I mean. Now, officially I should be, although I had my badge, returned soldier's badge, the same as everybody else. But I'm not officially a soldier although I was at their beck and call for the whole war. Always noticed this - you're not officially a soldier.

(10.00) I was just going to ask, how come you got an RSL badge?

I don't know - was given one. I think it's just ...

What were you saying there? What are the things - if you got called up, you were given how many hours notice?

Twenty-four. Twenty-four hours they told me.

And did you feel vulnerable - did you feel exposed because you weren't a member of the army? Did you think it was silly to be in a uniform and dangerous to be in a uniform without being a member of the army?

No, no. Never thought of it. If they called me up, I would have been quite happy to go. I would have done it without a word. But, I mean, when you think back over it. I got away with being called up and we never got shot and [inaudible]. As far as I can see they had no regular men in the army. I don't know, must be somewhere though, surely to God. But, Bernie Badger .... I said to Bernie, 'Try and find out if there's any record,' I said, 'Because I'd just like to know, now. Not .... The few years I did doesn't matter to me but it's something that I've thought about' - I don't know. He said, 'I don't think they kept any records of the VDC'. Well, that's his opinion, anyway. But I know Harvey Alby [inaudible]. If I see Alby I'd ask him because he'd go into it pretty thoroughly, I know. I've known him all his life, too.

Were there any invasion scares, where people thought that maybe the Japanese were about to land within a day or a few hours or anything like that?

Oh, yes. There wasn't a shadow of a doubt they thought that all right. But you see the ...

When was that?

Just before the Coral Sea Battle. That was the time they were really worried in Mackay. Somebody wrote a book about that - really good too, I mean. All the .... He was quite certain that they were going to land in Mackay all right, the fellow that wrote it. Its like this book here. I mean, he's trying to .... He may be right and telling the truth, he may well be - but this fella .... Because he undoubtedly knew the district from top to bottom. But he reckoned the first thing you had to do was blow the bridge and then that would mean Mackay would be useless, which it would be too.

Did you ever get involved in talks about blowing the bridges, or ...

No, no.

Or other sorts of ...

No, nothing apart from this book, that's all. I didn't believe it, so .... I don't think the Japs would do it that way at all. I don't think Japs would come to Mackay, either. [inaudible] You'd have to know it, but I know the coast right from here up to Scrape[?], the island. There was plenty of great places for them to land without them coming all the way down to Mackay - with no resistance at all, because there was nobody there to stop them. I'm certain if I'd have been a Japanese leader I wouldn't have done it, anyway.

On those occasions, when there was a scare, what sort of preparations were made? What would happen?

I don't know. They'd just call you up. There wasn't any .... No trouble calling you up but what are they going to supply you with. [inaudible] ... to me.

You and your wife were talking about a particular incident that occurred - just before we started interviewing. Where you came home and told her to get ready to go. Can you describe that for me? Tell that story for me?

Well, I don't know .... We were just told, the VDC, we - many a time, as I said, we expected to be in combat within a fortnight - many a time they said that. I don't know where they got their information from - may have been all right. And they said, 'Tell your wife to have everything ready because we are going to be shipped somewhere within a matter of hours'. You see - which she did. I suppose they all did likewise.

Where were they going to ship them?

I wouldn't have a clue.

In the event of an invasion, what was - did you have a particular duty to carry out?

As far as I know, it was 'Take your rifle and go and find them', that's all that I know. That's what we were told, anyhow. But - it was the ammunition the Japanese had, I mean - just going down here and killing you, that's all it is. No way you could get away from it or anything like that - or else by foot. And anything you could call a tractor, they took it. Whether they used it or not, that doesn't ... they just took it. Things like that you may be able to do something for yourself, make some sort of a barricade or something, but they just took some things - you didn't have them. I don't know whether, I don't know whether - I don't even know whether Queensland wanted the VDC or it was just the law, that's all - certainly was the law, but I don't know how much further south it went.

Oh, it went .... It was all over the country.

Was it?

Yes, South Australia, Tasmania. They all had VDC units, I think.

Yeah, well, I didn't know that. Contact though .... Probably our leader might have been too easy going, I mean, took things too casual, for all I know, but .... I know McDougall, I mean, McDougall wasn't - he was a pretty able sort of a character. He thought [inaudible] in the middle of the [inaudible], now. He was a little bit .... I remember one of the names - we always called him 'Macker'. 'What's the bloody sense in doing that', he'd say. That was the feeling of most of us.

(15.00) For what sort of things would he have that response. I mean, what sort of things would cause him to ...

Well, marching up - marching up to - you see, the river was one of their favourite places. Marching up and the enemy is supposed to be up on the top, there. Well, all you'd be walking straight into them. No chance in our life we were going to do anything. As far as like us - us old bushmen we went right around to try and get around behind them. But, you know, you're not supposed to do that.

Did you ever say, that the bushmen would go round and the military approach - the soldiers' approach - is ridiculous? Did you actually tell ...

I told them many a time, I can't see the sense in it, doing it that way. I think he used to agree with me, too, but that's the way he was told. I don't know, but I .... My opinion of the VDC is very low, it really is. Not that the blokes weren't good, but I mean the men that were running it. As I just said, quite some time back, fancy bringing a man in today and putting him in charge of a section. That's what happened.

You didn't get any pay or anything like that?

No. Only the shilling to tell you were in the army, that was all. But you were supposed to be at their beck and call. Just sent out to be [inaudible] ... change your plans - and your time.

Were you ever sent out at short notice, in addition to those Wednesday and ...

You'd have to get up before the dogs, you did, yes. I mean twice before the - twice, I think, - don't know whether we were .... I'm not too sure about that time, but twice, I was called up for [inaudible] .... 'You're now a member of the 42nd Battalion, here'. That's what they said. All, all that night were there .... But, the last time I was there, I was the only one there - called up. I said, well, I said that I was forty years of age, I said, 'I want you to know'. He said, 'We want you purely and simply for your knowledge of the district'. Well, I understood, that made sense to me because I could give - direct them anywhere they wanted - in the district - I could tell them anywhere they wanted to go - to get there. I was born out there - out, way the hell out, in the bush and gradually come in, I mean, know all of it.

Who were the people that kept you going, if it was such a ridiculous show?

God, it was ridiculous and [inaudible] in the army, what keeps them going on. I read a hell of a lot about it. And I reckon the only one bloody soldier knew what the hell he was doing was Napoleon, I don't think any of the others did. Only he did. But the history now, the history of the first world war which I knew quite well. I mean, I was old enough to read the papers, and

that. Fancy 60,000 Englishmen killed in one morning. I mean, not injured, killed. Probably be calling themselves [inaudible] ... army. That's the official record - 60,000 killed. In the Battle of Le Mans. I mean they got slaughtered, slaughtered them. And even now as you're reading about it - only recently - or writing about it, all the leaders of the first world war should have been taken out and shot themselves because they got that many men killed. Some people, Churchill, for example, he had no value on life. He's a unique example in my book. I mean, I've seen his property, I've seen his home, I mean, [inaudible]. There was only one man Churchill believed, and that was Churchill himself. He was responsible, largely, for Gallipoli, no doubt about that. His war record, I've read. The people in England were talking a bit about it. They said the people that knew him, said he was a very hard man to get on with as a man, I reckon that would be all right too. Take down in South Africa - when in the Boer War - he deserted and got away with it. There was no way in the bloody world, he didn't desert. He reckoned he had to take a message there, he had to take no message - he just got out of it. Churchill himself never put the army uniform on. He never put a uniform on, I don't think. Plenty of them - over there.

I respect the men that joined it, giving their time, and all free and for nothing - done their best and everything else [inaudible] ... I can say, to no purpose whatsoever. If there had been a war [inaudible], all they could have done is get shot because they had no way to defend themselves at all. And no vehicles to get away with, or anything else. If they were coming at you in a vehicle and you're on foot, what chance have you got. That's the way it appeared to me. I recall a very good, old friend of mine, talking to him. He said, 'I never wasted so much bloody time in my life as with them'. Nothing that anybody could do. But I guess that applied all over the land because .... I always think of a fellow named Hardy Hill. Now Hardy would have been a good soldier, no doubt about that, and we'd have a drink and he was talking about it. He said - my impression was he said, 'I've seen one Jap, he's got to do a job for himself in the bushes' - we were on patrol and my mate said, 'You're the best shot, see if you can shoot him'. I said, 'I didn't really like shooting him.' Of course I missed him. That's the only one I ever seen in the whole war - one Jap.
(20.00) There's something wrong with an administration like that, in my book, anyway. I didn't see another Jap throughout the war. I think - of course it takes a - it takes ten Australians to keep one man in a line, you know. They make sure, you know - and three Chinamen. Three Chinamen keeps one man in a line and ten Australians and thirteen Americans. So .... It's a pretty sad state of affairs, I mean. Those men, of course, you get some good ones, no doubt about that- that fellow that lived - the Australian in Africa. I'd say he was, I mean, he was a real soldier - he put all he got into it. But my God, it must have been an awful place to fight. I've been over there, flew over all that area. People don't realise how big it is - it's bigger than the whole of Australia, you know. Through the Arabia and [inaudible] and that .... But he .... It's like the Rats of Tobruk, I'm not trying to take one inch off them, but say the Germans couldn't take .... Nothing could be more ridiculous because no way could they get reinforcements. Germans could bring as many reinforcements as they liked in and get it. But when I read German reports, they got - sunk thousands of British ships supplying them with soldiers, and that's why they left them. Well, to me that makes a bit of sense. Nobody can tell me that you can't take any - you can take anything as long as you can get .... If he can't get reinforcements you can, what chance has he got, that's all there is about it. Must have been Napoleon said, 'The only way you win a war is get more men there quicker than they do'. He was pretty right.

Did you ever see any evidence of Japanese activity during the war, in the Mackay area?

No, except - I .... A plane flew over my place which wouldn't have been more than about 200 feet high and definitely had the rising sun on it so I think it was a Japanese plane but that was fairly early in the war, just inspecting everything, he was flying inland a bit - not far from the coast. But I reckon it was a Japanese plane all right.

And did you report that?

Oh, I probably did, I couldn't be certain about it now. Nobody much to report to anyway, I mean, we had .... Only got the VDC, I mean, because we .... See .... I remember a chap working for me, and one there near - an Italian, they were having a bit of a play around with lights and we told them about it and they just grinned. What the hell they were doing, they were just playing around. No doubt about it, lights were flashing on and off and all that, I mean.

This was .... Both these incidents, you were in the VDC when they happened?

Oh, I would be, yes. I tell them in there but nobody takes any notice. They tell you what a Japanese plane was, too and that sort of thing but you never - nobody would have known. But it wasn't a very big plane, it was rather a small plane but I'd say it was definitely a Japanese plane, the way they were looking, so low, they would have been high otherwise. They were having a look at everything.

What ...? Were you an air raid warden as well as being in the VDC?

Yeah, I can recall [inaudible] ...

How did you get recruited for that?

Oh, we had a meeting. This .... He was a first world war man, in fact he was an ANZAC, and he was very, very patriotic and he got together things so that we could contact in the event of bombing or anything like that - contact each other. And he suggested putting his plough shears - dish - up - they call them, and they carry a long, long way.

What, this was something from - a large piece of metal from a plough, you say?

Yeah, discs they call them, that's the name D-I-S-C, discs. And he had them and they carried well, there's no doubt about it.

And what would you use that for?

When somebody wanted assistance, you see.

Did you have telephones? You didn't have telephones.

No, no, not in those days, no.

What there were very few telephones in this area at that time?

They didn't come out there till - oh, it would be after the war, anyway. They were always short of money, they make out they are, we paid for our own telephones, but they paid it back eventually, but we paid to have the phones in. Always short of money. Electric light, the same. We supplied the money - most of the money for the electric light and they eventually paid it back to us.

What sort of training did you have for being an air raid warden?

None at all. You had to have a first aid certificate. I had two first aid certificates - that didn't mean much.

(25.00) What did you learn in the first aid certificates?

Normal ambulance man, same as .... I got the same certificate as an ambulance man, you see. [inaudible] .... We had to go before a doctor and pass an exam. I was very honoured because I got third in the class and the only ones that beat me was the chemist and the school teacher.

END OF INTERVIEW