TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Tape 1, Side 1 of an interview with Mr Des Lambert, recorded on 2nd December 1989. End of identification.

Mr Lambert, I wonder if first of all you could describe what was your situation when the war broke out. What work were you doing?

Well, my situation was that I was a clerk with Lionel Samson's, I used to do the shipping work and the purchases and all that. But I had been very interested in army life in that I had been in the heavy artillery which was really coastal defence. I joined up at the age of sixteen in August 1938. Now, when the war started on 3rd September 1939 I was only seventeen years of age and, of course, I couldn't be admitted to the standing army so I was instructed to hand in my uniform which was one of those blue uniforms with the red stripe down the leg and the white pith helmet and the leather bandolier and belt, all highly polished, my rifle, et cetera, so I was at a loose end really. I was debating whether I should put my age up and try for the AIF but I thought, 'No, I'm too small and skinny. I will never make it' so .... Anyway I was forced to wait then and when the news in Europe got bad in May 1940 and there was talk of forming a home defence corps I thought, 'Well, I'll have to be in that while I wait until I'm old enough to be either called up or otherwise old enough to join the AIF'. At the time you had to be twenty years of age to join the AIF and, um, well, to cut a long story short I eventually put my age up a year but that was after being with the VDC for, for - I'm not certain of the time - but I was one of the original members of the Fremantle battalion and ....

Let's go back to where, or how, you first heard of the VDC. What was the first news of that that you had?

Well, I am not certain whether I saw the ad in the paper or it was announced on the radio, but I heard about this meeting that was going to be held at eight o'clock this particular night in the Fremantle Town Hall. So I went along and I think that the reports said that there were 600 people there - mainly men of course. And all very keen to do something for the war effort.

Can you remember that meeting, and what was the atmosphere that night?

Yes, I can remember the first meeting. Well, everybody was very keen to, you know, do something. And there were members of the RSL there. Of course, afterwards the RSL formed its own battalions and members of the rifle club. But on the whole I would say that the majority of the people there were returned soldiers from the world war one who were keen to put on the uniform again. Of course, they had - the returned men had an opportunity of joining the garrison battalion and serving in places like Rottnest in the infantry or there was a horse transport unit but that would have been full-time. So, these men who were actively engaged, quite a number of them were tramway men, they thought that they'd like to do something part-time.

(5.00) Now what was the organisation of this meeting? Who chaired it and who spoke at it?

Well, the meeting itself was chaired by Sir Frank Gibson. Mr John Tonkin, MLA was there. Mr [Oxbrow?] was one of the organisers as well. Brigadier Dunkley - an army man - he

spoke on loyalty and all that, you know, what have you, and the British Empire, and .... So we all got thoroughly worked up, I think, we all wanted to do something.

Was there any discussion of the fact that at that time in fact the organisation didn't really have approval from the authorities, from the government?

Um, there wasn't any mention as far as I remember at the first meeting because it wasn't known then that it was compulsory to register a unit like that. So, of course we were at a loose end. We thought, 'Well, we want to do something patriotic, so we can go ahead and do it'.

Can you remember thinking at the time, 'Well, how will this be organised? Who's going to give the command? How will the line of command work?'

Yes. I did think that and I reached the conclusion that because we had a lot of ex-officers of the AIF of the first world war and other ranks, that it would be those people who would organise us really. Teach us rifle drill and all that kind of business - squad drill. But incidentally, because I'd been in the army at the time I knew squad drill, I knew how to slope arms and order arms, present arms and all that. So ....

What was the thought of the objectives of the defence corps, or of this organisation at that time? Was it essentially a resistance organisation in case of invasion ...

No.

... or was it as a reserves organisation to back up the army?

Well, I think that we could imagine ourselves, after reading the bad news in the paper, that eventually the German army would land at Fremantle and we'd be able to offer a token resistance, or something like that.

So, really almost - very much a token sort of gesture.

Mm.

Nobody ever really seriously thought ...

Mm.

... that this would be a defence army.

No. We really thought that as a home guard - it was being organised in England at the time that we would operate along a similar trend to the home guard in England. Because at that time with the fall of France and the escape of only a certain portion of the British Expeditionary Force that the British would have the German parachuters over within a few weeks, you see. And after, of course, taking England, well, they'd start on the rest of the British Empire.

Now, what was your next contact with the group after that meeting?

Yes. Well, we were each issued with an enrolment card. As a matter of fact I can't even remember completing it but I probably did with the rest of the people who were at the meeting. And the next thing I knew was we were being called to a parade on the Fremantle oval on a Sunday morning. I think it was ten o'clock or something in the morning. And then because there was a great shortage of rifles, even the AIF were short of rifles, we were issued with dummy wooden rifles and some of the members of the rifle club rolled up with their old Lee Enfield rifles. And after having a wooden rifle for several months I was eventually given an old rifle which must have been one of the first Lee Enfield models because it went back to the 1890s and it was in the years before they even had magazines on the rifles and each round had to be loaded individually through a lever on the top of the rifle.

[Laughs]. Quite a change after you'd been training for the civil forces prior to the war.

Oh, yes, yes. Of course I always had a modern .303 rifle in my heavy artillery unit. So it was a bit of a drop and .... But anyway, I used to be proud of riding home with this old blunderbuss on my bicycle. [Laughter]

(10.00) Before you got that, what was the drill using the wooden rifle?

Yes. Oh, well, that was mainly sloping arms and ordering arms and presenting arms. It was just the size of an ordinary army rifle and there was .... It was much lighter of course, but at least it did give a lot of men who weren't in the first world war the opportunity of learning a rifle drill.

And what about actually taking the pieces - the mechanism apart. How did you learn about that with a wooden rifle?

Well, well, of course, we couldn't. It wasn't until we got the later rifles that we were able to do that. Incidentally with an army rifle, it doesn't entail a lot of mechanical movement at all. All you can do with a rifle is really take out the bolt to oil it and then put it back. So it wasn't a great problem. We saw other men there with quite modern rifles and anyway .... I knew incidentally on how to handle rifles and how to fire a rifle and all that because I had already done that but .... The drill hall in Fremantle had a miniature rifle range which was loaned to us in that we had a full-sized rifle but a smaller bore was really screwed into the .303 calibre bore and we were firing bullets of a size of .22.

Where were you doing the firing practice?

Um, in the drill hall itself, in Queen Street, Fremantle. They had sand bags at one end of the drill hall and providing that nobody crossed our paths it was quite safe to fire the length of the drill hall.

How soon was it before you got hold of real weapons and with ammunition? Was there a shortage of ammunition?

Yes. There was a great shortage of ammunition and it had to be doled out. You know, if you went to a 'shoot in' in the drill hall you may only have three or four rounds at the most to fire with. But at least we were taught to aim a rifle properly and we were taught how to shoot.

Was rifle practice and the marching and presenting arms and sloping, that sort of activity, was that the only sort of thing you did or were there other functions?

Oh, well, well, that was all that I was involved with but the RSL people at their parades on the North Fremantle oval they were taught Morse code and signalling and all that. But I can't say that I was ever taught it in the Fremantle battalion.

Can you remember how - from how far away people came to the Fremantle oval to do this drill? For example, have you an idea of the extent that this organisation was covering at that time?

Well, of course, in those days very few people had motor cars and most people rolled up for the parades on their pushbikes or they came by tram, so it was only really the suburbs of Fremantle as I can recall where the men came from. I can't say that they came very far but, perhaps the suburbs of Fremantle - South Fremantle, North Fremantle, East Fremantle, and Melville and that would be .... And of course, Beaconsfield but that would be about the limit of, you know, of where the men came from.

And who were the instructors?

The instructors were usually ex-army men from the first world war and people who had served in the Australian regular army and had served their time. I can't say that I saw many men in uniform at all, so I presume that the instructors were mainly ex-army men.

(15.00) Do you have any memories of other sorts of exercises that you did in those few months that you belonged to the VDC - or the Fremantle group of what later became the VDC?

No. We only did the Sunday morning parades. We didn't do any night exercises or anything like that. I was in it, of course, right from the start and it wasn't until later when the members were issued with uniforms and all that that they were enabled to take part in the anti-aircraft gun drills, et cetera. But when I was with them we never had a uniform or anything like that, we were just a rag tag battalion.

Now you mentioned a second meeting. There was a first meeting and that was - can you remember what date that first meeting was?

Ah, the first meeting was 27th May 1940, of course, and then there was another one about a fortnight afterwards on the Monday also.

And what was discussed at that second meeting?

Well, the second meeting really brought us more into the limelight as to what was happening. You see at that first meeting it was only really a preliminary discussion. We didn't know .... But at the second meeting then we were told that we would need the approval of the federal government to form a volunteer defence.

> Was there concern at that time that in fact this group was acting without any official stamp of approval?

No. There wasn't any concern really because as - as ordinary rankers I don't think most of us cared a damn whether we were registered or not. You know, as long as we could sling a rifle around and look important.

> What sort of people joined it at that point? You mentioned there were quite a few tramways people but what other sort of people?

Well, it covered quite a variety of occupations. You know, there were clerks, accountants. There were lumpers what have you, you know, anybody who was patriotic enough, it wouldn't matter what his occupation was.

> Presumably quite a big distinction between those who knew how to present themselves in a military formation, because that's really what it was basing itself on and those who - those who knew nothing and those who knew something of it.

Well, those who knew nothing about army routine or anything were very much prepared to learn and it wasn't long until we were marching like regular guardsmen. You know, if you've ever seen a battalion of recruits on their first parade and watched them march, you would really split your sides laughing. But after a few weeks, you know, everybody gets into step and they swing their arms the right way and ... well, it looks good.

> In the training were the people who knew about the military drills separated from those who knew nothing?

Ah, no, no. We thought it was better that we all started off, as it were, right from scratch. And the ones who didn't know much could watch the bloke in front who knew a little bit.

> And how long did the training last?

Well, it went on for months because it was only on a Sunday morning in those days and only for around two hours. I think it was between ten o'clock and twelve o'clock in the morning. And, of course, you can't learn a great deal in that time.

> Ever instructed in any form of physical combat - actually grappling with a person?

Not at that time. No. We were mainly taught the parade ground stuff. It wasn't until afterwards that the members were taught bayonet fighting and all that, you see. But of course, in order to do bayonet fighting you need a genuine rifle with a genuine bayonet, you see.

And were you ever in a public parade? Did the group go on into the streets?

Not for the period that I was in it. I think if we had've gone on parade in our ordinary clothing the civilian population seeing us would have thought, 'Oh, God, if the Germans come we got no hope'. [Laughter].

Keep it quiet. [Laughter].

Keep it quiet, yes. [Laughter].

(20.00) What was the general public feeling towards this group?

Well, apart from the Communist Party, I think most of the public supported us because - I mean, in having somebody to defend you when you don't want to defend yourself is well worthwhile looking at.

At what point were you old enough then to enlist in the regular army?

Well, I wasn't old enough but I put my age up a year and I enlisted and was accepted on 20th March, 1941 and then I did a six weeks recruit training at the Swanbourne barracks and later served on Rottnest Island with the coastal artillery. Mainly looking after the convoys when they would come in. The convoys such as the *Queen Mary* and the *Queen Elizabeth* were too large to enter harbour so we had our searchlights, we had our guns, it was our duty to protect them.

In that ten months or so that you were with the Fremantle voluntary group, did you see any sort of trend or change take place in the way people approached that? Was there a lowering of enthusiasm for the whole project, or was it increased as time went on?

Well, I would say that it mainly decreased if anything because we didn't appear to be getting anywhere at that time. We didn't have any uniforms but we still went along to our parades. At that time, of course, in that period the war news appeared to be - ah - a little better, as it were. We were told by Churchill that, you know, we would eventually win the war. It was going to be a hard fight but we'd get there in the end.

What about the fact that it took the government a while to really give some sort of status to this group? How did the group receive that?

Well, we knew that all our priority of weapons and uniforms had to be for the AIF who were serving overseas at the time. We knew that there was a great shortage of rifles and ammunition so we were quite prepared to carry on doing what we were, you see, until perhaps we were old enough to join the army.

Was there ever any hint or indication that there were other roles that you might play in the community in terms of security? I mean did it branch out in terms

of helping in a national emergency in other areas? Or was it simply focused very much on the military?

Well, there was talk of air-raid precautions and all that and there being air-raid wardens, but I can't say that that kind of talk affected us greatly because other people, who were not members of the volunteer defence unit, were being trained as air-raid wardens, you see. We didn't worry about that at all.

What about the sort of sensitivity towards people who may have been from enemy nationalities or people in the community?

Well, personally, I felt absolutely no animosity at all, particularly with the Italians because where I worked in Cliff Street, Fremantle, on the opposite side there were families of Italians that I knew and I found them all right. I didn't feel any animosity towards them or German people. I don't think I knew many German people at all. But I can recall in the middle of 1940 after Italy came into the war, the government brought a train down to alongside the esplanade in Fremantle and the military went around all the buildings where the Italians were and they rounded up all the men who weren't naturalised and the women were crying and the children were crying and .... It was a sad state of affairs and of course I was still working at the time, this was before I went into the army.

(25.00) Did other members of your family join the VDC?

Well, my eldest sister eventually joined the army as a single woman and went to the eastern states - went to Sydney. My youngest sister who was only fifteen when the war started - joined the VADs, the Voluntary Aid Detachment, which was nursing, you see, and learnt the rudiment of nursing and finally went into the army full-time and ended up with the army of occupation in Japan as a nurse.

But none of them joined you on Sunday morning in training ...

Oh, no, no.

... down at Fremantle Oval.

It was men only. No. We didn't consider that a woman would be able to fire a rifle or scare the enemy in any way, you see. But, ah, ah, women were used in auxiliary units such as making teas and all that. It's a bit unfortunate in a way, because I think that nowadays women are quite capable of firing rifles from what I see on the TV and ....

Can you remember how it was received at work, because you were still working at this stage, weren't you, at Samsons in Fremantle. What was the general feeling about your belonging to this group, among your workmates?

Well, I was encouraged. Yes, yes. Of course most of the people working at Samsons were over the age of forty and of course they couldn't join the army or anything else like that. But some of the Samson boys, before they went into the air force or the army, they were members

of the Fremantle Rifle Club, you see, and as such they were getting a good training in being snipers, you see, and ....

So this group absorbed all the members of the Fremantle Rifle Club. They all, by virtue of their being members of the rifle club, also became members of this voluntary defence force.

Not necessarily. No, it was only people from the rifle clubs who really wanted to join the VDC. It wasn't compulsory or anything like that.

Can you remember approximately how many turned up on the - say - that first Sunday morning? How the numbers increased or decreased as time went by?

Well, it's like everything else. At the first parade you get everybody there and as 600 people attended the meeting, I would say that on the first parade there were about ...

Six hundred meeting - members attended the first - the inaugural meeting that started off ...?

Yes. Yes, I would say at least half of them turned up on the Sunday morning, perhaps more. I can't really remember but I know that there were a lot of people there on the Fremantle oval.

And these numbers gradually went down as time went on.

Well, um, I think that people realised that they couldn't do much, you see, not having a proper rifle, not having a uniform, you see. It's like everything else, you know, it starts off with a big bang and usually it's only the diehards who keep on turning up.

Can you remember from that time of the first meeting who were the people that really impressed you? Who were those people that lead the meeting that impressed you strongly? You said that Frank Gibson ...

Oh, yes, yes.

... had chaired the meeting but who spoke up very strongly?

Well, Mr Tonkin spoke very strongly, indeed.

Mr Tonkin was the MLA at that time.

Of course. Yes, yes. He was the member. And Mr Oxbrow, of course, he was - he was a businessman and I don't whether the - he had ever had any army connections at all. But Mr Tonkin was always a good strong speaker and he imbued everybody with his keenness, I guess, and his loyalty to the cause.

That's the end of Tape 1, Side 1.

END OF INTERVIEW.