



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: Susan Green interviews Laurie Turnbull, VDC, Fremantle, Western Australia, 17 January 1990.

I wanted to get married so I purchased a quarto- unofficial post office/general store in Como with the residence attached and operated that from there. And it was during that occupancy that the VDC was formed and I participated in that right from the outset.

What made you decide to join the VDC?

A number of colleagues after hearing that they were forming such an organisation and having been rejected to go overseas, I thought it was the least I could do, and did it gratefully and with great satisfaction.

Can you remember the very first meetings that you had with these men in the company with the VDC?

Yes, we met in a hall in South Perth in mufti. Most of us not knowing each other but it emanated from that and a desire to participate in any manner at all and we finally were doing duties like guarding the Canning Bridge, for instance, of a night time - two hours on, four off - and then go into our jobs in the day time. Later, after the formation of the battalion, we took on the 3.7 heavy anti-aircraft guns stationed at Leighton and Fremantle and South Beach and we were properly trained for this. Being a sergeant, number one of a gun, it was a great experience and we all thoroughly enjoyed it.

You must have been in a rather peculiar position at that time that you were quite young to be joining the VDC when a lot of the men presumably were old veterans of the first world war. How did you find those first meetings in terms of what you did? Were they training meetings? Or what did you actually do?

There was a contrast of the ages and, of course, I regained most of my health from the head operation and despite that was rejected - as I mentioned - from joining the AIF - I felt embarrassed at first because I was quite fit and amongst these elderly, more elderly members. But this was all taken in good faith. They realised the situation and we did our training on the various stations and the 3.7 anti-aircraft guns, et cetera, as I've mentioned.

You already would have known a great deal of this sort of work though and the ...

Well, the basic experience on the heavy coast artillery guns as a permanent army man helped considerably because it was just like a continuance of what I'd already had some years of experience.

Did you feel that you were a lot ahead of the elder men that you were associated with at the time in terms of your knowledge of the guns, and the weaponry?

Oh yes. The majority of them of course had had very little army experience other than the officers in charge who had their experience from the first world war. But, oh yes, I had a distinct advantage of physically being fit and having had that experience on the heavy coast artillery guns.

So how much time did you put into these sort of activities?

From memory it would take two, three nights a week, weekends where we'd go onto a station for the weekend. I can't quite recall how often that was but it sometimes would be every weekend or every second or third.

And on those nights that you went off, what would you be tending to do then?

Well, such as the guarding the Canning Bridge. We would have two men on there continually, two hours on and then we'd sleep for four hours, have another two hours, and then we'd go to our work, employment, the following day the same as everybody.

Did anything every happen during these guard duties?

No. No, fortunately. Some other training that we used to do was going out into the bushland around Applecross, and manoeuvring tactics and training, that sort of thing, under our own ... under the guidance of our officers, et cetera.

(5.00) Who were your officers?

Earl Arnie and Frank Rogers were the two main ones that come readily to mind. But they were a great bunch of officers and a great band of fellows; it was a remarkable coordination and association.

What was the background of the officers?

All sorts, from accountants to some not so very fit. Some were unable to get leave from work having been manpowered. But they were a great variety of men but very fine and outstanding fellows.

A mixture of professional and trades people, was it?

All sorts from accountants of Bones Limited to all walks of life.

Shopkeepers like yourself?

Yes, yes. There were two or three of the shopkeepers. But, all walks of life.

Let's just briefly look at what it was like for you as a person managing a shop at the time. It must have been a fair load to - you were just married - running a shop and also going off several nights a week and in weekends. Did you find that that was a bit wearing at times to do all that?

No, strange as it may seem, it was my own business. I was new to it but I had studied accountancy and could handle that part of it all right. I was physically fit which was important, a cooperative wife, and whilst we worked long hours in the shop, commencing at 7.30 am and closing at 8 or 9 pm of an evening and open weekends, I was able to work it in and with the cooperation of my wife particularly.

Your wife also worked in the shop?

Oh yes, yes. Very much so.

How did the war affect a shopkeeper at that time? Did you find there were any shortages of anything?

Strangely enough, nothing in particular. We were extremely fortunate right through. A supply of most lines were readily available and I can't recall any particular shortage of an object or product which could basically affect anybody. We were very fortunate in that regard.

You were what we'd now describe as a corner deli?

That's right. It was a little bit bigger than a deli. It was more of a grocer's shop in the old days, having to go round and pick up all your orders of a morning and deliver in the afternoon which the delis these days are nearly all cash and carry.

Now going back to the army aspect then, what were you doing in the weekends when you were away for, I gather, a longer period?

In the permanent army?

No, this was when you'd joined the VDC.

Oh, in the VDC. We would go down into the station. Most of our time was spent at Fremantle and the heavy anti-aircraft station there which was a permanent station and one of the biggest in this state.

Where did you spend most ... was this at Leighton or was this on the hill where John Curtin School is now?

On the hill where John Curtin School is and, strangely enough, on what was an old cemetery. But we would go into barracks and that's where the 3.7 anti-aircraft guns were stationed and we were just on duty all that time, each weekend.

Now before the VDC was actually incorporated into the army, how were you regarded? Did you see yourselves all pretty much as professional soldiers at that time, and what was your feeling about the community's view of you?

Oh no, there was never any thought of professional soldiering. We were just a community effort to assist wherever we can in anything at all. And even when we were taken over

officially and acquired uniforms, I don't think it affected any of us. For certain we operated as an army unit. Some ... many men in it who had previous ... some experience of some sort and we were regimentally trained and took it quite seriously but in a very, very cooperative community-minded spirit.

> You didn't feel you were taking yourselves more seriously in any way when you became part of the army?

(10.00) Oh, that was ... a certain amount of that for sure because the fact that we were firing these 3.7 heavy anti-aircraft guns. This was not a soldiers toy or anything of this nature; this was serious business. And even the gun crew down in the pits, everything had to be ... everybody had to be well trained and being a sergeant in charge of one of the guns there was responsibility for everybody to do just the right thing at the right time. It was very important. It was like a full-time, permanent army activity.

> What was the weaponry that you used at the very start when you joined the VDC, when you were just meeting as a small group?

We were issued with rifles. I forget the type of rifle. They were not the large .303 that were regularly known then although we received these later. Some of the, for instance, the sergeants and other officers received Sten guns, you know, machine guns and it was not just a 'Dad's Army' type of thing, it was the 'real McCoy' and we all realised that we were at war. And, in fact, on several occasions we expected attacks, especially after Darwin was attacked, and the guarding of the Canning Bridge, whilst now it seemed like a ... just a jaunter, back in those days it was real serious business and we appreciated it.

> Did you notice a change in the way people in the VDC regarded it as a home force as the war progressed?

I could say 'yes' to that. The seriousness of it all was so much easier to accept, and whilst we were perhaps treating it not so much light-heartedly, all of us realised without any shadow of doubt the seriousness of it and how important it may be that we may have to take greater activity, particularly with how the war progressed and the bombing of Darwin, et cetera.

> So what was the, for you, the memories of the really serious points when you felt, well, you know, we might actually be manning these guns and we may be facing the enemy?

I don't think it worried me or any of the boys although we were mindful of the fact that, was quite possible, particularly having the 3.7 anti-aircraft guns. But, I can't recall anybody having been scared about it or even worrying that, you know, we may not be able to handle it.

> Was there a stepping - up on the exercises, the training or the manning of the guns at any stage?

I can't recall that. It was fairly steady right through. The attendances were remarkable.

And you tended to after a while man the guns in lieu of the regular army, didn't you? That they would go off for weekends and you people would stand actually manning the guns for them? Is that correct?

That's right. That is correct, yes. Yes, those guns had to be manned during the days as well as at nights and weekends. And we were, of course, trained by those permanent men.

Can you describe what would happen say on an ordinary weekend when you went down to do that duty? Can you remember just the details of it? I mean, how did you get down there to start with?

Oh, briefly, we'd be picked up in trucks from our hall or depot in South Perth and taken down to the station and just go in to the bivouacs and our bunks and accept normal life like the permanent army people.

How many were in your group?

Ah, I can't recall the exact number. There must have been about, what, forty or fifty or ... at the Fremantle main depot station perhaps not that many. Thirty, between thirty ... I can't quite recall.

No, well, these, let's say, between thirty and fifty, would this group have all come from this South Perth area ...

That's right.

... and then been trucked down there, say on a Saturday morning?

Yes. And others from Vic[toria] Park may have been trucked down to South Beach or the Leighton station. But I personally fired ... assisted in firing shots from Leighton, South Beach and ... but mostly at Fremantle.

Did you have much contact with the other groups? For example, you're not far from Vic Park. Did you have a connection and interaction with them?

Not a great deal, no. Because time was the essence of the contract. None of us had that much time. There was no duplication. We all did much the same and, no, there was comparatively little contact that way.

(15.00) And in your day-to-day life did your duties from the VDC flow into that in terms of keeping an eye on what was going on in the community or ...

No, I can't recall. There was never any necessity from that angle. Most of the residents knew what we were doing, those that were doing it, and I'm sure they appreciated it. I was quite embarrassed, when I first bought the business, going around and a lot of the mothers used to look at me and say, 'Why aren't you at the war?', you know, and I finally mentioned how and why and then I was accepted and there was no problem. But ...

Was there any sort of security role that you felt you should be playing in terms of ...

No.

... watching out, for example, people who might be spying in the community or anything like that?

No, we never had any necessity for that. We, I think intimately, we were all prepared if there were anything like that, if it was necessary. But I can't recall any - getting close to that type of activity.

In what ways did the war impinge on your life, although there probably wasn't much else other than VDC and work, but did the war change your life in other ways?

I don't think so. You've explained the situation between VDC and work and the normal home responsibilities. We were busy. We had very little else to do or very little time to do it. And you had broken sleep of a night and that sort of thing but we became accustomed to it. I can't recall any real inconvenience other than ... we were proud to do it. And all my colleagues, and there was a great number of them, we were just one big happy group of blokes that were very proud of what was happening.

Can you describe what it was like when you were on guard duty at the Canning Bridge?

Yes, quite easily. On lovely moonlight nights there was the two of you. You'd walk up from one end of the bridge to the other and you'd stop and talk and talk about all things, all problems and private life and everything. That was about all. It was a bit difficult in the winter weathers when it was raining and as cold as charity and sitting in the middle of a bridge in the middle of a river, it wasn't ... wasn't very pleasant. But we had our waterproof capes and, I can't recall anybody really complaining. We had, I think it was, straw palliasses in the local hall on the hard floor. I can't recall anybody really complaining ever.

And who was the person in command on that particular base?

Well, Earl Arnie was our ... was our principal officer in charge of us and Frank Rogers was the 2IC.

Can you remember what Arnie's rank was at that time?

Yes, he was, I think, a lieutenant or he may have been a captain, I can't quite recall. Coincidentally he was one of our stipendiary magistrates in the courts. And my having had a long experience of justice of the peace and doing bench work in the courts I knew him personally. And Frank Rogers, both delightful fellows, he was the head accountant at Bones and we all fitted in with respect for each other and particularly for them as officers. It was a really remarkable experience.

Was there a close relationship between the men and the officers or was it always a kind of respect and respect for the rank as well as the man?

Oh, great respect, but very close right through. Great respect, very close.

Was there ever any questioning of what the commands that came through, particularly after it was incorporated into the army, as to what the hell was going on here?

No. We never had occasion to query that at all. It was a really straightforward, delightful experience. When I say 'delightful' it was regretful that it was upsetting everybody's' lives but it was war, it was serious, and particularly what was happening overseas we certainly didn't want it to come to Australia and there's not one of them that ever complained about what they were doing. And most of them, as I say, were much older than me, especially down in the gun pits, there, missing out on some of their sleep and, physically some of them must have felt it a little.

(20.00) Did you discuss politics during these periods, particularly on guard duty?

Oh yes. With groups like that - politics, religion and all sorts of things. But I can't recall anybody getting up on his hobby-horse and propounding something, trying to talk somebody into it. It was all on a friendly nature and bantering at each other and whatnot. Down in the gun pits when we were sleeping there we used to play cards and there was a group that gets a mention in our booklet. They used to play poker. I've never played poker in my life prior to it. But there would have been six or seven of us that got into this group and we played for years and years, even after, socially just once a month at each other's homes, just for the old friendship.

Was it big stakes in the money?

Oh no. Oh, goodness no. No way. They were all sales managers or professional men, and no way, it was just good fun. It was an unbelievable experience.

If you were to describe say the nature of the politics of these people, would they have been more of a right wing group or left wing group? I mean, how would you describe it?

I couldn't answer that accurately. There was very little left group thinking back in those days from my personal experience. There was certainly members there with Labor thoughts and others with Liberal thoughts which have always been, but there was never a doubt or a thought of not coordinating or holding it against each other. No, we never had any problems at all. I can't recall one.

Going back to when you were actually manning the guns at Fremantle, what would you be firing at? I mean, how often would you have actual exercises where you were firing the guns?

I can't recall whether that happened every weekend we were there but we had planes dragging what that call drogues behind it, some distance - and this was the physical firing - and we would have those on every occasion that we fired. That was quite regular but I don't think it would have been every weekend. But this was the real McCoy, these big 3.7 ... 3.2 shells are very big and heavy and, of course, it was dangerous. I can recall one day the computer went wrong with the sighting and the shell exploded the same distance in front of the plane as the drogue was behind. And, of course, there was a stop immediately and then one of the ... there's always one of the funny boys around the place, he said that the captain had just rung through to say we were ... they were dragging the drogue, not pushing it. That was dinkum, it was really ... It only happened once of course.

Now what happened there? Was anyone brought up and reprimanded for that mistake?

Oh no, no. It was a mechanical fault on the ... I forget the name of the instrument now, the sighting of it. No, it was just one of those things. It could have happened anywhere at all. It was nothing to do with the quality of the man himself. We never really found out what caused it actually.

Was there any concern about the supply of ammunition?

No, I can't recall anything like that. That was all done in a very orderly and methodical way by the permanent military people. We handled the unloading and the physical activity and then the gun pits of course which was quite a serious business but ... and a very deafening one. Some of my gun crew suffered from ear troubles through the constant noise of the gun. But the amazing part of it, one of the reasons given by - when I was discharged permanently unfit from the permanent army - was the fact that a ... one of the reasons given that if I went overseas any shelling or anything like that could upset my head from the operation and I'd not only be a drag on ... not being able to do anything but it would take a couple of men to look after you. And yet the remarkable thing, down in this gun pit, I had less trouble with my ears than anybody at all. I used to use cottonwool. I never had to use anything and it had no effect at all so I was extremely fortunate.

So obviously the operation was almost a benefit to you in ...

Oh, whatever.

Yes. Were there any contingency plans as to what would happen if you lost control of the guns? What would you do then, if you, under attack that is?

(25.00)I can't recall that ever being discussed. No, I can't recall that coming out in screed form or in discussions. It may have and I just didn't recall it. I don't think ... We were all prepared that if we were attacked we would just fire until we ran out of ammunition or were killed or something but it was never discussed that way. The thought was always there particularly, as I keep repeating, after the Darwin attack when we felt they could come down further. But, no, I can't recall anything dramatic in that way at all.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Identification: ... side two of an interview with Mr Laurie Turnbull recorded by Susan Green on 17th January 1990. End of Identification.

Can you remember playing any sort of intelligence role during any of this time?

We were called on on many occasions to attend to do duty on service ... on pillboxes up along the coast, looking out over the ocean all the time to pick up any lights or anything of that nature with a direct line to intelligence or head office somewhere and this was carried out quite extensively. There would be two or four men on a pillbox for the night.

Can you ever remember anything occurring during these sessions?

Yes. On a couple of occasions we spotted a light where there was somebody out fishing or something of this nature which we would report and ... but nothing of any serious consequence can I recall other than they were grateful for the services we rendered and the care we were taking in looking ... observing for so long.

Was everybody expected to take part in this particular duty?

They were asked to. It was not everybody that could do it. And I can't recall the percentage of men that actually did, or carried out those additional requirements. But most of us, the regular ones, you know, used to take it in our stride and just part of our ordinary obligation.

Did you ever see any particular aspect of what you were doing, all the different duties as part of the VDC work, as more important than any other?

Not actually. I can't recall that. I didn't assume that. But we were all - I keep repeating it - so proud to be able to do this sort of work that we were square pegs in square holes and really enjoyed it.

Can you remember stories from anybody else that were involved in the intelligence work that saw unusual circumstances or had unusual experiences?

No, I can't recall anything of any great consequence at all. No.

Can you remember when you headed north, just where you were stationed in these pillboxes?

My memory's not the greatest but I think it was up along Sorrento and places like that. There were these pillboxes right in the appropriate places, in rocks and whatnot, and, no, I can't recall anything other than places like that.

And how far would the pillboxes have been from one another?

I didn't even know that to be honest.

Were you - was there a feeling of being there with a lot of other men up there along the beach for a long way or was it a feeling of isolation?

No, I don't think we really knew. We just had a direct line with the head communication. It was just a direct line and that's all we ... our only communication.

Did you have weapons with you?

Ah, I don't think so, not on those occasions. I can't recall.

So you would have just been dropped off, say, two or four of you?

Oh, these were properly built pillboxes, you know, with some convenience but not very spacious and we were dropped there and I think we went in our own cars to things like that where there were small groups.

About what time would you have been dropped there?

At dusk, just before dusk and stopped through the night.

And then either drove home the next morning or night.

That's it, yeah.

(5.00) As the time went on and, for example, nothing occurred on these sort of duties, say, particularly the intelligence duties, was there a falling off in terms of interest or, as the war went on and there became more of a threat was there a closer attention paid to these sort of duties?

I can't recall any change really to be honest. I certainly didn't notice it.

There was a fairly steady sort of level of attention and dedication to it.

Oh, it was just a sort of ... it became a way of life, you know, and just accepted by everybody.

After the war, what was the feeling about when the regular army people came home and you had been a member of the VDC and there were all these returning heroes, what was you feeling about your role in the VDC then?

I didn't have any particular feeling at all. I was so, like everybody, so delighted that the war was over and to see these men returning, doing the job that I didn't go away and do, which I wanted to and volunteered to do, I welcomed them with open arms and grateful for what they did, will never change my thinking on that score.

Was there a feeling that the VDC's work, that the home guards role was a bit downgraded at that point?

I don't think the boys that, even those that didn't go away that were in the permanent army, I don't think they looked on us as second-rate soldiers or as, anything of that nature. I think they were just grateful that we were doing what we were doing at tremendous inconvenience to ourselves and our families.

What was the sort of reflection that you had of yourselves from the regular army people? Did they see you as a fairly well equipped and well-disciplined group?

I wouldn't know to be honest because we didn't brag about what we were doing and we had little occasion to ... if you're referring to the permanent chaps on the stations, we were very close, because some of us were almost as good as what some of they were. And, no, that was a great spirit of comradeship so far as on the station was concerned. For instance, over the weekends, at times to not only to break any monotony but more to keep everybody reasonably physical we'd have sporting events and it would be one station against another station. And the permanents and the VDC, it didn't matter who, what or why, they were all as one. That was a tremendous experience, we all used to enjoy. Particularly when the AWAS, Australian Women's Auxiliary Service, came in. And they all came in and they were all part of the station just as though we were all one happy family. It was a tremendous spirit, you know, permeating through everybody.

So there were footie matches and such, were there?

Not so much that because of lack of space, but sporting events such as crawling under canvas sheets and jumping hurdles and - what do you call these sports that you have of various things?

Obstacle races.

Obstacle races and there might be a 100 yard dash and things of this nature. But there was never any cricket or football or that nature because, I suppose, there was no facilities for the size of ... space or anything but ...

Can you remember any public displays of the company of the ...

No, no.

... sort of marches through town or anything like that?

No, nothing like that at all. I was a physical instructor, you know, for many years with the National Fitness and whatnot and because of that our own group of a Sunday morning for about half an hour we'd line up and we'd go through some physical activity. Some of the older ones would do what they could do but many of them, especially the manpowered people, they were quite ... reasonably fit and that sort of thing.

Did they show the same sort of interest as the rest of the people?

Oh yes. Oh yes. There was a great variation of status in a profession or education. You know, some were brighter than others, et cetera, but it made no difference to the humblest man to the one who is very, very ordinary and used to like his drink - no names mentioned. You know, we used to think he was crazy in doing what he did but he was just one of us as much as anybody else.

(10.00) What was the feeling about people who'd dropped out along the way, those who didn't attend regular meetings? Did they become somewhat outcast of ...

Oh no, I can't recall what happened to them because if they dropped out we never saw them and we were so busy and tied up, I don't think they were ever thought of again. No, I can't recall that either.

Just on a very basic level, how was the catering organised when you were in the Volunteer Defence Corps? Did you take your own food with you?

Oh no. No, that's all done through the station set-up. Oh no, that was ... we never went hungry.

Was it a VDC cook?

No. Oh no, no. That was all the permanent station people. But ...

When you went out on exercises for example?

Oh well, they would only be for a brief period, you know, two or three hours, something of that nature where it would be in between meal times.

Can you remember any night exercises?

Oh yes.

Not the guard duty at Canning Bridge but I mean actual going out to the bush.

No. Through the Applecross bush there with groups with compasses and trying to get through another group. But that would only be sort of after dark, after tea and there'd be no pillboxes, there was no meals or anything like that. It would be after ... after tea and the only thing is down with the guns when we were stationed down in the pillbox of a night time, to fill in time, somebody would go down and get a whole load of fish and chips or something. And I can well recall somebody coming back with quite an armful of it and he said, 'This is for Bill Brown' - I won't quote his name - Is he in?' and we readily said, 'Yes'. And enjoyed very much a free feed of fish and chips.

And while Bill Brown remained lamenting.

When they found out. But that was all part of the fun. Yes.

So people could go off. They weren't confined to duties?

Oh no, no. Once you went on duty, like on station, that would be even some of the permanent guys that have got a night off or something of this nature. Oh no, once you went onto duty, you were there and there was no getting a leave pass for the guys or anything of that nature.

Mr Turnbull, thanks very much for talking to me.

My pleasure.

That's the end of the interview with Mr Laurie Turnbull recorded on 17th January 1990 by Susan Green.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

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