



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: Australian War Memorial project to create a sound archive of Australia in the war of 1939-45. Interview with Charles Sims, by Rob Linn, 31 January 1990. Mr Sims served in the 2/27th Battalion from its formation in May 1940 as a lieutenant to a major when he was demobilised in November 1945. Tape one, side a.

Could you give some background of where and when you were born please and personal background in schooling and that type of thing?

Yeah. Well, I was born 12 July 1916 in Sydney and after two or three years there we moved out to Fiji ... correction, New Caledonia, Noumea. We came back to Australia then and eventually we settled in Wallaroo, South Australia.

What was your father's occupation?

My father was an engineer. He was a mechanical engineer. Incidentally, when we went to Noumea he was in charge of the smelters there; they were mining nickel, for the French, which is a lease/lend business for the Japanese, you know. So he came back, when we came back to Australia, he moved out to Cobar. He was there for a while still, you know, as a mining engineer, and then eventually he went to a posting as the chief engineer of the fertiliser company at Wallaroo and that's where I commenced my schooling, at the schools at Wallaroo and also the Kadina Memorial High School at Kadina, and I entered into an apprenticeship for electrical engineering and, of course, at the time just after the depression it was very difficult and there was only limited, you know, resources within the family for one of us to come down to college in Adelaide. So my youngest brother, he was fortunate in that respect and I stayed on doing this apprenticeship which carried on for a matter of five years. And then the ... I joined the CMF when the unit started up there in, I think that was '38, and did several camps ...

This is at Wallaroo?

Wallaroo, yes. They formed the 43rd/48th Battalion and they wanted to expand the influence with the military to, you know, as many districts as they could. So I joined up then and enlisted there initially as a private. Then we did a bit of bayonet training and a ten day course and a bit of field craft and a bit of this and that, and map reading, and I got my corporal stripe.

Well, who was your apprenticeship with at that time, workwise?

That was done with the Wallaroo - Mount Lyell Fertilizer Company who in fact had the ... sold the diesel there which carried out the reticulation of the electric supply in Wallaroo. So they had quite a bit of interest in the electrical field.

Were you unemployed at any time during this period?

No, no. No, I went straight out from school into the apprenticeship so ...

(5.00) And later when you joined the army how did your pay and conditions in the army compare to those that you were earning with Mount Lyell - Wallaroo?

Well, I started off there and my first pay was eighteen and sixpence a week - eighteen and sixpence a week. But out of that, you know, eighteen and sixpence a week, everything's relative to things at that stage and you could still have your little half ounce of tobacco. You could take a quart bottle down to the pub and you can get it filled up with draught beer, about one and thruppence. You'd buy yourself a bike or you saved up to buy a bike. Did a bit of your own clothing and it's incredible how eighteen and sixpence sufficed. Of course, you still had to rely on the family, you know, for board and lodgings although I used to pay five shillings a week out of that in ... for my housekeeping.

How about the army then? What was the comparison then when you joined?

Oh well, when we first started off with the army I forget what the pay was in the CMF in those days in the rank of corporal and then eventually to sergeant but I think it was, no, I'd only be guessing. I would be making a rather unfair comparison - I couldn't give you that - except, you know, once you're enlisted full-time with the AIF because I went in there as ... I'd already received my commission, and I went in as a lieutenant.

About the time you enlisted did you have any particular religious views yourself?

No. Always been brought up in the old Church of England tradition. Father was an Englishman. Mother came from a well-to-do family in New South Wales and that was a bit on the Cornish and Welsh sides, you know, in her blood. So, no, I had no set views on it other than I stuck to the religion and I backed her.

Did you have an interest in politics at that stage?

No. No, I didn't.

So you weren't a member of a party?

No. No.

You'd travelled some distances with your family outside the State. How widely had you travelled?

Well, other than going to Noumea, we were there for two and a half to three years in Noumea, and then coming back to Sydney. Just going within the, you know, the western districts of New South Wales - Cobar and Nymagee - then to Wallaroo. And from Wallaroo, of course, that was in, what, ... 1925, I think '23 or '25.

By the time you came to enlist what were your favourite leisure activities?

Well, I was always keen on sport, I liked sport. Cricket and swimming, tennis, golf. I would have like to have taken on rowing but it was ... the facilities there were not the best for young blokes and I thought you put a deuce of a lot of effort into it, you know. But, no, there

wouldn't have been that much competition although they had, you know, in the senior, they had a very strong team, the rowing. But, no, I stuck to the basic ones, the football, golf, tennis, swimming.

And were you married by this time?

No. No, I didn't get married until I returned from the Middle East in June '42. We were married on 6th June 1942 at Caloundra.

Did you postpone your engagement or marriage?

No. Oh no. As soon as I came back because I was friendly with my wife-to-be before I left. So I ... well, not only with my present wife but I was friendly with a lot of other, in your own age group and, of course, I didn't meet my wife until I came down from the country because she's an Adelaide girl.

But did you have .... Did you drink much alcohol before your enlistment?

I had a fair proportion. I mean, I liked it and, oh yes, I think I tried it and kicked the gong around like a lot of other young blokes did.

Did your drinking habits change within the services?

Well, other than that you're getting more money, I mean, you could try a bit more of the exotic, you know, drinks, whereas I couldn't afford that on what I was getting.

(10.00) At that point too would you have thought of yourself as an Australian pure and simple or as a British Australian?

No. I was a dinky-di Aussie. Yeah, a dinky-di Aussie having been born in Australia.

But did you see yourself as both a loyal British subject and an Australian subject as well?

Well, British, my allegiance was to the King, King and country and I've always been a, you know, royalist. I believe in it.

Did your father or your brothers or any relatives serve in the first AIF?

Ah, my father, he was in the ... being an Englishman, he was in the navy, RN, and my six uncles - they were his brothers - two were in the infantry and the rest were in the navy. So they've had a, you know, a service background.

Were you brought up in a tradition of the great war in any way, as regards Australia?

No. Other than those we observed at school at various functions like ANZAC Day and things like that.

What made you join the CMF when you did join?

Well, I thought, you know, having played all these sports and things, this was another avenue that I'd like to have devoted my energy to and I like the company of other people and I thought, 'Well, maybe seeing the, on my father's side at least they went into the services, it would be a good opportunity' and it was a good thing to do, you know, with the younger chaps there because there wasn't that much other than the sort of sporting activities in that area to do. So this was just another outlet.

What sort of training did you do?

When we started off? What in the CMF? Well, the basic training of lectures and you would do field craft, drill, weapon training, map reading - all those things that go into ...

You went in as a corporal and ...

Well, I had to sit the exam, that was not so much a written exam as an appraisal on the spot, you know, a ten day course in the country conducted by the commanding officer who was Alec Pope and a couple of warrant officers who came down and at the end of the course they put you through and they made an assessment and you became a lance corporal.

And later you became a sergeant?

Yeah. Lance corporal, then corporal, then sergeant.

And did you consider that militia training worthwhile?

Oh yes, my word. Yes, I enjoyed that very much indeed and it, you know, it brightens up your outlook on things and it made you appreciate things a lot more.

Can you remember what your reaction was personally to Robert Menzies' announcement of the outbreak of war, that Britain had declared war and Australia was also at war?

Well, I think at that stage, you know, we could see the writing on the wall and what the comments in the paper and there was a sort of a sadness in a way that it had to come to this but it was inevitable and with that a bit of elation that you sort of, right, 'now we can join; join up and see the world'.

Where and when did you join?

Well, that was at Wallaroo when this happened and I actually had come down to a three months camp and then at the outbreak of war on 3rd September '39 what I wanted to do was to go into a complete unit, South Australian, rather than end up or start off as a reinforcement. So I could have got into the first reinforcements, the 2/10th Battalion because we were in camp at that stage but the ... our first CO, Colonel Moten, he saw me at this three months camp and said he'd like me to become an officer in the unit which would be raised within the next couple of months. And I was highly, you know, gladdened by this. And, of course, I came back home on the train that evening and four or five days later I ended up with

pneumonia and of course I was then put in, or had, you know, private nursing facilities had to be there with fires in the room all the time to keep the warmth in the atmosphere and meanwhile, of course, the battalion was saying, 'What about it? When are you coming down to march in because you can't get your regimental number until such time as you present yourself for enlistment?' although my name was down, it was in the paper. So I mentioned this to my doctor and he sent me away. So it was ten weeks from the time when I should have joined before I could and that's why I've got a higher number than a lot of others. But I was original officer in the battalion and they can't understand it because they wouldn't save it. There was a blank block of n mbers for officers and they wouldn't put aside one number despite appeals from the CO and everyone else. But no, that was the rules and that was that.

And why did you enlist in the first place?

Why did I enlist in the first place?

Mmm.

Well, I thought it was the only thing to do, having participated in the training with the CMF with all the chaps. You form a comradeship, you know, camaraderie with all these chaps and we were all going to sort of enlist, which we eventually did. And, you know, they were privates and sergeants, they went through the ranks. It was something that you thought, 'Well, they're calling for me, why not be in it? Fight for your freedom, freedom of expression - freedom of this and freedom of that - your king and country'. You know, the old flag waving thing, to be in it, which is what I did.

Did you enlist with a group or ...

No. I enlisted on my own because, you know, there was this ten weeks after all the others had come down and of course I ended up with pneumonia so I was away for ten weeks because of that.

But did you particularly want to join an infantry battalion?

Ah, well, I attempted before the war, before I even went into the apprenticeship, to go to Duntroon, but then I failed on medical grounds. I tried to get into the air force. I failed on medical grounds. Something to do with the kidney system and the [inaudible] used to show up in these test tubes, you know, and they'd see that and they'd put me on a course of three months of eating basically parsley. I don't know what that was supposed to do but that was to clear up the symptom. It didn't at all and of course soon as it came to the AIF and I got in there and I came down here and had a medical examination in the AMP building, when I looked I could see the same discolouration in the urine but I went through with flying colours. That's why they have PBI - poor bloody infantry.

At the time did your family support your decision to enlist?

Oh yes, yes.

And how about your employer?

Oh definitely, they were right behind. They were wonderful.

You would have expected to return to the same job after the war?

Mmm, mmm.

Was there some type of send off for you in the Wallaroo community?

No 'cause I had to get down to the what's-a-name, pronto, to Woodside. Because they said when they rang up, I think it was on the Thursday about midday, and as I say, 'This was the last and final call. Unless you can present yourself by nine o'clock tomorrow morning at the medical centre at the AMP building I'm afraid we'll have to close that position off because there's others waiting to take it over'. So I hot-footed to the doctor and said, 'I'm off' and got all my things and got the train at five o'clock that night and got down. Spent the night at the Grosvenor and presented meself the next day up there for the AMP medical and was accepted.

Well, when you came to be a part of the 2/27th were you conscious of their heritage with the first AIF as a unit?

No. I wasn't to be truthful, because I was in the 43rd/48th and then they disband and became two separate battalions: the 43rd, which I ended up in, and the 48th which went to the river. And, no, I wasn't aware. I mean, I knew that it was a wonderful battalion but I couldn't have given you its history.

But were you aware of it being purely South Australian?

Oh yes, yes, yes. Because these battalions that are raised here are basically South Australian even though subsequently we had all the other States represented in it, they came through as reinforcements.

How was it decided at the time of enlistment who went into rifle companies or into specialist units like intelligence or signallers or mortars?

(20.00)Well, I was in the infantry because that was basically an infantry battalion, the 43rd, the 2/27th is an infantry battalion but with all the specialist groups in it. I'd done my training as an officer for the rifle company or the rifle platoon to start with anyway and that's where my ability lay and they could see it. The selection was done by the CO and the 2IC and other officers who'd seen a bit of service. If not service they'd been in the CMF for a long while. And on the specialist side, you know, some were engineers and others were in the medical fraternity. But, of course they could see that they weren't qualified to go into a medical service but they were for the RAP. And the engineers, they were with the pioneer platoon. And people who were capable of doing things with their hands, well, they were shunted around to these things and if you were a nice bullocky looking type they'd put you in the mortars. If you had a bit of grey matter, well, maybe you went in the I[ntelligence] section. No, it all depends what your bent was towards this and that and mine was towards infantry.

> Well, by August of that year the battalion had begun company exercises at Woodside. Who was presumed to be the enemy and on what sort of terrain was the unit going to fight?

Well, the enemy, we had fictitious names for the enemy, you know, blue force or this force or someone down from the north. The terrain you had to accept it as it was because it's no good trying to plan your training on the flat and all you had was hills all around you. No, the whole thing, you had to conform your tactics, you had to conform with the land as you found it.

> So there was no concept in the men's minds then of who they were actually going to fight or where they ...

I can't recall really that, whether that would have been so. Even after the war there was always a bit of tainting and this when they'd make up some fictitious name but it had a peculiar oriental ring to it.

> Well, can you remember when the men knew that they were going to be sailing and what they knew of their destination?

Well, I think after the reinforcements sailed, left Australia, to go to the, you know, 6 Division and some of them were waylaid and went through to England. And then, I think, Italy came into the war and some went down to South Africa, I was hoping that we would have made England because I knew the others had gone there and I'd never been to England and, of course, my forbears came from there. But fate took a hand and I wasn't to make it. And we thought, well, with Italy coming in it would appear as though we would be going to the Middle East. And even then, on the way over in the ship, you know, with the ... we thought, well, we were on three pretty big liners in that convoy - not all, you know, they were the three in our convoy - the *Aquitania*, I think *Mauretania* and the *Queen Mary*, and I think, well, we must be going up somewhere in the canal.

> Well, on the *Mauretania* you went to Fremantle and you were given shore leave in Fremantle.

How delightful.

> Well, what did the men do on their last leave in Australia, would you recall?

I don't know, God. I'd be foolish to ask them what they did. No, they organised the - they were very hospitable people over there - and they organised trips around the place, you know, and bus tours here and there and, you know, they had a few odd drinks. I think they had some dancing arranged for the men and they all had to be back on board by whatever time it was, whether it was eleven o'clock that night, I'm not quite certain. And, of course, we had a few who decided they'd like an extended leave which was only natural and ... but anyway we all got back on board eventually even though over the next few days a few orderly cases where people were put on charges for this and that, which is only natural anyway.

(25.00) What did you do in Fremantle?

What did I do? I joined - there was about six of us - and we were shown the highlights of Fremantle, up to Perth, in tour with these ladies and then we had afternoon tea with them and at the duly appointed time of being back on board we arrived back. But, no, just sightseeing because I'd never been there before.

> Then after Fremantle when you set out, what was shipboard life like? There must have been training of all sorts and some sort of ceremony of the crossing of the equator, all that type of thing. What was shipboard life like?

Yes it was ... well, it was a big adventure, let's say that, to, you know, to be sailing on a ship. We were on the *Mauretania* and it had never been converted at that stage or hadn't been converted into a troop carrier. And the facilities there were incredible. Even all the menus, when we sat down in the dining room, were still with the old nautical motifs on them, you know, the dolphins and fish and flying fish and everything, beautifully done, and they were all printed menus that we had which was still like, you know, first class - first class meals. And we were split up, not all officers of our battalion were in groups or being together, we were there with the artillery, we were there with the field ambulance medical services, I think there was about twelve nursing sisters aboard as well. But they rotated them around. But it was very good because I sat at a table where the three or four other people there had travelled fairly widely before the war, you know, men with independent means and I learnt a lot from that and it was very good. But then, of course, it wasn't all beer and skittles, you know, you no sooner got there we were in lectures, there was PT training and I think at that stage where there was regular meals - or not like it happened afterwards, it had to be rotated - we had two meals a day, I think. Two meals in twenty-four hours. They had to do this. But, no, that was really enjoyable except, you know, the odd fright when someone went overboard. There was a light ... you never knew because the number of people involved, you know, it was like going down good old Rundle Street or Hindley Street in the days when it wasn't a mall and there was people milling around everywhere. But this [fellow] went over and they threw over a flare and, you know, with a lighter, and one of the escort destroyers came back through or corvette came back and they even put their search lights on way behind us looking for this supposedly person who went overboard. But we never really ever found out whether in fact it ... whether he was found. I would have doubted it with the speed we were going. But, you know, it always made me aware, well at least at that stage, where the number of troops, a thousand involved, and these two big capital, or three capital ships and these little destroyers, corvette, and there they are. They get out there in the middle of the Indian Ocean with these search lights on. You know, I said, 'God, they'll draw all the crows in the world', but, no, they didn't. They were very efficient. I don't think as far as I can recall ever Australians losing anyone going down on the troop ships with the movement we had backwards and forwards from the Middle East, and New Guinea and Borneo.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

> Identification: Australian War Memorial project to create a sound archive of Australia in the war of 1939-45. Mr Charles Sims interviewed by Rob Linn, 31st January 1990, Adelaide, South Australia. Tape one side b.

Well, the *Mauretania* eventually arrived at Bombay and you were moved as a unit to the hills to the east at Deolali.

Deolali, yes, that's right.

And where you met with the 2/14th and the 2/16th Battalions. What did you think of them?

Those two sister battalions?

I'm talking about the nature of your sister battalions and what you thought of them and how you got on with them.

Well, at that stage, I think it was the first time we'd been in contact as you know, the three battalions together. Some of the people I'd known beforehand at schools but basically is how they operated as a battalion, well, we had no knowledge of that until a year or so later after the Syrian campaign. But they were good. The Western Australians always had a very good reputation I suppose coming from, you know, miners, Kalgoorlie and the two-up gang which was their national sport or recreation. The ... the 2/14th, the Victorians, again, knew some of the officers but the men and how they would have functioned we had no ... it was an unknown quantity and so were we to them. And it wasn't until we really got in and there was a bit of hot lead floating around that you became aware.

Was there any knowledge of how they got on with the British and Indian units at the time?

No. No, I can't recall anything of that.

Was there any chance for the men to travel and collect souvenirs or that type of thing?

Where, at Deolali?

Mmm.

I think we were there for ten days, I'm not quite certain of that. Yes, well, we were within the local precincts, yes, I think that was all you could really do there. Maybe one thing of getting them out of the Bombay area and getting them inland because they could have got on a lot of strife down in Bombay.

Have you heard of any of the men taking Indian servants at Deolali?

Well, I mean, everyone ... you'd go around and you'd see them being shaved while they're lying down in bed, a hair cut. It's incredible all this going on. They'd never had this attention lavished on them before because it's almost taboo for a European to be seen by an Indian picking up rubbish and doing this, you know, these menial tasks, so they do it. But you had to watch them as we found later in Palestine if you wanted to retain your personal possessions,

and not only personal but, you know, possessions, you had to have eyes out of the back of your head.

Why I asked that was because John Burns in his history of the unit suggests there was a bit friction between the Indians and the soldiers there at Deolali.

Yes. I can't recall that. I mean, there could have been quite easily but ... see, when John wrote that book that was the '48s, '49 and '50 - there's a lot of water gone under the bridge and there's a lot of deterioration in the mental process too and the thinking. You can't recall a lot of these little incidents but I wasn't aware of that.

Well, the battalion then sailed on the ... is it *Takliwa*?

Takliwa.

... on the Red Sea and there was open fire on Italian aircraft at some time and it disembarked at Kantara and it says too, to the Arabs all the Australians were 'George'.

George, 'Saieda' George. That was it, 'Saieda' George.

And the Australians, as you've just said, saw the Arabs as something to be a little bit careful of - rogues and ...

My word.

As the battalion was in the Palestine/Syria area longer than most Australian units can you tell me, was there any knowledge in the unit of local politics and what sort of responses did you have to the local people?

You say local politics?

Mmm. Was there any knowledge of local people and the way they worked in their communities?

Well, we did have a series of lectures and discussion groups given by certain people prior to disembarking at Kantara explaining the country that we were going into, their politics, their treatment of women and so on. And the troops were aware that they had to, you know, step warily. They should show due respect to the customs of the local people. And, no, we became aware of that, because I think that was a matter of policy of the command to ensure that we did have some knowledge of the things we might be facing there.

Did you view the Arabs with some suspicion? Did you have cause to?

I had a lot of good friends amongst the Arabs. Eventually, you know, we became friendly. But, of course, I suppose you get the odd rogue, it doesn't matter what country, what nationality. But they possibly more so than any others. They used to be around the camps selling this and selling that and especially their oranges, you know, oranges. But you had to be careful. All your rifles had to be ... I think we used to have the most peculiar,

uncomfortable sort of a bamboo slatted things and you could lift up the top when you went into it and you used to put all of your personal possessions and your rifle inside that and lock them and you slept on that. But even so, they got through. They managed to 'clifty' this and 'clifty' that. (laughs)

What was 'clifty'? Purloin, was it?

Yeah, purloin, yeah.

Early in February, 1941, Bob Menzies came to visit the camp. Could you remember that and how he was received?

Yeah. Oh well, I mean, you know there was one or two of the rowdy ones, 'Pig Iron Bob' or something like that. But by and large, he had a very good reception. Yes, I can remember that and I think ... was Casey another one? I'm not quite certain.

So generally Menzies got a good reception?

Oh yes. Yeah.

Then on 8th June 1941 the Allies invaded Syria.

8th June, yeah.

Now, up to this point in time little recording has been done with other units about the fighting in Syria. Can you give me some information about your own involvement and observations of the warfare in Syria?

But before we go onto that you did ... you were going to take in the part when we went out in Sidi Barrani.

Yes, go on.

That was before, when we came back.

Yes, go on.

At one stage we thought we were going through to Greece and that was the intention and we got issued with all our woollen underclothes and goodness knows what and we went for a march out of camp and - so that this would confuse the enemy - went out in the bush and ended up, I think that was getting on a train out on the mulga somewhere, and eventually ending up going into Mersa Matruh. And then A Company, the company I was with, we went up to Sidi Barrani and there to collect some of the POWs and, of course, whilst we were there Rommel started his push and we noticed ... heard this noise at night and thought, 'God, it was a "Khamsin"', these terrific storms they get, the wind storms. Anyway, the next thing some tanks appear on the horizon and little armoured cars were scooting back and they were the English and they said, 'You blokes better get into your vehicles and get going because Rommel's broken through and they're doing a wide ... and circling down through the entire depression and you'll be cut off'. So, I mean, the POWs didn't eventuate - the ones that we

went to take back, the Italians - so we were off, hot-footed it back through to Mersa Matruh and joined up with the rest of the battalion and then back we go into the Middle East again. And I think I've got this right, I'm not quite certain of that one. Is it at variance with what you've got there?

And then, of course, it started whether we were going up ... issued with underwear, woollen things, neck-to-knee, going into Greece. That's when the debacle started there. But it wasn't to be. The next thing there was going to be the first Australian action in mass into Syria and of course we'd made friends with a lot of the Jews along the way in their kibbutz, you know, with their ... Of course, they became a bit of the meat in the sandwich like this. So anyway, we started off and I think it was the 2/16th Battalion who were the first to go in to Syria. They had to capture the ... and Don Company of our battalion, I think they had to capture a couple of block houses on the way in on the main road. But before they could get near some of these of course up goes the main road, a terrific explosion, and that was blown up. So we couldn't use the coastal road and then they had to move inland a bit. And my first recollection of all this, because we - A Company - at that stage wasn't involved physically in it, we were just sort of in reserve and nearby was the Litani River where we had to make this bridgehead - or the engineers did. But I think it was Kees, an Englishman - Kees, he's the VC, Victoria Cross - they came n and did a landing on the northern side to establish, you know, this beachhead and to relieve the pressure so that we could get across the river and carry on. And, of course, we either landed in the wrong spot or whatever it was, it was a bit of a shemozzle. But eventually we got through and we got across the Litani River and that's where we became embroiled with the French for the first time. That's on a, you know, A Company. Don Company would have been there a bit sooner than that. I think they got across in another section.

> Was that unexpected to you to find the French or had you knowledge of that's who you'd be engaging?

Well, they said that there was the ... you know, the Free French and the Vichy French and all these African troops. Senegalese troops were there. No, I think we had an inkling. We were given some inkling of this that the Vichy French would be there, they would be resisting.

> And did you lead the attack on Monastery Hill?

What, the battalion?

> No, D Company?

Yeah, D Company would have done that I should imagine. That would have been in the history. See you're scattered and sometimes you wouldn't see any of the other battalions. And if you are at Battalion Headquarters as an adjutant or CO or the IO, all this information came into you but when you were in little groups, you know, out - radiating out - it was hard at times to become fully aware of what the overall plot was and what had been happening. You'd get it bit by bit but, see, your nerve centre was at the IO, you know, the Battalion Headquarters.

> And what was the nature of that action at that time against the French? Was there high ground and low ground?

Yes.

What was the attempt?

Yes, well, it was undulating ground. Inland a bit, you know, it was pretty mountainous, not like in New Guinea, not to that extent. But it was, it was hard going and of course we were eventually pushed in on the inside in the 16th Battalion I think - 2/16th was on the flank on the coastal front and we were up on the right - and, no, that was undulating ground.

(15.00) Then you'd get flats, you're little dongas and which didn't provide much cover and, of course, the French they vacated the defences on the lowest spurs and went up the top of the spurs, you know, in the high grounds so they could shoot down on us. And, God, I'll never forget that. And that was our first ... you know, the baptism to fire getting through to doing a company attack. And when you look back in retrospect it makes you smile. You know, we were supposed to be perfect. Now, textbook application of the principles and fire and movement which you did - arrowhead or diamond formation or flank this and that - which was all right from the point of view of, you know, textbooks soldiery. But when it came to having a bit of hot lead thrown at you, I remember Brigadier Stevens saying, he said, 'Look, the only thing that's it's like, you get a handful of wheat and you thrown it like that and it's all over the place'. He said, 'That gives you the formation where at any one stage you get the minimum casualties and the minimum number of troops in interrelated fire'. If you come down like that on the arrowhead you might have ten men down that side and ten in there and you've got it going over here and all those ten - and it was enter target later - and, you know, they can shoot straight down the line whereas they've got to try and pick you off individually. And that's where we suffered casualties walking on these flats with these French up in the hill, the foothill, firing down at us. What ... you know, there was no good going ... 'cause there was a creek bed further down towards the sea and to hell with the formation, are you going to break up a formation? It's a matter of getting bodies around there with the, you know, weapons that can neutralise the fire from these positions. You know, we could have done that. But that wasn't according to the textbook so we soon learnt that.

I was going to say, you learnt a lot.

Yeah, you've got to use the ground as you find it and you can't ... as I say, you know, the principles of war that apply with respect of what the terrain is but you've got to use a bit of common sense, that's it. Some of them, you know, sort of missed out on it. It's too late to use any common sense. But still, we came through that. That was our first baptism. And from then on, of course, it was a matter of fire and movement all the time 'cause the artillery was coming up and firing behind and 16th Battalion on the left and the 14th and the others - the Cheshire Yeomanry I think - out on our right flank. We didn't see them. We just knew they were there. They were providing protection and that was that but you don't know what's going on. You don't see it. You're not an observer to it except one or two little isolated incidents where they'd involved on your flank close in.

So the whole concentration was on the unit?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, but I mean, that's on that. But, of course, overall concept it was a brigade operation and the brigade commander was the one who was to do it and, you know,

with his attached troops and services, he was the one to plan it. So we worked as a brigade but you're not aware of that, all you're ... your own little show, whether it be a section, or a platoon, or a company, or a battalion. 'Cause even with the battalion there was a lot days you didn't see the others.

But everybody learnt a lot from that action?

Oh yes, yeah. But this particular one was just the A Company doing this first approach after we got over the Litani and got the first spur and looked down and we had to keep, you know, the advance going. We were ordered to move in and attack this other objective and of course there was a lot of open ground there. And, of course, there was ground where you'd go along in single file and that was like a washed out creek bed and they wouldn't have presented any targets, any opportunities for the machine guns up on our right flank to come down on you.

Mortars, yes. Well, I mean, mortars, you can't get away from those wherever you go. You don't have to be sighted, as long as they you're in that area, they can mortar you. But to walk across open ground like that, as we did initially, it's just one of those things. Baptism by fire and we soon learnt.

Well after that action finished you were in Syria for a further six months on garrison duties?

Yeah. Well, we went right through up to, you know, Damour, which was the most decisive action that we were involved in because that was cruel.

Tell me about that?

(20.00)Well, Damour, we got up there on these heights and the country was getting more precipitous and rugged and, of course, you were in amongst the villages as well and moving through their little terraces - they used to be terraced down like this, you know, they used to grow their vines and what have you ...

Terraced down the hill sides?

Yeah, and very rocky. So with shells landing there with the French and the shrapnel plus all the rocks, you know, it was a devil of a thing because, you know, quite a few people got killed and maimed with just rocks because it was ... not much earth on there and they didn't need much earth for growing their vines but they had a hell of a lot of rocks and they used to build up these 'sengers'. The French were doing that and they couldn't dig down into it and they built these little rock 'sengers' and all sort of raised up which gave them, you know, some protection. But that one at Damour when they couldn't find a track and, you know, we had all the battalion going out and then it was a do or die and, of course, they sent 9 Platoon out and, you know, I was in charge and I had been out on three other occasions - or two other occasions, that's right, and I couldn't see. And we ran into French patrols and suffered a few casualties. We had to go a long way, miles, because they had pretty good positions dug in and they had the observation over the whole of that area because they're much higher vantage points and we found that and that's why I had to stay out, you know, for thirty-six hours to find them.

The only way to do it was, it was no good moving around a lot of your troops so 9 Platoon, I sent them back and stayed there after we lost one chap. I think he was bayoneted by a French patrol and, you know, when we say a track what it is, it's like a goat track. It's only discernible mainly in full moon or in broad daylight and you couldn't be there in broad daylight. You couldn't move round because you'd be plastered. And that's what I thought, 'Well, the only thing to do, send them back'. It had to be then because we were running out of time. So we did that and found the track and then we started off on the operation after that and that was the ... the decisive ... that broke the camel's back once we got through and the 16th coming through the banana plantations down on the coastal sector and the 14th and the Yeomanry, and the 2/3rd machine gunners up on the right flank towards Damascus.

Well, what are your memories of the garrison duties in Syria?

Well, when you say garrison duty, it was a bit of a holiday really. Something strange, holiday. But it was a relief 'cause we were only there sort of the six weeks in that campaign although it was pretty vicious at times. But to go out on these garrison duties, you know, just seeing a bit more of the people, the countryside, getting in a bit more strife as the Australian soldier is tended ...

I want to get to this in a minute. When you say a bit more strife, what type of things are you referring to?

Oh well, when it happens with the women, wine and song I suppose with the boys. Not only the boys, I mean all of them, you could say all of them. But, you know, they went out and did this garrison duty and clean up because the French left things in a frightful mess - most unhygienic - all these smells. You know bottles of perfume that was their bath, that was their toiletry. They'd have a sort of wash and that and, of course, we went into one of the barracks and we thought, 'Oh, this is going to be good'. Well, there was no windows because of the blast from the shells had been aimed at it to make certain there was no glass left in the pane. But beds, and they had mattresses on there. I forget what they were, some sort of thing, but filled up with straw and bed bugs, God, and we didn't know what a bed bug was until we got ... and that night, blokes were yelling and screaming, 'God, what have they put in here?'. And, of course, in the morning we were bitten red, all our backs, the legs, everywhere. So, that was why we had to burn the whole lot and we put these what's-a-name bombs they used to have, you know, a round thing and you'd pull it out and it was a ... well, it was like the sprays you get these days.

(25.00) Insecticide?

Mmm. Yeah.

Well, did the unit have good relationships with the diverse peoples of the area at the time?

I think so, I think so.

And in Beirut itself, the historian seems to suggest that there was quite a bit of fun and games going on, that Madame Mareka was a great attraction?

Who was Madame Mareka? I missed out on that one.

Tell me a bit about some of the other things you did?

Oh no. See, we'd have leave passes to go down there and it was good fun. Again, see, something we'd never seen before. You had to be wary. I mean, they'd take your underclothes off you at times, some of these people, just ... oh, you know, but others were very good. But I didn't see much of that. We did a bit of shopping and things like that. Sightseeing a little. But I was more content to get into these places where you can have a few drinks and there was a few nice looking girls around the place and dance and, you know, enjoy yourself. But, oh no, I suppose it's like all these things, it doesn't matter if it's the first world war, second world war, or any other war when they let off a bit of steam. But I think by and large they were very well controlled.

Well, after Beirut you boarded the *City of London* ...

Gee, wait on. After Beirut ...

No, no, sorry. After Beirut you went to Bombay.

Yeah, we were there overnight, Bombay. That's right.

And then the battalion enshipped and made its way back to, I guess you thought it was going to be Java?

Well, I mean, it was going to be I think Sumatra or Java, whatever, in that area. And, no, that's right. We got on there and we came out on the *Ile de France* and we were in this suite. It amazes me these suites that ran down on the first class thing that you go from one suite into the next. So these dividing doors, they just ... you think it was a panel and they must have got up some high jinks in those days, you know, when it was a first class passenger ship. But we got at Kantara embarked on the *Ile de France*, got into Bombay. The next thing we had the night's leave, I think - either night or day - we went out on Grant's Road. I heard of this years and years ago 'cause at Wallaroo they used to come through, vessels, you know, shipping off wheat and so on, and they talked about some of these sailors - of Grant's Road in Bombay is the most notorious red-light district in the world. They said, 'You know, you could get in there and you'd disappear off the face of the earth and you wouldn't know'. So six of us decided we'd just have a looksee. And they had the English red caps there, they were the English colony with their red things and they'd been there for a good number of years and they knew the run of the district. But we were all armed, we had to keep together but to see these, in cages, I've never ... and the bartering that went on, and it was a seething mass of humanity, like ants - millions of them, God.

Were you saying human beings in cages?

Yes, oh yes. Yes, they were bartering girls, women, with a curtain just at the back, you know, and of course they'd bid. The hands out like this. It looked like the zoo. But money was changing place there, not a banana at the zoo, and undo the bolt, in, back. And, oh, maybe ten minutes later, sometimes less than that, out, and the next one. And I'd never see them go. No wonder, you know, some of those areas there people disappear. And, oh no, it was notorious.

But we got just the sightseeing of that and thankful to get out of it in one piece and then we, what did we do then? We got back and got on the *City of London*, yeah, *City of London*.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

> Identification: Australian War Memorial project to create a sound archive of Australia in the war of 1939-1945. Interview with Mr Charles Sims in Adelaide on 31st January 1990 by Rob Linn. Tape two, side a.
>
> We've just been talking about your embarkation as a unit on the *City of London*. Where did you think you were going at that stage as a unit? This is making its way, presumably, to Java I guess.

Java, that is correct. Well, that general area although we found out subsequently that we should have gone in up the Bay of Bengal to land at Rangoon to join the thing and I think this is where Churchill and Curtin were daggers drawn over the ... what the Australian troops, where they were going to be. He maintains they're wanted ba k in Australia because of the Japanese threat coming down from the north and Curtin said, 'Well, ...', at least Churchill said, 'No, we want them into the Burma, that's where we want them'. And anyway that was the first job we were going to do and then we found out later when the ... the mull - I forget what they call it - the mull at Trincomalee. I've never seen so many ships in this huge basin and there was only a boom, you know, entrance into it but it's like a huge saucer and all these ships and they had buoys and they used to have ... you know, you were anchored to a buoy. And what a target that would have been. And we found out later there was a Japanese task force that was floating around in the Bay of Bengal and they had a couple of converted aircraft carriers there as well as other cruisers and destroyers and they must have had an inkling of the movement from Bombay going south. Now whether that was ... the interpretation was that, right, they must be ready to come around, and that's where the second and third machine gunners under Brigadier Blackburn, because they were on a ship that was that fast it didn't need an escort, they shot off and left some of their equipment behind in another one. It was a bit of a mess up. And we were to be with them, see, to go around there because it chopped and changed, our destination. I think it was an airfield that we were going in to defend but, of course, the next thing we knew the Japanese paratroopers had evidently been dropped there. So we were moving around, it was like playing in a game of draughts. And then they said, 'Right, we're going south' and we had, I think it was - my recollection now - 35 vessels in our convoy going south and we had the two battle ... no, one battle ship, the *Royal Sovereign*, as far as I can recollect and the cruisers, the *Dorchester* and *Cornwall* and plus all these other little corvettes.

> It was the *Dorsetshire*, was it?

I think it was the *Dorsetshire* and *Cornwall*.

> So thankfully you actually got back to Colombo again in the end and then returned to Australia ...

Yeah, we went up and down and past the Equator three times in two days.

And you came back to Australia for training to prepare for battle against the Japanese?

Mmm.

Now that occurred in the Caloundra area from March till August. Now how much effective jungle training did the unit have at that time?

Well, up till that stage?

No, no. At that time?

Or whilst we were at Caloundra?

At Caloundra?

(5.00) Well, we were mainly doing defences against the Japanese because at that stage they thought it was like [inaudible] that they'd be coming through so we were mainly concerned on the defensive layout of the Caloundra area and that was part of our job. And Maroochydore where the other battalion extending further north. We did go into a bit of rain forest for a while but that wasn't any sort of training, it was just to say well this is the sort of thing if we go from here further north we possibly would have to expect this type of terrain. So, basically, it was on defence.

And what were you taught about Japanese tactics in the Malayan and other campaigns at this time?

Ah ... can you switch it off there. I had aircraft identification.

So you had some training on aircraft identification of Japanese at the time?

Yeah. There were sort of little booklets ... booklets issued. But I can't recollect anything else. No doubt if it was available we would have been given it but ...

Well, early in August 1942 the battalion sailed for Port Moresby and went into camp at Itiki near the southern end of the Kokoda Trail and Potts had taken command of the 21st Brigade and Cooper had replaced Moten as CO for the 2/27th.

Yeah, well, that happened back in Australia.

That's right. And the 2/14th and the 2/16th Battalions were sent forward along the trail and as you went up with the 2/27th you met the Militia Battalions of 39th and 53rd in retreat. What were your feelings about the Militia Battalions coming back?

First of all, just go back a bit and say, we were held - the 2/27th - were held as a divisional reserve aiming to go down to Milne Bay because they had to bear that in mind of what

happened with that operation down there. So we were held back in reserve until such time as it had stabilised down at Milne Bay, then we went up after the other battalions. But, and it was at that stage we ... well, struck a lot of our own 21 Brigade who were returning, wounded. And then we struck some of the 39th Battalion who were a great bunch of chaps - youngsters - and then there was one battalion, the 53rd I think, whilst a lot of people blame, you know, they ... Well, I had cause to do because I nearly lost a whole platoon because of the fact they weren't there when I sent a platoon out to relieve them at an ambush with the Japs coming down to Efogi and they just disappeared. But they had no training really. They didn't even know they were even going there. I think they were going down from wherever their training was to get on a vessel and somewhere else. They had no idea they were going to go up there. But the other battalions, the 39th - which we had quite a bit to do with, they were involved in the operation of 16th and 14th and the 27th on the brigade campaign against Gona. See, they came down there as well.

So your feelings about the militia at least in this action was a bit, one way and the other. You felt the one battalion, the 39th, was excellent but the 53rd let you down a little?

Yes, yes, yes.

Now, could you just outline for me some of the problems on the Kokoda Trail that you faced with communications and food and that type of thing?

Well, of course, the big one was food and the fact that you've got to have a proper evacuation for your wounded. That's essential. You've got to have that otherwise your morale goes to pot. But, food, we were rather surprised that the powers that be hadn't foreseen this and established, you know, depots along the track with food, rather than having to resort as they did to the biscuit bombers and everyone having to cart seven days' rations on them plus all the ammunition and in some cases it was a total weight of well over sixty to sixty-five pounds per man and in that sort of terrain that's a killer. And it rained every afternoon and it would get freezing cold at night and get stinking hot in the mornings and you'd go ... you'd take three steps up and come back two and everyone had to make sticks to try to get up there. But with a weight like that it was a killer. But that's all we could do because they never provided the arrangements to stagger depots along the trail where food was readily available.

(10.00) And, of course then, the evacuation of the wounded, they had to come back over this muddy ... well, you've seen photos of those tracks. It was cruel for human beings to have to put up with that sort of thing. But, that was it. That was the situation and you had to take it.

What were your relationships like with the Papuans?

Well, the ones that we had with our ... 'cause I was evacuated at one stage with the old fuzzy wuzzy - were good, I thought they were wonderful.

Did you sustain an injury at that point?

Oh no, this was subsequently. This was ... yeah, yeah. But, no, they were good, the fuzzy wuzzies.

You had good relationships with them at the time?

Mmm.

After this action Potts was replaced as brigade commander and Blamey had a side-swipe at the brigade and Potts and this seemed most insensitive and his judgments were wrong. How did you and some of the others feel about Blamey's assessments at the time and with him being so far away with no idea of the conditions under which it was being fought?

Well, you can say everyone to a man was ropeable. They were disgusted that they ... our commander should make an allegation like that without knowing the facts. And, of course, a lot of it I think it was with the journalists too and correspondents and they painted, you know, at times the incorrect sort of picture. Well, whether he gleaned a lot from them or from his own people I don't know but in a lot cases it was wrong. Although some people with him say that he would have denied it at that stage, that he didn't mean that and was taken out of context. But based on that, what we took to be the gospel, he said those words and inferred ... ropeable - shocking.

What did you think his words were? One account we read was that the rabbit that ran away was the rabbit that was shot.

Yeah, yes, yes. Well, that was my recollection. I can't recall actually on that parade what was in fact said. I can't really recall whether I was on that parade because I was in the hospital. We came back and were cut off at Efogi and whether I'd got out of hospital in time - I had dengue, pneumonia and, you know, tropical ulcer - and I can't recall. But I have a sneaking suspicion I was there and heard, you know, those comments.

After a brief period of rest and reassessment the battalion was divided into five - Chaforce and Jawforce, Eilogoforce and Koitakiforce - and then most of the 2/27th reassembled early in November and moved down to the Seven Mile aerodrome near Port Moresby and then you were taken into the Owen Stanleys for the heaviest action that the battalion saw. And Gona was definitely the hardest fighting from all that I can see. Can you describe something of that action at Gona?

Yes. But beforehand you were saying some of the hardest, it was but I don't think compared to the Owen Stanley where you had the physical, you know, the herculean task of trying to climb up with all your ammunition and thing and then to come back. You know you slide, you thought you were never going to get to the top and then you get to one top of the hill and you'd look down and there's another one. So, up and down, up and down. And that, to my way, it was equally hard I think ...

So the earlier was physically just as ...

Oh, physically, yeah. Of course the mental process started to come in after having gone through all that and endured that, the Kokoda operations, to have that and to be, you know, forced back, you know to withdraw back to a firm base so that we can lengthen his supply line then hit him as we did, you know, for the rest of the division. Whereas in Gona, down

there, physically it didn't take that much out of us. I mean, there were swamps and this and that but it was the mental, the mental thing of continually having to, you know, go into attack every morning, afternoon, being subjected to fire, being subjected to this or that. No, I would have put the New Guinea one, at least the Kokoda one as ...

(15.00) Just as hard.

Oh gosh, yes.

But at Gona were you being pushed from top to keep attacking?

Oh yes, all the time. Because they wanted - as far as I can gather - they wanted to get the news to the public. They wanted to ... and also through Parliament, they're the ones, the politicians. They had no idea what in the deuce was going on. They wanted to have some bright news and say, 'Righto, here we are. We have this day taken Gona', and they didn't worry about the loss of life and, you know, we were decimated like the rest of the battalion down to Gona.

And how did the survivors respond to that type of treatment?

Well, I mean, they were ropeable but this actually came out, you know, subsequently, what was behind it all, trying to push to get good news and it was a waste of human life. They threw in lies whereas afterwards, you know, a couple of years afterwards they'd throw in weaponry, ammunition, bombs, anything else rather than human lives and it was an appalling waste of human resources that, that Gona one.

The battalion, after that horrific fighting, the battalion gradually reformed at Ravenshoe on the Atherton Tablelands.

Yeah.

And the carrier group which had been in action also returned and Bishop came in - John Bishop came in replacing Cooper. How was Blamey, who had been such a harsh critic of the unit, received when he inspected the battalion there in June?

Where, at Ravenshoe? No, we had quite a bit of troubled waters there and John Bishop had the task of doing this and because they still were smouldering ...

The men were?

Oh yes. And for him to come like that. And, of course, they realised then because ... well, you've got to leave be, you know, and get on with the job. But, oh no, they never ever forgot his remarks and the innuendoes. But, no, John Bishop had a bit of a hard task there trying to convince them but I think Blamey, afterwards, he did make mention of this and he knew the feeling amongst the men and he was trying to indicate that what he had in fact said had been taken out of context. He didn't make those statements, it was due to misreporting and so on. But, on the other hand, he admitted he was a bit hasty in his remarks because he was being

pushed by the government and especially MacArthur and, yes, it wasn't a very happy incident that one, but anyway.

Not very many men were placated by the sounds although ...

No, no ...

Well, in September 1943 after time back in Australia the battalion went north again and came into action against the Japanese in the Markham and Ramu Valleys.

Yes. Up the Shaggy Ridge.

That's right. Could you describe some of that action in that end?

Well, we left I think it was the Seven Mile aerodrome on the old Douglas's. I think it was a battery, the 2/4th Artillery, very friendly with them because they were affiliated with the 21 Brigade and they were the first, up till that stage, to drop out. Their guns and these blokes had never jumped with a parachute and they did that in the Ramu and, what was the name, Kaiapit ... was it Kaiapit?

Kaiapit.

Yeah. They dropped there with their full guns and these men - incredible. You know, twenty-five pounders and ammunition. God, they'd never been up in a plane some of them and had to jump out. But we all came in, we landed on a strip that had been cleared by some of the commandoes and we thought, 'Oh well, this is rosy. We'll push now up the valley and the 9 Division will be coming around through to Lae' and we were somewhat elated to think that the tide had really turned. Because the tide in fact had turned in Gona and before that on the Kokoda Trail because that's their first ever defeat on land and that was the end of the road as far as they were concerned.

(20.00) But landing on that one and coming down there we had an umbrella of fighters, the American fighters over us all the time, providing aerial cover. And we got out, disembarked, and went into our, you know, these areas, defensive areas and we spent the night and we moved on I think the next morning further up the valley crossing all these streams, by God. But hot and humid. The perspiration, you know, you'd have a drink of water and it would come out ... it's lucky it ever penetrated as far down your gut as your stomach because, oh, and going through all this kunai and some of this kunai, you know, ten feet high and razor sharp in parts, you know, you'd get cut and lacerated and you'd get mosquitoes and bugs and gnats. And, of course, it was wonderful going through these, you know, these swift flowing rivers because they were only fairly shallow but you'd be able to dunk yourself and have a bit of a wash as you went along, and, of course, the clothes would, you know, would dry on you. But, anyway, we got through all that part and then another bit of a push till we got further up to ... what was the other one? I'm trying to think of the other ...

Johns' Knoll?

Mmm?

Johns' Knoll?

Oh no. Well, that all happened after it but where we started off from to make this penetration up into Shaggy Ridge. And there was A Company, you know, we were the first to get there and it was only called Shaggy because of Bob Clampett, he was - when I was evacuated with pneumonia again he took over - and because that was his nickname, Shaggy, because he wouldn't cut his hair when he first joined the battalion. So they called him Shaggy. So, yes, so it was named Shaggy Ridge and very sort of apt. And I heard all this when we were evacuated back through to Dobodura in hospital and Brigadier ... who was our brigadier then? He was evacuated back and he was in a tent on his own and he had communications when they were launching the attack on the pimple at Shaggy Ridge, the 2/14th and so on - and Dougherty, Brigadier Dougherty - and he knew I was there a couple of beds away so he asked me to come in and listen into this and he had a sort of, almost a running commentary. Now where that was provided by the air support, we had these Air Cobras and we had the light things and the other one was the Australian built plane ... oh, a little fighter plane, an Australian fighter plane?

Wirraway?

Wirraway, little Wirraway. Now whether they were getting the feedback from there or not, I don't know. But he had a running commentary of this because they bombed it from the air to start with. It was a path like that, see, and the sheer sides went down, if you'd have stepped off you would have had it.

Just recap, why were you evacuated at that time? Did you get ...

I ended up with, you know, pneumonia again and this was at the start of the Shaggy Ridge, on the little knoll to go up. So out I went. Because I'd had the thingy for about three weeks but, you know, kept fighting it off, trying to, but it gradually caught with me and, you know, I was hopeless because at night you want to be very quiet and still and of course I couldn't stop coughing and bringing up, you know, the discharge and phlegm and goodness knows what. So they said, 'Well, you get back into the hospital again'. So I went out with the bearers, native bearers, and, you know, I was sad because I'd gone through all the operations - well, I mean, Shaggy Ridge was the start of it - with the battalion, every operation they were in. But I didn't see that through to the top of Shaggy Ridge. No.

Well, did you go back with the battalion to Australia in 1944, early '44?

No, because I was never involved in any of their marches through Brisbane or Adelaide because I was either running a school up at Canungra or coming back from New Guinea. We were late in getting back. Yes, so I missed out on those two marches. I think that one because I was in hospital or they went back and we were flown back afterwards I think.

So did you meet up with them again in November when the beach landing manoeuvres were on?

Oh, when they did that up in Queensland? Yeah, well, I was at Canungra so this is why I wanted to get out because I knew this other one in Borneo was on so I didn't ... I missed out

on all that and I came back about two days before the battalion was moving out from [inaudible]. Yeah.

(25.00) So you were with the battalion when it actually sailed?

Oh yes, yes.

June, '45?

Oh my word, yeah.

And you were on your way to Balikpapan at that stage?

Yes. We went into Morotai.

Mmm, right.

And we were stationed there and then they had a bit of a thing, a trial landing with the American ... these LSTs.

And how did that go at Morotai?

Very good, yeah. Very interesting that was. And then we were on board and then we had all our plan, because there we went through ... it was the only operation which involved the, all three services - army, navy and the air force - in, at Balik. And, of course, we did these ... a rundown of the whole thing at Morotai and where every man ... well, every company commander had his own big drawing sheets and they knew the whole lot from A to Z - aerial photographs were there - and they could see what they were going to do and when they were going to do it and, you know, what was happening on the right and the left, which was incredible and that's the first time being involved in an operation like that, then going off with these Americans in the LSTs and these Alligator things. You know, jump out of these, and we're seven miles out from the shore line and we watched the whole of the bombardment - aerial bombardment. I think Queen Wilhemina said, 'No, don't bomb my installations of oil otherwise I'll be suing you', which I think she got fifty million whatever it was out of it. But they had to because they were worried because the pipeline going up to Sambodja followed right along the beach line or just in from that, bomb that and they were frightened that they'd set the whole of the sea alight. And of course it was over a seven mile front, stakes driven in - I've never seen a network out on the beach, you know, some below high water level, you couldn't see them - and criss-cross and mines and they sent the Japanese demolition ... Japanese ... American demolition teams in, they did an incredible ... Frogmen, they cut this and demobilised these mines, cut a path through I think it was the night before we were due to take off. And in we went and then all the bombs came over and they dropped and oil wells going up, flames, smoke - I've never seen ... it looked like Guy Fawkes' day. (laughs)

And at the time did you feel that somehow you were being diverted from the main action further north by MacArthur and that perhaps Balikpapan was a questionable operation?

Well, that we found out subsequently, it was questionable. I think there was no need. I think, you know, the Australian at that stage had fought their first major operation against the Japanese and were successful and I think MacArthur, a bit of kudos for his own people to get involved and that and we were just a diversionary thing, thrown out there to give 'em something to do. But, nevertheless, it was a big operation. It's the biggest that the Australian forces have been involved in in our division going in with the air force and the navy and sort of the Dutch navy as well. There was a couple there, the *Van Tromp*, I think was the vessel. So, no, it was good to get it over.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

> Identification: The Australian War Memorial project to create a sound archive of Australia in the war of 1939-1945. Interview with Mr Charles Sims by Rob Linn in Adelaide on 30 January 1990. Tape two, side b.
>
> Now we've really got to the action of Balikpapan. Can you remember in the training and briefings you were given about the work at Balikpapan any language training or lists at the time?

Language training, no. No, I can't.

> Did you ever at any stage pick up any pidgin in New Guinea?

Oh yes, yes. Well I mean, that was, yeah, that was part of the thing we used to do at Canungra in the training down there, the jungle training war centre. Yes, but, oh yes, you learnt a thing, you know.

> This is your work at Canungra. Should we just go back a little bit, can you describe what you did for those months at Canungra?

Well, I was one of the instructors in the officer training wing and they had battalion sections there which they came as a battalion, operate as a normal battalion in the field. But the officer training was to ... you know, training officers which involved Dutch and Americans who were involved in the sou'west Pacific. So basically this was officer training and went through the whole gambit and it was a pretty hard tough course and very realistic because all ammunition fired is live and we had our top, you know, crack shots firing at people two feet in front of them, three feet, to give them the effect. Sometimes there was a casualty but they said this is all part and parcel of the training for war but this is to acclimatise them because a lot of them hadn't had any close encounters with a bit of hot lead. But this was the effect of being shot, when you, at ... they were crack shots these boys and they did this, simulated that. They had river crossings. You name it, we had all sorts of things. Up at night jungle training in lantana, people losing their eyes because of, you know, they wait a while and these vicious spikes that are on some of those things and one caught the eye of a prominent South Australian, you know, officer who was going through but that was it. So we'd train 'em up there up to full colonels and, 'cause, they'd never seen any operations, they may have been staff appointments but they'd never been involved, you know, in our operation in sou'west areas.

How did you feel about training these men who'd had no fighting experience as such?

Oh yeah, but a lot of them did. They had training experience as other ranks. But for those who hadn't, well, I mean, that's part and parcel of the job, they realised it, it had to be done. Some enjoyed it, maybe one or two didn't but still.

So when the time came for the Balikpapan operation you, in fact, had met some Dutch officers.

Yeah.

And did you meet any during the operation?

Yes. I had one attached to me when we were up at the divisional outpost, A Company, at Bangsal, at Bangsal. That was the divisional outpost and there was a little NICA officer Netherlands [inaudible] and had his jeep and his driver and batman, so he was there.

What was your reaction to the Dutch?

(5.00) Well, after seeing them fly in on ... what was it ... oh, an aircraft which was a seaplane and they came in - and this was out from Holland - medical, I think, and he was to bring most urgently needed supplies for the people we'd liberated to the Dutch for the PW camps in Makassar, he brought his old 'Vation Army ... at least, his Alsatian dog, which would have weighed I suppose all of sixty or seventy pounds - it was a monster - instead of medical supplies which were urgently needed. And there was nearly a riot when this became known by those we had liberated, you know, from the PW camps in Makassar. Shocking, you know, this was the attitude. And the local people who'd been in PW camps there they had no liking whatsoever for the NICA administration as they turned up.

Were you aware at the time that there were communist party cells sort of acting within the Australian troops?

No. What? Over there? In Borneo? No. No. I can't recall that. But that was ... oh well, I mean, if they in the I Section think they would have possibly known but ...

And were you aware of any Australian or Japanese arms being transferred to Indonesians for possible use against the Dutch?

Well, of course, when we went into Makassar we, A Company, was the first one in there with the brigade headquarters and we had 25,000 Nips to try and control with all their disposal and problems with ammunition and ... well, Jack was involved in some of that and he went out in the underground workshop - incredible. But then I was overall in charge of trying of dispose of this thing and he said 'put the ammunition out', these beautiful firearms - some of the handmade back in Holland, you know, these under and over shot guns, beautiful. And this all had to be put in and taken out and dumped. But I knew in some of the depots we had to rearm the Japanese themselves to protect the depots because we didn't have the number of troops to do it.

This is in Makassar?

Yeah. This is to stop that movement. I forget what they call themselves, I can't just recall. But they were ...

The independence movement.

Yeah. They were raiding these things to collect arms and ammunition.

Just looking back, Balikpapan was so incredibly organised with all the different forces involved. How did that compare with the earlier campaigns? Did that really strike you the differences, say, between the first Owen Stanleys work and the last?

Oh yes. What, do you mean between ... when we went into New Guinea first to Port Moresby to go up in there?

What were the great comparisons?

Oh well, I mean, the information. It's essential that you get the correct information, the right information and which we never got in New Guinea. You know, for instance, they'd been there for years and years, there were no maps. What maps they did have, I mean, a grade six child could have done. You could draw it off the world atlas and made a thing, say, even put in a few hatches here and said this is the rivers, you know. Oh no, that was the unknown and they had all that time beforehand to have done this with the administrator. I mean, to supply the maps of the terrain and then the food thing and then the evacuation. Put in airstrips. They only had the one up there I think. No, I think there was one at Kokoda and another one at - I can't even think of the name of it. They landed something there once. But, you know, just small planes, some evacuation there. Because the ideal thing would have been helicopters - wonderful.

There was a definite change then over time?

As against the Balik operation?

And Gona, too?

Well, Gona was ... no, I mean, that was on a par with the Owen Stanleys because there was very little ... what you ... you had to get out and patrol yourself to get your own information. There wasn't that much available.

And was there a difference with the Japanese as well over that time?

In what way?

Well, did the nature of the fighting change?

(10.00)Well, I think, in the Owen Stanleys you had a job to see them at times and other times you could see them miles away coming down with their lights ... lanterns, you know, walking down towards Efogi. But once in close-in fighting it all depends. Of course, we used to talk about a jungle, in a rain forest you can have no undergrowth underneath and these things it's like a huge umbrella above. I mean, you can see but, except, the only thing that would obliterate your vision is the tree trunks and things. But when you get down in savanna country you get a smaller type of bush scene, which part of the New Guinea was like that, they could come right up, you know, within a matter yards from you. You wouldn't know.

Now, of course, as far as Balik was concerned, well, we went through there and they were just obliterated off the face of the thing and they were run ing backwards and forwards. And we got in there pronto and held the high ground and we could cover them, we could fire down on them, and there was no major battle as such like that.

> Well, moving on to the time when you were in Makassar, were you informed about the events and forces that were already in the area at the time you came into the ...

What, the Japanese? Japanese?

> Not just the Japanese but the others as well?

Well, I mean, there's only the Japanese forces in there when we moved into Makassar. Later, of course, the Indian brigade came in I think but we were the first in there when Makassar ... at least, when Balik fell. And we went around, coming through on the ... there was that ship that was wrecked down here, blown ashore at Glenelg.

> No, I can't recall.

Yeah. It came in, it was washed in. The *Burdekin* and the *Barkoo* named after rivers in Queensland. And we went over - I think it was the *Burdekin*, it may have been the *Barkoo* - and we were proceeded by a flotilla of outside looking pumps and they had electric cables draped, a festoon between them, and they had big generators there and this was ... and I think we were met by, oh, maybe ten or twelve miles outside and approached through a channel into Makassar and it was stipulated, the admiral himself, would have to be on a barge so if anything happened he'd go up first because they proceeded and they were to clear these mines that had been dropped by the RAAF, they dropped these mines, and of course the generator going through that was to neutralise ... at least to demolish the mines. They would suddenly 'up'. I didn't see one go up. So we went on quite happily.

> I would like to deal with some of the relationships with the Indonesians themselves. Was there much bartering with them at Makassar?

No, not while I ... All I was ... As far as I can recall the only people we did any bartering with were people we released from the PW camps. They were Chinese - they were the wealthy people there - the Chinese or the Dutch. Indonesians, I can't recall, as a group having been involved with them at all.

Were there any military encounters with Indonesian forces at any stage? That's the independence movement?

Yeah. I think the only ones would have been the Japanese protecting. Although we could have had one or two patrols somewhere or other, you know, sent out to reinforce.

But you can't recall any?

I can't ... I wasn't involved in any of those.

Was there any term the Australians used for the Indonesians?

Not aware of it.

Right. Now Makasar was one of the wealthier cities and placed under Australian rule. Did anyone try to take advantage of this material wealth by commandeering, souveniring or buying goods?

Oh yes well, I mean, we gathered that all the population when they knew the Japanese were coming down they converted their [inaudible] into precious stone, you know, diamonds. [inaudible], I think they're diamond mines just down from Balik. And they used to put them in silk cloth then in earthenware jar and they'd go out in the field somewhere or other and plant them, bury them, and they'd then make a note. And at one stage, again I won't mention any names, but it was from another battalion, they knew what was going on with these people because you're supposed to send out a group - people had to, you know, dig - so you had a party to help and that and the person would say, or the family would say, 'Right, along here forty paces and that mountain over there ...' you had to have some natural feature because a tree could have been blown up or whatever and then they'd say within that certain area, you know, three feet down and you'll find them and they did. And, you know, there were diamonds and all sorts of valuable things. All the jewellery and old state stuff that they'd had for years and years. But, one unscrupulous sort of person decided that, you know, this is money for the taking and of course they went out and they did the digging themselves and confiscated this. And, of course, then an order of the day was issued that the padre was to go out on every search party that was delegated to go to a specific area. But they, oh yes, they'd all sort of hop in and make a little bit of whatever it was I suppose. But I can't recall anyone really knocking anyone over the head and doing things and taking their valuables from them once they got back to their own homes.

A lot of the Indonesian historians have often claimed that the Australians were at first very tough with the Dutch and then later supported them. And they believe that the change in the commander from Dougherty to Chilton was significant in this. Do you think that Chilton changed that policy at all?

Well, of course, at that stage, when Dougherty left I think I left. I went out in December and some of them still carried on there until after that because ... I can't even think. It was earlier in December that I left. I may have met Chilton - I knew him beforehand - I may have met him up, you know, there a couple of days before I came back to Australia because I was to come back originally from Makasar.

And did you find that your wartime experiences changed your perception of other races and cultures?

Yes, I suppose when you look back you realise we're so young in this country against the cultures of some of the others and they've been going on for, you know, hundreds and hundreds of years. Yes, I would say that was so, it did change your thinking. You got a bit more tolerant of them I suppose and what they've had to put up with. Because a lot of those things you take in South East Asia now, very seldom have they known peace for any length of time. Usually there's always warring factions, it's been going on there for hundreds of years. And, you know, in South East Asia and this ... Well, in New Guinea look at the hills tribes now, I don't know. Unless you know them and what they're up and their past history, you can make an incorrect judgment.

Did you return to any of those scenes of your wartime experiences after the war?

No. Very much would have like to but, no, I haven't.

At any time did you, after the war, did you maintain contact with people you'd met over there - islanders or Asians or Dutch?

No.

In terms of your post-war experience how long was it before you began a civilian job?

Well, I used up my long service - whatever - leave I'd accumulated and I was demobilised I think in about 14th or 15th December and then I could have gone back straight away but I wanted to utilise a little bit of time with my wife and at that stage, you know, my first son because he was born when I was over in New Guinea. And then I think I started about 6th February, 6th February so I had, you know ...

Back at your old job?

Not there, no. I came down to Port Adelaide, in the same company, but I took over down there as an electrical engineer at our Birkenhead plant.

And did you find any problems in returning to civilian employment?

Oh yes. Oh yes. Even, you know, going back through with Peter Brune, these questions, he's very thorough in asking this and that, and he's read every imaginable book, every story - he wrote a book covering the campaigns - and of course then I say to my wife, you know, sometimes it gets me down a bit because you remember these things, and you recall them, and you were so lucky that you would have been back there yourself with hundreds of others but ... and, you know, you'd think, especially at night when you're trying to sleep and you think, 'God, what if this had have happened? What was so-and-so ...'. But it did take a little while. You know, I was very young and very restless and you have almost akin to a nightmare sometimes. You might go on for months and nothing would happen and then suddenly another little ... something would blow up, some little incident and I suppose, you know,

physically and mentally it's engraved in your mind and that's that and physically, you know, it's impaired your body to that extent now that you're suffering all sorts of things, prematurely. Not that I call it prematurely now, I've been suffering them for years but this does happen. I mean, you can't put the human system into conditions like that with the mental strain and impose a severe physical strain as well and it's very hard to take.

> What were the main changes you noticed on your return to Australia that had occurred during the war?

What within Australia? Within Australia itself? Well, I don't know whether I really noticed any change other than the beer tasted a lot better, the sea water was nice - nice and fresh - the sand, beautiful. But, you know, it's a funny thing you think of these things. In our early training at Woodside, there's a place up there called Woody Knoll, and we used to go over this thing and charge up there with these respirators on, you know, which were the gas masks, bayonets, all in our equipment and you're puffing and panting and, oh God, it was shocking. You know, the rigours you'd have. And we used to talk about Woody Knoll when we were in the Middle East and when we were back in New Guinea and it's just a pimple really but it assumed this gigantic, out of all proportions, and we came back here and said, 'We're talking about Woody Knoll, now where is it?'. 'That!', so that's Woody Knoll. It's funny isn't it how it builds up, your mind builds up and the whole thing is out of all proportion to what ... to reality.

> Do you think overall that there was some resentment from returned men towards those who didn't go?

No. I mean, there must have been resentment. I mean, God, after all, we're no two human beings alike and there must have been some but some were, people who do that, they were pretty intolerant. I mean there were jobs to be done back here, the occupations that had to go on. You just can't sort of take the whole of the manpower out of a country and send them off. Oh no. A lot of them, you know, they'd volunteered but they were forced to stay back in reserve occupations. Oh no, by and large, there may have been one or two instances that you could but by and large ...

> Did you take advantage of any rehabilitation courses or schemes for ex-servicemen like low interest home loans, anything like that?

Well, I did the low interest home loan and it took me, what, twenty-five years before I'd ... because I had to be in a situation ... I think initially it had to be in a new home. It couldn't be what they termed getting a loan for a second-hand ... I'm just trying to think. I got out, what, in '45. The first time I got the loan was ... the first time I tried it I couldn't get it for some reason or other. Not that I wasn't eligible, I was eligible all right, but I couldn't get it. The next time I was given wrong information and missed out because they said, 'If you want to buy a second-hand home' - they call it second-hand when you get one that's not been built on the spot - 'it is not available'. And then I found out it was available. So it wasn't until we moved here that I took advantage of that thing and that was twenty-five years ago. What are we now ... that's ...

> '65.

'65. So, I said, yeah, twenty-five. Yeah, it's about twenty-odd, yeah, twenty-odd years. Yeah.

(25.00) And have you kept up with your unit at all? Or were involved with the RSL?

Ah ... the unit, yes. They have a monthly luncheon. I think it's the third Monday in every month or second Monday, whatever it is. I go down there occasionally but it's a fair way to go down to Glenelg. I always go to the ANZAC Day and their reunions. We've got the fiftieth anniversary coming up which we'll go to that. But I haven't been active enough, I mean, at least as active as I would like to have been.

So since the war you haven't been consistent in reunions or ANZAC Days?

No. But, see, I went into the CMF after the war. I thought I'd pass on whatever knowledge I had and to train, you know, another generation. And ... which I did and I carried right through with that and I went through all the ranks up as far, high as I could go and that was the finish. You couldn't go any higher than that in South Australia. So I finished in '65 I think, I went on the reserve list. But, you know, I have always kept in touch with the battalion on ANZAC Day and I occasionally go to these monthly luncheons. So hopefully I will see all the boys on the ... April this year which is our fiftieth anniversary.

Are the war year memories still very important to you?

Mmm. Yes. 'Cause you often get, you know, contemporaries whether army, navy or the air force and they like reading history and like discussing certain things and it's good to get some of these things off and, you know, bring them to the light of day again.

Have you noticed a changing lev l of interest in the war in society over the years?

A changing interest in society. Oh well, what, from the point of view whether they think the ANZAC Day is worth a holiday? (laughs) It doesn't mean much to a lot of them other than it's a public holiday. But, oh no, there's quite a few people going around to the schools and they have a discussion with the children as to the significance of ANZAC Day, you know, first world war and the Australian and New Zealand forces and, you know, how it originated. And when you see these old codgers going up there, you know, going across this year, what ninety-three or something, yeah, incredible isn't it?

Did you find that, you know, we started off this conversation by talking about your political and religious beliefs ...

Yeah.

... well, did the war change them in any way at all?

No. No, not really.

Some of these things might be intangible but what do you think the most important effects of the war were on you?

The most important effects of the war? Well, it possibly made me a little more tolerant than I was or what I would have been without having had that experience. You appreciate the other person's point of view. You appreciate the good life that your forbears, you know, struggled to obtain and, you know, we to maintain. But I think by and large that's it. No great sway one way or the other with that.

> One Australian who went through horrific experiences on the Burma-Thai railway wrote: 'I don't personally regret having been a prisoner-of-war, perhaps it was a privilege'. And while they deplore the loss of life and the suffering other ex-servicemen make similar comments, would you agree with that? 'I don't personally regret having been a prisoner-of-war, perhaps it was a privilege'.

A privilege.

> To being in the war.

Oh yeah, but, ah, [inaudible] being in the war rather than being a POW on the Burma railway.

> No, I meant generally in the war?

Yeah. Oh yeah, well, war generally ... Right once you're through and you've gone through it all, it's a wonderful experience but one that, you know, once you had, you wouldn't want to do it again. Well, I wouldn't and those from the first world war who enlisted in battalions and they went up to the front. You know, even one of sixty-two ... or sixty-three in our unit. He went up with a military medal I think in Syria. But they are few and far between. I mean, you can become a bit of an encumbrance to the rest of them because, realising your age, you haven't got the physical ability to cope with this and that, or the mental. And, of course, then you become a drain on the others. See, you should pull your own weight.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW.