



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Interviewer	Green, Susan
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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Identification: This is Tape 1, Side 1, of an interview with Mr Robert Richardson, also known as Roy Richardson, recorded by Susan Green on the 1st March 1990. End of identification.

Mr Richardson, I wonder if you could start by casting your mind back to the outbreak of war and telling me what were the circumstances of your life then. Were you working, and how old were you? What, you know, where were you at then?

I was secretary accountant of J. & W. Bateman Limited, wholesale merchants at Fremantle. Um, um, ...

Yes, how old were you then?

How old? At that time ... I was born in 1905, so as the war started in 1939, I was thirty-four years of age.

Right, and were you then required to go and enlist?

Ah, until Japan entered the war, ah, there was no compulsory call-up of all, er, males, but after the call-up came I went to the, to the enlistment office and submitted myself as a prospective, er, soldier and was told that as I was in a reserved occupation, ah, I would be given a certificate of exemption. At that time, er, the VDC was formed and I immediately enlisted in that area so that I could at least give some form of service to the country.

Why was your work, ah ... why did your work qualify you at that time for exemption?

I was exempted because, er, I had more or less control of a prominent food distributing country - company - which, after the war commenced in Europe, was engaged in supplying the army, the air force, er, and the navy with necessary supplies both in the food area and as far as the navy was concerned, with the hardware and other materials.

Now, moving to the VDC aspect of your life at that time. When you first joined the VDC, what were you required to do?

At first we had night, er, meetings at which we indulged in training with rifles, bayonets et cetera, the usual type of thing, and at weekends we had quite a few practical experiences of bushfighting in the area of Mount Pleasant. Er, later, it was realised that the permanent army needed to have as many men as possible in the area of the north of Australia and our company took over the aircraft station at Fremantle.

Looking first at the sort of training that you did, had you handled weapons previously?

I was an NCO actually in the citizen forces from the time I was eighteen years of age until twenty-one. I was actually - what do you call it? - er, er sergeant major in the army - in the unit, at that time, and attended the usual camps at Karrakatta.

(5.00) So it was quite familiar to you to, for this military training and the exercises you went on?

Oh yes, I attended all the practical shoots at Swanbourne and those places and was actually a member of the, um ....

Rifle Club was it?

No, member of the, um, guard that was formed to protect the Governor-General when he arrived to open the GPO in Forrest Place, and that consisted of some twenty members of the 44th Battalion.

Now, when you went to the, on the bush exercises, can you describe what you did then?

Yes. Actually, another unit, er, of the VDC from Fremantle were sent to the area as an invading force and we were sent as, to oppose the progress of that force and to eliminate the unit.

This was in Mount Pleasant?

Yes. It was very interesting actually to see the chaps hiding behind trees and blackboys and so on.

Was it a bit of a game?

Oh a bit, it was a war game, I suppose you could call it that. But it was training because it was realised that we might, from a practical point of view, in the case of an invasion say, of Perth, we would need that sort of knowledge and experience in using all areas for tactical purposes.

What was the impression you got of the way your officers operated during those sort of exercises?

The officers were always very keen, ah, that their unit should do very well and not be discredited by lack of enthusiasm or anything of that nature, and the men responded accordingly.

What was the feeling in your unit? Was there a strong sense of patriotism?

Oh yes. Everybody was in it because they were either reserved or in some cases had incapacity to be passed for general, for the general army, and as a result they all felt they were doing something of help and were quite prepared to, if necessary, um, er, take part in any invasion of our particular coast area.

It wouldn't have left you with much free time, I guess, if you were working, er, at Batemans during the week and then once a week at night and ... both days on the weekend did you go off?

No, no. Sundays. Sunday was the day. Apart from that we had some, um, night exercise or two just to familiarise ourselves with what it was like down on the post at Fremantle, should we have to spent the night there, which we did on a number of occasions.

Which particular post did you spend nights?

Um, I think there were four anti-aircraft posts in Fremantle and we were on one of them. I couldn't tell you the name of it actually - or the number of it - but it was, er, it had four guns in that particular post and we used to ... we had a unit there that was capable of, er, getting the range and all the rest of it, and at times we had practical demonstrations of firing - what we call `shoots' - at a target drawn by an aircraft across the north of Fremantle. On several occasions we actually hit that target and I think the limit was about 40,000 feet.

What was your particular job?

(10.00) I was number five on the gun, which meant that as soon as the commanding officer called, `Fire', I pushed a lever that sent, put, sent the gun off and away went the shell. And one occasion I got quite a surprise. The number two on the gun was the rammer, who forced the cartridge into the breach of the gun, and instead of ramming it in, he left it partly exposed and to my surprise the cartridge slipped out of the barrel of the gun, rolled down and fell two or three feet, and hit the concrete floor, and I (inaudible) myself on the end of the (inaudible) with the cartridge going sky-high. (Laughing). Fortunately, the setting did not work, even with the shock of falling, and the, er, lieutenant immediately said, `Throw it out'. So that was thrown out until the shoot was over and we had time to check the setting on the cartridge to make sure that it wasn't going to operate.

Well, did you feel it was a pretty professional sort of approach in general, to the way the military exercises and tasks were carried out?

Oh yes. We actually had two occasions, er, planes from one of the RA... RAAF fly over the forts at Fremantle with the idea that they were attacking planes to eliminate the posts. In all cases we felt that they would never have survived, because they were low-flying and we, er, simply used aiming the gun at the, directly at the approaching aircraft. So if it had been a real attack, I'm quite sure they would never have got through to eliminating the posts.

Aside from the blunders such as you described a moment ago, were there any real emergencies that you can remember?

No. No, no emergencies. We were on alerts. We were on alert on a few occasions when the Japanese apparently had warships in the Pacific ocean that were quite capable of attacking Fremantle as a ... we were on alert at those times and we were on the, er, very much on the q.v. to make sure that as far as we were concerned we'd do the best we could to repel any possible attack.

Where were you living at the time?

Er, 10 Hensman Street, South Perth.

And what was the feeling, in, particularly in Fremantle at that time? Just in the general community, what was it like working there?

Everybody had a sense of, er, that they had to do their part, and I never heard of any anti-racialism - racism - or anything like that against the Italians or anyone else who formed a big part of Fremantle. As far as we were concerned, er, they were people who'd been there for a long time and, er, it wasn't their fault that they were war, at war with Australia, and to the best of my knowledge there was very very little, er, violence or anything like that going on because of the war.

It was interesting because a lot of people were interned, weren't they?

Oh yes.

And a lot of women were left without men in their families at the time ...

That's right.

Was that something that you were conscious of at the time?

No. I never came in contact with any families who were bereft of their husbands because they happened to be in internment, um, so I couldn't really comment on that.

And there was no sense of, for security sake, that you needed to be aware of what was happening around you or - I mean, was it ever brought home to you that you also had to look for the enemy within as well as without?

No. Um, we had no worries of them on that score, but in our premises at, both at Perth and Fremantle, er, we had anti-aircraft, ah, positions in the buildings which were reinforced with heavy materials in case a bombing raid came over, and the staff had to get into protected areas.

Were the supplies ever particularly protected? Were they that valuable at the time?

Well it was necessary to preserve ... er ... all stocks because, ah, as the war progressed, ah, it was harder to get certain commodities because of shortage of staff in the factories. Ah, but apart from that, er, things were fairly normal. Commodities like tobacco and cigarettes were rationed. You couldn't just go in and buy what you wanted - you had to have a, a permit or just get get a certain quantity. But apart from that, er, most other goods were available.

What particular things do you remember that were in short supply?

(15.00) Oh it's hard to recall them specifically, but, er, the tobacco and cigarettes were definitely in short supply because they were, naturally, requisitioned for the army and we were unable to supply the people who normally bought those goods.

There was rationing of other foods too though, wasn't there?

Um ...

I mean, did your firm deal really essentially mainly with the services - the military services - at this time?

Oh no.

Or were you also supplying the shops for general distribution?

Yeah. We supplied the shops as usual, er, with their requirements and it was up to them to see that they did their part of the distribution of them as well.

So can you remember any rationing regulations at that time for the general community?

No.

Other than, as you've mentioned, the cigarettes and tobacco?

No. The manager of the grocery area was the man who had control of all those different regulations and that type of thing.

What was the impact of the war on a firm like Batemans?

It meant that, um, materials and stock that were slow moving at times became very much more in demand and it resulted in quite a lot of materials - particularly hardware areas - um, were able to dispose of items such as steel, er, and iron and various other types of things, er, that had been very slow selling. But from the point of view of the start of the war when everybody suddenly realised that materials were going to be very valuable, they came in to Batemans - including the navy - and went right through the stocks and more or less earmarked their requirements, and from that point of view, it enabled stocks to get at least to (inaudible) level which previously they hadn't. But from there on, of course, so many materials were - including food - er, were in short supply and as a result it was a case of being very judicious to see that they went in the right direction all through.

Was there then a, a search or did Batemans look for other sources of supply, or for other types of say, for example, food products to try and fill those gaps?

Oh yes. They, they seized every opportunity of sending a representative to the east to the various factories so that people over there were aware that Western Australia was on the map and needed food like the eastern states did, and that we got our share of production. That operated pretty well right through the war.

There was a feeling then that in a way the supplies were being, ah, directed into the eastern areas rather than being, ah, brought to Western Australia?

Well we felt that that could be the case and that is why we took effort, made efforts, to see that Western Australia as far as our particular distribution was concerned, was not overlooked.

What about as, the accounting job of it? Was that very different? Or did that carry on pretty much as you would have?

Oh, that carried on as normal. They, um, we were in the fortunate position of not having to rely on increased bank overdrafts and that sort of thing. Um, consequently, we were not handicapped in any way by shortage of finance.

Had that been the case prior to the war?

Prior to the war we always operated on an overdraft which had a limit, and um, through careful management we never had any difficulty in being able to meet our commitments every month as we usually did.

But working for government services, or supplying government services, meant you had ready cash?

It meant too that we had to keep very careful records and be very, er, and follow up very carefully with the various departments concerned to see that they did their job properly and did not handicap our business by being late with payments.

Was there a strong sense of security with the delivery of supplies to the service areas? To the services?

(20.00) Yes. As far as I can recall, we never had any difficulty with that. Er, the army picked up the requirements very very often, er, and we saw to it that whenever a truck - er army truck - visited Fremantle, never any hold-up in the supplying the vehicle with what we had and what they wanted.

How, how did the staff operate? I mean, were there shortages of staff at that time?

No. We didn't have any staff shortages. Um, er, the sales area, er, suffered because a number of the travellers were taken off the road or went into the army and we found that it wasn't really necessary to do much more than, um, maintain a skeleton representation with all the various people. Ah, the stores and distributors around the city in particular had to follow up their side of the business very carefully to see that they got their supplies. Consequently, we, instead of chasing them, they chased us.

What happened in the case of more remote places? Were they still getting food through? I mean...

Yes.

... for example, places like, er, Kalgoorlie which is still a big reg..., was a big regional centre then?

We had a branch at Kalgoorlie and we never had any difficulty with, er, letting them have their share of what was available. They got, got their supplies regularly and maintained more or less a regular course of business.

And what about in the northern part of the state?

Well, the north, as you probably know, until comparatively recently, operated on a two-order-a-year basis - one for the dry season and one for the wet season. Consequently, their orders were always sent in, er, prior to the wet season arriving so they'd get the goods onto the station, 'cause most of them were wet-abound. Once the rain started up there the roads were not like they are today. They were primitive to say the best of it and with no bridges over some of the big rivers and that sort of thing, they had to get their supplies into the station to see them through until the rains stopped, the roads hardened and got better and then from there on, their orders resumed the usual, er, two-order-a-year basis. Of course, nowadays, with the advent of the mining towns, most stations are within reasonable reach of a bigger supply basis and the wholesale side of it does not come into consideration so much as it did while the war was on.

> What was the transition like from war time back to civilian life when, at the end of the war, for Batemans? Was that a, had a lot of the network of, ah, selling goods, er, been lost?

No. Er, it was remarkable how quickly things returned to normal once our representatives were discharged from their various, er, departments in the defence forces. Er, they resumed their positions with us and we started where we left off, and just resumed normal arrangements and it wasn't ... I would say it was not very long before everything was back to normal in that regard. Supplies became more freely available in all directions and the, er, fears of not being able to get this or that subsided to a great extent.

> How did it affect your own life, this ...? I mean, what was it like for you at that time?

It was a worrying time. I was ready at any time that the government thought fit to have another re-examination of qualifications and that sort of thing. I was perfectly ready to go at any time. In fact, I thought when the Japanese were threatening invasion I thought they'd probably put the VDC on a permanent basis, but they didn't.

> So it was very frustrating for you that you were, that you were back home here?

Oh yes. We, er, we were very very ... I was very pleased personally when the whole business was over and we could say, `Well, let's get back to normal as quickly as we could'.

> Did you notice there was a change in the way the VDC operated at all as the war progressed, and as the, the threat from the Japanese became more worrying?

(25.00) Oh definitely. It was realised that we were on call and that any tick of the clock there might be an air-raid or something of that nature, or an attempted landing somewhere along the coast, and we were prepared at any time with ... We were issued with rifles and bayonet and we knew that we would probably be called on at, to go and defend the landing - possible landing places up and down the coast.

> The commanding officers that you had, did you get to know them fairly well?

Oh yes. I knew Earle Arney very well and I knew Captain Richardson very well.

Now Earle Arney was a magistrate wasn't he?

No. Oh, he subsequently became a magistrate. At the time he was, er, the - what do they call it ... associate - to the Chief Justice, and um ....

And what sort of people were they? For example, Earle Arney, what type of personality was he?

Earle Arney was a man small in statue (sic), but big in knowledge and ability, and his son Peter is also an architect and a very nice chap. Earle himself was a, he was associated with the Supreme Court for quite a long time. Subsequently, as you've mentioned, I think he became magistrate to the Children's Court.

He worked well with people did he?

Oh worked very well. Um, er, he had a very good understanding with the unit and everybody, to my knowledge, were very friendly with him and he with us.

You all ... at the beginning of each Sunday, I assume that you all lined up, that you were together as a unit, before you went off to your separate posts?

We had a, we had a rallying point at a hall near the, um, um, Wesley School - Wesley College. There was a hall in Kent Street - I think it was Kent Street - anyway, that's where we used to assemble. That's where we had our night parades in the hall and ....

This was in South Perth?

South Perth, and we did our exercises in that hall, and it was our rallying point, and if everybody just ... in the event of an emergency of any sort, would simply make for the hall, and there would ... we were picked up there regularly by army trucks and taken down to Fremantle every Sunday or to, on the open field exercises.

And, some of the other officers. Um, there was, was it Lieutenant Beere?

Beale.

Beale?

Beale. B-E-A-L-E I think it was.

Right.

He was another very, very nice chap. Ah ...

What was his occupation?

I don't know. I don't even know what Captain Richardson did. I've got a feeling though that he was retired, er, but Earle Arney was the one who I was mainly concerned with. He was Captain Arney too.

And the commanding officers were usually of professional status?

No, not to the best of my knowledge. I think all of them were same as we were.

Right. What qualified them particularly, do you think, to become the officers?

Who they knew and their personality.

So there was a network of, um, an `old boys' network?

I don't know. I wouldn't, I wouldn't like to say that. I don't know, er, how they came to be selected. All I knew was that they were selected and were running the unit when I joined.

Mm. Didn't ... you didn't wonder about that at the time?

No. I had no need to wonder about it. I was going to do my share of what was necessary and that was it.

Would you say that the people who were the commanding officers were generally more of conservative sort of political leanings?

I think without a doubt that was the case in, with our unit, and the men who were the officers in that. I think they would be conservative.

That's the end of Side 1, Tape 1, of an interview with Mr Robert Richardson.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

Identification: This is an interview with Mr Robert Richardson, Tape 1, Side 2, and this is recorded by Susan Green on the 1st of March 1990. End of identification.

Was there any feeling at that time of the concern from the left wing that was a threat there? I mean there was also, there was obviously the anti-Fascist feeling, but was there also a concern at that time about Communism?

Not that I was aware of. I, I never personally experienced anything of that nature from any of the union leaders who were, used to call in and, er, just to say `hello' and more or less pass the time of day to show that they'd been going around doing their rounds, but I never experienced anything anti from any of them.

What was the situation for union leaders at the time of the war? Were they eligible for enlisting, or should they, were they, should they compulsorily enlist?

They would have, if they were of the age, er, suitable for active service, they would have had to undergo the same sort of examination that everyone else did. Those who were in reserved

occupations - and I don't know that they regarded union leaders as a reserved occupation - ah, but they would have had to undergo the same visit to the recruitment office.

Did the unions pay much of a role during the war time?

Not as far as I was concerned. There was very little, er, delay or anything like that caused as far as our business was concerned. They just operated their normal way, er, checked on the records of staff et cetera, at our various branches, and as far as I know did not cause any inconvenience whatsoever.

What sort of checks were they doing when they checked your records? What were they checking for?

Just, oh just to make sure that the terms and conditions of the various awards were complied with. They were entitled to do that and we had no trouble in presenting them with the time books and so on, to show that everybody received their correct amount of pay.

You mentioned that you lost some people to the services during the war time. Were those people replaced by others who were at home?

Only where it was necessary. Um, naturally business did decline during the war, but the men who left us were not replaced in the general course of events. We just made do. There was quite a lot of overtime worked.

So what would have been your working hours at that time?

My working hours were from 8.30 to 6.00 o'clock daily. At times it was necessary to keep my secretary back and get up to date with correspondence et cetera.

Were you married at the time?

Yes. Yes, I was married at the time - two children.

That must have been a bit of a strain on family life?

To some extent it was. They didn't see as much of their father as far as the children were concerned, but we got along quite well just the same.

(5.00) And did you work on Saturdays?

At that time it was a case of working Saturdays. That came in later on when, er, most businesses, including the banks, closed on Saturday mornings.

Did you feel that you became a much more effective soldier as the war went on with your stints with the VDC? Were you, did you have a feeling of confidence about what the VDC could do in the case of invasion?

Yes, I was quite sure that the efficient was ... the unit was efficient and was quite capable of carrying out its object of trying to shoot down any enemy planes that might come about ... around. And also, of course, we found that it was, speed at times was essential, and there was

always competition between the four guns as to which one would get the first shot in, when we had practical exercise and the planes came over.

Did you have the same feeling of confidence about, if there, in the case of a landfall though? If the Japanese had actually made a landing?

Well we knew that it'd probably be a fight to the death. It was quite evident.

What was the feeling about the eastern states and Western Australia at that time? What ... was there a feeling that Western Australia was really out on a limb? Was being forgotten?

There was a certain amount of feeling that way because the politicians had stated that the defence line would be on the eastern coast, not on the western coast, and that caused quite a bit of dissatisfaction at the time.

In what way? How was that expressed?

Well there weren't any, as far as I know, any great public movements or anything like that, but it was very, it was very considerable the amount of feeling that did exist among the people and they talked about it.

What was your own feeling?

Oh my own feeling was that it was pretty one-eyed to worry about the eastern states only, and not the Western Australian coast.

Did that feeling go right through the war?

Oh yes. It was pretty evident that we were going to be left on our own if the worst happened, but at the same time, I think that steps had been taken after that announcement, to make sure that there would be some token of resistance here if anything did happen. But the main consideration were the big cities in the east.

Right, and it would be a token gesture ...?

Here.

Mm.

As far as I'm concerned, that was my impression.

Just switching back to Batemans again - the Bateman family - what was their role in the war? Did those people enlist? They were the owners of Batemans?

Ah, the, um, Bateman business, as far as I could gather and as far as I could ascertain, started in 1834 - six years after WA was settled - and two of the sons who came out with John Bateman and his wife from England ... two of the sons - they had six altogether - John and William, started business in 1934 as exporters of sandalwood and ....

1834?

Yeah 1834, and they were ... it was the second business that's still going, from the inception of the state. Sampson - Lionel Sampson and Sons were the first, and the other J. and W. Bateman were second. And John and William Bateman started that. Now, it came right down through the eighteenth - er nineteenth - century until the father of what you could call the current Bateman family, died in 1907 and his son John and Lewis were the two executors of the estate, and they carried on the business until 1919, when it converted into a limited company and - private limited company - it was proprietary limited. And it went, then they had six children and two of the sons went to the war - one was killed and one was a returned soldier from that first war - he was a Gallipoli veteran. And, but the present current family, um, various sons from the other members of the family did enlist and were in the army or air force.

Mr Richardson, thanks very much for talking to me.

My pleasure.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW.