



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Identification: This is Tape 1, Side 1, of an interview with Mr Bill Morcom, recorded on the 27th February 1990. End of identification.
This interview is being recorded by Susan Green.

Mr Morcom, I wonder if you could start by telling me how old were you at the outbreak of war?

At the outbreak of war, I was fourteen at the outbreak of war. I was born in 1925.

And were you attending school at that time?

Yes, at high school.

Now what was your first contact with the VDC? When did you first hear about it?

Well I was in a small bore rifle club and we had some fellas from the VDC from the first war that came round and asked us would we be interested in joining, and er, when we went to our first training session at the East Fremantle oval on a Sunday morning.

Now was this a family thing for you? Did you have brothers and a father who encouraged you and went along with you?

No, no. It was the people I was knocking around with at the time, like through playing sport - cricket especially - and football.

And what was your family's view of the fact that a fourteen-year-old going along to train to defend Australia if necessary?

Well actually, I was fourteen when the war broke out, but I ... was 1941 when I was sixteen that we were approached to join the VDC and, as far as my parents concerned, I don't recall them objecting or saying anything at all. I think they were quite happy.

Were you still at school then?

Oh no, no, no. I'd left school. I was working at a wholesale grocery firm in Fremantle.

Now what was the first sort of exercises that you were put to when you went along to these VDC sessions?

Oh, we did our basic training like, in those days, we didn't have any military equipment. We had, ah, wooden rifles that had been made and things like that, and we just did the basic drills for, oh, I suppose five or six months or something like that. And then they decided that they'd put us in heavy ack-ack 3.7s and we had to go there all day Sundays and learn how to load and fire, and we used to have shoots every now and again.

Could we fill in a few details here? Where did you go for training?

Ah, on the, on the stations where they had the 3.7s. You see, in a battery they had four guns in a battery that were dug into the ground, and they were permanent fixtures, and we used to do our training there.

And that was particularly for the artillery, but did you do training like learning to present arms and marching and this type of thing?

Oh yeah we did all that in the basic part of it. We used to go up to the rifle range at Swanbourne and do a shoot about once a year, that's all.

What month did you join the VDC? Can you remember?

Oh no, that's a little bit hard. That's a long while ago.

And what battalion were you involved with?

I was in the, um, 661 Ack-Ack Battery.

Now, did that .... That was related to a particular area?

Yes, the Fremantle area. Er, the headquarters for those groups - there was one at South Beach, one at Gun Park - which is now John Curtin High School - one at East Fremantle oval, near the Fremantle Trotting Club, and the main one was at Buckland Hill in Mosman Park.

How many fellas were in your little group?

We had a gun crew. I think, if I remember, in those days a gun crew was about eight, if I remember.

And what part did you take in the gun crew?

Oh well everybody had to learn all the jobs, but my basic job was a gun layer.

What did that involve?

Oh you followed ... they had, um, range-finders which picked the distance and the height and you sat on the seat with the handle and had to follow a little arrow that came into the circle. You had to keep that in line all the time.

(5.00) So in a sense, you were keeping the gun on target?

Yeah, that's correct, yeah.

Right. And did you get to know the fellas in your group pretty well?

Oh yes, yes.

What sort of people were they?

Oh very good. Most of them were, you know, fellas from the first war and that. But, they were pretty good.

Could you tell me who were the commanding people?

Oh, well we had a fellow named Lieutenant Bill Beere. He ran a furniture shop in Fremantle. Another fella was named, ah, Albert West. He was one of the bosses at Spicer and Dettnolds. That's two I can recall.

And did you get fairly close with these people? Did you find out, what sort of people were they? Were they ...?

Oh very good, very good, 'cause we were only volunteers. Like I mean, it wasn't like if you was in the real army where they put the pressure on you and all that. If you was unavailable for any duties or anything, well there wasn't much they could do about it. You'd just, you was either sick or you was working or something and you just didn't go.

And the people that were, that you were associated with, were they .... You've mentioned a couple of people involved with, not trades but with businesses in Fremantle. What was the sort of range of occupations of people around you?

Oh well I was a storeman. There was one chap worked across the road from where I was actually, at Elder-Smiths. He was a wool classer. One fellow worked at Bushells in the factory. You know, it was pretty spread around. One fella worked in a shop, in a hardware shop.

Now these people were people that were too old to enlist?

Oh no, no, no, no. Some of them were a little bit older than me - not much older - but in my case, er, when I become eighteen, well I was manpowered 'cause there was a shortage of labour and the job I had was classed as packing army and naval stores in the foodstuffs range, and most of the people where I worked at G Foot Son & Co. - the younger ones - they were already drafted into the forces, so that didn't leave us many there. There wasn't - mostly - lot of girls, young girls and that were working there, and older fellas from the first war.

What was the reaction for you of people around you that you were not going off to fight in the war overseas, or joining the main services?

As a younger fella, I used to, used to just get a lot of comments and that on the trams and when you walked around town in your uniform. Oh I think, you know, they had the idea you should have gone.

Was it not very complimentary comments?

No, not, you know, a lot of people usually a lot'd just stand there and stare at you as you walked past with your green uniform on, because it stuck out pretty well compared with the ordinary brown colour that the rest had.

Mm. And how did you react to that? Did you find that affected you at all?

No, didn't worry me at all.

> Were you going off after work at night and in the weekend? Can you just give us a run-down on how much time was committed?

Well I had one, we had one night a week allocated to us - I'm not sure whether mine was a Tuesday or Wednesday - but we used to go at 6.00 p.m. till 6.00 a.m., and we used to stand our two-on and four-off the same as they do in the forces, and usually all day Sunday we used to have to do our basic training and that.

> Could you describe a Sunday? Can you remember just what was the whole routine of a Sunday for you, from the being picked up - which I think you were weren't you?

Yeah, we were picked up, yeah. Well, what we used to do was just the normal gun crew, you know, loading and unloading and gunlaying and all that, and then swap positions and then you go, have to march down to the kitchen and have your midday meal and then you'd be back again doing the same thing again. Sometimes they used to take you to another area doing the same thing.

> Was it fairly hard physical work?

Well for me it was, but I was pretty small then, and that's why I used to get all the jobs - easy jobs - like gunlaying and that because, um, those shells, they weighed for those 3.7 guns they were pretty big. They were about, oh, four foot long and they weigh about thirty pound at least. They're pretty heavy.

> And how did the duty during the week time, how did that affect you? And particularly as you were having to go off to work, you essentially would have a couple of nights a week. Was it two nights a week?

(10.00) One night.

> One night a week, but you didn't have a great deal of sleep?

Oh no, when you're young you get over that, but it was tiring. Sometimes it was pretty tiring, especially the wintertime, when you'd be out doing your guard duty out there in the freezin' cold and wind and ... 'cause you couldn't sleep very well on the palliasses they gave you. They didn't give you beds, they give you old, er, with fur - hay 'n that - in it. It was hard, oh hard as a rock to lay on. Oh God!

> (Laughing). You still remember that, those sleepless nights?

I remember that. Oh, fully dressed too, mind you. You had to have all your gear on.

> And so when you were on duty, what happened then? Did you just chat away or how did you pass the time?

Oh you was on your own.

Oh right.

We had different, might be two - one on gate, say, and the other one round the guns or somewhere, but there's no-one to talk to.

Was there a sort of a change in the way the VDC was regarded as the war went on? You mentioned at the start you were involved with the training and also the fact that you were not, that people tended to look askance at you because you weren't in the main services. As the war drew on, what was the sort of feeling of the change of feeling of the VDC?

Oh I think one of the things when we got out of the green uniforms into the army, ah, brown, and most of the forces'd moved further north towards the islands and only had caretaker crews during the day, I think the reaction changed completely. You know, they di... , you didn't stand out like anything there with a different coloured uniform on. You was just looked like one of the rest, except for your colour patches.

Right.

But as far as, ah ... it definitely did improve as the war went on.

And was, did that reflect in a better sense of working together and general *corps d'esprit* - the feeling of the body?

I don't think so because most of the fellas that were in it were from the first war, and they, terms of being older type of person, I suppose it didn't annoy 'em or upset 'em. They just didn't take any notice of it.

Did it upset you at all?

No, no, didn't worry me.

Were you ever asked or instructed to be on the lookout for any sort of subversive behaviour or activity in the community around you? Were you aware of that being part of your duty?

No. We weren't involved in that. They had an intelligence group to do that, which I think was based in South Perth or somewhere. That was nothing to do with us. We were only doin' general, er, guard duties and things like that.

So that was something that was quite alien. You were just saw as purely a physical getting out there and having guns and such?

That's correct, yes.

> Yes. Tell me, you mentioned that you had fairly primitive instrument... weapons, rather, at the beginning. Could you tell me a little bit more about that? What were the sort of things you were training with?

Well, when we first went down there, they, these older fellas you know, from the first war and that, they'd made rifles out of timber, out of pine and stuff like that, and ah, to do our training with, you know, present arms and all that sort of business. But later, when we started to get army instructors, like fellas that came from the Middle East that were here, we used to have the basic weapons - .303 and the bayonets and all that caper.

> Did you see the way things were done initially as ... were they a bit old fashioned for you, in that the people who were in command were probably, as you say, the VDC..., the first world war veterans, and had perhaps a different style or knew a different style of army life?

Well, that was my first little bit that I had, so I knew nothing else, only what they taught me. I didn't know, you know, I'd never been involved with anything like that.

> No. You had had experience with weapons though, hadn't you, because you'd been a member of the small bore rifle club.

Oh yeah, only about six months I suppose. Might 've been three months - it wasn't long.

> Right. Yeah, so it wasn't something that struck you the way they were ...?

No, no, something I had been doing for years, no.

> Was there a very strong hierarchy in the structure of the VDC as you remember it?

Oh, we had an army general that was in charge. A lot of the chaps that were in the top section of it, which we saw very rarely, they were, some of those were solicitors and doctors and people like that. But we didn't come in contact unless we had a special parade or ANZAC Day march or something like that. But otherwise, we never, we hardly ever saw 'em or even heard of 'em.

> (15.00) So it was fairly much a status thing in a way that the officers were those people who either were professional people?

Oh yes, I'd say most of 'em, yeah. That's in the higher sections, like lieutenants and people like that, well they were only ordinary ex-servicemen from the first war, most of those chaps.

> Did you have a feel that you knew what was happening in the line of command?

Oh we were told, er, you know, whatever concerned us, they'd tell us, but they didn't tell us too much what was going on, but you could ask them a question and if they knew they'd tell you. But most times, they didn't tell you anything at all. They'd just say, ah, `Next Sunday, eight o'clock, at your pick-up point and you'll be going to the Swanbourne Rifle Range' and

that's all he used to tell us. They didn't give us any what we were gonna do up there - well you knew what you was going to do - but, er, I mean you didn't get much other information.

> Do you remember why you were selected to go into your particular battery? I mean, was it, how did you get chosen for that?

I think it would be because we all lived in the Fremantle area and, ah, it looks like our job was to protect the installations of Fremantle Harbour and especially the waterfront and that, 'cause all the guns were all stationed round those areas. It didn't involve any airports or anything because there's none around Fremantle.

> And do you remember any emergencies of any sort, were you ...?

We had, yeah, we had two. Yeah, I do remember one. Er, I spent the whole weekend - they came and got me on the Saturday morning. They lost a Jap convoy up, er, up near Timor somewhere - aircraft carrier and a few others - and we were on duty till the Monday night till they gave the all clear. There was another one, off Fremantle, where an American submarine was, after he came through the minefields of Fremantle, instead of staying on the surface, he decided he'd go under, and he bobbed up somewhere, oh about couple of hours later he bobbed up down near Garden Island, but that was a ... I was on duty that day when that happened. I'm, it would'a, had'a been a Sunday or a public holiday .... But that'd be about the only two I could recall.

> That time when you were on guard for the Japanese convoy. What was the feeling then? Did you really anticipate that this might happen? That there might be a landing made by the Japanese?

Well it looked like it at the time because there was troopships and aircraft carriers and the usual warships in it. Oh it definitely looked like it. We were on stand-by for about three days before they gave us the all-clear.

> You, I guess, had to miss work that day? You said that was on a Mon... you didn't finish till Monday night, so you would have just stayed away from work that day?

That's correct.

> What was the plan if there was an invasion? Do you know what your instructions, or orders, were to be then?

No, we weren't given any instructions in the event of anything at all, we'd just take our orders when it happened.

> Right. Was there a big drop-out along the way, or was there more support for the VDC? I mean, what happened in terms of the sort of participation of people around you?

Do you mean the ones that were actually in the VDC?

Yes.

Oh no, they stayed in it. I don't think there was any drop-, no drop-outs at all.

Right.

Only through illness or something like that, or some other nature, but, er, no, once they were in it they were quite happy. They stayed there.

Right. And you mention on your record - your career record - that you were involved on guard of the North and South Moles?

Mm.

Now what was that? Could you describe just, you know, where you were at that time, and, you know, what were you doing?

Well, when we were on the South Mole, we were on the Bofors that were down there alongside the submarine net into the harbour, and the same thing applied at North Mole, and then later we were on the twin sixers that they had right on the end of the Mole. That was later towards the 1944-45.

So you were standing on guard, and if something had hit that submarine net, well you were there to, in a sense, be the front line?

Well, yeah. Well, we, we'd know all about it. We were right alongside it, but actually we were on Bofors, which are like anti-aircraft guns.

Why were they particularly located at the end of the submarine net then, do you know?

No. I think it was to give it more open space, because at the end of the Mole is a big blockhouse where they had guns there, and the lighthouse, so there'd be no field of fire. So that's what I think, they were further back.

(20.00) Right. What was your preferred sort of duty, if you had one? I mean, where, when you heard what you were going to be doing one day, did you sort of feel, `Oh gosh', you know, `I don't feel like this today', or you looked forward to some types of duty?

Oh, as I said previously, being younger, I used to have all the jobs like gunlayer, or gun loader - especially on Bofors. That's where you stood on the top and you dropped the bish... the rack into the loader and fired it. You were exposed there, you're stuck up in the air, and you know, just [inaudible] her like that all the time.

So, I mean, was that something that you've enjoyed doing, or ...?

Didn't, oh it didn't worry me, because - especially on Bofors - there's only about four jobs you can do that's two layers and a loader/firer, and the chap in charge of it. He's on the back of the

gun with the handle for quick traverse. If they want to turn around quickly, he just pulls it round. But the older ones, they used to have the job of loading the clips.

> Were there any sort of jobs that were envied? Particular duties that were envied by various parts of the VDC? That it was, this was, whether it was artillery or infantry or any particular association of work?

Mm, none that I know of. No, I don't think so. Took it as part of the job that you was doing, 'cause everybody used to take their turn.

> So you rotated pretty regularly?

Oh yeah, yeah.

> Was that an effective way to operate do you think? Or do you think at times it would have been better to have kept people so that they specialised in one particular area?

Oh well the object behind it is that, like any job like that, somebody gets injured or something happens, well someone's got to take his place straight away, so everybody has to learn all the jobs.

> Did you have any sort of country exercises where you were sent off to the usual army sort of thing of go out and survive in the bush for a couple of days and see how you go?

No. Er, mostly we used to go out on the Sunday somewhere out in the bush. They'd do a bit of scouting work, or patrol work, but no, not away from home. It'd be on a Sunday, or Saturday afternoon, or something like that. And no, we never used to go for bivouacs or anything like that.

> Right. Any time for social life during this time?

What do you mean, the weekends?

> Well at any time, during the week and during the weekends. How did you fit in with work and the VDC duty? Did you get a chance to have fun?

Oh well, there was only, you only did one night a week, unless there was some special parade on, but I had ... I was playing cricket at the time and football and which was on at the weekends on Saturdays, so that didn't interfere at all.

> Were the people that you were playing football, were they all associated with some sort of voluntary war effort?

Oh I don't think so, not that I know of. Don't think so.

> And so the people that you were socially in touch with weren't necessarily belonging to the VDC?

No, that'd be correct.

What about your schoolmates? The fellows that you knew from school? Did they join up or were they enlisting or what?

What do you mean?

Enlisting, in sorry, in other services.

Oh most of those were, they volunteered or they joined up. Had them in the navy, air force, army.

From the time that you first joined up the VDC, were you exposed to a great deal of propaganda about what your role was for the wartime effort?

Well the usual posters were put up everywhere about security and in the newspapers everything. It was everywhere. Everywhere you went it was, it was just normal procedure that they had it advertised everywhere.

Did you feel that there was a very patriotic feeling about what you were doing? Did you, um, feel a sense of pride in the fact that you were helping in case of invasion? That you were helping to defend Australia?

Oh yes, I think so, otherwise I probably wouldn't have joined it. I would have just stayed and waited till my, till I was old enough to be drafted in the army.

Thank you Mr Morcom.

That's ...

Sorry?

That's a pleasure.

That's the end of Tape 1, Side 1, and that's the end of the interview with Mr Bill Morcom.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

END OF INTERVIEW.