J.R Now, were you a conscript into the army?

R.H Half and half, I was a conscript, but I volunteered for National Service. I was in the CMF at the time and was told that I would be exempt if I, I'd been in for 2 years and I was told that I'd be exempt if I stayed in for I think another 3 or 4 years. But I was considering joining the regular army at the time so I signed on the dotted line at the bottom of the page and ended up a conscript with my papers stamped "volunteer".

J.R Right. A volunteer conscript.

R.H A volunteer conscript that's right.

J.R And where were you living at the...?

R.H Melbourne.

J.R Right. In the city?

R.H Ah no, where was I living at the time? Mont Albert I think.

J.R And had you had sort of family connections with the military?

R.H Well the Australian.. I'm from England originally, but yes most of my, my father and uncles and so on, were, served in the British forces, and I had a, my mother's older cousin was one of the first ashore at Gallipoli so I suppose there was a military tradition.

We also had a fairly strong communist branch of the family who were bitterly-opposed to Australia being involved in any war, but I wasn't really affected by their sentiments.

J.R Were you sort of politically aware at the time?

R.H I thought I was, the CMF at the time was, obviously went to some pains to indoctrinate us with the values at the time. I wouldn't go so far as to call them political cadres, but sometimes officers would come around and tell us all about the domino theory, and how it *was* inevitable that Australia would fall if communism took over South East Asia and swept down through Indonesia. And it all seemed to make sense, and these guys would emotively bang the table and say "We are pledged to support a country that is under attack by illegal enemy insurgents and so on. Mind you, we had two wars going at the time, of course, Indonesian confrontation was going at that time and it was a case of tossing a coin to decide whether we were likely to end up in Borneo or Vietnam.

J.R Yes, right. You weren't sort of opposed to conscription?

R.H Oh no, I wasn't. [no] Well to an extent I'm still not, although I wouldn't support conscription in the same form as Vietnam. I don't see anything wrong with conscription, providing it's for the defence of the country.

J.R So you were quite happy to go into the army?

R.H I was, yes.

J.R And how did you find it once you were in? Was it...?

R.H A bit of a surprise, I thought that with 2 years of CMF experience behind me, I was going to be an old soldier, but I soon found that it was a completely new ball game, the training was far more intensive. Obviously we had much more modern equipment, I think I soon realized that the CMF of the day had been a Dads' Army, in every sense of the word, both in equipment and in standards of training. But I suppose it did help me to a certain extent. Recruit training is where most of the people unsuited for the service are weeded out.

J.R And what sort of people were they in your group that you went through with? People who weren't fit enough or....?

R.H Oh the people who were weeded out... A couple of them were medically unfit, in fact they found that one guy had a hole in his heart, after about 5 weeks training, they thought that it was a bit funny that he kept fainting after every PT session, and eventually he was examined by a real Doctor, not one of the septuagenarian quacks who examined most of us for entry. And I think he had an ECG done or something and they thought Good God, this guy's got a hole in the heart, so he was very rapidly discharged. Most of the others were people who had somehow scraped through the psychological selection protest, process....! and were found simply to be wanting, just people who simply didn't have the emotional strength, mummy's boys and so on who just could not cope with the shock of suddenly finding themselves in the army where you had to do your own ironing and basically responsible for yourself. And had to face the consequences of your own shortcomings.

J.R And so most people coped alright?

R.H Oh yes.

J.R Then you volunteered for infantry or?

R.H Yes.

J.R In your mind that you'd go to Vietnam? Or did you want to?

R.H Ah.. I don't really know at the time whether it was all that likely. We did have a battalion there at the time of course, but..

J.R This was what, 1965?

This was, yes I went in in.. I was inducted in September 1965, so we had the first battalion over there, but at the time it was still a toss-up as to whether it was going to be Vietnam or Malaysia, because although Sukarno had fallen by that stage, we did have a military commitment there, and there was no intimation that our involvement in Vietnam was going to be upgraded to the level it was.

But after I'd ..... I went to infantry because I'd been in an infantry unit in the CMF, and I enjoyed that life, I wanted to be, if I went into the army at all, I wanted to go in as a fighting soldier.

J.R Right. What were you doing before you joined the army?

R.H I think I had about 20 jobs before I joined the army. My first job was as a grocer's boy, and from there I graduated to several factory jobs, I worked on farms, bit of a Terry Burstall actually, I don't think I tried horse breaking, but I knocked around, did a bit of seasonal work. I did quite a few jobs.

J.R So you weren't leaving an established sort of training or anything to go into the army?

R.H No, oh no. I was working for a second hand furniture store as a storeman before I left, that was probably one of the few jobs that I really enjoyed doing before I went into the army.

J.R Anyway, so you went through, to infantry corps training?

R.H Yes, I went over to 7 battalion because there were too many of us at that time for the infantry centre to handle, so we were posted direct to a battalion and did our corps training. I went to 7 battalion and by that stage the writing was on the wall about Vietnam.

I was approached by an officer who said that in view of my CMF experience and the fact that I'd come through recruit training quite well, there would be a chance that I may be sent overseas earlier than the normal 12 month period, minimum period of training. In fact I went over with 8½ months training behind me. I was told that I, unless I had any objection I would be shadow posted to the headquarters platoon of a proposed Australian task force. And that was the first intimation that the... I might add this was I think about December 65 or January 66, a long long time before it was officially announced.

I said that I didn't have any objection, in fact I was quite excited at the thought of getting overseas, so corps training progressed, I completed corps training in about March and then I was again approached and informed that I wasn't going to the headquarters platoon of the proposed task force, I was going to be posted to 6 battalion in Queensland which was very likely to be sent to Vietnam. So I found all that

immensely exciting. I went up and joined 6 battalion who were currently doing the Canungra jungle training course. A few days after arriving there the official announcement was made by Prime Minister Menzies that the 5th and 6th battalions would be going to Vietnam as a separate task force, operating independently of US forces. I think the air, the atmosphere in Canungra that night was almost electric, an almighty great cheer went up from everybody, even people who weren't all that keen on the war because it finally made it official.

J.R It was decided.

R.H It was. [yes, yes] And there was much bragging about what we were going to do when we got over there in the boozer that night.

J.R Right. And at any stage that you remember after you were in 6 battalion, was there a time when they said, if anybody doesn't want to go, you know, take a step forward or.. because there's this thing about everybody, that went to Vietnam volunteered to go to Vietnam.

R.H That's garbage.

J.R And sort of, in some battalions some people have said, yes there was a big parade and they were told to take a step forward if they didn't want to go, so of course nobody did, others say "anybody who doesn't want to go you know just let one of the officers know and you don't have to", but you don't recall anything...?

R.H There's certainly nothing at that time, no) there was no question of not sending people, although people who tried very hard to get out of it, did not go.

There was one guy in my platoon, in 6 RAR, who made it known that he didn't want to go and that he was considering deserting if he was sent, and he was transferred about a month prior to the battalion leaving. So I think he may have made approaches and said "Look, I do not want to go".

J.R So it wouldn't've been likely in, that anybody who was violently opposed to the war or anything like that If they'd made a noise (talking together)

R.H I think anybody who made their opposition known would have been weeded out. Because basically a person with such an attitude is really unsound anyway, you don't wart I that kind of person in an infantry platoon.

J.R (talking together) No, no it only causes trouble.

R.H It's devastating for morale. And these people are indeed sometimes at risk, because one of the other fellas tried a bit of malingering, he'd do things like fall over on exercises

and make out that he'd sprained his knee, and on one occasion he got his can opener and made two puncture marks in his leg and said he'd been bitten by a snake. He was weeded out subsequently, in fact he was told that he was going to be transferred to a home based unit, but word got out and indeed he was very lucky not to get quite savagely beaten up, in fact I was involved in intervening to protect him. He had to be taken into protective custody because many of the other guys were quite angry that here was a person who wasn't fighting for his country. And these were National Servicemen.

J.R Yes, yes. So there was sort of a lot of pressure to conform to the sort of group?

R.H I suppose I'm....

J.R Or if people kept quiet about something I suppose it was...

R.H Well, I think it's important to distinguish between that time, this is early 1966, and later years of the war, because at that time we were really expecting the war to be brought to a quick conclusion. The massive American intervention, the bombing, and the commitment of ground forces, to us it seemed that it was just a case of destroying the enemy's bases, getting some of their larger formations into fixed battles, beating the living daylights out of them, and then negotiating a settlement. That feeling probably persisted throughout my tour of duty, we really saw ourselves as beating them. Which we were, but what we weren't doing, what we didn't take account of was that these units could regenerate very quickly, and the destruction of their bases was neither here nor there, because they just moved back into the area and rebuilt them.

J.R Anyway, so you set off to Vietnam, went by boat? No. 707 *s,* we travelled first class from Amberley.

J.R Right, right. And what were your first impressions?

R.H First impressions when? you mean on arriving at Vietnam?

J.R Yes, yes. Did you arrive at Tan Son Nhut or?

R.H Yes. Quite a surprise really. I began to feel a bit of unease when we landed, the plane, well we stopped over at Manilla, that was really my first trip outside Australia, well since coming over from England as a child, and I remember looking down at Manilla at the squalor and dirt and so on, and I noticed that Saigon was even worse. I can still remember with fascination looking at the rivers, the great snake-like rivers, I thought my God, I've never seen a river like that before, but dirty looking houses, some tiled roofs, some grass huts, and then as the plane came in, we started taxiing past this line of tanks on the runway, and helmeted troops in full battle order posted at various intervals.

We got off the plane, I think walking into the heat was an experience I'll never forget, from an air conditioned 707 into..

J.R Sort of soup.

R.H Into a soup, that's right. And we walked over to these buses and I thought, my godfather, why do they have wire netting on all the windows, and I started realizing by then that this was a real war. I of course realized that they were to stop grenades being thrown in through the windows.

And we flew, - sorry we were transported about a mile across the aerodrome and boarded American C130 s and then flew to Vung Tau, where we were collected by trucks and taken to the Logistic Support Group.

J.R Was it all set up by that stage?

R.H It was being set up. [Right] I think the force had been there for about 3 or 4 weeks. Oh, it was very primitive, just tent flies and so on, but 44 gallon drums full of ice, ice cold beer and great bits of ice over them, so really it wasn't too bad because really we hadn't been told anything about what we were going to be doing in Vietnam. And my initial thoughts because Vung Tau, did you ever get to Vung Tau? [Mmm] That was a lovely place, the warm, the warmth, just the pleasantly cool breeze of an evening, sitting back there with a cold can watching all these young Vietnamese women walking past on the road outside and speculating when we might get to know them a bit better. And I thought well gee, I hope this war never ends, it seems great. What I didn't realize of course was that we were about to be sent to Nui Dat a week later, just in time for the start of the wet.

But if I can just tell you a brief anecdote, I remember that when we got off the C130 s we met an American unit that were just emplaning to go home after their tour. And one of the boys asked one of the yanks what combat was like, I suppose it was the kind of question a soldier lust arriving in country would ask. I'll always remember this GI said "Man it's like your asshole's turning inside out" And really that's a perfect description [Very American] of being in combat. Yes, it was very American and very appropriate, it describes the kind of fear you experience when you're being shot at, perfectly. Never yet met a constipated veteran. (laughs)

J.R Anyway, so you stayed at Vung Tau for..?

R.H We stayed there for a week, we just did acclimatization training, we went for runs in the morning, or hikes, came back, everyone'd rip their clothes off and run into the surf and then we'd just potter around generally. The food wasn't too bad at the time, of course the base was primitive, but then a tent fly

was more than enough to keep any rain off or any sun off, and the wet season hadn't started in earnest. Then we did this stinking great patrol through the Rung Sat and that was quite an eye opener, we were wading in waist deep mud, it was supposedly a safe area, we went with a party of Nung mercenaries, who were led by an Australian commando officer, I'd love to know who the guy was, but I've got a feeling he may even have been Ray Simpson. I don't think there were too many commando advisors who served over there, he wore his green beret with a commando badge. But actually we set an ambush on this river that night and we did in fact spy a number of boats coming downstream. Our Platoon Commander, who was a National Serviceman himself and obviously a little green, gave us the order to hold fire, but the Nung mercenaries expressed the view next morning that we should have fired. So that was one..

J.R Did they always do you think do that with new troops sort of take you out on your first patrol, 'cos I suppose when other people who have said, yes we went to patrol what was supposed to be a safe area and we met (laughs) ....

R.H I don't think there's such a thing as a safe area in the Rung Sat because it was swarming with VC and there was really nothing to stop them getting out at any point. But we just weren't sure so we didn't fire.

J.R And did you follow the same sort of procedures on patrols there as you had in your training? So that, you know, you felt pretty much at ease about what you were doing?

R.H Oh yes, we followed the same routine that we'd been following for months in the jungle. Things like, by that time we'd all got to a pretty good stage, we all knew one another, owe'd sorted out people who weren't suited for jobs like being forward scout, I was one, I was last on the list, of priorities as forward scout because ',couldn't keep a straight line, which made it very difficult for navigation. My section commander used to get really ropeable with me.

J.R So sort of arranging who was going to be your forward scout was kind of a sort of a consensus about you know, who was good at it and who wasn't or?

R.H That's right. It was a very skilled job, you needed someone who didn't switch off because there are obvious dangers in the job, the forward scout had to be alert, had to be able to pick out enemy, not only on the ground but in trees, had to keep an eye out for mines, possible mines on the track, booby traps, trip wires, all that kind of thing, and he also had to have the skills, navigational skills to be able to quickly direct the section's attention to a particular point. Like we use things like the clock ray method, 9 o'clock would be over that-away, you'd imagine you had an imaginary clock ....

J.R Yes, I have to always look at my watch when people tell me things like that.

R.H But he was pretty good at that. Another technique was to use tracer bullets, who had a few tracers in the magazine and you'd yell out "Watch my tracers" and fire a few shots. And also of course you had to be capable of following a straight line in thick jungle, because if your section commander pointed you to somewhere on the map you'd head off and be expected to go in a straight line. Whenever I did I'd generally have an angry hiss from behind me and turn around and cop a mouthful of obscenities and say "Harris, you bastard, you're straying off to the left again". I just couldn't help it.

But in areas where we were in very heavy jungle it was very fatiguing for the forward scout who was virtually clearing a track at the same time, and we just had to take turns. Some of it was so thick that the only way you could get through it was by holding your rifle in front of you, across your body and virtually throwing yourself forward to flatten the ground.

J.R Didn't they actually cut a path with a...?

R.H No, that was even more fatiguing, but it was pretty horrendous that, because with a 100lb pack or so on your back you'd have to pick yourself up and then repeat the process. Sometimes you'd be going for hours just to cross a, just to get through a few metres. No-one gave a damn about the Vietcong in those circumstances. [No] We were more concerned with the jungle.

J.R And were your NCO s mostly people who'd had experience in Borneo or Malaya?

R.H At that time, yes. Not only the section commanders, section commanders and platoon sergeants were invariably people who had had previous experience, but in some cases some of the ranking soldiers, the regular army soldiers had had tours. We were a very experienced, well <u>they</u> were d very experienced force at that time.

J.R And was their experience pretty useful?

R.H It was, because it really forced Nashos like myself to conform to higher standards of training. We were under tremendous pressure really to do as well as these people did, to have their bushcraft skills, their general skills with weapons and so on. There was great deal of peer group pressure to bring us up, and I think that probably worked beneficially. Because a lot of people did express the view that, were concerned about sending a battalion over with so many conscripts in the ranks, they really thought we were watering down the quality of the regular army. And those fears proved to be groundless, as Long Tan demonstrated graphically. The National Servicemen there fought just as well as the regs, if not better. Perhaps you should wipe that off the tape ...!

J.R No, no that's alright. Put in a good word for the Nashos.

R.H Don't play that back to Terry Burstall or he might flatten me! (laughs)

J.R Anyway, so, then you went by Chinook or something up to Nui Dat? No, we went by road. I never had a ride on a Chinook in my whole tour of duty, I feel very left out when they play that "Only 19" song about Vung Tau, boarding Chinooks to the dust at Nui Dat. We saw Chinooks quite often, but they were usually used for carrying heavy things like artillery pieces and so on. Never actually used them for troop carrying purposes in my time.

J.R Okay. So you went by road, so that was your first sort of view of the, of the province.

R.H We went by road, that's right, we drove along the highway through Baria, past the edge of the Rang Sat, the smell and the stench of the mangroves and the marginally less pleasant smells of some of the villages, over the bridges and so on and saw the ARVN lounging around on sand bags and so on, and thought my godfather, aren't they meant to be in this war! Then we arrived at Nui Dat, which was just being established, I think 5 RAR had been in the area for about 10 days actually. They were still under intermittent contact with the enemy who had more or less maintained continual pressure on them. I think the enemy actually were just deciding to get out and leave the field to us until they were better prepared.

I remember just when we were getting off the trucks at Nui Dat, the artillery opened fire from just on the other side of a small hill and it was the first time any of us had heard guns fire, we'd never been exposed to that in training.

J.R Hadn't you? Hadn't you?

R.H Not artillery, and it was rather amusing to watch, there were guys diving for cover in every direction.

J.R It's extremely noisy isn't it?

R.H Oh the noise..! the funny thing was, about 6 months later I was at a fire support base as part of the defensive force, and I had one of the best night’s sleep of my life, about 20 metres or so from one of the guns. I remember waking up the next morning surrounded by empty ammunition cases and one of the gunners commenting "Oh sleeping beauty's awoken!" (laughs)

J.R Get used to anything (talking together)

R.H So it showed how quickly we became conditioned.

J.R So were you pretty busy setting up the battalion lines and?

R.H Yes, that first period was absolutely horrendous, we were being worked into the ground, we were digging in, in fact

the very night we arrived at Nui Dat we were warned that a Viet Cong force had been spotted heading our way, and I think it must have been taken seriously because the artillery fired all night, fired defensive fire missions and there were air strikes going in, and at that stage we hadn't even dug in, we were just on the ground, so..

J.R Was it the Australian artillery there or the American?

R.H No the Americans weren't, they didn't arrive for some time. The Australians were there and the New Zealanders, there was a full regiment, I think two batteries of Australians and one battery of kiwis. So that was quite an introduction, at that time we were more or less camped where we got off, beside near where we'd got off the trucks in a hastily prepared defensive position. The next morning we moved out and basically founded what was to become the perimeter of the Nui Dat base. We started digging in and we were well dug in by that night.

But it was very hard at the time because there were no tents, we just had our little back pack hoochies which you've probably seen. I erected mine against a paddy bun, well not a paddy bun you know the earth banks running through rubber plantations to contain water, and I thought this *is* great, this is nice and thick it will stop a bullet. What I didn't realize was that it also retained water and we had the first monsoonal downpour that night and ...

J.R You were in the dam

R.H I was virtually floating around in about 6" of water and a lot of personal gear, photographs and so on from home were destroyed, so it was a very miserable introduction to Vietnam. I think I celebrated my 21st birthday in similar circumstances. And of course we were doing patrols during the day and sometimes night ambushes 4n the surrounding area, then coming back and filling sand bags and putting up barb wire. The first three months were just physically exhausting, physically and mentally exhausting, were like zombies at the end of it.

J.R So when did you get there, April, May?

R.H June, June the 4th, sorry June 5th ‘66.

J.R So did you have much contact on the patrols?

R.H With enemy?

J.R Yes.

R.H No, we were chasing them around without any success for something like 6 weeks, my first contact with the enemy was Operation Hobart which has been well documented in Terry Burstall's book. That was quite a savage fight, they, a company of D445 walked into our position. The funny thing was that at the

time there'd been a number of accidental shootings, in fact I think there'd been more Australians accidentally shot by their own mates than had been killed by the enemy at that stage.

J.R And was this sort of because of the nature of the patrolling you were doing or?

R.H I think people were very jumpy, I remember a couple of incidents, I think one guy on a night ambush went to sleep and the guy next to him decided he wanted to urinate so he stood up to urinate, and the guy next to him woke up, saw a figure looming over him and just put his rifle up and shot him. And there was another incident...

J.R Killed him or?

R.H Yeah, killed him. I think there were a couple of similar incidents... There was another incident where a unit, I think a section or a platoon from 5 battalion became lost, whilst on a patrol and came back to their base, didn't realize they were home, thought they were coming up against enemy force and actually put in an assault on their own position. I don't think that one's in the official records either.

J.R No, It's quite an interesting thing this, I mean it's awful the sort of accidental shooting, but I was checking, there was an incident in Gary McKays book about where somebody in his platoon shot somebody in another platoon, and I was looking in the battalion history and it's not, I mean you can't tell at all from the [No] history, it just has them listed as a casualty.

R.H It happened more often, there were two things that happened far more often than army records will ever reveal, one was accidental shelling of our own positions, that happened on Hobart and again on Bribie, and in neither of the official accounts of that battle is there any reference, but both the guys killed on Operation Hobart were killed by an Australian shell, it hit the top of the tree they were sheltering under, they had been wounded and had been put there for shelter and the shell came and hit the top of the tree and killed both of them.And on Bribie, where I was involved, we had to call artillery in very close because we were in dire trouble, and I think 3 of the shells fell short. I was told unofficially by a fairly senior officer that one of the guns had a malfunctioning sight. But we lost several guys killed, and a number wounded, including myself, from those 3 shells that came in short.

J.R I wonder if this, I mean you were in the sort of early days) I wonder if they tightened up procedures later on? Have you ever talked to anyone from later battalions (both talking together?

R.H Well I would highly doubt... I haven't really, no. I haven't really had a chance to have a really deep enough conversation with any other veteran, but certainly there was an incident

just prior to mine, just prior to Bribie, this was documented, where the kiwis, the army seemed always ready to blame the kiwis when they did something wrong (laughs)

J.R Well why not.

R.H But the kiwis dropped a bracket of shells in on D company, and as you may recall warrant officer Jack Kirby and a number of others who had survived Long Tan were killed. And the loss of Jack Kirby in particular was a really shattering blow to the battalion, he was the father figure and indeed he was one of the heroes of Long Tan, he was probably under decorated for his role. There are some who think he should have got a VC for that.

J.R Did it have a bad sort of effect on a platoon when there was this sort of accidental, well I mean casualties from the enemy was it a different sort of reaction or?

R.H Well, fortunately no-one in my platoon was accidentally killed, although a guy in 4 platoon B company was accidentally shot by the machine gunner of his section, it was a very tragic accident, he was a very popular fellow, in fact he was a mate of mine with 7 RAR in corps training, a really inoffensive guy, and what happened, he went to sleep whilst on a patrol, because sometimes when you were moving through heavy country if you were at the tail end of a column it was really slow. You might move 10 yards, then you'd sit down for half an hour, because if you were crossing rivers and tracks and so on on a column of march you had to really go through all this rigmarole to make sure you weren't ambushed, like sending patrols down each side of the track, clearing the area, then getting across. And this poor fellow went to sleep, he woke up to find himself alone in the jungle, panicked and started running down the track after his unit and the tail end charlie in the last section happened to be carrying a machine gun just turned around and let him have a burst, and I do know, I knew both the guys involved in that action, accident. And the machine gunner was very upset by it. I met him sometime later in Australia and was still very distressed by the incident. Plus of course the army always holds a Board of Inquiry and so on into these incidents, the legal officers come up and it's almost like a court martial.

J.R Yes, pretty unpleasant.

R.H It's unpleasant.

J.R And what, what was the sort of atmosphere after something like that, or I suppose when you were wounded you wouldn't've known 'cos you wouldn't've been there, I mean do people get very depressed...

R.H People get very upset. After Hobart, I had the unfortunate job of having to carry the 2 dead to the landings, having to help carry the 2 dead to the landing zone, and yes people

were very upset, a couple of guys were howling their eyes out, 'cos they knew these fellows and yes, it was very distressing, and I know we were all very shaken for some time.

J.R Does it make you sort of jumpy, or slow?

R.H Oh yes, yes, I remember [depressed or agitated] I treated Vietnam as a big joke up until that occasion, and in fact when the enemy walked into our camp and the shooting started, the last thing I thought of was contact with the enemy. I thought oh some silly buggers are firing on us, this will all stop in a minute. In fact I'd just made a cup of tea on my little hexamine stove and I remember going to ground because there were bullets flying around everywhere and branches and leaves and that raining down on me, and I remember going to ground very careful not to spill my mug of tea and putting my hand over it (laughs) to keep the leaves out. And in fact I was lying there sipping my tea with no thought at all of war, thinking geez, I wish these silly buggers'd recognise their mistake and stop firing and next thing I heard this weird bugle call and the awful realization dawned that, because we didn't use bugle calls for communication, I thought God this is the real thing. And a fairly nasty fight of about 30 minutes duration ensued. We were actually mortared, our platoon was mortared to pin us down whilst the enemy conducted flanking movements. 'Cos I think a few of us had the impression that the enemy were terrified of fighting Australians, we thought/look we've got such a reputation [they'll stay away] they obviously want to avoid us. But on Hobart they attacked us quite ferociously, it was only when they realized they were up against a fairly strong force and the artillery started raining down on them that they pulled out.

J.R Was it just your platoon that was involved?

R.H No it was the full company. So it was roughly an even battle, there was a company of them and a company' of us.

But that was one of the things that Terry Burstall raised in his book, was that we'd faced a large enemy force that was aggressive, very aggressive, and really the commander should have been alerted by that because if the force had been larger and had maintained the action we would have been in trouble, because there was no-one around that could have got to us to help us.

J.R And so after that incident at Hobart, you had some casualties, were replacements brought in, did you get replacements, reinforcements pretty...

R.H Yes, well what normally happened was that whoever was in the task force headquarters, the D & E platoon they called it, the defence and employment, that was treated as a reinforcement unit, people were posted over from there. So had I gone over with that platoon I would have ended up in one of the two battalions in no time anyway. But yes they were posted

over fairly quickly, and what happened was that the platoon that had been most heavily engaged was immediately sent to Vung Tau for some leave. Probably the theory being that a week or so of wine, women and song would make them feel better, I don't know whether it really had that affect. But the fact that they gave us leave for our heavy engagement was one of the reasons why B company was grossly under strength at the battle of Long Tan, which could have resulted in us being wiped out, had we contacted the enemy instead of D company.

J.R Right, so after Hobart did you go back into, was that while you were out on a patrol, just a sort of patrol near the..

R.H Well that's a funny thing Jane, because we, according to the battalion history we were put there 0.s a blocking force to trap this Viet Cong Unit that was being chased by C company, 6 RAR. But, we didn't know that we were part of a blocking force, in fact we were not terribly tactical, we were in a proper company harbour position, but up until then them'd been a lot of resentment in the platoon at the rule that we had to dig in if we stayed anywhere longer than 10 minutes or so. We were supposed to dig these shell scrapes which is more or less, you're probably familiar with the term, it was just like a little, it was a grave sized [Just enough to lie in] just enough to lie in for cover. And we were dirty on this because it meant that by the time you finished digging one of these in the jungle it was time to move again, so we'd never get a chance to have a hot meal and a cup of tea and so on at midday. So on this very day our company commander came and gave us the choice between digging in or having a hot meal. Everybody opted for the hot meal.

Now if we'd been put there as a blocking force, and he knew it, surely he wouldn't have told us, told us, that.

J.R Yes. so you were staying there for awhile in other words.

R.H (talking together) So I don't think that even the company commander knew that we were there to block the withdrawal of an enemy force. That's a very disturbing, one of my very disturbing memories of Vietnam.

J.R Right, yes. So after the attack, what happened, did you go back to ..

R.H We returned to base after a few days, I think we spent about 2 more days and then conducted more sweeps of the area. But yes, I do remember feeling very .... edgy after that.

J.R And this was in August by then or July?

R.H That was July, yeah, it was exactly 4 weeks before Long Tan.

J.R Right. So you were still in the digging in phase in Nui Dat and...

R.H Yes, we dug our positions, our, well we dug our fire pits and so

on with overhead cover, that only took a couple of days. We had proper shovels and all that to work with there, not those silly darn folding shovels that we carried in our packs. And I think we'd set up claymores, banks of claymores in front with, for defensive fire, but I think it was sometime before we actually got a decent barb wire defensive position put up, I think there was a shortage of barb wire at the time. There was a shortage of everything, didn't have enough machine guns, didn't have enough ammunition, that was a, even the tents when we eventually got them were rotten.

J.R (talking together) Sort of a sorry tale really isn't it? I remember reading that thing about 1 RAR ...

R.H Oh that was disgraceful... About Colonel, was it Colonel Brumfield, the commander? [yeah, yeah] about his shirt ripping, that was his best shirt too, even his uniform was rotten. Yes that was disgraceful.

J.R Yes, you sort of read about it in the 1st and 2nd World War and you think, oh that was a long time ago and things'd be different now, but they're not really..... (talking together) don't seem all that much better organised.

R.H There seems to be a bit, well, from what I see I think the equipment is a bit better, they seem to have been gradually upgrading equipment. But whether or not they're all that much better organised I don't know.

J.R It's sort of frightening. Anyway, so things continued on during July, more patrolling?

R.H Oh yes all the time, night ambushes, standing patrols, they were a bit of a doozie. It'd be a half section going out, couple of hundred metres from the wire and staying out there the night. They were a bit scary, the idea was if you had a contact you opened fire and then ran like hell back to base. What happened if somebody got hit and you had a casualty to evacuate I don't know.

J.R So was there a feeling, especially after Hobart that you were pretty vulnerable?

R.H Yes.

J.R And did that increase the... tension or?

R.H There was a feeling among the diggers, obviously there wasn't amongst the commanders, otherwise they wouldn't have sent out D company the way they did. You have read Terry's book so you're familiar with all the blunders and the...

J.R Yes, although, I don't know whether it's so much in his or in Lex McAuley's book that there <u>was</u> a lot of concern at the high level that ..... (talking together)

R.H I think it's more in Terry's book. Lex tends to be very, to be a bit of an apologist, I think that's where his book falls down. I think there was some blatant blunders made and those feelings are shared by a lot of ex 6 RAR veterans.

J.R Yes, yes, I can imagine.

R.H In fact one member, whom I won't name because he's still a serving member in a fairly senior job, says as far as he's concerned he'd like to stand some of the senior officers up against the wall and have 5 minutes free time with an M60. He's very bitter.

J.R Well I won't get you to go through the battle of Long Tan because it's ...

R.H Well I can't anyway, I wasn't in it.

J.R Wasn't your company

R.H B company was indirectly involved, but I wasn't with them at the time, I *was* in hospital.

J.R Oh right, well I'd better find out then, what happened? [Sorry] Why were you, were you sick?

R.H In hospital [Yes] Yes, I was sick, I had a, it was officially put down as PUO, Pyrexia of Unknown Origin. I just had a fever and my glands were up and so on. I was very ill for a few days, so I was shipped to Vung Tau and I'd just been discharged that afternoon and had been sent to a tent on some remote corner of the beach, which was sort of a holding area to be sent back the next day, and I was imbibing one or two cold cans in the 2 Field Ambulance mess and this guy came walking over from the chopper pad, whom I believe he was a fellow by the name of Robbins, his face looks familiar from Terry Burstall's book, I remember he had this hand and arm injury, was really wild eyed and so on, heading for the field ambulance and I said "What the hell happened to you?" and he told me about the battle of Long Tan. So that was my first knowledge of it.

J.R And did the word sort of spread, I mean were people aware at the time that it was a pretty big (talking together) sort of engagement.

R.H Oh like wildfire, yeah like wildfire. Yes, that really changed things, we knew we had a war on then. Well, put it this way, word filtered up to the senior officers that there was a war on, we already knew it, from Hobart.

J.R Yes, it was almost a necessary thing to happen in a way, wasn't it?

R.H Yes. until Long Tan we still (talking together)

J.R Sort of the biggest battle early on in the task force.

R.H Yes, that's right it was probably a salutary lesson because there were certainly numerous occasions, subsequent occasions, where heavy fighting was involved and to send troops into the field with 60 rounds of ammunition per rifleman and about 3 or 4 hundred rounds of ammunition for a machine gun, which can be burned up very quickly, was just ridiculous. From that day onwards we left 6" deep footprints from the weight of all the ammo we carried with us!

J.R So you went back up to Nui Dat pretty soon after...?

R.H I went straight back to Nui Dat from hospital and was posted back to my platoon which was currently involved in sweeping the Long Tan area. So I saw the battlefield of Long Tan days afterwards and I remember getting quite a shock. The rubber trees were already starting to die, you could actually define the battlefield from quite a distance away by all the browning rubber trees, they'd just been shredded by shrapnel. And we saw all the holes in the ground from the enemy mortars and the...

J.R Did it have sort of an atmosphere?

R.H Yeah. Oh it did. People were very quiet.

J.R And were there any people put into your platoon who'd been in, in the other platoons who were involved?

R.H On no, no. (talking together) no, they were just brought up to strength. They were brought up to strength.

J.R (talking together) They'd switch them around a bit, but only within their company [with reinforcements] did they, I guess?

R.H Well I don't think they switched them around, no.

J.R They did a bit.

R.H Did they?

J.R Yeah.

R.H (talking together) You've probably spoken to more veterans than I have.

Oh I imagine they would have, particularly a platoon like 11 platoon which was effectively destroyed as a fighting unit. Just to replace all of them with reinforcements would have been foolish, because there wouldn't've been the usual mix of experience, so I suppose they would have shuffled people around. But the only occasion where my company lost heavy casualties was on Bribie, and of course being one of them I don't really know what happened after that day. Probably much

the same thing, people would have been shuffled around.

But normally, the normal action involved maybe one or two people killed, half a dozen wounded and it was just a case of replacing them.

J.R And was it hard for the replacements to fit in do you think? Or did .....

R.H I think it probably was because we tended to be very cliquey. Ah... Bear in mind that many of these guys had been together since recruit training, even some of the people like myself who joined the battalion a few months before they went over were almost regarded as new chums. So people who came over later in the piece, yes, they probably had a bit of difficulty. We did have a few reinforcements join us shortly before Bribie and unfortunately I think most of them were killed on Bribie, or at least wounded. Reinforcements seemed to have a very high attrition rate.

J.R Even though they would be spread through the sections? [Yes] Presumably they wouldn't all be put in one section.

R.H No, no they are usually spread. I don't know if that's coincidental or not, whether they're just not experienced enough to sort of, read the play when there's a battle on, or whether, well being killed or wounded in war is a random thing.

J.R Well, maybe it's not.

END OF TAPE 1

TAPE 2

R.H Well, put it this way, I got hit in the thigh by a piece of shrapnel, and I often what would have happened if it had've been the spine or the head or something like that.

J.R Well yes it's random in that sort of sense.

R.H It's random in that sense, yes.

J.R Have you seen the film Platoon?

R.H I haven't seen the film yet, no I 'm meaning to go and see it.

J.R Yes, you want to go and see it. I won't say it's an enjoyable experience, I went to see it and someone said "Did you enjoy it?" and I said No. Enjoy is not the word.

R.H From what I've heard....

J.R At the beginning of that, there are a couple of people killed, and that's because they're new to the platoon, inexperienced don't know what to do and you know sort of put their head up to see what's happening and pow.

R.H Probably with the Americans that situation might have arisen, in fact I was horrified, when I was wounded I was sent to the American field hospital 36 Evac. And the Americans were getting battered at the time, they were launching, I think it was Operation Junction City or something like that. And they were getting bit of a pasting, and this guy was in great pain and Was put into the bed next to me, his bed was made up with a board and so on for spinal injuries. He was paraplegic and I said "What happened to you?" and he said "They just took a 51b piece of shrapnel out of my back", and what had happened, this guy had been standing on top of a bunker watching an air strike going in, and this piece of shrapnel, obviously it had ricocheted or something, because a piece that size surely would have cut (tape stops) Anyway this American with a shrapnel, horrendous shrapnel wound had been standing on top of a bunker watching an air strike going in, which is something you just don't do. As soon as an air strike or an artillery fire mission comes in, the normal procedure is to flatten yourself on the ground, 'cos inevitably some of them land where they aren’t wanted to. So I got the impression then that the Americans were pretty ill-trained if not ill-disciplined force, so I'm not surprised that they lost reinforcements at such a horrendous rate. But at least by the time an aussie, even a reinforcement joined a section, he was a pretty well trained soldier. And it was just a case of fitting in, getting to fit in to the section. But there was always I suppose a danger period of a few weeks until he knew people and people knew him.

J.R So how did the rest of the year, after Long Tan, was it a

sort of routine of patrolling and...

R.H Yes, well we did a few very lengthy operations of 4 or 5 weeks in the field, and in fact a month after Long Tan we entered the Nui Dinh hills, overlooking Nui Dat for the first time, and captured a very large Viet Cong base without a shot being fired, and that base had obviously been there for many many years, because they had their own tax office there. We got all the records, took them back to Nui Dat, and these indicated that this office had been in existence since the French had been in Vietnam.

Yes, we walked into this place, grass roofed huts and so on, many of them with furniture in them, some of them had food on the tables. What happened was that the Americans had sent in a B52 strike the night before and pounded the hell out of the hills, but they bombed, I think they had an idea that this base was there, but they either bombed the wrong valley or they'd been given the wrong valley to bomb. And when we entered the hills the following morning we found the valley where the bombs had landed with these huge rocks that had been sliced in half like some gigantic knife, then climbed up a hill and came down the other side and walked into this base, which was undefended, and of course unoccupied. And we spent several days in there removing all the stuff, no weapons of course, they got them out.

J.R And it wasn't booby trapped or anything?

R.H Wasn't booby trapped, as I said food was on the tables, I think the Viet Cong, I've got a feeling it was the headquarters of the Chau Duc District Company, which managed to maintain it s presence in the province throughout the war, although they suffered very grievously on some occasions.

Anyway, we destroyed that base and conducted a few other operations, that was Operation Vaucluse that particular one, we conducted Operation Ingham further to the north of the province and found another large base, there was no combat involved on that. We always seemed to be lucky, we did have a few little patrol scrapes) which usually involved someone from the other side being killed, we really had a charmed life.

J.R Did you feel you were under sort of a strain? Did you find there was a sort of cumulative tension after sort of week after week of .....?

R.H It was physically exhausting and I suppose it was emotionally exhausting, because after, after the earlier battles we knew that we could run into it at any time, so you had to be continually on the lookout. But I think after awhile we were beginning to relax a little bit because we thought, look they just don't want to fight us any more, we've destroyed their bases, we've beaten the hell out of them a couple of times, they seem to have withdrawn from the province. And really it seemed that way up until Operation Bribie, when my company

really came in to some very heavy combat.

J.R And how did you relax?

R.H I'm almost embarrassed to tell you (laughs) Let's just say wine, women and song whenever I got the opportunity!

J.R But after you'd been out on patrol and you went back to Nui Dat.

R.H Booze.

J.R Booze. [Booze] Was it a problem, alcohol? Or drunkenness I should say..?

R.H We usually drank until we were drunk. I had some shocking hangovers over there.

J.R And were there ever sort of fights or incidents as a result...

R.H Oh yes, they'd often be fights. Not all that frequently, but sometimes people would get on each others' nerves and they'd be a punch-up. Usually they'd flare up and be over as quickly as they begun, but occasionally you'd see two guys walk, stride purposely out of the boozer and shape up to each other and box on for half an hour or so, pretty tough boys in 6 RAR, they were mainly Queenslanders, a lot of boys from the far north and so on from cattle stations, they were tough.

J.R Do you know, did the sort of problem, well did people develop a drinking problem do you think up there?

R.H I have little doubt. I didn't drink when I went into the army and I had a definite drinking problem when I got out of it.

J.R And did the alcohol work as a relaxation?

R.H (talking together) I think it did. I think it did. I'm a great believer in Dr. Fosters actually (laughs) at least from the from that point of view. Obviously in the long run it catches up with you, but there were times when I came back because I think I suffered from a classic post traumatic stress syndrome, particularly after Operation Bribie, I was having nightmares and jumping every time someone banged a door.But I found that drinking probably helped me, it was probably more use than valium. Also I suppose being young it helped.

J.R So what happened on Bribie? What was the sort of lead up to...

R.H We were, now it's said that Australians were never ambushed in Vietnam, in fact in an article in Time Life which you may have read in John Rowe’s Time-Life book,

An American team did a report on us and I remember seeing 'B Company has never been ambushed, that was after Bribie when it was no longer a company.

J.R (talking together) So that's your company that's in [yes] oh right.

R.H As far as I'm concerned it was damn near enough to an ambush. Because we were basically lured out by a, the Viet Cong attacked a South Vietnamese army post, A company went out by helicopter and walked into this force and became heavily engaged, suffered a number of casualties, they were the Ready Reaction force which was on standby, Lie were supposedly having a rest day back in Nui Dat, we were having a rest day to make up for the day that we were called out on Christmas Day. We weren't the Ready Reaction company. but we were ordered to move at a moment's notice, in fact most of us had a fair bit of grog swirling round in us, we were putting a concrete floor down in the boozer. So we had a hasty meal while transport was being arranged, threw our packs on and jumped onto the choppers and we came out, we landed near A company's position, advanced into the jungle, conducted a, tried to make a flanking attack on the enemy force, came under some fairly intensive fire, so we moved around to what we thought was behind them.

What we didn't know was this enemy force was actually setting a road ambush, they were expecting us to come out by road, they had some very heavy weapons covering the road, we ended up going round into the front of their position and running virtually into the lot, into the thick of it. They had anti-tank guns, heavy machine guns, the whole lot. So we made an assault on the position and we were virtually mowed down, they let us get to within very close distance and then opened fire, they cut down quite a few people very quickly. Those of us survived, myself included were, basically holding a very tentative position when we were ordered to withdraw under cover of artillery fire to get a more effective defense cordon put up.. And of course the artillery came in and...hit a few of us, myself included.

J.R So what was the procedure then? Were you choppered out or?

R.H Well I was sort of pinned down for a couple of hours, it took quite some time to get out, in fact at one stage I was between our guys and theirs. In fact I remember one of me mates...

J.R Did you realize all this at the time did you, when you were quite (talking together)

R.H (talking together) I did not expect to get out, I was convinced that I was going to be killed.

J.R You were quite conscious...?

R.H I was conscious, yep.

R.H But I remember one of my mates who was a machine gunner in one of the other platoons, he called out to me by name and said "Lie flat I'm going to fire over you, you're in-between us and some nogs." So I got down flat and a fairly large amount of machine gun fire came past within inches of my prone body. But it had the effect, but that was an interesting action in another respect, the armoured, the cavalry tried to do a similar mission to what they did at Long Tan, to force their way, force the enemy away, to charge the enemy with the armoured personnel carriers. And obviously this unit had learned from Long Tan, and they were waiting and they, they knocked out a carrier, I think they damaged another one. Unfortunately I was in the carrier when they hit it, I was put into it, they put a number of wounded into it and it was hit just as it was starting to back out. The driver was killed, the carrier virtually blown up, so that was a very lucky escape for me.

J.R What they had to get you out of the carrier?

R.H I had to get myself out, under my own steam, managed to get to another one which took me to a rear area and managed to get me onto a helicopter.

J.R Was it very noisy and sort of disorganised at a battle like that?

R.H Oh yes, yes. You got, the fire in the jungle was incredibly loud machine guns and rifle fire, shells and that, a shell makes a bang, when it lands close to you in particular, the noise is just out of this world. And of course you've got wounded screaming out and so on, so yes it's very noisy and pretty harrowing in combat. And of course bullets make a very sharp crack when they pass you, like a whip crack, so you always know when you were being shot at.

J.R And how long did all this go on for?

R.H I think the action lasted for a couple of hours. It seemed a lot longer.

J.R Yes, yeah. So at the end of it, where were you?

R.H I was flown out to the 36th Evacuation hospital, I believe the Australian hospital was full up at the time, it was a bad week. And I spent about 10 days there, I had a couple of operations to remove the shrapnel and later to sew up the wound, and was shipped home to Australia. Ended up being posted to several sedentary positions.

J.R So when you came back, were you hospitalized..... for awhile?

R.H (talking together) Well I was virtually, I was on sick leave for 3 months because they didn't know exactly how bad the damage was, didn't want to open my leg. But I visited Neurologists and so on who thought there was a possibility my sciatic nerve was severed; which it turned out to be, so

after 3 months I was put into hospital and had a fairly lengthy operation to suture it, that involved about 34 months as a guest of Heidelberg Repat.

J.R And what was the sort of army support services like? I mean did you feel you were sort of shipped around and left or were you....

R.H I think the army just got rid of us as quickly as possible.

J.R [talking together] Did they. Did you ever see any of your friends again, you know.....

R.H I have never seen anyone from my platoon. They came to visit me in hospital, survivors, 'cos my platoon was the one that copped most of the casualties. But no, I haven't seen them since, so I'm looking forward to the Welcome Home March, I'll walk there if necessary, I'll walk to Sydney if I have to. I'm really looking forward to that, I'm hoping to see them again.

J.R And the other ones who were injured, didn't sort of go to the same hospitals as you? So that you...

R.H We were sent wherever we could be. I think it was mainly a question of severity of wounds, if you're obviously going to need surgery, you were sent to the American hospital, people who just needed patching up, a few sutures or something and perhaps a bit of bed rest, were sent to the Australian hospital. At that time it wasn't a full hospital status, it was 2 Field Ambulance then which was sort of growing into a hospital. I don't think the army was ever prepared for the casualties that we were going to sustain in Vietnam.

J.R So how long did you have before you were discharged from the army?

R.H Well I signed on for an extra 9 months, because I was still a bit of a crock when I got out of Heidelberg, and at that time the army was so short of personnel, clerical and all that, that they were able to find work for me, so I was, actually I worked at the hospital itself for awhile, which was convenient because I was having outpatient treatment, just doing clerical work in the army office there. I even played the Judas sheep at one stage, I went into Swan Street Barracks and assisted in processing an intake of National Serviceman.

J.R Telling them all how good it was.

R.H No, just telling them to go to Table B and so on, they were all bemused, I felt like a real Judas.

J.R Did you have sort of feelings, yes, saying you felt like a Judas, did you have feelings of hostility towards the army or...?

R.H Well I went through a couple of funny phases really, when I was over there and I realized that the Vietnamese, you know we weren't

sort of having little young Vietnamese women coming up and hanging around our necks, as had been portrayed when the first American Marines had landed at Danany. In fact when we realized that some of them were quite hostile to us, I think many of us started having second feelings. There was bitterness expressed sometimes when people were killed or badly wounded, from some of the members of the platoon who really felt by that stage the war was a waste of time. We were conscious of the fact that the South Vietnamese weren't really interested in fighting for their own country. Some were, some of their regular units fought very bravely, but most of their units, the regional forces and popular forces and so on, they obviously didn't have their hearts in it. And I think there's a bit of bitterness, most of us thought, well look if they don't want to fight for their country, let the communist takeover.

And then when I came home I suppose, having had friends killed and so on and having copped a bit of flack from the anti war movement, I became very gung-ho. Even to the point of feeling quite violent at times towards anti war people. Plus of course getting back-slapped by the RSL, "Good on you son, you've done a good thing for your country". But over the years I became pretty anti-war, I think I went to a couple of Anzac Day marches after I came home and then I more or less dropped out for about 12 years or so, didn't tell people I'd been to Vietnam. No-one seemed interested anyway. And then in later years I became involved with the VVA when I realized the plight that some people were having, I considered myself lucky to... have sort of come good.

J.R You said before that you were classic post traumatic stress disorder case, did you sort of recover from that by the time your leg had recovered or..?

R.H Yes, although I've always been very bitter about the war, and sort of edgy and uptight, I've always been a difficult, I think I've been a difficult person to live with, I always snap at my wife and the kids very easily, I've never had much patience.

J.R But do you think that was an effect of Vietnam?

R.H I think it was. I really think it was, although I think I largely made a recovery, but I've always felt very bitter and resentful about the war, particularly during the years when I wasn't having anything to do with veterans.

J.R Do you think it was because you were wounded?

R.H And that of course. Yeah, well I was 22 when I was wounded and I've never really been able to play any active sports since then, it's always been a problem my leg. I'm a lot better off than people like John Thompson of course, but I've alwaysbeen a bit dirty on the fact that it seemed a waste of a good leg.

J.R Yes, quite. And how did you get involved with veterans?

R.H I just read things in the paper and heard things on the news about the VVA and about the Agent Orange thing and so on, and I thought, well I'll join them, go along to a few meetings, if nothing else I'd like to talk to a few people that I may have been over there with.

And I became actively involved, because at that time I was half way through my law degree, and I became an advocate, and represented a number of veterans, even a widow, in hearings before this very board. And I think I had about a 95% success rate, so, I got a few people up.

J.R Did that have any connection with why you started studying law?

R.H No, I don't think so. I think I always wanted to be a... I always wanted to do something at University, law was something I always had in mind. I've always had a bit of a, been a bit of a person for the underdog. And when they started the mature age scheme at Melbourne University I applied, and was one of the lucky selected.

J.R And just going backwards again, when you were in Vietnam, did you have much contact with Vietnamese, either with Vietnamese in the army, or civilians?

R.H We had interpreters attached to the units, some of their loyalties were a bit in doubt. But yes, we did have contact with them, we didn't actually have much contact with Vietnamese armed forces, we never operated with them. I suppose about the only contact I had with Vietnamese ones, were ones which I, "censored", No, it's okay, I've always been frank with my wife, but you know obvious liaisons with some young women while on leave, and trading with people, you know just dealing with people in shops and so on.

J.R You weren't involved in any villages in any way?

R.H No...

J.R Other civic action sort of things or cordon and searches?

R.H Oh yes, we did two cordon and searches at Hoa Long. They were funny in a way, we moved into Hoa Long, the first cordon and search was unsuccessful because the Viet Cong in there had a tunnel system and they all got out. But we cordoned the village, and we sort of held a defensive position for a day, and I remember at first light the next morning we were absolutely besieged by Vietnamese children. I was sort of, at a machine gun pit, and there were kids climbing all over things and, you know for their own sake I had to keep them away from the machine gun, but it was just impossible to keep them away, they were just curious kids and, I quite liked the Vietnamese, I quite enjoyed spending time with the children and so on. They were very worldly children, it was incredible, when you see five kids of 5 or 6 years of age warning you to stay away from such and such a girl, you'd say "Why?" and they'd hold their genitals and walk around doubled up, (laughs))you'd say, oh right, yeah point taken.

J.R And do you think the sort of attitude of the Australian soldiers was that the people were worth helping, or, you know did people feel positive about it and ..?

R.H I think there was a lot of hostility, probably based on Australians' perceptions of Asians. Remember we were so darn prejudiced towards them in those days, the White Australia policy was alive and well in Australia and I think we looked down on Asians, they were just slant-eyed, second class people. It was most unfortunate, that plus I think the feeling that many Vietnamese didn't fight, wouldn't fight, it has probably maintained that attitude among many veterans. I've been personally involved in a sort of a get/together with Vietnamese veterans in Victoria with the Royal Australian Regiment Association. They invited us along to a slap-up celebration, commemoration rather, we attended their commemorative day.

J.R Are you a member of the RAR?

R.H I'm a member of the RAR Association, 6 RAR Association, the VVA and an unfinancial member of the R.S.L.

Yes, we attended their commemoration, their armed forces day commemoration and social function afterwards, and indeed there are fairly close links between the two, between Australian and Vietnamese veterans in Victoria. I've tried to get something like that done with the VVA up here, not a great deal of interest has been shown, but I'd like to get a few of the guys together one of these days and show them News Front, which I have on tape, and that Four Corners programme on the refugees and so on, for educational purposes, and say look, this is what some of these people are going through. I don't know whether I'll be successful.

J.R No, because somebody told me there'd been a proposal in Brisbane for the South Vietnamese forces to march on Anzac Day and I think. the VVA up there had been very opposed to it, the RSL had been in favour of it, but the...

R.H I'm sorry to hear that. [Yes] 'Cos they after all did fight the same enemy and indeed from watching Neil Davis's film News Front, he did spend a lot of time serving with the regular Vietnamese and Cambodian forces, and some of those soldiers were every bit as brave and as dedicated as we were. Probably more so, they did it for years. So I think it's a bit unfair to tar them all with the same brush. But of course some of their regional and popular force units were rubbish, sometimes they fought for both sides, depending who was on top at the time.

I suppose many veterans, particularly ones who went over later are bitter about their failure to protect the Dat Do mine field which was laid towards the end of my battalion's tour. And most of those mines actually claimed Australian victims rather than the other side, because the mine field was never protected by the troops who were supposed to protect it. It would have worked

beautifully if they'd protected it, but a mine field just left out in the middle of the open is just asking for trouble.

J.R It's just a supply of mines isn't it?

R.H A welcome supply of free mines for the opposition. Not that hard to lift a mine [Isn't it?] Bit risky, but...

J.R Bit risky. I spoke to John Thompson and he was putting them down.

R.H Who the Vietnamese?

J.R No John Thompson..

R.H The mines?

J.R Yes, he was laying mines.

R.H Well actually I wished that mines had been left out of it because we didn't have to contend with mines in my time. In fact the only mine I ever actually *saw* was a homemade one. It was a cluster bomb that had been laid upside-down in the ground, one of those, that are like pineapple shaped things in a canister. They've got all these wire strips, these steel strips, as tails, and they, when they drop them they burst out of the canister and explode over a wide area. They're very effective against enemy personnel, more so than one big bang. But this one had been laid upside-down in the ground for someone to step on, but the dirt over it had blown away or been washed away or something and we all thought it was a huge joke. "Silly buggers, think they'd get us with that". But of course later on mines were....

J.R Yes, yes, were the big danger. So, when you said people weren't very interested in Vietnam veterans when you came back, did you ...

R.H Well they were a bit, they were a bit, because it *was* still controversial. I came home in early '67, and people were still coming up and saying "Look, what do you really think about the Vietnam war, do you think we should be there?", and these in some cases were intelligent, University educated people. So obviously the later feeling of the moratorium hadn't really got going by then. But of course it did, in time.

J.R And you felt during that later sort of period you sort of disguised, or you didn't advertise the fact that you were a veteran?

R.H No, well the only time I ever wore my uniform into town was simply because I couldn't be bothered going home and getting changed, I wanted to meet someone in town, I went into town in uniform with my ribbons on, and an old guy came up to me and asked me if I'd been to "Veetnam", and I replied "No, but I had been to Vietnam". (laughs) "MURDERER" he just

ranted and raved "MURDERER MURDERER", wandered off down the street yelling out "murderer" at the top of his voice. So I never wore my uniform again.

J.R Did that make you feel pretty bad or pretty angry?

R.H Yeah, I suppose it did. Because I certainly didn't murder anybody. Not too many Australians did, I don't think.

J.R And did you, you felt quite supportive of the war did you, later on? You said you didn't like the anti war protests?

R.H Oh, I don't think I really felt all that supportive of the war. I think I did get that sort of feeling that, we've lost that many guys there now, why don't we get on and finish it for God's sake. I think any soldier feels that way. Or at least go for a settlement, a genuine settlement. In fact you may think horribly of me for saying this, but sometimes I think the Yanks should have kept dropping bombs on Hanoi in 1972, because I think they were that close to getting a, some kind of a genuine settlement it wasn't funny.

J.R Yes, some people certainly think that.

R.H They'd almost forced the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table, in fact they had almost forced them to withdraw their troops from the south. Had they forced them to withdraw, then of course there might have been some sort of a compromise reached, because in the long run the South Vietnamese tried for what they saw as the least favourable, the least unfavourable defeat by forming an alliance with the N. .F. And this is a point that angers me with many of the old anti war clique, they seem to very conveniently forget that the N. .F were pushed to the background by the north. The north, who were supposedly helping the N. .F to liberate their homeland, took over.

J.R Yes, it didn't quite work out the way they....

R.H Of course not. Not many of the old N. .F people around these days.

J.R And was it a sort of significant time for you when, in 1975, when the tanks rolled into Saigon, was that?

R.H I felt pretty shattered by it. Oh I don't know whether I really felt grief stricken, in a sense I felt thank God it's over, but I remember thinking at the time, one particular person I thought of was Johnny Thompson. 'Cos Johnny was a very, I think he was a bit gung-ho in those days, he certainly wasn't

J.R Did you know him then?

R.H Yes, I knew him at Heidelberg Repat. [Oh right, right] And remember thinking God, how do people like John Thompson feel. You know with his battered body, now really knowing it was for nothing. And of course we had two only children, only sons

were killed in my platoon, and I still think of/you know, how their parents feel. In fact did you see that film about the Nursing Home, oh no you're not a Canberran [No]. There was a film with Elizabeth Montgomery as a sort of a mad nurse in a Nursing Home who was murdering patients, basically for their money and to keep a decent turnover rate in the bed, when they become too old to be self supporting she gives them lethal injections. Kirk Douglas was supposed to be an old guy who gets bunged up in a car accident, but at the start of the film it sort of gives the introduction, and Kirks sort of lying in bed and he's having a, memories of his son, waving goodbye in uniform and then another flashback of the son walking through an Asian jungle, then stepping on a mine then a big flash and dead son. And that moved me quite a lot seeing that, because those are the people that I really feel for.

J.R Yes, yes, yes, yes. Yes, I went to a Long Tan day in Albury a couple of weeks ago, and they were dedicating a memorial and there were some parents of the people whose names were on the memorial and they were obviously women, older sort of women crying as they put wreaths on, yes it's very ...

R.H Sorry, where was this, Brisbane?

J.R In Albury.

R.H In Albury [Yes] I was just trying to remember someone who might've been there.

J.R I don't know the names ...

R.H The Long Tan veterans. Most of them would have been Queensland I think.

J.R Yes, they weren't Long Tan veterans, I mean it wasn't a memorial for Long Tan veterans, it was a memorial for all Australians killed .... (talking together) [No, I know what you mean, probably a few mothers and so.....] Yes. They were sort of the age of mothers rather than widows. I suppose that's one thing, there weren't that many widows 'cos so many people were young and single weren't they? I mean there were some widows obviously ... (talking together)

R.H (talking together) Some of the regular soldiers, yeah that's right. Oh yes.

J.R They tended to be younger and single.

R.H Yes, that's true, most of them were. But yes, I often wonder about how the parents feel. [Yes, yes....] Well actually one wasn't an only son his brother was killed in a motor bike accident 3 months before he went over, whilst we were at Canungra, and in fact he didn't come over with us, he was detached, sent on compassionate leave, and we went over without him, then about 2 weeks later he walked into the company lines, and I remember thinking you mad bastard, you could've got out of it. And he was one of the first killed on Operation Bribie.

J.R Yes, it must be very hard for people to come to terms with it, at least.... If you were killed in the 1st World War or the 2nd World War which was such a popular, I mean community supported- it does make it harder doesn't it?

R.H Well I've got 2 sons and I certainly look forward to having them around in my old age if I make it that far. I think I would become very anti war if there was another Vietnam declared.

J.R Yes, I feel the same..

R.H I might, I might, I might volunteer to go to it myself, but I would not want my kids to go to it.

J.R No, no, no it changes your outlook once you have children of your own doesn't it [Yes] Yes.

Have you got any impressions of what sort of image the veteran has in Australia now?

R.H I think we're gradually, we're gradually being recognised as what we were, we were simply soldiers who were doing our duty. I don't believe in, I think if you have an army you cannot afford to give individual soldiers the right to decide whether or not they're going to do something, up to a certain point. For example, I would have refused to participate in the My Lai massacre. I would refuse to participate in torturing. I believe that I have a higher moral duty not to do that kind of thing, and I think that most soldiers would be the same.

In fact I was involved in the capture of that girl who was featured in the water torture case, remember that?

J.R Yes, yes.

R.H We captured her, after a brief exchange of shots with her and her two male companions. The male companions escaped, they ran like hell, very gallant weren't they? [Yes] Left her alone, she ran into a cave, which had no exit, only one exit rather, we came up to the cave and gave her the option of surrendering or having a dozen or so grenades thrown in after her. She came out, we captured her, we treated her quite humanely, she wasn't bashed up, she wasn't raped, she was fed. We, we did have to leave the area though, in case the enemy attempted to rescue her, we were only in platoon strength, so we did take her for some distance over the mountains, we virtually had to drag her at some stages, but she was not really roughly handled, she wasn't struck or anything like that. She was tied up, but we fed her, supplied her with some bedding for the night, she was given the job of sleeping in between the platoon commander and the platoon sergeant. I'm quite sure nothing happened. Actually she wasn't bad looking, so it was probably a safe place to put her, and she was loaded onto a helicopter the next morning and taken back to Nui Dat, where I believe she was tortured.

That was not done by infantrymen.

J.R No, no, no.

R.H So, I'm rather proud of the fact that I can say, as an infantryman, we treated captives humanely. It was the people back at base who did nasty things [Yes, yes] to them.

J.R Yes, so do you think, that Australians do have a sort of a picture of Australian veterans, do you think it's influenced by the American media?

R.H Oh of course, without doubt. We're looked upon as Rambos, aren't we really, (Talking together) So many people think the Vietnam veterans are...

J.R (talking together) I mean do people react to you now, now that you're sort of like, I gather, you know people are more open about being veterans, not that I suppose it comes up all that often.

R.H Let me recount an experience, at the Macquarie Conference, we were staying in the Menzies, Menzies College, we were all together in the same wing, one of the regular inhabitants of the wing was a very nice young fellow, who was genuinely interested in Vietnam, asked us a lot of questions, supplied us with tea bags, because at first there was no brewing material, he was a very nice young fellow, in fact everybody liked him, but he made one slip up, which we didn't hold against him, but it really made me wince.

There was this young girl in the next corridor, it was a mixed college of course, who I think had lustful designs on him, and we were all saying "For Cod's sake, why are you knocking her back" (laughs) "Now when you get older you'll realize how many you [You.. missed] you missed." He said "Oh no, you know" what was his excuse, he said "Oh go to bed with one of them and everyone in the college knows about it", which is probably true. But he had an Asian Australian, an Australian born Asian friend, and he told us that he told this girl, she'd asked where this guy had been, because I think she might have been a bit interested in him as well. Amazing isn't it, so many frustrated women in the world and I never seem to bump into them! But she'd been expressing some interest in him as well, and she enquired as to where he'd been, why he'd been away for some time, and this young fellow said "Oh we've got a whole lot of Vietnam veterans staying in the corridor with us, and I've told him to stay away because if a helicopter goes over they may freak out and murder him or something", and she said "Oh they wouldn't really do that would they?" she was really genuinely concerned, and unfortunately films like Rambo, the only time I feel like doing a Rambo is when I see Sylvester Stallone's face, I'd like to blast it away with a M16, for what he's done to veterans, the Rambo image. I think we are seen that way, whereas most National Servicemen, obviously a lot have problems.

J.R You don't think that, well....

R.H We've never had the support services that World War 2 vets had like the resettlement schemes. They were abolished by Whitlam,

on the grounds that they were just a duplication of the Neat Scheme. Now when Fraser got in and abolished the NEAT Scheme, the National Service..... [there was nothing] ...but there was nothing.

So I had the very distressing experience in talking to an unemployed Vietnam vet the other day, nice young fellow, but I believe that we should have the same benefits that the World War 2 diggers get. Like a right of employment in public, they had a preferential right of employment in public bodies and so on. 'Cos my view is, if a person fights for his country he at least has a bloody right to work for it. Not necessarily to sponge off it for the rest of his life, but at least the right to work.

J.R And do you think that the Vietnam Veterans Association has promoted a particular sort of view of the veterans?

R.H Probably, because, some of them have gone overboard, mainly the Victorian branch which has been disinherited by the National Body for some years.

J.R I met the Victorian branch, at the conference.

R.H You've met (whispers here, coughs etc insinuates "tell you later off the record")

J.R Yeah, VVA, do you think they promote, perhaps work against the veteran by perhaps promoting this image of sort of illness and distress.

R.H Well those who, who flog the Agent Orange issue to death, obviously do so. My own view on toxic chemicals, I still maintain a bit of a watching brief on it. There are some claims being accepted. I think there are possible grounds for implicating toxic chemicals in the development of cancer.

But there are some claims that are so absurd, for example, about 12 months ago I met a guy who'd had coronary bypass surgery, who blamed Agent Orange for his heart trouble. The guy was about 6 stone overweight, a heavy drinker, ate like a pig, didn't exercise and didn't seem to think that there were, it would be fairly normal for a person in his condition to have coronary artery problems. So these kind of people who get up and blame Agent Orange for that. I mean some blame it for almost any kind of health condition.

So obviously they do make the veterans' movement look a bit silly, but, by the same token the VVA does a <u>lot</u> of work behind the scenes, particularly in advocacy representing veterans and widows, working in with the counseling service' and providing support, in fact before the counseling support service existed, virtually all crisis intervention was done by veteran counselors, such as myself, I've had the task of counseling in an extremely unprofessional way, in some pretty nasty situations. It's rather harrowing when you're trying to prepare a case for somebody, for an appeal) and you're looking at his wife with a couple of great black eyes and a couple of terrified children.

And you try and point out to these people that perhaps they do need professional help, and if they can't control their impulses when they're half pissed, well perhaps it's best to stay off the stuff. (laughs)

But I think the VVA does an excellent job, I think there *is* a need for some kind of pressure group, applying pressure on politicians. The RSL I don't think really has either the interest in the younger veteran, or the sophistication in many areas to, to really represent their interests.

J.R But have the VVA and the RSL got together a bit or the Coming Home..?

R.H Oh yes, well the RSL originally opposed the Coming Home march, now they're being very supportive, so there's a bit of egg on their face.

But also I think, I was a bit sickened by hearing it, Ian Collings at Macquarie, getting up and saying that the RSL had opposed the Agent Orange Royal Commission because it didn't want the burden of proof provision to be altered, in the Repatriation Act. That to my mind is sickening hypocrisy, because surely the merits of the claim should be all that matter, rather than disturbing their cosy little practice of getting TPIs for elderly men, so they can afford to play on the golf course. Don't say too much about this for God's sake, I just realized (laughs).

J.R Anyway carry on [I'm shooting my mouth off] What do you think about the Coming Home, you're obviously, I mean you're looking forward to it....

R.H I'm looking forward to it. I don't particularly care whether the public welcomes me home or not, I think I've got my act together now. I don't give a damn about what people think I did in Vietnam really. I've got a clean 'conscience. But I'm looking forward to the chance of seeing a lot of mates I haven't seen for many years.

J.R And the indications are that it will be pretty well attended I gather?

R.H The latest estimate is up to 25,000. I'll believe that when I see it, just quietly.

J.R That's sort of 50% of everyone who ever went there isn't it? [That's right] Which would be terrific if it...

R.H Apparently the Hotels and that in Sydney are booked out.

J.R Are they [mmm] — what am I going to do?

R.H I'd say park bench would be more than adequate. [yes, yes] Well I've been offered accommodation with a friend's grandmother, a friend and I are going together, and I thought to myself,

sorry it's his, yeah his grandmother. And I said look, do you really feel that your grandmother wants to put up with a couple of drunken ex diggers. He said, she's been putting up with me for years, so I thought, oh well. But I'm by no means certain that I'll make it back there. I think I'll probably sleep where I fall. Even if I don't drink I think the emotion and all that of the day ...

J.R Yes, get pretty exciting.

Well is there anything else that you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered?

R.H I think we've pretty well covered it all Jane.

J.R Right.

END OF TAPE 2