WALLY THOMPSON

J.R Well if you could just start off and tell me a little bit of background and how you got into the army? And when you got into the army?

W.T Well, before, I was in the reserve before, as they used to call the C.M.F., and I joined that when I was seventeen, or seventeen and a half and I think it was about 1949 or 48 or one of those periods, then I got called up for the first intake of the old national service, that's when the 18 year olds did three months,„ and once I did that, prior to that I was a clerk with the P & 0 Shipping Company, Donald Hamilton, but I just found that, you know I liked the C.M.F and I just didn't want to settle back in it. I applied to join the regular army, and my parents knocked me back. Said, you know I'm not joining the army and that was it, so when I turned 21 I went and joined up. Or virtually I was 22, or about 21.

J.R Why didn't they want you to join the regular army?

W.T Well, well my father had been a radio operator see, and maybe they just wanted me to go into shipping, you know they didn't, no particular reason, they thought, thought I'd be doing something else. So then I joined the regular army and it's, the biggest tiling about soldiering is, I would say, you either, you either love it or you don't like it. And there's no in-betweens, that either means you're a good soldier and you like it, or you're a person who doesn't like it and you don't give it your best because, now I found that the army is, is not a job when people talk about jobs it's a way of life and you either give everything to that way of life or you're better to be out of it. Because it's a system that you've got to rely on people and if somebody's not completely got his heart and soul into it, he's unreliable. And that's what I found, it suited me, I liked it and at that stage I was engaged to my wife and she sort of accepted it and away we went. But at that stage I was supposed to be going to Korea after I did my training and then a unit, they decided they'd reopen Canungra and send a unit to Canungra and then to Malaya and of course I got sent across that way instead of going to Korea, so.. And when I came home from Malaya which was a 2 year posting, it was a long engagement I can assure you, and then we got married and then it, I've just sort of reengaged period after period. And I ended up spending really all my adult life in the military, which I've never regretted at all.

J.R So how long did you have in the army altogether?

W.T Regular army was 34, 33 years and 4 years in the reserve. So it's a....

J.R So in the years just prior to the Vietnam commitment, were you involved in Borneo or Malaya then?

W.T No, Malaya, as I say I went to Malaya in 55 to 57 with the 2nd battalion, we were the first to go to Malaya after the 2nd World War, did two years there and that was during the Emergency and then I went back to Malaya again as an. instructor at Kota Tingghi, at the British jungle School for two years and at that period, that was 61 to 63, our battalion wasn't allowed to go to Borneo. And just as we came home they decided then that they could go to Borneo. But we were in that theatre, but I was training people for Borneo. Borneo commenced, first of all it was Brunei and then Borneo started and then the British units just come on after the other going through and we were training them at Kota Tingghi at the British Jungle School. So then I came home from there in '63, posted to 1 RAR, and that was late, well the end of the year, started in January, then with about 3 months or 4 months being home from there I volunteered for the Training Team. And at those days there was no thought of battalions going to Vietnam it was just advisors and, so you know I had, you know I had 4 years overseas prior to that.

J.R So what was the feeling in the army then about Vietnam?

W.T Well nobody really knew anything about Vietnam, you know it was, it was very interesting when I came home from, and I'd already spent a year with, you know in Vietnam with a Vietnamese unit up in I Corps and they were sending the 1st battalion and I'd left the 1st battalion, you know we never thought the 1st battalion were going to Vietnam, to go on the Team, then some lady said to Judy around here, "Oh it's a good thing your husband's home from Vietnam because the soldiers are going up there." (laughs) So, you know, that's the attitude the people in Australia, well they'd never heard of Vietnam most people, they'd heard of Indo China, mostly the older people, but, you asked somebody where Vietnam was and you know, it was over there somewhere, you know they didn't know it was near India or up near China. (laughs) So, and in the army at the stage, you know, the carry over the army's had different emphasis on training, you know we originally, when I first joined the army we were training for what they called limited war, and that was for Korea. Then of course we went to Malaya which was, is known as C.R.W, training, you know you've heard of that term? And it sort of fighting in small groups in close country, in jungle country, so really most of the emphasis was on that training. Then we started, when you used to come back to Australia we'd switch off that and we'd go back to this limited warfare training, and at that stage we were sort of between the two, but we really never ever thought of going to Indo China. At that stage we did, we were prepared and we used to have exercises and deployment because we had what we called Sprinkler Force and a lot of us thought we might have gone to Laos you know, I don't know if you've heard about this Sprinkler Force or [No, no] Ambrose? Well in that period we used to quite often go to Richmond and load up in the Hercules and load all our equipment and, we were going somewhere but it was, it was, as far as we thought it was going to be in Laos or Thailand or somewhere. But

Indo China was never, well even though Laos was part of Indo China it wasn't Vietnam, you know. So as far as Vietnam, but, there was in the early 60's and late, or the late 50's there was all this Ambrose and Sprinker Force and that was for us to go somewhere, and obviously it might have been to assist the French, I don't know, in Malaya, so we really, we were never told anything about it, but that, but there was a force, a contingency or something in those days to that.

J.R So when you went to the Training Team were you clear what your role was going to be once you got to Vietnam?

W.T No, well before we went, the original advisors went to training centres as such, and they were, sort of you know not in the combat areas, well when you say that they were in training bases, they weren't allowed out on patrols or things. Then the government decided to increase the advisors to 100 and send them to the field, and we were, then they got onto people to saddle up and we were 70 to sort of fill the gap. And we were the first to go to the ARVN infantry battalions, so really our briefing, I had a ex warrant officer briefed us and when we get there at Dong Da training centre we'll have our own room, we might have to share a fridge and take your mess kit and all these things... we never used, never saw the fridge, never had the mess kit, (laughs) so really the answer to your question was no, we really didn't know, we had a big brief in Saigon and which General Westmorland briefed us and, I went, we then split up into different corps of Vietnam and we went to I corps which is the top corps, and I was allocated to 3rd battalion, 5th regiment, 2nd division. And the first, and I went to the headquarters in Danang and next I got on a chopper and flew out into the bush and then there was my battalion, (laughs) 300 Vietnamese.

J.R And you had to sort of kind of improvise did you how you were going to play it?

W.T Well, see I think they selected, the people selected for the team were fairly experienced warrant officers and sergeants and I think we'd all been around enough, you know, everyone, everyone had combat experience and they'd been to either 2nd World War, Korea, Malaya or Borneo or combination of them. And I think we had an army then of real professional people who, they're given a task they, you know, the typical old aussie you could sort of roll with the punches and saw, and I found that you know you sort of, you got to be a self starter and you, you were not only advising the Vietnamese you were particularly I believe at that stage, advising the American advisors, who were very ...

J.R So there were American [Oh yeah there...] you were attached as an advisor [to a team] to a battalion (talking together)

W.T Yeah, to a team of three advisors, there was an American army

captain, American sergeant and myself as an Australian warrant officer, there were three of us. So, and there always had to be at least two of us in the field. So you didn't get much time off because you had to have somebody to cover in case we get wounded you have to have another, you know American or Australian. So, but they increased the advisors of the battalions later on, I think it ended up about 5, but that stage it was only three so, so we were actually advi... when you say advisors you weren't commanding the Vietnamese, you were there to, and that's where people get a lot confused, when I was there I told them to do this and told them to do that, well, there's two ways to skin a cat, if you want to do something you don't tell people to do it, you sort of get around them and eventually they do it and it was their idea and you say "Oh well done" kind of thing, you know it's sort of, you know. But that's the type of person I think they had in those days was you know very professional soldiers. You know and...

J.R And how did the Vietnamese officers feel about having foreign advisors attached to them?

W.T Well, well we controlled the helicopters, and that was pretty important when you were in the jungle, have no other means of getting around, so you know if they [a fair bit of leverage] Well that's right, if they wanted gunships or if they wanted helicopter evacuations, we could very much influence that. And also, you had contacts where you could maybe, see one of the things in my unit, example, they had, well before we get onto that I would say, in any, you try to achieve certain small goals because the chap who came after you and if he achieved something, you know, you go along, that's what I say, you didn't rush in and say "why don't we do this." And one of the things I changed, when I got support they had two recoilless rifles and only one mortar, and I thought mortars were more important, so I worked on that, so eventually I was able to get them two mortars and get rid of one of the recoilless rifles, but it was, so you know you could influence maybe what you could get, but you had to sort of be very subtle, not so much subtle but, you had to convince them that they were making the decisions, you know. And any advisor who went there and straight .. I remember, the Americans only do six months in the field as advisors and the first lot I had were American army, then the marines came in and they took over, and there was a marine captain and a marine gunney sergeant and also we had a young marine lieutenant. Now this marine captain tried to tell the Dai oui something and he really, you know, we should do this and, the Vietnamese captain turned round and he said, he said;"you advise and I command, please remember that." You know, so he got the message, you know the old marine gung-ho, you know he was there to advise him and he would ask his advice, but you never, you know with us, the Australians you normally, you wouldn't've approached it like that, and that's one thing about the Americans, there's a lot of very good Americans and I've got a lot of time for Americans, but some of them tend to think that they know, these people have been fighting a war, the dai oui was a North Vietnamese

for a start, and been in the first Indo China war) and with somebody coming along telling him how he's been fighting this war now for about five years, how he's going to do it after two months in country, you know., well...

J.R Yes that's what I was wondering how they reacted to having advisors, I mean if you imagine Australian troops having some foreign advisors attached saying, you know that this is .. (talking together)

W.T Well the thing is with the Vietnamese if you must understand, it was a different type of war. And I never forget one of the Vietnamese officers said to me one day, he said "I wish we were allowed to fight this war like the North Vietnamese fight it." Because we were training them that, you know, they had to slow down and they had to use gun support and they had to use helicopters. And of course that's, at the end of the Vietnam war, they had all these things but they didn't have any ammunition or anything to use them. So we taught them how to fight our way, and that's why the advisors were mainly there you know, to sort of, the logistic side and sort of supporting them in that way. Because the Americans hadn't really fought a war in Asia, well when you say a war in Asia, the 2nd World War, Korea wasn't an Asian war, but we'd fought in Malaya and Borneo and we're used to, you know cordon and searches, you know we're used to working in the jungle. And the Americans really) their army was on the plains of the Rhine or something, you know they trained an army to fight in Western Europe. So really, that's why I was saying we were teaching, they'd often come up to you, even American majors or colonels and say (in an American accent) "Well what do you know Mr. Thompson about" and they used to call you chief "what do you know, chief, about cordon search and" you know "what would you do about this" and you know because we'd had that experience. And there were many of the Vietnamese officers had gone through this jungle school when I'd been in Malaya. 'Cause the British regard less of a lot of people don't know, they used to have a special wing, that stat wing, which ran 30 Vietnamese on every course we... you know, they were doing the sort of, what was it about, oh those courses would have been about 10 weeks or so, or whatever, 6 weeks or 10 weeks. So there were a lot of Vietnamese officers trained in this jungle school and they understood exactly, a lot of their techniques were straight out of the British jungle school. So, but, accepting you as advisors that's the thing you must never tell somebody, and particularly Asians, you know that you're running the show, you know you're behind the scene, you're stage managers I suppose. But they trusted you for, you know, little things I think that the advisors could do, you know, I think we can handle men fairly well, and it doesn't matter what nationality is because the Australian soldier, as I said most of these chaps had been Korea or Malaya, they'd dealt with Malays, they've dealt with Koreans, they've dealt with, you know many other types of people, and also we, we, even though we're not in Asia, we live in the Asian sphere, you know we, whereas a lot

of Americans really, first time they've ever been to Asia. All of us at least had spent two odd years or more in Asia, so we knew how to respect Asian culture and things and I think also our training, of the limited time we had we really didn't know on the course I did what we were going to do. But we were told about cultural things, you know not to point your feet, you know this direction where Buddha is and you know, so I think our blokes sort of respected that. But that's getting winded around to what we were saying, but still it's....

J.R And do you think the Australian, the advisors, people like you were effective?

W.T I think very much so. Particularly in training the Americans. And I don't say that lightly either, I think that's one of the reasons we were there, as the Americans could sort of, you know sort of sap our brains because we'd sit round and talk to them, whereas a lot of time you just sat around we'd just talk about things and how we used to patrol, how we'd lay ambushes and how we'd do this and yeah, or how we did it, you know, because that was our bread and butter and you know the Australian soldier is a jungle fighter. And he's proved that you know as in the 2nd World War and through the Malayan Emergency and Borneo. And it's not, you know it's just, it's even the way you move, the whole thing, how you live in the bush, so, no, they were very much.... 'Cause as I said the Americans trained for limited war on a big scale. And you know where we go out and we had no rations for example. When you talk about ration packs, we didn't have any rations. It didn't come from anywhere, we ate what the Vietnamese ate, and if they ate pig and, whatever you got, you just had to accept that, and you didn't particularly like it all the time but that's all you got, and some of the Americans found that you know, distasteful and a bit difficult to stomach for awhile, but you'd just eat it and you know, get on with (laughs) But their culture, they were, you know, not so much their culture, their army was not trained for that environment, you know, whereas we, we'd, well we've had Chinese and we've had Chinese restaurants here for years and it's just been part of our way of life of eating rice and using chopsticks. But to see them trying to use chopsticks for the first time, you know, had to give them little spoons and... So you know the Training ¯ream's side's very interesting side, particularly those early days.

J.R And from then, that was say '64?

W.T '64/'65.

J.R The sort of tactics and things, ways of operating you were using then, were they similar to what you were doing later on in Phuoc Tuy when you were with the...

W.T Yeah, yeah, it really, it doesn't change because regardless of what people say the Vietnam war, there were big battles fought, but its still, it’s a sub-unit war and that's a company

war moving and letting the platoons go out and do their thing. It's not you know big, massive, you know like Europe would have been or brigades moving, you know the only time our brigade ever got together was Coral where we were at, and that started off as a battalion and build as a brigade thing, it was only one battalion, but with a brigade and the other battalion was over at Balmoral. But it really is, all it gets down to, the section and platoon commander, it's really their war, you know ten men working under the platoon, you know the set up with the companies and platoons. And it's that type of war, you know you'd patrol until you found something and then there'd be an attack on it, and normally there'd be a bunker position or something, but it was, you know good, good junior leaders) and that's a thing you still need in our army now, we need good lieutenants and we need good corporals. 'Cause the corporal really leads the section, in infantry, he's the first commander on the ground. And I don't know if any of the chaps you have interviewed were section commanders (No, no) well they're the ones who really out there make the first decision, then the platoon commander makes the decision then the company commander. And if they can't then it goes to battalion, but you know, but it's really, you know it's an individual's small group thing you know, most of Vietnam except the bigger...

You'd move in a company groups a lot of times with a company commander, but you know you'd have one platoon out, forward and two platoons sort of following up with a company in the sort of centre part, or the, but it would be the forward section that would have the first contact, and that was commanded by a corporal, and then the platoon commander, he'd say I can handle it, there was a couple of riflemen, so he'd handle it and the platoon commander'd say you get... contact, a couple of riflemen, we can handle it with section attack or whatever. And if it was more than that it would be a platoon, and if he couldn't handle it then the company, and the company would sort of look after the mortars and if you know, if they were there, or get guns to fire etc. But really it was our bread and butter, and you know we're very good in close country, Australians. I think we're good, see any type of fighting is similar, the tactics are the same, but the techniques are different. You know your technique in close country, you've got to be quieter, you're really, you've got to anticipate, in limited warfare in open country, you can spread out further, you can see further, you then have a tendency of not the closeness, you get a tendency, "where's the blokes on the flank", but in close country the enemy could be so close to you, yet you're closer together yourselves, but the enemy could be close to you too. In open country you're spread out, but you've got more chance of detecting the enemy coming, which is, which is completely different and you can take, you can, the sort of thing that happened to the soldiers in the soldiers in the 2nd World War who fought in the Middle East was so different to when they came back and fought in New Guinea, you know, they went from, you know fighting, we call it you know, fighting in the trees, you know, you know and that's what it's like, and you can imagine, people cannot understand what it

was like in the jungle till you get into it, you know it closes in on you, its, unless you're in primary and that's where you've got big trees and they're bunched fairly sparse underneath, but still there's undergrowth and stuff. But really we were pretty well trained for the... As a matter of fact I think we were extremely well trained. I don't know if you had that, any of the national servicemen, I don't think any army I've ever seen, trained our soldiers as well and culled the ones out that were no good, and the national serviceman, the better ones went to the arms corps I don't know if you've been told that either, you know they were sort of sorted out you know if they had more self-discipline and more mature they'd go to the arms.

J.R Most of the people I have spoken to have said they were very well trained except for some people who felt they, that on specific things like a specific (task..) weapon that they perhaps hadn't come across before they got to Vietnam, that sort of thing.

W.T Well it could have, see, the M16 for example, and when I went over with 1 battalion, the first time 1 battalion was over there, we were using SLRs and Owen guns and we only got the Ml6s sort of later on, and maybe we didn't have enough training on them but we didn't have them, and then they were issued there because we did, have a lot of stoppages and, see the Americans tell you all about that weapon, it's self cleaning and it's got a little extractor thing and so obviously you've got to clean thoroughly otherwise carbon will build and it will stop. And quite often in contacts we'd have chaps out with rods trying to, what we call separated case, has anyone ever told you about it, it was where the round comes out of the cartridge case and it sticks, because the carbon that's held it in, its expanded and they'd have these rods in there trying to pull them out in the middle of a fire fight, which is a bit difficult.

J.R Not what you want.

W.T No, that's right, but that's just, just part of the game, you know the people later on when we got the weapons were better trained.. But we also did, we had to use a lot of American equipment what we didn't have, for example our trip flares, which you use a lot of trip flares, we've got the British type trip flare we had, but when we got there we used the American ones, a little one and you've got to set it up slightly different. Same as claymores, really at that stage we were only getting claymores, so a lot of things we really had to teach our soldiers, like me as a CSM, I had to get my sergeants together, get the equipment, train them on it and then they'd train the soldiers on it. But it really doesn't, it's like weapons, if you can handle one weapon, you can handle any of them. The main thing is know how to strip it, clean it and how to fire it, and if you do that, it's not all that difficult and you learn very quickly... Well, you can, you can say those words, "your life

depends on it". But really it's not your life it's your mate's lives and that's the biggest thing with our soldiers, it's not what's going to happen to me , if something happens to me that's bad enough, but if something happens to my mates because I failed, you know that's the old mateship, you can't do that. And it's very strong in our army and it was very much built up in our system of sending battalions at a time training and going away, and the reinforcements were really outsiders till they were accepted. Because this group who went away, they arrived, we did our sort of platoon training, company training, battalion training and then we did normally part of a brigade thing as a final testing at Shoalwater Bay, but if people didn't saddle up they didn't go, and that could go from Majors down to corporals.

J.R And did that happen, did that, did many people get .... (talking together)

W.T Oh not many, but there were a lot just didn't go, they weren't acceptable. The last battalion I went away there was, a couple of sergeants, no CSMs, a captain, oh.....

J.R What sort of things were they non-acceptable, physical fitness or ...

W.T No, they just not up to standard, depends on the CO's standard. (laughs) And he's the law, he's taken to, he's the man who's taking that unit away and he is responsible for everything. And if he, he said, you know, see there were testing phases we went through, you know, at Canungra we'd go through a testing phase at Canungra, and some we could have lost at Canungra when we were on the final exercise, but they were tested whether you know they, they may have done one tour there as a lieutenant and now they might have been a captain or a company commander, but they just weren't up to scratch, you know. It could have been for many things, you know there were orders, they weren't clear, they weren't precise in things, they didn't you know, but it was up to the C.O. and the testing group and then the C.O.to his decision, or somebody's decision, we'll put it that way. But they weren't up to scratch.

J.R And do you think there was much variation, I mean you were with 1 battalion and then 4 battalion, but you would have been aware of the view of what other battalions thought of.

W.T Well in the.. you know, the thing is battalions don't change, people change. See you can go away, there was one battalion, I won't mention its name, but its first tour was a very good battalion, its 2nd tour, nothing wrong with the soldiers they did their job but I don't think the hierarchy was as good as it could have been. And that affects it because the hierarchy command the show or run the show, and if they don't come up to scratch, the soldiers are only as good, you know, if they're given orders and they're good

sound orders and, it will work, but they can only do what they're told and you know, when I say told, they're not like English soldiers like cannon-fodder type of soldiers. But you know if the plats wrong, you know it's going to be wrong before we even start, so.. And it was just the way different, different people did things, you know. And that goes with every level from section commander to C.O. and there's been good C.Os and bad C.Os, they've been good corporals and bad corporals and all the gamut in-between.

J.R Just sort of finishing up on your time with the training team, because what I'm more interested in is the time with the battalion, but how did you feel about the war in Vietnam at that time how it was going, was there a general optimistic feeling.

W.T What at that early stage?

J.R Yes.

W.T Well we weren't doing all that well, that was the period in 64/65 where the South Vietnam army was taking a bit of a belting, and that's when the Americans came in, in strength, you know that was when the marines landed in our corps, I corps, and it was mainly the airborne went into Bien Hoa, it was after they mortared Pleiku airstrip, Danang and a few other places.

I was there the day, in Danang and as I said we didn't get that much time off, and we were in Danang and I saw all these planes flying over, these Sky Raiders and these were Vietnamese planes and these other navy Vietnamese planes and I said to somebody "Where are they going?" and they said Hai Phong. And they belted hell out of the Hai Phong and ten they came back and General Ky was the chief pilot of them, and they came back to this hotel we were at, in their flying suits and we were sitting there having a drink and we were invited over to have a drink with them and that's... and he said "Yes we have just been to Ha: Phong", and he said "Now we should cross the border and take Hanoi and the war will be over". Now whether, that's what the other side did, they came down and took Saigon eventually, but that's what it was about. We, we, well I'm no politician but maybe we didn't have the strength then, but the only way to stop it was to stop where the supplies were coming from and stop the will to fight, and we didn't do that. And we, that's what I said to you earlier, the Vietnamese felt they fought the war the American way, and it really wasn't in their heart to do it that way. They ended up defending their country, and the invaders were coming in more, see in those early days everyone denied that the North Vietnamese were in Vietnam, there was no Ho Chi Minh trail, that was all a fabricated, you know all this, invasion from the north, well I'd like to know where these people are coming from, if they weren't coming from the north they were coming from somewhere and, when you talk about the V.C., everyone sort of talks "V.C," but there's the V.0 and the N.V.A, two different kettle of fish, that's the North Vietnamese and the others are locals, and most of these you know, reinforcements coming in are N.V.A, you know... So really, on, that'll stick in my mind

forever and a day, that's, that flyover and what they said about, and that other business where I told you that captain earlier said, "we should fight this war like the V.C. fight." So we adapted, you adapt different ways and it doesn't necessarily suit you. Oh no, I was very hurt personally over Vietnam, when I came home with 4 battalion, and Judy was there when this happened, we arrived at the wharf and, I think it was General Stone or was it Generaly Stone, anyway I think it was General Stone, he came over and I was asked the same, we were the last battalion to pull out of Vietnam and he said, very similar question to what you said, and I said "I feel extremely hurt, you know we've come home and we've left the Vietnamese." You know, we went to help them and then we left them, you know, and... Is no good talking about my soldiers you know, when we're fighting the enemy we were a common bond, and I was very hurt, and they just cut me off, and it didn't matter to me anyway, I said what I was going to say. But you know, sort of "How do you feel leaving your mates behind?" Well I said "Most of them are still there." (laughs) So you know, for a soldier, who you know, particularly when we never lost a battle, we never lost a fight, we never lost anything, but we lost the war. And we didn't lose the war, 'cause we were home three years before the war ended. And that's what people, old soldiers and people say to you "Oh you blokes, we won our war" and I said "Well it doesn't like it with all the Japanese here", but what I'm getting at is, we fought a war and we fought hard and our soldiers were good, and people say "You lost; but it was three years after we were home. We came home in 71 and Vietnam fell in 75 I think, so you know that's four years after we were home, so..

J.R Yes, so it was sort of never resolved was it?

W.T Well the war was going, but it was what they called de-Americanised and we handed over to the Vietnamese, but as I said we trained them our way to fight, and then if you read some of those books at the end, "Not With Guns Alone", have you read "Not With Guns Alone?" (No) It was terrible, you know they had helicopters where they had no one who could repair, they had no parts and they couldn't get gun ammunition and while this is happening the North Vietnamese were pouring in tanks and goodness knows what, so you know, it, it's terrible, that's like, the common analogy I suppose is the aborigines, we taught them our way to live and now they, look at them, they're a shambles. So you know that's the same sort of a thing, only in a military sense. So really those earlier days of, instead of being, the nice guys, maybe we should have been a bit more aggressive, and maybe this war wouldn't have got to the stage it did and it would have been over a lot earlier. And I don't know if anyone's ever told you that before, but it's..

J.R No I haven't spoken to anyone who's actually been there in the...

W.T Maybe, you know if they're coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail with all their supplies and things, maybe if we'd have taken out Hai Phong and Hanoi, that'd been the end of it. But you know, see the western countries, we're not like that, we're not the aggressors, you know we're not the invaders and, if we can be all the other horrible things...

J.R It's very hard to know isn't it, I mean you don't know how much sort of will to win there was amongst the South Vietnamese peasants, I mean who were pro V.C, maybe they would have gone on fighting.

W.T .. See all the, I've, this battalion I was, I was in the mobile battalion in the regiment, and we moved all the time and I was in many villages and, just moved all over Quang Nam and Quang Ngai province, and I think the peasants just wanted, the war to go, the average farmer, villager, he just wanted, he didn't want any side of anything, he just wanted to plow his field and get on and live his life. You know and that's when, once again it's like North Ireland, the average protestant and catholic, they just want to live a life and bring their families up and get on with it, you know. But if they're not with the Prods, they're against the, you know the I.R.A, so, you know if the whole thing could go away they'd be happy. So the quicker we could have finished the war, and really the South Vietnamese aren't very friendly with the North Vietnamese, even now if you read about it, they're different people. They've got different ideological ideas of things, the southerners are more, they're more, you know they're more progressive, you know they did start secondary industries, their rice crops normally feed the rest of Vietnam. The north are very, that's why they don't keep their soldiers there very long now, because they see the decadent ways that are still there in Ho Chi Minh city. So they're different people, its, but you know that was the feeling, you know, a lot of professional soldiers get very upset about Vietnam, you know, particularly the Americans as well you know that, and we blame the Americans, you know, when I'm with Americans I say "well you blokes really ... " and they say "well how do you think we feel about it" you know we're the military, and ... You know it's pretty hard for the blokes who died there and were maimed .or the blokes that are dead they're dead and buried, there's nothing, but the blokes that were maimed, when it seems to be for nothing.

J.R Do people talk about it much in you know army, circles?

W.T Oh .. We have our say now and again, you know...

J.R There's one thing, some people have said to me, you know probably because it didn't end in a victory, I mean even if you say the Australian contribution was good and worthwhile but the overall thing didn't end well, and so they've kind of buried it, and they've sort of don't have it in the training manuals and they don't talk about it in the ... you know... (talking together)

W.T Oh well, what we've got to do, what we've got to do, is we can never live in the past, see if the hierarchy of the military start living in the past, you know it will be like they'll become the Colonel Blimps of the present day, and it's no good saying what we did in the 1st World War because the blokes in the 1st World War had ?? talking about what they did in the Napoleonic war or the Crimea, so they're so outdated, you know, and you know, if the blokes start talking what they did in the 2nd World War, we've now got to think of more mobility, so, if you start reminiscing back on it people say "Oh that was a little limited war, close country". And as I said it was a lower level main command, the Generals today have got to think of limited war, continental defence where they've got to have mobile forces, so when you talk to them-and I've got some pretty good mates in our Generals and Brigadiers and that-and we talk. Now and again we have a beer and we talk about old times and you know.. So they, in their own hearts I think a lot of the senior officers, because they were platoon commanders, they were company commanders. Most of the Generals now were company commanders in Vietnam, and the Brigadiers, you know, so they did exactly, they were the ones who were doing all these things, so course they feel hurt.

J.R Did people have theories that say, you know what we should have done, is there much ...?

W.T Oh not really, what we should have done is gone north (laughs) It's like, the Australian army has always been an aggressive army, you know, and all our tactics have been forward defence. And when you, you go out and stop him before he comes to you. That wasn't like Vietnam, we ended up trying to hold ground and defend things and when you've got a fluid force you can go round to, it's stupid, you know, you'd go out and you'd take something and lose a lot of people and, and they'd just vanish and they'd attack somewhere else and you'd go over there and they'd, while you were over there. It's like if I wanted to be a bank robber, you know and if I wanted to rob the bank down here, all you do is get (got it all worked out) well it's so easy, you get a few people, you'd organise, but it's the way people do things. You spread the police force and everything out, then you have a big traffic accident over here and you have another domestic up the road here, so all the police are out there well you do the job down here. (laughs) But that's and that's why ..

J.R That's what the V.0 did to you, isn't it....

W.T Well virtually, you know they'd cause an incident, which we'd react to, and they'd attack somewhere. But the only thing is, and because of our battalions, we had helicopters) you know, and we would have done the work of maybe at least a division in the 2nd World War, that's where people, because of mobility. Blokes'd say to you "Oh we had to move, you blokes now have got your helicopters and ? " I said

"Look don't tell me that was any joy" I said "That just meant we were in the stoush here, hop in the helicopter and within half an hour you were in another one over here." And really that's what mobility is, it cuts your force, but it makes the ones who are doing it do a lot more soldiering. And, but I'm sort of getting a bit technical there but if you can understand that a small group with high mobility can be shoveled around and do a lot of things. But they were de o inating where we'd go, we'd go into an area and we'd be doing an operation, a cordon and search or a search and destroy or something, then something would happen, so they said, oh there's a more pressing mission here and we'd, then they reckon there's a rocket belt up here, they're going belt Bien Hoa with, you know, these 22 mm rockets; so into the helicopters again up to there and you know good run around.(laughs) But I don't think that's answering your question, sort of round the traps.

But when you say do people sort of, I'm sure that any soldier who's a regular soldier has got you know his own ideas of what went wrong and how we should have done things. But then again it's no good crying over spilt milk, what's happened happened, and all they did when they were there they weren't, in command, you know they didn't issue their order of the policies, they just got on and did it)and they've just got to make sure that if we ever go to war again, you know, there's better decisions made, in some areas. And that's being critical of the people at the higher level, but in retrospect how can you ...

J.R But I mean even the people at the higher level were operating within what the politicians were saying...

W.T Yeah really, a lot of political....

J.R (talking together).... not too many casualties and things like that.

W.T So is difficult.

J.R Anyway let's move on to your 2nd tour, with 1 RAR. You came back in '65 from..

W.T '65,and I went to Sydney University regiment. (Oh right) Spent two years with that Sydney University regiment, who I thoroughly enjoyed being with...

J.R That was before you started being bombarded with protesters and....

W.T Well I just left S.U.R, and went to 1 RAR when Sir Roden Cutler was, first when they tried to attack the colours, which are very important you know to the regiment. I think it was at, what do they call that open day the first, day indoctrine .. (Orientation) Orientation week I think it happened there. But the C.O. of the battalion there was the

2 I.C when I was with them, tied Brigadier Dart, but General Murray was the C.0 then. But they were a good unit, and I enjoyed with them. Well then I went to, from there I was posted as C.S.M. of 10 Task Force, and that was, you may never have heard of 10 Task Force, but they formed this Task Force, it was a training Task Force to, so that, oh the Brigade, no they ... Task Force Majors and things going through, to go and work in this headquarters, and the Brigadiers went there as well and there was sort of, to give an idea of what a Brigade headquarters would be like and that was sort of rotation from there to Vietnam. And a job came up in the, one of the C.S.Ms in the 1st battalion was, oh getting sick or something, so I went and saw the C.O. of the 1st battalion who was then Colonel Bennett, and I got a job with 1 RAR.

J.R And was that before they were posted to Vietnam?

W.T Yes, but a lot of their training had been finished, but I got the trip to Canungra with them and was sort of final exercise and went away with 1 RAR.

J.R Could you just tell me what a C.S.M. does?

W.T Well the Americans, you know, he's a jack of all trades, but he's like the father image of the company, I'll put it that way. I think is one of the most rewarding jobs you can have as an O.R. in the army, you're sort of a father image} the old soldier, the American's have a term for it in their army, they call "top soldier", you know and "1st sergeant", "top sergeant". And really you work for the company commander, you're responsible to him, mainly for discipline, but you're really responsible for the training of the NCOs. See if you understand the army, it's very hard to explain to civilians; how the warrant officers and NCOs fit in, you know.. The sergeants work for their platoon commander in their platoon, but they also work for the C.S.M., you know the Company Sergeant Major, you sort of have O-groups [orders group] and things or have them up and you're really the jack of all trades and you support your company commander in everything, you know. You're the expert on infantry minor tactics, the expert on weapons, the expert on drill, you're expert on discipline. And your task in Vietnam, my task, was mainly, when the boss was engaged, and the company commanders in Vietnam used to have to take a terrible lot of orders on the radio, you'd be moving in the day time and he was getting his orders for the next day. Well he'd be on the radio to the battalion headquarters, and the platoons would be, well somebody had to go around and make sure the platoons were linked, we call it linking procedures, and the C.S.M would normally do that duty, you'd go and check that the sentry posts wer're right, you'd check the weapon pits, you'd just go round and talk to soldiers and get a feel of the, you know in the platoons things were going right and you know, you're sort of a father image, you know, that word's a good word the Americans use "top soldier", you know you go round and just talk to the other digger and say to the sergeant, have you got any crook, blokes

feeling crook or anyone got a bit of a problem, and you'd just go down and have a bit of a yarn)and go and talk to the platoon commanders and see how they're getting on. In many cases the, and, the bloke you were talking to... Tim Fisher was one of them I had, you'd go and talk to him and save them running up to the company commander all the time, you don't want them running up and worrying him, you know, you might be able to sort a little problem out they've had, he might have a bit of trouble with one of his corporals or one of his diggers might be, having a bit of a problem, might have been for some problem at home and he doesn't know how to handle it, and you'd sort of give him that little fatherly advice. Or your advice whether it was fatherly or not, but you know you'd had more experience, you're the most experienced soldier in the company, so they'd use you as a testing, not a testing board but a sounding board on things. But if you didn't get mound, if you just sat in the company headquarters, they couldn't come to you so you'd go out and .. Without, once again like I say like the Vietnamese, you didn't force yourself on people but you'd go along and you'd have a look at a gun and you'd say to the section commander "Not too sure if you've got that right there corporal so and so" or something, you know, because you had the experience. Or you'd go and say, "your sentry post out there, how does he contact in?" and they'd say "this way... " "Oh yeah" .... People like you to check on them, and soldiers like, they like a pat on the back like anyone else and they like a kick in the backside when they're wrong too, because it's all learning. And they don't want to make a mistake 'cause those corporals, those soldiers were their soldiers and if anything happened to to them, you know, so any little advice you could give was all accepted.

J.R So you sort of usually work through the other NCOs, rather, I mean would soldiers come up....

W.T No they wouldn't come to you personally

END OF TAPE ONE

TAPE TWO

W.T Well you were saying about the CSM, what he does.

One of the things is, you've got to be very careful that you don't break down the chain of command, because you know, the corporal's got his ten soldiers or you never had ten, you were lucky to have seven, you know they start off in training with ten, but you end up with about, on operations, you were lucky to have seven in a section. So the normal thing, you'd come down and ...you're maybe the first person you , but you'd normally go to the platoon commander, just let him know, say, you know, "Were you linked up?" you know "Who's on your flank?" and you know "Are you responsible for that flank or is lieutenant so and so?" or "which platoon?" and so I'll just potter around and you'd go and see the sergeant and you'd go and see the corporal, but I'd say, you'd go through the chain of command, unless things, you know when we were in an operation and things were flying around a bit, you'd just go to where you thought you were needed. But if you were stopped for the night you'd just go along and you know, do those sort of things. I made it a sort of a routine that, I'd like to know where the sentry posts were, and I'd like to know how the communications for that, I'd like to know where the links I'd like to know where the guns. 'Cause the company commander would normally do this, but I said in many cases our company commander would be taking orders and he just couldn't get around to these things, so I'd sort of do it for him, and if anything went wrong he would have expected me to do that, you know...And of course the other thing in the morning you'd just, you know, go round and check if anyone's sick or you know, just to get a feel like the boss would say "well" you know he'd say, you could say "Oh we've got a bit of a problem down in that platoon you know, blokes are getting a bit tired" or you know "I'm a bit worried about, you know that section commander down there" or you know... Because once again the platoon commander's going to try and hold his group together, you know it's this in-house loyalty and you've got to be loyal to everybody, and you've got to be loyal to your boss, so you gotta' sort of, if he can't get around you've got to be his eyes. And that's very much like an RSM in a battalion with a C.0, you've got to, but you must use that chain of command because if you don't, you know you won't be welcome because you know, and you're breaking down their authority, and you can't do that.

J.R So sort of going up from the CSMs, did all the CSMs sort of have a talk to the RSM...

W.T Oh yeah, when you get back to camp, you know, say for example

when I was RSM of a battalion I used to go out on all the maint dems when they were on, to the companies, and I'd go round all the soldiers and just around and, you know I'd go to the company headquarters, see the company commanders and CSM and I'd say "oh I'd like to go round the platoons, the CSM would then take ? to the different platoon sergeants, and I d see the platoon commander and I ' d say 'well I want to go out and see the soldiers", and I'd wander round and have a talk to diggers and you know.. And it's sort of, that's, that's that sort of, I used to call it and the "chain of command" is the chain of command from the company commander to his two commanders to the cor... sergeants to the corporals. My chain of command is the chain of communication, my chain of communication is RSMs, CSMs, CSMs to sergeants, sergeants to corporal, and that's the O.Rs' chain, its chain of command, you know...But, I'd call it the chain of communication, so you know you don't get the chain of command confused with the chain of communication. But if you want things to work, you know, the boss would make a policy or give an order and it would go through the orders group, but you'd have this sort of thing and follow it up through the chain of communication, and brace people up and, so that's how it works.

It's sort of very much I suppose in a factory I suppose is the difference between, you know, the manager to the supervisors, I suppose, I don't know how it works, but, you know somebody has to make the thing work on the floor, the managerial side make the policy and issue the directions, and these people make it happen. So it's sort of in that way.

J.R And can you remember any sort of specific examples or incidents say where there was perhaps a problem in a platoon and you were involved? (Oh yeah, but,...) just to make it more specific?

W.T Well...I had a platoon commander, and this was in 1 RAR, had a problem he was a national serv... he wasn't, well I won't tell you who it was because there was only two national service officers (laughs) But one of them was having a problem with one of his section commanders, and instead of you know running up to the company 2 IC or to the, you know I'd go round and had a talk to him and told him how I, you know I thought he should handle it, and I used to quite often have the young officer come and see you, and sort of, don't call them young officer, they're not young officers, they're officers in war, so they weren't young, but they ...

J.R They hadn't been in the army very long...

W.T Yeah, they just like to know, you know, things like that, could be on problems they're having in their platoon, could be with one of their NCOs, it could have been they're not sure how to handle a certain situations, and you just sort of that's where this sort of... that's where this sort of father image, the old soldier image comes in, you know "I'll go and see the CSM he

should know... "

J.R And I guess they could go to you with sort of, without loss of face, whereas if they went to the...

W.T Well this is exactly what I was getting to about the, they use you as a sort of sounding board as I said earlier, they keep on running up to the company commander, they don't want to do that, it shows that they're not competent or they haven't got co.. not that they're not competent, they were very competent, they wouldnd't have been there, but you know they might have been hesitant how to do something and they just.. the boss is a busy bloke and they don't want to go to him so they'd come and see you and you can... And if you thought it's something the company commander should do, you'd go and do it. See its very much like being an RSM in the unit, you'd go round and if you couldn't fix the problem with the company commanders, like CSM fixing with the platoon commanders, you would then take it to the boss and say "Come on sir, you'd better get down there to that platoon because we've got a bloody problem here" And, but you'd try and advise and fix it without worrying, you know that's the way you do things. And in many things the trouble with our army today I think too many things get out of hand, it keeps gets thrown up the ladder without someone at the lower level making a decision and fixing it, and that's the way you fix things, so you know.. So that's the sort of thing that CSMs do.

I don't know if you've ever heard of Phil Thompson, have you? That chap who died of Agent Orange (Yes, yes) Well Phil was in the co.. he was the mortar man, and while I was around checking the perimeter and these things, Phil used dig a hole, I used to sleep in the same hole as Phil, and of course Phil was about that high, was that high, and he'd always come back and say "Oh I've nearly dug the hole" you know, On odd occasions we got mortared you know, Phil and I trying to get in the little hole together. But oh no, it was a great...

The other thing is, see a CSM is, to me it was a great experience being a CSM with a rifle company on active service, it's, you know, really is something, you know, and, it doesn't matter what goes wrong out.. they're having a problem with their trip flares, you were the expert, you can sort of fix it for them, or if they need something, you know the CSM will fix it, you know so you get, you're terribly responsible for things. You're sort of overall responsible for everything, but nothing in particular. And the other big job of course is you're responsible for getting the casualties out, so, you know, you've got a company medic (talking together)

J.R So if there's a casualty someone would notify you?

W.T No you'd go up there, you know. Say we were moving along, a company and former platoon has a contact, a couple of blokes are wounded, the medic would, they call the, the company medic, he'd go up and I'd go up with him) and we'd sort of get the casualties, and then my responsibility was to get the helicopter in and get them out. And, so you know, you'd have all the wounded blokes and they'd talk to you and you know you sort of, you know different things people say, was this going to happen to me and you'd just try to conform them as best you can.

J.R You didn't go out with the casualties?

W.T Oh no, no you put them on a helicopter, ... You sort of the companies are doing the, the platoons are doing the fighting and they can't be mucking around, and in many cases you'd have to, if the forward platoon, you'd have to use soldiers of the rear platoon. See at one stage we had 9 wounded in one little stoush and to get them back to a helicopter, you know it takes nearly a platoon's worth of blokes to carry them. And, so no, you'd get them back and this is where our company medics, have you interviewed any company medics? They're somebody... (No, no) ..A rifle company medic you must talk to. Well, one who was in 4 battalion with me got an M.M. in D company, O'Sullivan and I think he's RSM of 1 Field Company they've got out here at North Sydney somewhere I think, Mick O'Sullivan, so he.... But the company medics, you know, a lot, the one we had was a national serviceman and he did a marvelous job, you know they'd put in drips and, or we could all give morphine, and you know these sort of things and put in sutures or, you know, really good, but that was part of your job as CSM, get the casualties out.

The other thing I used to do is I used to run the gunships, you know you see these helicopter gunships, well you're having a contact and you've got to contact them and the ones we first had were American, and you contact them, and you know bring the fire in from them, so you've got to be sort of with the troops to sort of control that. But as I said, you'd go where you think there was a problem and it...

J.R (Talking together) So you're sort of a floating....

W.T .. Well you just tell the boss "I'm going" and as soon as something would happen you'd go. But different CSMs would act differently than, you know everyone does it their own way.

J.R And there's not a sort of person like that at platoon level) you're the sort of first...

W.T No, the person at platoon level is the platoon sergeant.

J.R And he has a different, I mean he has the role of sort of commanding the ...

W.T Well the platoon commander commands, see this is like, it's the equivalent is in the battalion, is the commanding officer and the regimental sergeant major. Company level, is the company commander and the CSM, platoon level is the platoon commander and the platoon sergeant. And you know, you're sort of, the platoon sergeant is the battlefield 2 IC, you know he's the understudy, well he's not, in many cases in those days he'd know more than actually the platoon commander. But he was ready to take over, and he'd run the platoon and in many cases platoon sergeants ran platoons and corporals ran platoons. But a company commander, a CSM would never take over from a company commander, because it's the higher chain of command, but you would run things till they'd, because you couldn't pull a platoon commander out of a platoon, and we had in 1 RAR, the company 2 ICs didn't usually go to the bush, they'd stay home and do the administry thing. And really, if the company 2 IC was in and the CSM we'd get in each other's way because we'd be trying to do the same things. Now our company the 2 IC, well we didn't have a 2 I.C, we started off with one then we didn't have one, and, but, he'd be in your way and so it's... So anyway that was round about...

J.R What, one thing I'm interested in, is which you mentioned before, was how people fitted in, the reinforcements fitted in? Because although the battalions went over as units, it's my impression from seeing some figures that in fact there was really quite a high turnover, wasn't there, during the...

W.T Well there is. Yeah, well, I don't know if you've spoken to people about it but the biggest thing, and I'm talking mainly about in infantry because that's what I was in in Vietnam. We saw a film called The Platoon, did you see that at all?

J.R Oh yes, I saw that.

W.T Right, well you saw there the reinforcements weren't accepted and all this, and that's got to be garbage. Because if they're not well trained, how do they fit into the team. Your life's at stake, now if he doesn't know how to act as a sentry, or how to strip that gun, or how to lay a claymore, or how to put wire up, he could get killed, but you could get killed too. So you know, my corporals I'm sure made sure as soon as they got a reinforcement that, and we also didn't have the thing like the Americans, they go straight to a unit, we had a reinforcement training company, were you told about that? (Yes) Well they'd go to D.R.U, I think it was (A.R.U) A.R.U and they'd be trained in the sort of in-country training before they came to you. But I'm sure our blokes would also run them through a bit of a thing

before they were satisfied that they were right. But I, really to me I wouldn't know if a bloke was a national serviceman or a regular, they're soldiers, and all this, you know it, even when we came home in 4 battalion, originally the national servicemen didn't want to go because they were leaving their mates, you know, they were sort of pulled out first hand you know how do you pull people out of a section that are fighting together and one bloke goes home and the other doesn't, you know, that's the government, they don't understand what i s all about... But I really, oh they might have a bit of a joke, but I used to call not a regular soldier, it was only a three year soldier, if he didn't sign up for six years he wasn't a real soldier. So a national serviceman was two years there, so he was as good as, but it was only all sort of joking, but there was no, I never really heard anyone saying 'nasho' in Vietnam or, oh they'd say pogos for the, the infantry blokes had the idea anybody that wasn't in the bush was a pogo. But, no, you know you wouldn't dare say anything about you know the blokes in the unit, in front of people.

J.R Now, we were saying before that battalions varied a bit depending on the people running them, and presumably companies also varied. Did you notice a difference between the companies in your two tours with battalions?

W.T Well, there's two types of company commanders. And in particularly I noticed in one of the units, once again, one of the units, the difference in the company commander, the way he operated, what a difference it made to the company. One chap was a real centraliser and you know, over-commanded, you know, and really didn't let his people get on with it, when they changed company commanders the company blossomed; this fellow was as good a soldier, but he had a different way of doing things, and the company just went from strength to strength, you know. Where it was an unhappy company, it was still achieving, but when he took over, it was completely different and it was really a very good rifle company.

J.R And with that sort of change, did you see a difference in the soldiers, the private soldiers, did they sort of react differently?

W.T Oh well they'd feel it, yeah (they feel the difference) Oh yes of course they did 'cause, you know "here he is again, bloody hell, can't we do anything", "doesn't he trust us" you know, "doesn't he trust you skipper?" You know what reflects on the platoon commander reflects on the soldiers, you know the platoon's only as good as the people in it. And, I think Australians like to be told what to do and allowed to get on and do it. They like to be, people take an interest in what they're doing, but don't do it for them, you know, no-one will ever learn if you do it for them. You've got to

tell them what to do and maybe if they're not sure how to do it, tell them, maybe once how to do it. In peace time you can let them try it out and if they make a mistake you've got a training point, you say "okay we've got to concentrate on this." But in wartime if they make a mistake, it's too critical, but you can't keep doing it for people, you can't, the company commander can't run the platoons, and the platoon commander can't run the sections. You've got to give trust and confidence in the people who are doing it, because if you keep doing it they'll never get confidence themselves, and their soldiers will see them and say "Oh don't they bloody trust you mate?" That sort of attitude, so you can understand them. But yes, I did see that, particularly in one of the battalions, where the change was traumatic. From one, one, you know, kind of leadership to another.

J.R And why was there a change in company commander?

W.T One of them went home.

J.R But he went home for , not for ....

W.T No, he was sick, medical, medical he went back. That's what we were told, and I presume he was sick. You know he didn't look too good anyway. But, no, he was medical.

J.R And was there much sort of, well, you'd call it absenteeism I suppose, on account of sickness? Amongst the soldiers? Oh, not a great deal, um, malaria, you know even though people take them Paludrin tablets, people do get sick, you know..... malaria, dysentery type of things, bowel infections and things... there wasn't a great deal of .. there's the odd case who just won't go out, you know you get blokes and you can't, I remember this in one of the units I was in, one corporal it happened to, he'd just had enough, and it's no good, it's no good forcing him to go out because he'll, he's either lost confidence in himself and he's dangerous to have ground, so it's better to cut.. you know he did a good job and everyone's got a point where they, they've had enough. And this business of you know sort of bullying people doesn't work, you know you can get them out there, but, if they can't do the job they're supposed to be doing it just lets the whole team down, and once again I said everything's a team, so, you're better off than to say well, rightoh, we'll find another job for this fellow and you know, 'cause he's done a, you know he's done his bit and everyone's got a testing point.

J.R So what would happen in case like that, I mean would you talk to him, his platoon commander would talk to him.

W.T Well this could be one of the cases where, you know your CSM, if you were a CSM, this happened when I was a CSM as a matter of fact, you know the platoon sergeant might let me

know first or the platoon commander and say "you know I've got a bit of trouble with this corporal", and you know, "he doesn't want to come out, he's, he's getting a bit jittery and what do you reckon", and you know we'd talk it over and see the company commander and we'd just sort of move him on into Admin company or somewhere where we can.. or you could, there were a few jobs, not very many in the sort of base camp area back at Nui Dat where you could sort of give him a rest for awhile, let him just sort of think things out a bit and you know, you could sort of, the blokes didn't hold it against people, you just sort of say you know, okay this bloke's got a bit of problem at home or whatever you'd think of saying, and you just let him do something or send him on a guard somewhere, or do something, you could handle it for awhile. You could find somewhere for a little while, but if he, you know after that if they didn't sort of come good you'd have to sort of get him out into somewhere else.

But it didn't happen to many people, but it does happen to people.

J.R Did you sort of, could you see over the course of the 12 month tour that people were becoming more stressed or tense or ...

W.T Oh they got tired. [Pause] Yeah, after Coral, I particularly remember after Coral, we came back and we were out there for a long while and a lot of the fighting was out of Coral, you know Coral was bad enough when we got attacked there, but it was out of Coral and particularly the company I was in we got into a big bunker position and it was, and if it hadn't'a been for the tanks we'd have, we would never have come back. You know, and, and after that we came back, you can tell people are tired, they're and I made the comment to the C.O, the R.S.M. invited the C.S.M, and we had a drink with the C.O, and the C.O, made some comment and I said "well" I said "I'm absolutely buggered Sir, and if I'm buggered the soldiers have had it." And he said "Oh no, ... and I said, "they've had it!" You'd see blokes that were physically tired out you know, and ....

J.R Is it partly the lack of sleep? I mean the lack of sort of good sleep?

W.T Well I think it's the lack of sleep, it's the tension of things, it's the food, you know, the food, it's not like you know, say, chaps on Gallipoli, but if you're eating, constantly eating tinned food and you know you're not getting enough sleep, see as I said the sections, instead of being ten which are trained, everything you train are ten, you're lucky if you've got six or seven, mostly the average would be six, two of them have got to mount the gun together, the section commander might try, or he normally didn't 'cause he's got to... So you've got six blokes, two hours on, four off sleeping, now that's constant at night. Then you stand to and stand down and anything happens on the wire, everyone stands to, then

you've got, to get up the next day and patrol and, this goes on day in, day out, you don't know Sunday from Saturday to Monday to Friday. You don't even know what day of the week it is, you just, you need a break where you can just go to bed and sleep for 12 hours or 24 hours and just not, not be worried. I think everyone, you know, you don't know if you're going to get mortared or rocketed or, you really don't know what's going to happen. And maybe for the older soldiers, you know it's more natural I suppose, but young people maybe think more than older people, get more concerned about things. I don't know, but you know, they, but the soldier's the one who do the soldiering, they're the ones that are out there on the sentry post, we don't go out on the sentry, they're out there on their own as a sentry, then they're on the guns, they're the ones that are the forward scouts, and you know, and they're only kids, you know, when when you say a kid he could be a 23 year old or not ... or 23, say 19 to 23 year old man, still he's only a kid, when you really look at it now,,, today when you see a 21 year old and say what do they know:

J.R Yes, they're very young.

W.T That's right. So, yeah people do get tired.

J.R And was the sort of regular thing of, for the battalions, of having say 4 to 6 weeks out in the bush and then a few days back at Nui Dat do you think that was too long, in retrospect?

W.T Well, it depended where you were, see that Coral operation was fairly extended one, but if the job's to be done you've got to do it, somebody's got to do it. They brought in a thing of, you know, they tried to get companies back and then give them a couple of days down at Vung Tau, but, I can't remember all the ones there. It was tried to be fitted in, but you know it depends on the situation. See that's the difference, where these blokes needed to get away from that environment, you know, and unlike the Americans we had no Vietnamese on our bases, we did everything ourselves, so if somebody had to sort of help the cooks off, it was one of the soldiers. You know we didn't have Vietnamese work like American bases, they were Vietnamised, you know and everyone, the Vietnamese came in and did everything, no wonder they knew where everything was. But our soldiers when they came back, even then they had to do duties, we still had to have alerts and man the guns within the company perimeters. So there was never really, when they could completely, unless they went to Vung Tau, and that would be about 3 days, then of course they had their R & R, one R & R trip. But you know they couldn't count on going down to Vung Tau, you know, I don't know when our company went down, we were there for about, I don't know, nearly two months I think before we had one. So you know, it's ...

J.R Yes, yes, it's quite a while.

W.T Yeah it is. And the only thing is for the young fellas to come back was to go to the canteen and have a few beers. So you know, that doesn't help them too when they haven't been drinking for about a month.

J.R That's one of my other questions was alcohol, did it cause ok problem?

W.T Well in my periods there was no hard liquor. In the messes you had hard liquor, you could have whiskey it you wanted or whatever. The soldiers only had beer, and that was limited to so many cans but there's always a will there's a way, you know the bloke who doesn't drink gives his or somebody else stack them up. Oh there was the odd occasion when a bloke sort of went over the top, but we really didn't have a great deal of problem. You know the junior NCOs would handle them, you know they're their soldiers and they played up they'd say "You've had enough and get off to bed, or, ..

J.R What about the NCOs themselves, was there a problem with...

W.T Well no, the junior NCOs would drink there and the senior NCOs would go to the mess, you know, so, but you know blokes wouldn't, not saying that they wouldn't, you know put a skin full on, but is no different to anyone else in society, and maybe the trouble is, you know the being out there, they'd get affected quicker. But you know beer, really, you know they'd just get drunk and go to bed.

J.R So there wasn't a problem with people becoming dependant 7

W.T Well, when I was in, oh they'd get a bit noisy and singing and they'd be telling the headquarters to send a message down to keep them quiet "Oh bugger them". You know, but that's Australian way and.. But we did have a problem in, one problem in 4 battalion with a bloke went a bit over the top, but you know he had problems and ... But that was sorted out within the battalion and in the company... no problem. I think they had more problem with that sort of thing with the service units, you know the blokes who really ran muck were mostly in service units, because you know they could get the hard liquor and, somebody gets down and drinks a bottle of Jimmy Beam or something or Southern Comfort or something, he does get up in the trees.

J.R Were there any, you were saying earlier that the people were screened pretty thoroughly during the training process before they went over, but were there any who when they got over there sort of turned out to be misfits and really did cause problems?

W.T Well, if they did you know they wouldn't last in the sections, you couldn't, you just, you can't afford to have somebody who's not, you know not up to scratch.

J.R So you relocate them?

W.T Well they'd be, you'd get rid of them. You know you couldn't have them in the rifle companies. You just couldn't have them going on operations if they, you know if they didn't fit in, because it was just too dangerous to people. I'm not saying that they would all end up in sort of company, but there are jobs you can find for people, you know. And you know, you can move them out, you know there were jobs in Saigon and a few other places. You could shuffle them off somewhere. Or if the worst for the worst, send them home, it's better to send them home than have them there.

J.R Were there any sent home that you can recall from your company?

W.T Oh I can't really remember now.

J.R I mean it wasn't, obviously, didn't happen often?

W.T No, no be the odd case. No I can't remember now, you know, oh a lot of the lads played up, but you know you sort of sorted them out and they got on with it. But it's so different see, another characteristic of the Australian, you know, I like the old bit of the old larrikin in people, you know particularly in soldiers because if they haven't got that, they're lacking something you know in the true sense of being a soldier. And when things are hard, you need that bit of a larrikin to come out and just sort of get, crack everyone up and we all burst out laughing and, and, Phil Thompson I'll never forget that, we were out on this operation and, it was, I don't know it wasn't monsoon period, but it was wet, and we had to dig into this place, and it was digging into like oh sort of red clay, and oh we were all filthy, and the water kept, as soon as we'd dig it would fill up with water, and Phil Thompson just stripped off and dived and starting swimming around and so, it just broke everyone up, you know, and that's the sort of thing that keeps you going. But if we were all so bloody serious and morbid, you know, we'd all be depressed. So, you need that sort of, you need.. just about every section and platoon, you need a bit of a character, you know to sort of get the thing rolling. So you know, blokes like that are alright, its, you know it's a wonder... You know you can tell when a blokes got problems, you know, they don't communicate properly to the rest of the blokes and you know, they get solemn and you know, all that, you can tell... and they're no good to you because they'll fail you.

First of all, you know, the section commanders would try to sort this out, they'd know if a bloke's not pulling his weight, he's got a problem and it could be a Dear John, it could be something wrong with his kids at home, it could be anything.. and it would come out and then they'd try

to sort it. The old Dear Johns, you know a lot of them would just stick them up in the soldier's canteen, you know, and they'd say, "oh" and that was the way of saying 'well that's it (Dick?)!'" (laughs) I don't know if you've heard that, but ....

J.R Yes, I have heard that (and they'd say well that's you know, bugger it) (laughs) kill or cure.

Was there a sort of, was there a feeling over there of being very cut off from home and being, was there resentment of the sort of lack of support from home sometime?

W.T Well it didn't, didn't appear to be. See, I think we were doing a job and see most soldiers, this would once again affect the people in Vung Tau more, because they had more time to sit around and think about things. Our soldiers were generally, they got on and did what they were doing, out on patrol or whatever they were doing and there really wasn't much time to think about... The main thing they'd like to get letters from home, that's the thing when you see blokes when they didn't get letters, you know it's surprising, you know, people would sort of joke about it, you know "you didn't get any mail Harry" or something, you know is important, mail was terribly important, 'cause that's the link, you know, it sort of takes you out of the world you're in, into the other world, and its personal things, you know and that's why I think these Dear Johns were so personal, that's when the blokes broke, and got,... that's when they'd put them up on the notice board. But mail, you know, and I know myself, you know I used to love getting, you know, letters and read Judy's letters, and you'd read them about 10, 20, every time you had a break, you didn't bother, you'd pull the letters and read them again, and mail is the most morale thing for soldiers in the world, you know...

J.R So there wasn't a problem at that stage with sort of antiwar feelings at home or anything?

W.T No, no, I think when the fellas go home was when that happens. You know, particularly, I don't think it worried the older soldiers very much because you know that's our way of life, that's our, you know, livelihood, we're regular soldiers and so what, we you know, we had to do a job and we get on and do it, but I think for, I think everything was a lot harder on the national serviceman than the regular soldier. Because, you know, he had his way of life, these people were only part of the army for part of their life, they left their careeers or whatever they were doing and came into the service and then went back in, they were in enough transition adapting back out of a, you know, maybe the most traumatic experience they're going to have in their lives. And coming back into civvie street and then being sort of told that they were bloody fools and mugs and you know, and, you know, especially if you're young and you're

full of aggression and, you know, must have gone down very hard on them. But I think it was a lot, you know, the younger, I suppose it would affect a lot of the younger regulars too but, but they'd come back and get on with it because they were living army, and I think the older soldiers to us, well we were mostly married those weren't married, but you lived the army and there was, you know, blokes who've been overseas and who really worried about what you did in Malaya or Borneo or Korea, you know, who cared, you know. There was only one war and that was the big war. You know, that... see we never really went to any, that, and it was worse for the old soldiers, you know, we were treated, we'd never been to a war you know, you blokes what "this bloody Vietnam bun fight" you know, see no-one really knew much about it and it was sort of you know, and, oh you know, the sort of joke, you know, people would say to you "Oh you blokes were reading magazines, we were filling them in our show" you know and all this. On it would go, you know, the helicopters, and we didn't have helicopters and we didn't have this. That's why a lot of our blokes never joined the R.S.L, they had one gut full of this and, "if that's the R.S.L they can stick it you know and its, and the R.S.L's not like that, but, it's normally the people who talk a lot are the ones that never really did anything anyway. But that's why these blokes just... You go to the R.S.L. and they rave on, and is obvious when you say what ... they'd.... they're the typical old diggers you know, and our blokes'd walk up to the bloke and say, they'd say "And what unit were you in?" "I was in the 9th" and they'd say "What the 9th divi, well what unit were you in?" "Oh the 9th" you know, and they were never down, you know to a bloke who'd been in a battalion, he'd say his brigade or his battalion, so you know you soon pick out these blokes, whatever they were. (laughs) So you know it's just not the effort, and that's why a lot of these things come out now like the Vietnam Legion, and that's a great organisation, I've never belonged to it, but I went to one of their functions in the Newcastle branch, and they've got the three services in it, and there's over 200 members and they, they get and do their own thing. The R.S.L's given them a little area of the R.S.L, there and they're got, they're a common bond to each other and you know they don't have to worry about all these other things, so. But I forget the question now, we've drifted off a bit...

J.R I've forgotten the question too (laughs) But that's alright, I'm sure you've answered it.

What was your homecoming like? With 1 RAR?

W.T Well I came home before the battalion, I was a medical out. But when I did come home, I was at the Infantry Centre, but I marched with 1 RAR and that's where this girl came out and threw the paint all over the C.O, which was quite impressive! (laughs) So, but, you know, 'c was

just another parade, and you go on... Most of the blokes you know they wanted to get home, and their families, their loved ones, a lot of them had to sort of go from Sydney then , you know, and go by train or plane, but...

J.R I'm just interested in when, before the Welcome Home March last year that it was sort of just accepted in all the press reports that no soldiers from Vietnam had ever been welcomed home.

W.T Oh no, no, that's completely wrong.

J.R Well when you look at the newspaper reports at the time, there were huge crowds, welcoming the battalions, so that ...

W.T (talking together). Well in regard to that, I, when this reunion parade or the, on the 3rd of October, they were talking, a lot of the older regulars didn't want to, said "Oh we've had our welcome home" and things and I was a bit against that, because I said "Okay we may have had it, but once again we are the battalions again, the services never had them, the navy never had it, the air force never had it," Most of our battalions had a parade when we came home, but what you were saying are the rotation. Unless the national servicemen were in the battalion at that particular stage, they didn't, and really to me the 3rd of October was, and I said this statement a few... "Really, we never really had a day what was our day." You know, we as battalions had a march and people who were there at the same time as us might have marched, but it was never really of all the people who have served in Vietnam, particularly the national servicemen. And I said if I was a 35 year old now, or whatever and I had kiddies and, I would like my kids to see me at my day, and I said we've got to give those blokes their day, we had our day, a lot of these blokes came back from the 2nd World, Korea or Malaya or Vietnam, but to them it was a one o f f , and I reckon they deserved it. And it proved it, what a great day it was, but it's got to be a one off, I know Melbourne is trying to have a similar thing and I, I don't think that's right, I think it's got to be a one off, because we've got to have one body to represent us and that's the R.S.L, whether we like it or not. We've got all these, I belong to so many associations, the training team, the 4th and the, you know R.S.L, but one body's got to be the spokesman and got to be the R.S.L, so we've got to be very careful we don't fragment ourselves and don't have a voice. But that's what's happening because of the R.S.L, the way it originally fellas were accepted or not accepted and they just said, you know, 'stick it' sort of thing and that's what happened.

J.R Have you had any involvement with the V.V.A?

W.T Well Phil Thompson was the President of it and he was, as I say I served with him, I was there when he got wounded, and you know I knew his wife, and his second wife, you know.

And I know Terry Loftus is in it now, have you ever met him at all? (Yes, a big bloke) Big Terry. Well Terry's a mate of mine too, Terry's heart's in the right place, but I think they go off a bit half cocked, you know, they ... See a lot of us are very concerned about this Agent Orange and everything and Phil, you know he, there must be something there but I think a lot of it was, I think most of the blokes who have been affected by Vietnam are the national servicemen. They just couldn't, that transition was just too much and they had too much of a traumatic experience to get it out of their system. And I think the regular soldiers, you knows we've still got that military in, which keeps, it's the brotherhood kept on going and not saying some of these blokes haven't got it, regulars, but I think it's mostly the national servicemen.

And the main thing is the grog.....

J.R What I was interested in yes, (But I don't want to be sort of quoted on these things) No, no, it's just some people suggested to me that people's drinking habits sort of started in the army, (Well) when they were up there (that could be) and that.... I don't mean that they're blaming the army particularly.....

W.T But the soldiers have always had a reputation for being drunken, licentious brutes you know, it's a sort of, you know, but what do people do when they're on their own, they haven't got any women companionship, there's no entertainment, except having a drink, well what do you do. And what do you do to maybe you know to really get to sleep at night. When you're out on operations you're so tired, if you do get any time you sleep$_2$and you don't sleep long, when you come back, once you get over the initial sleeping it's very hard then to break a routine when you're cat napping, sleeping all the time to go back, and they say, well we're in for 3 days, day one you might sleep for about 12 hours or so, but after that, once you get to sleep you don't want to be woken up so a lot, it's a bit of the old anesthetic, have a few tubes and (laughs) So you, know, obviously people did start drinking more heavily but it's not like the average, you can't tell me that blokes now don't drink more, you know every function you go to on civvie street now there's alcohol and blokes drink every night of the week and have a binge, well these blokes couldn't do that. They'd have a, maybe get onto it when they came in or went on R & C or R & R, but that, you could count those on one hand what they do. So really it's all, or may, I know blokes used to get grog in somehow, but it was never really a problem, but if a bloke had a drinking problem, he would have had that anywhere. But its, you know, when I say but this, you know, I don't know whether its Agent Orange, has, there is such a thing, there's got to be something in it or something in something, I don't know, but, 'cause I've lost so many mates of cancer and other things, but, but I've lost a lot of civvie mates with cancer too, so, but you know

they've worked all these statistics out, but if you talk to Terry (I know, I've heard him) he's Mr Doom and Gloom. Every time Terry rings me up "Have you heard mate that so and so's died." You know I'm not knocking that, them at all, but just not my scene I'm afraid. And you know, when you write this thing, I hope you don't, sort of, if this comes out you sort of quote this too much, but is, a lot of blokes are very concerned, you know we feel that there's something there but why haven't I got agent orange, why haven't the blokes round me, is it only certain. ? See I remember with Phil Thompson, we went through some areas there and we thought it'd been napalmed, but obviously that had been agent oranged, you know they'd been defoliated. And, but we were all there, and whether we've got these things and we don't know about it, but I do know that I get this rash, don't I aide, and it's never cured (Judy calls out "what's that") That rash I keep getting, you know they talk about this rash you get, I'm always breaking out in a rash. But I think I've had that since the days of Malaya, but not, not the.... (Judy says I believe personally as my observation, I believe it's a mite when it gets under the skin, and certain conditions be it emotional or environmental it brings it out, because it grows, you can follow it)

Yeah, this comes on me, I don't know if it's the same one they talk about, they get this rash, but.....

Judy I remember when we were married, 'cause Wally had just done two years in Malaya, and he, we were on our honeymoon and he had this great gentian violet because of this rash.

W.T But that's similar to the one I had...

Judy And one that, when we were in Malaya again your legs used to swell up, with a sort of a rash, particularly after you'd done a lot of river-crossings and things like that. I'm not, when you gave lessons on river crossings and so forth.

W.T Yes, but I don't know, but it comes on me like little lumps. I've been to the doctor and he said oh it's, you know, they just said, a caterpillar or something's bitten you or something, I don't know.....

J.R They don't know, do they?

W.T No, you don't and

Judy All I know when he's got it he's like a bear with a sore head because of the unbearable itch.

W.T And you've got to be careful, you scratch it, it breaks out other places then, and but that's the only thing that sort, but I think emotionally I think that's the trouble with a lot

of these national servicemen, they just, see, if you came home on a ship you had 12 days to sort of unwind, and then you had more service and you had your leave and you came back with your mates and it was all out in the bush again, but they just had such, you know they would be in the field and their time would come up and the maint dem chopper would come in with ammunition and food or something, they'd hop on that, go back have a shower, change the gear and maybe two days Saigon, three days they'd be back in Australia, now..

J.R It's very weird isn't it, and did the army not give any sort of thought to it at the time?

W.T Well obviously they didn't, you know, they most probably thought, oh the quicker these blokes get out, that's what they wanta do, and the blokes would have said that, well now I'm home ?? I don't want to be hanging around a personnel depot, you can see their, they would have been just as bad. And it's no difference to the blokes in the 2nd war, as soon as they got home they wanted to be demobbed, and the 2nd World War it took a lot longer to get them out, because there was so many, but they had it down to a fine art, the discharge cell, and the blokes would virtually come home and be a civilian. And that was great, well they were trying to race out and do it, but when they got there, they had nothing in common with anyone, "where's me mates, you know, and no-one's interested in them, you know and blokes'd you know, and they didn't really want to talk about certain things and no-one understood them. I can imagine how, you know, they said you know, everyone's talking about the local football game and how important that, and he's just come back where his mates are being killed, you know and no-one really, it must have been pretty hard on them.

J.R And I think, I mean although sort of in retrospect people talk about how it was an unpopular war and things, I think it was only with a concern of a very few people. Most people I think weren't interested... either way.

W.T Yeah, but I think the other thing which sort of, people say oh dirty war, I've heard that time, you've heard the term dirty war? (Mmm) Now I just cannot unders... I said "well, what was a clean war?" and don't tell me the 2nd World War, where literally blew Cologne, and Bremen and (civilians) that's right.... Japan, the Japanese must <u>never</u> forgive us for those atomic bombs. But Germany was the same, you know we literally, Bremen and these places, and Hamburg, that, you know, that was just hundreds of thousands of people burnt alive. But that was a clean war, you know, and things would happen in the Islands and that you know nothings, like the Cowra break-out with all those Japanese, now if we did a thing like that today, we'd, we'd

be called murderers and butchers and, we literally went out and just anyone we saw we shot. You know just like shooting kangaroos, I 'spose, but then again we thought they'd kill us, you know the dreaded yellow peril, so you know that's the sort of thing that hurt soldiers too, and say this thing, "Oh you burnt villages down". If you had to move people from one location to another, you couldn't leave supplies and that for the enemy. But you know in the 2nd World War we did that. You see on Anzac Day in Timor they're burning villages and things, we did that.....

END OF TAPE 2