



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Tape 1, Side 1 of an interview with Mr Timothy Megaw recorded on 12th March 1990 by Susan Green. End of identification.

Mr Megaw, I wonder if you could start by telling me why you joined the VDC, how that came about?

Well, I was unable to join the normal forces being manpowered by my employer and I felt that I should be doing something and so I joined the VDC.

What was your work that you were manpowered?

I was working for a company that was making building materials and they were considered essential at that stage in the war.

And what attracted you to the VDC as opposed to any other organisation? There were a lot of other groups weren't there, operating at that time?

Well, I was not aware of any other group that operated at the time that ....

I'm talking about things like, there was the air raid precautions and ....

Oh, the ARP, air raid precautions, yeah ARP, no, no. I wasn't into that, no.

So let's look at those very early meetings with the VDC, what was happening then?

Well, to start with just a crowd of us got together and we were, of course, in our normal clothing and we were, we'd meet at a particular place - it was Swan Street Hall in South Perth that our group met and for quite some time we'd just meet there, go through a few drills, marching etcetera and anyone that had any knowledge of machine-guns, rifles, or whatever, would give a talk on them. That wasn't till some time later that we were issued with uniforms, rifles and into our group came a Lewis gun and, ah, Bren guns, that type of thing.

That was later when the VDC was absorbed into the army.

Yes, the army seemed to take a bigger interest in us then and assigned various jobs to the VDC.

What was the ethos at those first meetings? What did you really think that you were trying to do when you were doing those very, fairly, if I might say, primitive sounding, drills?

Well, we thought that getting together as a group was better than doing nothing, seeing that the enemy as it was, Japan, was getting awfully close and we thought we may as well be prepared for something. There was the story, of course, that we had, we were given broomsticks to practise with and 'Halt. Who goes there?' 'Stop or I'll fill you full of white ants', but I never ever saw that happen. We never did have the broomsticks. We did start out

with a rifle called a .310 rifle, I think it was left over from the Boer War, quite a nice rifle but it was just a single shot rifle.

(5.00) Can you give us a rough idea when these first meetings took place? It was obviously well before, or some time before the Japanese came into the war.

Ah. I really can't give you a date on it, no. Sorry about that.

Now, what were the duties that you did at that time, other than drilling, what else did you do?

We just attended lectures from people who had been in the services or were still in the services. That generally was all that we did at that stage.

No guard duty.

No, that, the guard duties came later when we were sent to ... this was naturally when we had rifles et cetera and in uniform ... we went to Canning Bridge. And there was a sentry on either end of Canning Bridge, and that went from sundown to sun-up and no-one was permitted to go under the bridge. It was considered, well, it was a fairly vital link between the north and the south of the river.

Now this was after you had weapons and presumably after the army took over the VDC?

That's right.

Right. Tell us about those guard duties, then. What were you doing on sentry duty at the Canning Bridge?

Well, it was only to keep .... No-one was allowed to stop on the bridge. No-one was allowed to go under the bridge. Unfortunately the sentry boxes weren't nailed down or anything and one night there was a fairly big storm and one of the sentry boxes was blown over and a Don R hit it and he was killed unfortunately. And the only other incident that I can remember on the bridge was a chap in a boat went, started to go underneath and he was warned not to go under and he continued to go under and somebody shot at him and it took us six months paperwork to get out of that one. But, oh, and we used to have to, when we were off duty, we were two on, four off, we slept in a hall which is still there. I can't remember the name of it, but it was a Masonic hall and when the Masonic people had their meetings, was down one end of the hall and we were down the other. And when they were not there the reverse was in progress, and quite often somebody coming off guard would wander in the wrong end and all hell'd break loose. We'd, well, we'd be told we'd never be allowed back in again, and God knows what all, but we did.

You mentioned that when the sentry box blew away, or got lifted by the wind that a Don R ....

A dispatch rider.

Right.

He was regular army. He just happened to be going down to Fremantle, I presume on duty, and he never made it.

What was the feeling within the ranks of the VDC at that time about what was possible for you to do? Was it a bit of a joke?

Oh, no. Most of us took it fairly seriously. When we went down to Park Station, down to the 3.7 anti-aircraft guns, say, most of that was all underground there and a few of the lads used to regard it as a good spot for poker. And you'd always know where to find a certain bunch, they'd be all playing poker. But ....

Who were the heavy poker players?

I can't remember their names, thank God. I wasn't one of them I was younger and at that stage, wasn't into poker.

Did big money change hands?

Oh, no, no, no, it was just a bit of fun to pass away the time. Because once we'd done our drill during the day and had a shoot, there wasn't much to do during the night. So all you did was made your own amusement. There was nothing, nothing organised there.

(10.00) You mentioned that you people met at the Swan Street Hall. Now the B Company of the No. 2 Battalion covered quite a big area. It covered Como, South Perth, Vic Park and I believe Melville. Did you all meet separately, from the different areas?

Ah, Como and South Perth met together. Melville, I don't know, I don't remember them at all. Victoria Park, they had their own drill hall over in State Street, I think, it was, in Victoria Park. They used to meet there. But the company commander was in South Perth. His name was Earle Arney and he looked after the whole crowd.

Was there a fairly good feeling of cohesion with the group, despite that fact that there were meetings being, taking place in different areas?

Oh, yeah. There was a bit of rivalry, of course, between - especially when we were on the guns - between the Victoria Park crowd and us as to who got closest to the targets and things but other than that we were pretty good together.

And the officers, tell me for example about Earle Arney. What type of person was he?

Oh, he was a terrific guy. He had the rank of captain, I think. And he was one of the nicest chaps you could ever wish to meet. Most, well, I would say that all the officers, Beall, a Lieutenant Beall, he was a very good officer.

What marked out a very good officer, at that time?

Well, he had the respect of the chaps and he could mix with the chaps but he also, what he said went. So I mean there was no mucking around and he was the boss.

Do you think that particular qualities might have been required for the officer in such a set-up where essentially you were voluntary, weren't you?

Oh, yes, yes. We were certainly voluntary, yes.

To keep you there?

Strange. Towards the end of the war, I think they even paid us to go on these meetings. I wouldn't be too sure on that. I know we were paid when we went into camp for a week or a fortnight. We were paid when we were on the observation posts down at North Beach. But we weren't paid for anything else, though.

Tell me about what camps you went on?

Oh, there was the ... we had a, one up in the hills at one of the quarries. We went up there and we only stayed overnight really up there. That was a grenade throwing exercise.

You were learning.

Yeah. We used to go down to the rifle range down at Swanbourne and practise down there with our rifles. And the camps at Park Station, the maximum time there was about a week. But normally it was only over the weekends that most of it was done. But if it was a big shoot then you could be in there for a week.

Where was the Park Station?

In Fremantle.

Yes. Can you be more specific?

I think there's a high school there now. It's ....

The John Curtin High School.

It could be the John Curtin High School, no, I can't be more specific than that. We used to practise on the guns there but we only ever had one shoot there, and that caused so much trouble in Fremantle, breaking windows and things that we were transferred for shoots up to Buckland Hill, or down to South Fremantle. The South Fremantle shoots were more of a naval type shoot than anti-aircraft shoot.

What other sort of camps did you go on? You mentioned going on this one day grenade throwing ....

Yeah. Well, we went out every weekend, we'd go out somewhere and do some thing but I can't remember them all, of course. But ....

(15.00) Did you feel frustrated at being home when you might have been overseas fighting?

I think we all felt that, that we were sort of tied up here and this was the best we could do. But, oh, most of the chaps felt that way and some of them, as soon as they become out of the manpower or whatever it was that held them there, they joined up.

Did you ever feel as a sense of disapproval from people in the community around you, that you were presumably fit looking, of age sort of person ...

No.

... why weren't you away fighting?

Um. Away from the VDC, if you were in town or somewhere, yes. The subject would quite often come up, why aren't you in uniform.

Did that change when the VDC became part of the army?

Not really, because again, we were not in uniform all the time. They .... Strangely enough they, I fell over and got hurt down at Park Station once and I was taken to Hollywood Hospital in an ambulance and all that sort of thing. And I was in there for about three or four weeks, and then I had to attend out-patients down there and I had to be in uniform. And yes, there was a difference, the way people accepted you if you were in a uniform then, or if you weren't in a uniform. So, although it wasn't an AIF uniform, it was just a VDC uniform .... We used to kid about the name, of course. The VDC, we used to tell, if you were going out with a young lady, it was the V-Bomb Disposal Corps.

[Laughs] Can you be more specific, about how you fell over?

Oh, no, I just fell down in a slit trench. Hit my head and all sorts of things, broke my arm.

So were you laid up for a while then?

Yeah, I was in hospital for three weeks, three or four weeks and then I was off work for a couple of months, I suppose.

You mentioned that you were on an observation post at North Beach. What was that?

Well, the regular army, I don't know why they had to leave, but they had to go and do something somewhere else, and they called for volunteers to go down and man this post. And about eight of us went down and we were down there for several weeks and it was an observation post where we could see right out to Rottnest, of course and any lights at sea we had to report to a post and the name of our post was Number-Two-0-Pip-Fisho-Fred, for God's sake. And I remember one night that I was on observation and it was just about time for me to go off and I saw this light north of Rottnest and I reported it, rang up and reported it and they said, 'Okay'. And then a few minutes later the phone rang and they said, 'Can you still see it?' 'Yes,' 'Put the 'scope on it.' 'Yes.' 'Well every time it flashes, you say yes.' And until two o'clock, or three o'clock the next bloody morning I was saying 'Yes, yes.' I didn't report too many lights after that.

Put you off.

Oh, yes. It's a great way to get a sore throat.

What was the relationship between the VDC people and the army, for you, the regulars?

Oh, really, I think they took us as a bit of a joke. Some of them were quite okay. The chaps at the anti-aircraft stations, they were very good to us, very good, but generally the regulars, I think they took us, you know, *Dad's Army* sort of thing, although a lot of us were quite young.

Any other incidences on that observation post that you were there, for how long was it?

I can't remember exactly. It was two or three weeks, we were there, but I remember once a civilian came in and reported that there was a bit of a lifeboat up north of North Beach on the beach.

(20.00) And so we thought we'd get rid of that so we rang up the people concerned on the other, er, regular army and told them about this and they immediately put it back onto us and told us to go and pick it up. Well, we had no means of transport whatsoever, but luckily I knew the milkman in North Beach so we went and borrowed his horse and cart and we went up and picked it up and brought it back. Apparently it was something they wanted but we did not get a helluva lot of, you know, sophisticated stuff like a car or a truck or anything like that.

And what was it? Was it a piece of life raft?

It was off a lifeboat, off some wreck. I did, at the time, find out but I can't remember what it was now.

Can you give us a rough idea of when that might have occurred?

No, no. No, I ....

The Americans in the war then, or ...?

No, I can't even remember that, sorry.

And where did you live while you were at North Beach? What was ...?

Well, there was a house there, quite a big house, that's where we slept and had our meals. And there was a lady there, she used to do the cooking. And the observation post was up on a hill, quite close to where we were, and we used to, there'd be two on, on observation and the rest sleeping. And you went on ... it worked out that you'd be on two hours and off about six. So it wasn't a great strain on you, it was quite okay, I think.

How did you get into the particular group or crew that you were with in the No. 2 Company - No. 2, the B Company of No. 2 Battalion?

Well, it was just this area.

> Yes, but say for example, the group of people that you went to the observation post with?

Oh, they called for volunteers and a lot of people couldn't get time off to go down for two weeks but I was able to go off for time off, I was able to do that. And same with the rest of the group that went down.

> Looking at the work that you were doing at that time, how was that affected by your involvement with the VDC? Did you find that it was, that you were giving a lot of time to the VDC?

They were, the company I worked for were fairly good, though they ....

> Which company was it?

A company called James Hardie and Company. I was able to go into various camps and had time off from work. Of course, they didn't pay me, either the army paid me or if they didn't pay me I didn't get paid at all. When I was hurt for instance, I was in hospital, say, three weeks, off for another four, say, seven - eight weeks and I did not receive any pay at all during that time. The army paid me compensation about six months later, I suppose it was, but .... And of course, 200 pound I think it was they paid me. In those days that was a fair amount of money, and I took it with two hands, I tell you.

> You were pretty badly injured then. It's not what you'd expect in the VDC.

No. No, I ....

> Tell me, how did the war affect a company like James Hardie? What difference did it make?

Well, we couldn't sell our materials to just anyone. They had to have a permit to buy the stuff and most of our stuff went to defence works like up at Exmouth, what is now known as Exmouth. They built all of that. They built, oh, dozens and dozens of places up around the north and around Perth here. And they were all made of this, our building materials.

(25.00) What sort of materials were they?

Asbestos cement. Dare I say that word.

> Yes. Not a friendly one now.

Not, nowadays, no. But I was with them, with the company for forty-three years and I'm still alive so it couldn't have done me too much harm.

> And were there particular shortages of things that you can recall?

Oh, what, in ...?

In that particular industry in the manufacture of this ....

Oh, gosh, yes. Yes. We used to have to substitute lots of things in those days for .... Now the cement works was right next to us and we got, oh, maximum of their output. Then there was a shortage of asbestos, would you believe, and they were experimenting with other materials to put into the sheeting to try, but ....

What kind of things were they trying?

Um. There was, um, oh gosh, oh, I can't remember. No, I can't think of the name of the stuff what we used to put in with .... I don't think any of that ever went out to the public because we were trying to make stuff out of, without asbestos, but it didn't work out. But that was because we couldn't get the asbestos in from South Africa. And at that stage Wittenoom was not on the map, so we just had to get by with what we could.

Were there other substitute materials, that you can recall, other than the one for asbestos?

Nope.

Was there any sort of graft that went on in terms of gaining access or ...?

To get the material?

Yes.

There were attempted, in all the materials that were, you had permit materials, you had a quota .... I think the cement works, they got it worse than we did because it didn't matter what sort of a building up were putting up, you needed cement. And they had a bad time.

Were you ever approached?

Oh, gosh yes. Yes.

And what would be the sort of offers that would be made to you?

Oh, they'd come up with some fantastic offers about what [inaudible] but ....

Could you just describe the type of thing that you might ... was it money or was it perks, or...?

Yes, yes, mainly money, they'd offer you so much if you could give them a, so many sheets of asbestos, but it was too tightly controlled to do that. You had, they had a permit to buy so much and that was it. I mean, you had to account for every sheet that was there, so in our materials it was pretty hard. We had seconds, what we called seconds of, mainly in corrugated sheets that if it was not first class and it was put down into what we called the seconds and they were available and lots of people .... But that was mainly after the war that we were allowed to sell that to, say, chicken farmers or something like that to build up, and, oh, I could, you know, a lot of chicken places just started out with that sort of thing.

Mr Megaw, what was your title with James Hardie? I mean, what was your work?

Well, at that stage I was the Production Clerk. I ended up ....

So that was supervising the production process.

That's right, yes. We had two machines and three shifts and I ended up, with the company, I ended up Area Manager for the north of the state, from Shark Bay up to Kununurra.

That's the end of Side 1, Tape 1 of the interview with Mr Timothy Megaw, recorded on 12th March 1990 by Susan Green. End of this side.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: This is Side 2 of Tape 1 of an interview with Mr Timothy Megaw, recorded on 12th March 1990 by Susan Green. End of identification.

Mr Megaw, at that time what was the feeling current among your colleagues in the VDC and in the work place about how West Australia stood in relation to the eastern states and how you might be supported or not supported during the war?

We felt very isolated over here because we had nothing was stationed over here in Western Australia. We had no sort of ships, the only ships we had were when the Americans came into the war we had quite a big naval force here then and submarine force. We had the Catalinas, they were based at Crawley and then up at what is now Exmouth we had another American base up there, so until the Americans came in the thoughts were fairly bleak over here, especially when Japan came into the war and things were looking fairly bad for us. All our people were overseas fighting, or in England fighting and we requested that a ship to be sent from England to loan us a ship to look after us over here. We were told there wasn't one available, and it was then that we really knew that we were isolated.

Do you think that gave the VDC's operations here a special sort of edge in that you were the only ones that could possibly put up a resistance?

Well, we did feel as if we were doing something positive in, well, defending the country as you might say but what we were doing we thought was the right thing to do.

Were you ever involved, or did you ever see any involvement in intelligence work through the VDC?

No.

Was there ever a feeling that you had to be on a, perhaps more on the look-out for any kind of subversive activity around you, because of the peculiarly sensitive position of Western Australia?

The only time that was, was when we were at the observation post down near North Beach and then we had to report every movement, every aircraft that went over, every light we saw at sea, every ship we saw going in. That was every one.

> You mentioned that the army, you thought, had a view of the VDC as a bit of a joke, or didn't take the VDC quite seriously. What about community attitudes? Did the community place a great reliance on what you were doing?

Oh, I don't think they placed a reliance on it, but at least they did sort of recognise that we were doing something instead of, you know, not doing anything at all. No, I think the community themselves, they accepted us fairly well.

> And the officers that were leading you, what qualified them to be officers? Was there anything in common that they had that you could see made them stand out particularly?

(5.00) Not really. The only one that I can remember that was, you know, had anything to back him up, and that was, again, Earle Arney. He was a magistrate of good standing and I think the other officers, I think one of them was a car salesman, so I don't think ... they just, they were our officers and ....

> It wasn't an old boys network in any way?

Oh, I don't think so, no, no. I don't think they knew each other before the war, but just got together during the war.

> You've had a long involvement with theatre and with acting through your career. What was the involvement during the war in the theatre for you?

Well, there was very little entertainment here in Western Australia and I belonged to a theatre called Patch Theatre which was in Munster House in Murray Street. And we had a show on every Thursday, Friday and Saturday. And sometimes with a matinee on Saturday. And we'd have full houses every night. We used to .... The show, one particular show, would run for say twelve weeks and then towards the end of it you'd be rehearsing for another one and be on show of an evening with the current show. I did that for quite a number of years.

> That's a fairly full life. You were working at Hardies during the daytime. How many nights on VDC duty were you doing?

We'd do two or three nights on VDC. Weekends you'd be, if I was to be away for the VDC for some particular reason like going into camp or something, then the theatre just didn't have me for that time.

> So you'd have a stand-in for that period. And then you were away on some days with the VDC work.

That's right.

> And rehearsing the two or three other nights and performing.

Yep.

Were you married at the time?

No, I didn't get married till 1946.

So life was just fully VDC, theatre and work?

Yep.

Right. And did everyone go to the theatre or was it service people that went to the theatre then? Who were the sort of people that were going to the theatre?

Oh, it was everyone used to turn up there. They .... We only had a seating capacity of about two hundred and fifty and that used to be ... to start with it used to a silver coin entrance and later on, of course, we got a little bit more sophisticated and we used to charge them. I can't remember what it was we charged them but we got rid of that donation of a silver coin.

Was it a lucrative time after you got rid of that donation for theatre during the war?

I wouldn't say it was lucrative but we certainly made some money. We .... Lots of people used to come to see us, people that were like, I can only think of one, like Chips Rafferty. Whenever he was over here he wouldn't miss one of our shows if there was one, and there was always one on, so he'd always come up and see it. But people like him used to come to see our shows. The Governor, he used to, he and his lady used to come and whoever was a current visitor to the Government House, they used to come. And at that time I was also the trustee of the theatre and my wife and I we were host and hostess of the, looking after those people.

What sort of effect did the war have on the selection of plays?

Ah, well we had two lots of theatre going. We had an experimental theatre where we did put on experimental stuff but in the main theatre, yes, they were like *Hobson's Choice*, and *Sheppy*, *Gaslight*, that type of theatre, and a lot of people, you know, who are fairly well known in theatre nowadays, they made their start at Patch.

(10.00) So it was fairly light kind of theatre. You weren't going in for the heavy stuff for the general public?

Not generally, no. No, well, it wasn't the time to do that sort of thing. In the experimental theatre we did but that was mainly, well, not mainly but a lot of that was just for ourselves, you know, we liked it so we'd put it on. Didn't matter whether people would come to see that or not. We saw it.

Were there a shortage of people at that time to be involved in theatre?

Oh, yes, I think, well, I think there always is a shortage of people involved in theatre, but at that time, of course, yes, I guess there was a shortage, yes.

And was it a period of blackouts or ...?

Oh, yes.

During rehearsals, you had to have dim lights?

Oh, there were blackouts, oh yes.

Right. So how, it must have made it in a sense quite exciting, the word comes to mind, to be doing this type of work during that period.

Well, once you put the blackout curtains up you never thought of it. I mean, no, it wasn't exciting in that way, it was just, no, no, the theatre or the play [inaudible]. I don't think anyone thought of it that way.

I guess what I'm getting at, that at a time when life was so full anyway, that it must have been a very extraordinary period of your life to be involved in so much, or did you live life like that anyway?

Well, yes, I don't think I wasted much time. We were, I had to be doing something all the time and they just happened to be the things that I got involved in.

Right. And were any of your people, the people who were involved in theatre with you, were they also in the VDC?

No. I don't think there was anyone at the theatre who were, they were not involved with the VDC at all, no. No, no, there wasn't any.

Right. Mr Megaw, thanks very much.

That's it.

That's it.

That's the end of the interview with Mr Timothy Megaw, recorded on 12th March 1990 and that's the end of Tape 1, Side 2, and as I said the end of the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW