



# TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Readers of this transcript of interview should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal conversational style that is inherent in oral records. Unless indicated, the names of places and people are as spoken, regardless of whether this is formally correct or not – e.g. 'world war two' (as spoken) would not be changed in transcription to 'second world war' (the official conflict term).

A few changes or additions may be made by the transcriber or proof-reader. Such changes are usually indicated by square brackets, thus: [ ] to clearly indicate a difference between the sound record and the transcript. Three dots (…) or a double dash (- -) indicate an unfinished sentence.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Tape identification. This is Tape Number One, Side A, recorded by Rob Linn, for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive, Australian War Memorial, on 8th March, 1990, interviewing Mr A N, Bert, Ward, who served with the 2/27th Battalion from August 1940, until he was wounded at Gona in November 1942, and then discharged in October 1943, and held the rank of private during that time.

Bert, could you give, please, some background on when and where you were born, your education, and your first employment?

I was born 18th May 1919. My education was mainly in the Norwood area. Then finishing at the Norwood Central School - in those days that was a version between primary school and high school - in grade nine.

I left school, as it was possible in those days to do so, about a week before the age of fourteen, to start employment. I started as a messenger boy, earning ten shillings a week, working fifty-two hours a week. I left that job some six months later, joined a paint firm, and then over a period of time improved my education with various courses at night school. I was with that firm then until I joined the army.

In the first few months of the 1939-45 war there was a call-up of all young men who turned the age of twenty-one during 1940. The first intake was for those people who joined twenty-one between January 1st and June 30th 1940. And, as my birthday, twenty-first birthday, would be in May, I went into the army, and then into camp in January 1940. It was, from memory, a three-month camp, but I'm a little unsure now of the dates and circumstances.

After the camp, well then I was, in effect, drafted to the - member of this Militia battalion, it was the 43rd Militia. And that was - went on until early August 1940, when, after the so-called 'phoney war' in France, and the call for far more people to join the AIF, I enlisted in the AIF.

What did you hope to become, before war intervened?

Well I don't - in those days most people were interested to get a job. You could appreciate, this was not long after the depression, and so there - I think the great majority didn't have any particular ambition to attain a certain standard, or status, in the community, but rather to get a job, and move on from there, and improve oneself. And so, at the time of enlistments, I was a salesman, but, as I have mentioned, I was - well, being involved in various courses of education. So, (laughs), I don't know quite where I would have finished up, quite frankly.

(5.00) Did you have any religious views on enlistment?

No strong religious views. I had been baptised into the Church of England, but, largely because of locality circumstances, had attended a number of Methodist Sunday schools, but without any particular strong convictions.

Any political convictions?

No.

Had you travelled much within the state, or beyond?

No. No, that's - you must appreciate that this was at a time when wages were very small, and it was quite an event to be able to purchase a pushbike to get around. (Laughs).

And what were your main leisure activities?

Cycling. I did become a professional racing cyclist, I would say from probably '36, yes. I first started racing in 1936. And training for professional racing cycling was such that it took up all leisure time.

Were you married at the time?

No, oh no, no. You see in 19... I turned twenty-one in May 1940. Mmm.

I was wondering, did you have any sense of yourself as a dual allegiance, as both a British and Australian subject, or did you see yourself as just an Australian?

I saw myself as an Australian, but with a strong link to England, because in those days, and I'm talking about the - back to my schooldays in the '30s, we were inculcated with the whole viewpoint of our involvement as members of the British Empire. And in the - at the commencement of the war I had no strong thoughts of joining the army, or certainly no wishes to join the army, and things didn't really, well, bite, or come home to me, as they did with many, many others, when immediately following the fall of France things did look so ominous in Europe.

Did you have a family background in the first AIF?

Yes, my father was in the first AIF. As it happened, by pure coincidence, I ultimately joined the same company, in the same battalion as he was in. He was in Don Company of the 1/27th. But that was a pure coincidence, not by any action on my part whatsoever.

But he had been gassed during the war. I don't think very badly, but certainly had been gassed. He just didn't - he never spoke of his wartime experiences, and never gave us any comment in favour, or, for that matter, even against it.

Did you though grow up with a tradition of the first AIF at all?

I think there was in the background. Although there wasn't much reading matter, and my father never had their own 1/27th war history, yet I think all youngsters at that time, all Australian youngsters, had quite a fair grasp of Australia's involvement in the first world war, not only with Gallipoli, but with of course France.

And you said you eventually joined the Militia?

Mmm.

But now what were your reasons for joining at that time?

Well when we were drafted, when we were called up, and went into camp, we weren't given a choice. (Laughs). We - after doing our initial three months, as I think it was, approximately three months training, we then were actually drafted immediately into a Militia unit. There was no ifs, ands, or buts. And I would have, and could have, stopped in the - that unit for the rest of the war, if I'd so desired. And so that was, say, take it from approximately March/April of 1940, until I joined up.

And at the time of the overthrow of France, I, and many others, tried to get into the air force. But at that time the air force had closed all enlistments, they were getting far more applicants than they could possibly handle, and so, with a certain amount of frustration, that I, and many others like me, then joined up the AIF.

(10.00) Can you remember your reaction to Menzies' announcement on 3rd September 1939, of the declaration of war?

No. No, that - it was something that the - well the scene had been set with the information coming through from newspapers, far more so than radio, or the wireless as it was called in those days, but the - the scene had been set, as far as the newspapers were concerned, that war was virtually inevitable. So we were not shocked, or astounded, or amazed, it was just simply accepted as a - well one more step in the developments of that time.

Could you go over again when and where you enlisted?

I enlisted in Adelaide. It was probably a week after I had tried to get in the air force, and I know I went to some trouble trying to get into the air force. (Laughs). Under different listings, trade listings, and realised that there was no - just no chance of that happening in the foreseeable future. And, with the position in France worsening day by day, according to the news, I then decided to join the AIF.

But you said your reasons for enlisting previously, you said were - were far more that really that was it ...

Yes.

... for you. But did you enlist with a group of people, or on your own?

No, purely as - on my own. I had no-one in this draft that I remember enlisting with, there was no other individual that I knew of at the time.

Did your family support your decision to enlist?

At that time I was living with my mother. And I'm sure she had grave reservations, but there was no - there was an acquiescence, rather than agreement. Certainly there was no antagonism.

What about your employer?

I think that at that stage a lot of employers realised that this was going to happen with the greater number of their employees within a certain age limit and with certain physical capabilities.

Did you, or can you remember, if you expected to return to the same job after the war, or did you in some way think that you may go in a different direction?

No, I just assumed that I would return, not realising just how long it would be before war's end, and it was just something that there was no great thought given to. Just an assumption that you would finish up back in the same firm, with possibly much the same sort of job activity.

Did you have any type of send off at all, before you went?

Not that I can recall. No, no, I'm sure that there wasn't.

And when you enlisted did you for any reason have to falsify any of the information on the papers?

No. Because you see at that time I was a serving member of this Militia unit, and so it was purely a matter of leaving that unit and moving over to the AIF.

One thing I haven't mentioned, of some possible ... some interest, my younger brother, he had been a merchant seaman, this was before the war, and so in January 1940 - and he would then have been of the age of nineteen - he joined a British merchant ship, here at Port Adelaide, and left for overseas.

Well by August 1940, you were part of the 2/27th Battalion?

Yes. Yes. On enlistment in the AIF you were just drafted into the army as such, with no specific unit. You wouldn't have known at that stage whether you were going into army, artillery, or any of the many, many specialist units, such as, say, a petrol company. And it just happened that along the line, it was at a time when they must have been drafting a certain number of people to be with the second reinforcements of the 2/27th Battalion, that I just went into it.

As just a footnote there: the first twenty - first reinforcements of all infantry units are accepted, and are trained with the unit as a whole, and this is to allow for a certain wastage of the units right in the very initial stages. And so the first reinforcements left with the unit for overseas, and the second reinforcements went later, and then of course there were many, many different groups of reinforcements from then onwards, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, and so on.

(15.00) Well when you became a part of the 2/27th, did that link with your father's first world war experience become evident, and did you know it was a purely South Australian unit?

Oh yes. There was no question of it that when I was drafted into the 2/27th, 2nd reinforcements, I knew then that - and only at that time - that I would be entering the same unit that my father had fought in in world war one. And it was only when I joined the unit at Dimra in Palestine, in April 1941 did I know - well it was pure coincidence I was drafted into Don Company.

So you missed out on all those early training exercises at Woodside with the battalion did you?

Yes. But, if I may go back though, there had been ... I had been in camp before they were, about - because I had had three months camp as a member of a Militia unit, when I was drafted in January 1940. And so though the original members of the 2/27th were those who enlisted in the AIF - (clears throat), excuse me - in May 1940. So I was in the army before they were, but I was in the Militia unit.

Now when you were training with the militia unit at Woodside did - was there any specific enemy in mind that you would be fighting?

No. No. It was just something that you were called up, and you were just simply prepared to, well, await developments.

Now when you were shipped to the Middle East did you also go onboard the *Mauretania*?

Yes.

Right, so you were the same as the first?

Yes, that's right.

First shipment?

Yes. They left in October, and I left in January.

Did you too have onboard training as you went?

To a very limited degree. The way they packed people onto troopships there was an extreme limitation on what training could be done. A certain amount of PT and things, physical training, things like that.

Were there competitions and other sports onboard at the time too?

Extremely limited, from my memory. Mmm.

Did you go on the *Mauretania* to Bombay, and then on to the Middle East?

Yes. To Bombay, and then it was a different ship from Bombay. I think in my case it was the *New Holland*. I wouldn't be definite on that, but in any case it was a Dutch vessel.

Did you spend any time at all in India?

Yes. I think this happened with most of the Australian infantry units. They went to Bombay, and then were entrained at - for - to go up to a place called Deolali - D-E-O-L-A-L-I, about, approximately 100 miles inland from Bombay. The - the original unit, the first, the 27th unit, they spent, I think, a week there. And I think our particular group spent about ten days there.

And were there other Australian units there at the same time?

Not to my knowledge, but it was a very, very big camp, but mainly occupied by British troops, and it is possible there could have been other Australians of which I wasn't aware.

Were there Indian units there as well?

Not to my knowledge.

How did you get on with the British at Deolali?

Well we had a very (laughs) poor opinion of them. And I think this was largely because it was the first occasion we had met British troops en masse. And, no, we - well there was no great - there was no antagonism, there was no antagonism as such as that, but my own personal impression was that they seemed to be rather a poor lot. (Laughs).

Did you get the chance to travel much in India, and collect souvenirs or anything?

No. I was fortunate, inasmuch as I did get leave down to Bombay, and I spent a very interesting day at Bombay. But that was all.

How did you think the local Indians related to the Australian soldiers?

Well they had very little contact with them, and strangely enough it was mainly the children. And of course they hung around in their droves. And - but really things are a little bit vague for me there on that score.

(20.00) So after some initial training you moved on to Palestine. And what were your opinions of the Arabs and Jews that you may have met at that time?

Well at that particular time I had very little contact, or virtually no contact, with Jews. And only a limited number of Arabs, because of the fact that we were involved in training, and shortly afterwards left for Egypt, and so I didn't have enough contact to form any strong opinions.

Now by June 1941, you were brought into action in Syria?

Yes. Well now before that happened though we did return from Egypt, and we went up to a kibbutz, a Jewish kibbutz, in northern Palestine, and at that stage I formed, and I'm sure this applied with most of our people, formed quite an affinity with the Jews, because we felt that they were really a fine type of people. Person. And these were in the main quite young Jews and Jewesses, and they really did appeal to us. And I think at that time we started to get stronger views in favour of the Jews as, and to some extent against the Arabs. Not strong views against the Arabs, but yet we certainly would have favoured the Jews as compared to the Arabs.

Coming back to the actual beginning of the Syrian campaign, that campaign would have been your first taste of action I suppose?

Yes, although in Egypt we had been subjected to aerial bombardment, and we were living in an - or camped - in an area where we did get casualties from mines. What had happened at Mersa Matruh, the Egyptian troops had laid minefields, the British had laid minefields, and over a period of time there was that much confusion, and maps had been lost, that we were actually living in a gigantic minefield. And so there we did incur casualties. And as a matter of fact I was nearby when we had our first casualty. And it was a poor chap that's - I know we buried him next day, and then it was another further two days before we found his boot and his foot, they'd been blown so far away from where he had gone up.

So the first casualty was actually from a mine?

From a mine. At Mersa Matruh.

Well moving on to Syria again, what are your most vivid memories of those actions in Syria?

Strange as it may seem, the heat. This was in June, and we struck an extremely hot period, and at times a shortage of water. But - and possibly this is more in retrospect than anything else - it was like a cowboys and Indians sort of a campaign, as compared to what we encountered later in New Guinea. That sounds a hopeless exaggeration, but yet I think it might put it in some sense of perspective.

In - what do you mean, that - was it much more of a - a gentleman's war, is that what you're trying to say?

Partly. And partly it was the nature of it, that we were split into small groups all the time. We were - everything was moving, go, go, go. There was no trench warfare, there was no point of real fortifications, at least from our side. There was with - at times attacking the French. But somehow or other - well I could almost relate it to one's idea, as formed from the *Boy's Own Annual*. Now I don't think I've conveyed that too clearly, but I've tried to, well give it to you in a - in a brief comment about a - cowboys and Indians.

Were you surprised that you were actually fighting the Vichy French, and was the fighting very vicious at times?

No, we weren't surprised, because we'd had some degree of briefing as to what was underway. That the - there was the danger of the Germans, after the Greece and Crete campaigns, that they would attack in Lebanon or Syria, and would come down through Palestine to reach the Suez Canal. So we quite understood why we were going into Syria, although we did expect that at virtually any time the Germans could have landed troops, and started a major campaign.

(25.00) Was much of the fighting vicious in Syria?

Well it was hectic. Put it this way the - the first action that I was involved in was crossing the Latani, and attacking a very strongly fortified area on the north bank of the Latani. And, quite candidly, if the French had been prepared to stand and fight, it could have been an extremely bad show.

But I think that there was so much confusion involved, and one thing which became very apparent, and was proved time and time again, that when there was any suggestion of the French being outflanked and encircled, well then they would hastily retreat. And it was this score of creating the confusion, sometimes quite inadvertently, and some ... (laughs), and without any obvious military strategy involved, but just simply a matter of this encirclement, or attempted encirclement, and outflanking, that caused them to retreat from positions that they should never have retreated from. They could have held the campaign up far longer than they did, and they could have caused far greater casualties.

> In the writings you were showing me before the interview, you were - you wrote one anecdote, if you like, or an experience, that you were involved in, would you recount that for me?

Mmm. Yes. Well I don't know, I'll give it in a correct order, but I might mention that just prior to crossing the border we were informed that the only major physical barrier on the route up to Beirut was the Latani River, because there was only the one bridge over the river, and it had been arranged that a unit would move ahead and capture that bridge to save the French blowing it up. Well when we got to near the river we were informed that the bridge had been blown. And as it happened it - the French had left behind a small boat, a folding rowing-boat, and they'd left that behind on the north bank. And during the day the - a member of the 2/16th Battalion, which had arrived at the river before the 2/27th, had swum across the river, and, although wounded, he'd been able to get a rope onto the - this boat, and then, with the help of some others, was able to get it back to the southern bank.

Well during the night Don Company crossed this river, only six at a time, and - to get across. Now the French could have easily stopped us in our tracks at that stage if they had stopped on that - right on the northern bank, instead of retreating it back a little way away from the bank.

But - there was quite a lot of action that night, but with the - the time it took Don Company to go across this river, (laughs), six at a time, and the boat was being hauled backwards and forwards with this rope, well the time had lapsed as far as the artillery barrage. And during one of the trips across we had got a telephone wire across.

Well, to give you some idea of the circumstances of the night, it is in the official war history that that telephone wire was cut twenty-eight times during the night, this was ....

END TAPE ONE, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

> This is Side B of Tape One. Bert Ward talking with Rob Linn, on 8th March 1990, for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive, about the 2/27th Battalion.
>
> Bert, you were recounting an incident on the night that the Latani River was crossed?

Yes. I'd mentioned that the telephone wire had been cut no less than twenty-eight times during the course of the night. So this would give some indication of what was happening with the artillery fire, machine-gun fire, and of course possibly in that there might have been just a few breakages by misadventure.

Well, in any case, the Don Company were attacking the French Army barracks, and quite a number of fortifications. Well in the confusion of the night over - because of the very rough terrain, and the barbed wire entanglements, quite a number of the people started to get split up, and lose contact with each other.

And I was in a group of five, on the absolutely extreme right hand side. We had proceeded far too great a distance before we started to turn left in an encircling operation. And as it happened we got behind some French troops. We had no idea how many there were, or what sort of a fortification they were in, but they certainly sent over some thousands of rounds, which went over our heads. By that time we realised we were in strife, and we had our heads well and truly down.

And ultimately we could hear them retreating, and we could only assume that they thought they were hopelessly outflanked by a very large group of Australians. And so off they went. And we assumed, possibly rightly or wrongly, that the way they were firing, because they were going over our - our heads, that they would have lot of their fire would have finished up in some of their troops in their rear positions. Which would have added to the overall confusion of the night. And caused far more trouble than they could have ever imagined amongst themselves. (Laughs).

Well anyway, the five of us, gradually we got split up to the degree we were wandering around quite individually. And it was just before dawn, when I was on my own, that I noticed a person, in the very dim light, extremely dim starlight, a person poking his head out, and climbing out of a dugout. I immediately put my rifle and bayonet down at his throat. And I got a - a terrific outpouring of words of - and - in a definitely a non-French accent, but of course that didn't mean anything, but the only words that I could understood was, 'I've got your major with me'.

And so this chap gets up onto the top of the dugout, and then immediately afterwards he was followed by our company major. Who stood on the other side of my prisoner. And they

started talking about what they would do about getting a Frenchman out of the dugout, a Frenchman with a broken leg.

And I thought to myself, 'Well what the heck? He's not going anywhere, he's got a broken leg, so, (laughs), let's get on with it, let's get - do something else. And what should I do with my prisoner?' And they - and my company major never said a word to me, and I'm just getting a little bit peeved, thinking, 'Well I've rescued him, after he's been taken prisoner of war'.

And as it happened the - just at that stage the dawn was breaking, and I realised that this chap, my prisoner, he had a warrant officer's insignia on his shirtsleeve. And so I thought, 'What on earth have I struck, this can't be a Frenchman'. (Laughs). So I just lowered my bayonet - rifle and bayonet - and I quietly slipped away into the dawn. And then I met up with some of our other fellows.

(5.00) And it was afterwards that I found what had happened was that a unit that had been deputised or delegated to capture the bridge was a Scottish commando unit. Two hundred men had been landed that far south of the river that they had landed in an area which had - occupied by the 2/14th Battalion AIF troops, a Victorian battalion. And if it hadn't been for the score that they realised at the last moment that what they were listening to was Australian language, and not French, that there could have been quite a good fight.

And the other 200 men had been landed that far north of the river that they had been almost all been captured or killed. And the - amongst the people who were captured was their regimental sergeant-major. And, as it happened, when the rest of Don Company had been involved in their - in the fighting, after us - the five of us had been lost - they had captured the French who had captured these Scottish commandos and had released them. And so amongst the Scottish commandos was their regimental sergeant-major who had unwittingly, as far as I was concerned, become my prisoner.

So anyway I faded out into the dark - into the dawn - and it was quite some years before I told our company major of just what part I had played that morning, and how I thought I had rescued him from captivity, but it wasn't the case at all.

> After the fighting in Syria finished you were given some duties still in Syria, what later became Lebanon.

Mmm.

> Now much of what we know about that time, the Australian soldiers, particularly the 2/27th, had a jolly good time?

Well I think that that's a little bit of a broad statement. First of all we went to a place called Hammana. This had been a big ammunition dump, and an army barracks area for the French in the mountains due east of Beirut. And while there, although we did get leave to places such as Beirut, and to Damascus, a lot of the time was taken up with, well, guard duty, and a certain amount in training. So it wasn't all beer and skittles.

Virtually everyone - well I'm sure everyone did ultimately get at least one day's leave in Beirut. But ... or two days leave in Damascus. But to get two days leave, as far as the Damascus trip was concerned, you certainly had to have enough money in your paybook, so that they knew that you wouldn't be well and truly adrift while you were on leave.

And later on we went up to Tripoli, and at that stage - and this was getting into possibly October ... November, November, that's right November. Then those who were - again, had enough money in their paybook, to prove that they could afford to do it, were - had the option of going in what in effect was a lottery for leave for - to Jerusalem.

And so first of all if you didn't have enough money you - you never even got your - your name in the hat. And I was fortunate enough to be one of those who did get a week's leave in Jerusalem, but this was a case of being the minority, there weren't that many who would get that leave.

And what was that week's leave in Jerusalem like for you?

It was extremely interesting. First of all it was a matter of going down to Haifa. Camped there overnight. I lost a lot of my money in a nightclub that night, so that had some bearing on the range of activities for the rest of the week. Then on ....

Would you be willing to admit how you lost the money?

Just simply paying for drinks. The ... there was a group of six Australians entered a nightclub, and immediately we were joined, each one of us, with a Jewish hostess, and so of course it was our obligation to buy them drinks for the night. And so I was the first one to buy a round of drinks, and that's what dented my (laughs), dented my wallet. (Laughs). There was no hanky-panky, I never had enough money for that. (Laughs).

(10.00)Then, as far as Jerusalem was concerned, I was fortunate inasmuch as joining up with a few other of the Australians down there. We did get around by taxi, down to Jericho and the Dead Sea. Bethlehem of course, and places of interest in Jerusalem. And then, rather ill-advisedly, I decided to go up to Nazareth, to see a friend of mine who was in the 2/9th AGH.

Because of my limited knowledge of local circumstances that I organised to go by bus from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, connect up another bus from Tel Aviv to Haifa, and then connect with another bus from Haifa to Nazareth. And because of the - well lack of communication, or adequate communication, I didn't realise the time factor was such that I had no hope of getting back to Jerusalem that night. If I had known a bit more I could have taken up a direct bus through - an Arab bus, not a Jewish bus - from Jerusalem through to Nablus and from then on to Nazareth, which - I could have made the trip easier.

So in any case, when I got to Nazareth, and knowing that the draft was scheduled to leave Jerusalem next day to go back to Syria, and if I didn't get back to Jerusalem I could have been AWOL, I had to hire a taxi to go from Nazareth to Jerusalem, and this then really emptied my wallet, this taxi fare from Nazareth to Jerusalem.

And, as it happened, the next day the draft movement was cancelled, I was marooned in Jerusalem without the proverbial feather to fly, and so my last two days in Jerusalem was left walking around the place. Because I couldn't have afforded to do anything, but at least I had bed and breakfast supplied from the army hostel, and so I didn't starve. But it was, well, a little different ending to what I would have wished.

But that whole time of leave in Jerusalem had quite a great impact on you?

Yes, I think I - and particularly the last two days, because of lack of money - I think I saw every tomb, temple, church, monument, that one could have ever expected to see in Jerusalem. I must admit on the religious angle I was a fairly omnivorous reader, and I think that I was possibly clued up a little more than most of our chaps on the historical side, the religious background side. But I was disappointed and disillusioned to quite some degree by the commercialism that I encountered in Jerusalem. And I must admit there was the - when the first thoughts entered my head on the sphere of things, as far as relating Christianity, Mohammedan religion - Muslim religion - and of course the Jews - the Jewish religion - and I - I think I had a far greater understanding, a tolerance, of other religions from that time on.

After that time the battalion was shipped back to Australia via a number of different routes.

Mmm.

And training began at Caloundra in March, 1942.

Yes.

Were you trained effectively in jungle fighting methods at all?

Nothing. None whatsoever. There was nothing involved as far as jungle training. The circumstances of Caloundra, we were split in the main into very small sectional groups of possibly ten men, and we were on beach guard patrol. And when we weren't doing that it was a life of - like outback camping. It was a holiday type of activity in the main. And when we weren't doing that we seemed to be walking and marching through vast swamp areas at the back of the sand dunes. And so that it was as far divorced from jungle as one could possibly ever imagine it.

(15.00) Were you given any information on Japanese tactics?

If so, to a very, very limited degree. There was some information that was passed on, but it was in the most broad details. Nothing which would have fitted anyone or given them much information. The most interesting aspect of it was the fact of the encircling activities the Japanese employed in Malaysia, which we in - actually had earlier employed ourselves in Syria.

In early August 1942 the battalion shipped to New Guinea.

Mmm.

> And when you were eventually brought up to the end of the Kokoda track the first thing you probably would have seen were members of the 39th and 53rd Militia in retreat. Now what did you think of the Militia at that time, and particularly the men you saw?

Well - in case there's any confusion, that was actually at the start of the Kokoda Trail, right. Well we didn't see them that first day, but we did see them from the second, third, and the later days. And my initial reaction was the age of them. They all appeared so young. Presumably they had to be nineteen, although many of them certainly looked much younger than that. And at this stage, well I was only twenty-two, so I was no old man (laughs). But all these youngsters, and they looked so terribly young, that - and - well there was no antagonism, and there was no thought as far as I was concerned, or I think many of us were concerned, about, well, why were they retreating, but rather a sympathy for them. They looked so bedraggled, so lacking in morale, that one could feel that sympathy, rather than anything else.

> Well at that point what was the morale like in the 2/27th itself?

Oh quite good. We didn't know what was ahead of us of course. (Laughs). But, no, look we had a job to do, and it is something which most civilians would never understand, the *esprit de corps* which is inculcated in people, in members of an infantry battalion. And particularly there was that - a high degree of spirit. The high morale of a unit which had actually been involved in active combat.

> Well that morale, how did it fare under the conditions that you actually found along the trail, and at Efogi? What were the difficulties that you faced?

Well if it wasn't for the morale it - there would have been a terrific number of people would never have been able to endure the conditions to have got up the trail.

It was a score that we were all very strong physically. Extremely strong. As you've possibly heard from other people, prior to this time it was thought that white men could never carry heavy burdens over these mountains. And here we were loaded up with a lot of gear, and in my case, I was a Bren gunner, and so I carried extra ammunition, and although a Bren gun is passed backwards and forwards for everyone to take a turn at carrying it, the Bren gunner copped the major portion of it. He carried it far longer, and far more often than any other person. And so I know that the physical difficulties of just simply getting up the trail.

And one occasion - and I think this was at Loribaiwa, where it's a little native village, and a village is only a collection of a dozen native huts, it was right at the top of a crest. Presumably the natives had built it there for their own protection purposes. And to make the last 100, 200 yards to get to this little village was so difficult that a couple of our older members just couldn't make that last bit to get up to that village that night. And they just simply slept in the mud where they were and rejoined us next morning. And yet, 100/200 yards up, there was a bit of hot - a hot meal available for us.

(20.00) Now, I think that as much as anything, indicates the terrific roughness of the terrain, the energy-sapping difficulty. And it was something that you could force yourself on, hour after hour of marching, and during the day, in the early afternoon, the heat would sap your energy. Particularly when we were going through kunai patches.

Because the trail, it varied. Sometimes you'd be through real jungle. Then you'd be crossing a creek. And then you'd be going through a kunai patch, and when you were going through the kunai patch, with the kunai grass six to eight feet high each side of you, it seemed to be like going through a little sauna bath.

And I could imagine that unless there was that spirit - well, you were going to hang on. You weren't going to let go, you'd continue while other people kept going. Or people just simply would have laid down, and wouldn't have been able to continue.

> Weren't there difficulties with getting ammunition and food in, and the wounded out?

Well this of course was before the - before the fighting started as far as we were concerned. We carried all our own ammunition at that stage. The food was dropped at a place called Nauru - N-A-U-R-U - the 'biscuit bombers' came over.

In those days it wasn't a matter of food being dropped with small parachutes, it was just simply that the people in the planes would shovel out the foodstuffs, cartons, boxes, by just simply shovelling them out by their - with their feet, into just simply as low altitude as possible. And at first we didn't take that much thought of this, because they had to try to land the - all the - this gear, as - over the top of this little village, so it wouldn't be lost in the surrounding jungle.

And anyway the bully beef was coming down, and these tins of bully beef, they weighed three-quarters of a pound, and they were coming down in a shower such as - a golden shower, because of the colour of the tins of bully beef. And after the first lot - first plane went over, and this shower came down, we started to realise that these tins were going through the thatched roofs of these native huts, and landing in the ground, and a couple of our fellows got hit. And even if - when they hit the ground, or hit any part of the huts they would ricochet off, and really started to put the wind up us, and so we would rush backwards and forwards, according to where these showers of the tins of bully beef were coming down. And of course also at the same time there were some cartons of biscuits coming down. So it certainly wasn't a very well-planned sort of an operation, (laughs), but they - well they had to get the gear there somehow.

And it was later that they were able to land gear, but this was much later in the campaign. Before they were using a dry lake up at Myola, where they could drop it down in a designated dropping area, where they were able to recover, well, say the greater proportion of what was dropped. Up till that time it was only the - well I suppose overall a minor proportion of what was dropped from the planes was ever retrieved and used.

> What about the fighting say at a place like Efogi, what was the nature of action, once ...?

Well you've got to understand that different companies, different platoons have a different slant on the fighting, because they can only relate to their own activity. And with almost all forms of warfare you find that they are section activities, and platoon activities.

Now Don Company were held in reserve in the very earliest stage, and then they were on the right flank and then when the initial fighting started ... and so we weren't involved in the first day.

Then we were - took over as the nearest platoon to the company, and then the nearest platoon to the Japanese, as the retreat was arranged, and we would leapfrog back. A section would hold the line, well so-called line, a so-called area, and then it would be relieved, and this would happen one after the other of sections, platoons, companies, retreating back.

(25.0)) And at one stage I know that I was the last person left between the Japs and (laughs), and Port Moresby. And I hurriedly dug a few inches of earth alongside the track. And it was one of the rare areas that I had a view of about 150 yards down the track, when ... I was there with my Bren gun. And the Japs had been mauled during the morning, as they were - had been attacking on what was our left flank, their right flank - had been mauled very badly. And so I think they were - had stopped to regroup, and to test what our defences were. Just how things were. Because suddenly out of the side of the track came a Jap, and he ran down the track away from me, and I followed him with a burst of machine-gun fire. And then he dived off the side of the track, into the scrub, or into the kunai, and the jungle. And I can only assume that he had been delegated by some officer to find out if we were still in that particular area, and he was the bunny to test what he could - what fire he could draw.

Well the only fire he drew was mine, the Bren gun, but much as I might have wished otherwise, I don't think I hit him, although I sent enough after him.

Well after that action there was a brigade parade at Koitaki.

Mmm.

Would you remember the circumstances of that brigade?

No. As it happens I wasn't on that parade. I can't recall the details just why, but I was back in camp. There's always someone delegated to do different jobs, and so all I know is from hearsay, when the other chaps came back that - late that afternoon or early evening.

Were they incensed when they came back?

Confused. They couldn't make sense of it. Well incensed may have been with some people, hopelessly confused with others. It was almost as if they hadn't heard right, they'd misunderstood something, or something had been completely distorted, and that's the only way that I could put it to you. Naturally enough, not being there myself, I finished up even more confused than they were.

But is what was known that Blamey had said something that tended to be ...?

Was accepted as derogatory. Accepted by virtually everyone there. And although afterwards there was definite attempts to whitewash it, and different versions were given out I don't know whether you have read the biography of Brigadier Dougherty, some of his staff claim that what was said was completely different from what most people say that they heard, and clearly heard. But I think it was a most gross misjudgement on the part of Blamey. How much was lack of communication, how much was arrogance, and ignorance, and pig-headedness on his part, well of course it would be beyond me, as an ordinary soldier to comment.

Did it give you personally though some qualms about the superiors?

Oh yes. Well actually we all had most definite qualms long before then. Once we realised that the Japanese force was so much greater than what we had been led to believe. And - well of course later on it was certainly reliably estimated the Japs outnumbered us by at least five to one.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Rob Linn on 8th March 1990, for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive, about 2/27th Battalion.

Bert, you were just talking about attitudes towards the high command, and that you as an individual, and other soldiers, knew that they'd already got the Japanese force wrong - did this continue through the New Guinea campaign, this sense of them not getting it right?

Yes. Well we, as ordinary soldiers, thought, well, it would have been logical to have waited until the Japs got towards Port Moresby. You - it was impossible to hold any sort of a line in the mountains. Because, whether it's in the desert or whether it's in the jungle, lines don't mean a thing. This is not like the trench warfare of world war one, because people can outflank you. There's - it's no different from a naval operation in that respect, as to how people can move around.

And so, if the forces had been held much nearer Port Moresby, well then the Japs would have had all the logistic problems: the supply problems of ammunition and foodstuffs getting towards that area. And they could have been defeated with far fewer casualties nearer Port Moresby than what was happening along the trail. And so we had a very poor opinion of the strategy, and the intelligence of all top brass at that stage. And of course this was reinforced once we got to Gona.

Well what was the - your path in getting to Gona, were - were you part of Chaforce?

No. No. As it happened that - after returning to Port Moresby I went down with malaria, and so I was in hospital for a few days, and then to convalescent camp for a few days. Quickly

went back to the unit. But they did select people whom they believed was the strongest physically at that time for Chaforce. And in one respect I was fortunate that I wasn't able to go. So I wasn't in Chaforce.

We left by plane from Port Moresby, flew to an aerodrome that had been crudely prepared at a - at Popondetta. This preparation was no more or less than chopping a big area of kunai grass, and making an open clearing. And from there we marched to Soputa. Which was at the junction of the tracks leading out to Gona, Sanananda, and Buna.

And that night, at - or that afternoon - at Sanananda the whole area was bombed, and this was when the - quite a number of the hospital group were killed in the bombing at Sanananda. The Japanese did land bombs right at the ... the hospital was only a matter of tents, but there were large Red Cross emblems there of course. How much that was deliberate, or whether it was just the misadventure of bombing, well I wouldn't be able to comment on.

Then we went to Gona, arrived there on 28th, and without any opportunity of checking the area in any way at all we were thrown in on the morning of 29th. Incurred very, very heavy casualties, because we couldn't see where on earth the Japanese were entrenched. Couldn't check any aspect of it at all, we just simply were told to proceed - my particular platoon anyway - over completely open ground where the Japanese had burnt the kunai, made what was virtually an open area with no cover at all, except the last few inches, it was right down in the ground, but where we were subject of course to sniping from the palm trees. So there was really no cover, except from machine-gun fire.

(5.00) Well we incurred heavy casualties, went back, withdrew, that night. And then started again, another attack over the same open ground next morning. And I was wounded. Able to crawl back to the regimental aid post. Because I was completely paralysed in the initial stages but then, as I got movement back into my arms, I was able to crawl on my arms - my elbows - back to the aid post. Got bandaged, and during this time I was getting some movement back in my legs, and so it was a case of anyone who could walk, or could hobble, just got out the best way they could back to a casualty clearing station, then to the field ambulance.

I was a Bren gunner, and there are thirty-six Bren guns in a battalion. I was told later, but of course I've got no idea if it was - the accuracy of it, but I was told later by one of the regimental aid post people that everyone who was one of the machine ... Bren gunners was either killed or wounded, that will give you some idea. The Japs did concentrate on anyone with a - well, with a Bren gun, or with a Tommy gun.

And so probably I had pretty little hope there anyway of missing out, of getting hit somewhere or other. And that was the first time in my life, that morning, I knew if we made that attack over that same ground, it was a case of knowing that you had to be hit, there was no possibility of getting through.

But one still went ahead. And I think this is so different from what one would see in some of these rather crazy American war films. You were given a job, you was expected to carry it out, and that's all there was to it.

Did it seem astounding to you at the time that such orders had come?

Look, it was, because we knew enough, had heard enough, to realise that we had the Japs bottled up, in a comparatively small area. Now they could have been bombed, or they could have been just simply held there, to die of starvation, or to run out of ammunition. Now one or the other of these things could have so easily have happened. And yet we were being sent in where we had no hope, because we couldn't even see where all this fire was coming from. Because of the nature of the trenches they had dug, the dugouts they had, the machine-gun posts, they were all cleverly built and disguised. All you were ever aware of, this terrific hail of fire. Where it was like being attacked by about 100 swarms of bees. (Laughs). And so this is where it came in, that you - you just knew the chances of getting from point A to your objective was just not on.

Did many men of your platoon go down?

Oh yes. Yes. Some indication of it, and it is in our war history, there were 777 men landed at Port Moresby in August, and the full unit strength in January was seventy. Seventy out of 777.

Your wound was quite severe, Bert?

Oh yes, yes, well the initial stage that I was completely paralysed. Completely. Never had the slightest movement. But then I got movement back in my arms, and then in my legs. And - although one leg took quite a while. And then after that - of course when they operated, and took the splinters of bone out of my brain, and the blood clot, that must have cleared a lot of it. And the only effect that I, which I did have for some years, that I couldn't wriggle the toes on one of my feet as much as I could on the other. And that was for some years, but I couldn't even tell you which leg - which foot that was now. But otherwise, as far as I'm concerned, I think I'm normal, and don't have any obvious, or specific, brain damage.

(10.00) After hospitalisation, you were eventually discharged in October 1943.

Mmm. Yes.

How long after that was it before you began a civilian job again?

Only a matter of weeks. I was in very poor health, because, being in poor health after being wounded, I got a recurrence of malaria, and that was very debilitating. And that's what kept me - my health down at a pretty poor level. And it was a combination of those two factors. And it took me quite a while. From memory I had at least a dozen attacks of malaria over a period of time. This was while I was in hospital, while I was in different convalescent camps, and then after I was discharged. And - but they gradually became less and less in severity.

Was your post-war job different from your pre-war job?

No. Went back to virtually the same activity. And I think that at that time I was so, well, happy to be alive, and in some reasonable health, not suffering some extreme disability, that I think that the security of it had some bearing on my attitudes, and where I didn't take enough

steps at that time to look for a different range of activities, and to, well, get out of that particular area of work.

So you did have some problems returning to employment, in your mind at least?

Oh, to some degree. I did feel it rather difficult to settle down into a, well not in those days nine to five, it was eight to half past five, (laughs), job. But nowhere near as bad as what many people experienced.

And were you married at that time?

No. No, I didn't get married until 1948, by which time my health was pretty well back to normal, yes.

What were the main changes you noticed in Australia on your return?

I - all I could be really sure of was that the greater number of people weren't truly aware of the seriousness of the war, and the circumstances. Of course this is back in '43, '44, when it was still possible, not probable, but it was still barely possible that Japan could have lodged an invasion, or where far more Australian troops could have been lost.

And do you think there was any resentment from returned men towards those who didn't serve?

No. No. Look, I would say this, that at some time or other every serviceman who really saw active service, not these back line people, (laughs), but everyone in the AIF who really saw active service, at some time or other cursed the day he joined up. Now this may be because of a variety of circumstances and reasons. And so - but it was your own pride, call ego, or call it what you will, that once you had joined up, you'd volunteered, and so you were going to see it through to the best of your ability.

Did you eventually do any of the rehabilitation courses, or apply for any of the schemes that ex-servicemen could apply for?

No. No. They - if they were in existence when I was discharged in October '43, it must have been in the most embryo stage, and I can't even say that I was aware of anything that was open to me at that stage. I think this wasn't really underway until well into '45. And so I never took advantage, and of course by that time I'd settled down into a job, and so - well nothing happened as far as I was concerned.

And do you march, and go to reunions on ANZAC Day?

I didn't march for many years. This would have been, well, until possibly 1960. I think some bearing on it was the fact that - well, married, young family, two children, and as far as I was concerned my marching days were over, my army days were over.

(15.00) And it wasn't until somewhere around about the late fifties, late sixties, I was talked into going along to a reunion. Shortly after that I was almost shanghaied onto the committee of an ex-servicemen's association. And from that time onwards I became involved, I was prepared to do work, but I still didn't march, right until the time that I became president of the association. (Laughs).

And so then I started - I joined in the ANZAC Day marches. And it wasn't until then, and I was president at the time, that I even applied for my medals. Somehow or other that - I felt that it seemed so wrong that, after being awarded medals, that one had to apply for them. So it was in the 1960s before I wrote over, and asked, and obtained my medals.

And this was with the 2/27th Association, you became involved?

Yes, yes.

Did you join the RSL?

Oh yes, I joined the RSL back in 1943, immediately I was discharged. I was very well - welcomed into the RSL. I met some very, very good chaps, because I was single in those days, and so I have been a member of the RSL, a financial member, from 1943 onwards, I've never missed.

Do you consider it a fair and effective organisation in looking after the welfare of ex-servicemen?

Very strongly so. I have been involved in that, in a limited degree I must admit, but I have been involved in it, and I - but I have been very well aware of a lot of its activities, very well aware. Possibly more so than the average person, and I'm strongly in favour of everything they've done, and are doing.

And do you think successive Australian governments have treated ex-servicemen fairly?

Fairly. Not necessarily very well, but fairly. There will always be some anomalies, some tragic anomalies, but yet, in the main, I would say that it has been fair.

And when you came back the - were there troubles in reestablishing relationships with friends and family?

No. No.

And did many of your friends come to be ex-servicemen?

Yes. The point about it is that when you live together in an infantry unit, as distinct from almost all other types of units - I mean there are air force, army - air force, navy, or many units in the army - you form strong associations, because you're so close together.

And there is this feeling, and I know it may seem a little exaggerated, but your life depended on the people with you, and you'd form bonds which were even stronger than family relationships. And so that carried over, and I know that it is with our association, there's extremely little talking of war years, and war year circumstances, but there's a relationship because you don't have to talk about those sort of things. They encountered the same conditions as you did, they are aware of all those circumstances, and somehow or other it brought about a degree of - an affinity, which is - well all I can say, has carried on from the 1940s right until now.

Well did your war experience leave you with any long-term disabilities or illness?

Well, as you can see, the only disability was the fact that I've been left baldheaded, I understand all my forebears had good lengths of - good growths of hair, and, (laughs), possibly I should have tried to get the Repat to have given me a toupee much earlier. (Laughs). But I learnt to live with that.

And so, no. And for some years, I must admit, the malaria gave me trouble, and I still think I may have some slight effect from that malaria, because malaria many bouts of malaria leave you with a weak spleen, and I think that it's left some little bit of a side effect there, but not to any great degree.

Are the war years still important in your memories?

Only because of my association with the people. For no other reason. I have been very happy to see that over the years that the balance of power, and the balance of fear between the superpowers has kept the world from another major war.

(20.00) Have you personally changed in your willingness to talk about the war over the years?

Yes. I feel that I can talk a little easier about it now. But not that there was any great reservations in the past, except the fact that the majority of people with whom one would come in contact, well they could never truly get on your wave length.

There are so many things that, if you didn't experience them, that you could not truly understand. And reading about them, and hearing about them, still is not quite the answer. And this is why there is that affinity with people who had the same experiences.

Well finally, Bert, what were the most important effects of the war on you?

A tolerance, a tolerance of other people's viewpoints. Because when you are living, as we did, month after month, in a group, say, of ten, eleven people, drawn from all walks of life, and gee there were some (laughs), some characters amongst them, some real hard nuts, and (laughs), and rough guys, tough guys, all sorts, well then you accepted them as individuals. And so it was more than tolerance, it was an understanding, and acceptance of them, and I feel this has helped me through life, to get along with people, to a degree that I may not have otherwise been able to do.

Thank you very much, Bert.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A.

END OF INTERVIEW.