



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number	S00940
Title	(VX3359) Fleming, Allan Percy (Major)
Interviewer	Nelson, Dr Hank
Place made	Melbourne, VIC
Date made	2 April 1990
Description	Allan Percy Fleming as a major, 2/8 Battalion and Army/Airforce Cooperation, interviewed by Hank Nelson for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-1945

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Tape Identification: This is an interview with Mr Allan Fleming on 2 April 1990. The interviewer is Hank Nelson. End of tape identification:

So whereabouts were you born?

In Melbourne. Good place.

Yes. And your father, by occupation?

Tram driver.

Whereabouts in Melbourne were you born?

In Carlton, I think, at the hospital. There was a hospital in Carlton in those days. And my father was a boy from the bush who in a family of ten, didn't get much education in the bush. Came down to Melbourne and found the first job he could get was driving a cable tram. 'Hang on, we're going round the curb.' I don't know whether you remember those days?

I remember the ...

Gripman. Yes.

... I don't remember the days but I remember reading the material about it.

Yes.

And your mother?

My mother was also a country girl, a bush girl from the same bit of bush up in north east Victoria on the King River valley which runs south from Wangaratta. King River joins the Ovens at Wangaratta. And this was well up along the valley at King Valley, Whitfield, Cheshunt, that area.

And you start off going to the local primary school.

In first - my mother and father were divorced after the war. And, for a start, I was living with my mother, where I'd been during the war, of course, in Cheshunt in north east Victoria and went to school there at the State school in the bush for - till I was about twelve. And then my father arrived with whatever it is they give to divorced couples giving possession of children and, in that beautifully even-balanced way that they had in those days, a learned judge'd decided fifty-fifty was the best way and given my sister to my mother and me to my father. So he came to collect.

Was that a one-teacher primary school, or what was it?

One teacher. One was a one-teacher but I went to one which had three teachers, by going into Whitfield, which was riding on the back of the horse with my mother because she was acting as the postwoman during the war. And quite exciting, there were three to four rivers, one

major river and three off-shoots all within about 200 yards that she had to cross over first with a horse, which was most exciting in flood-time and with me clinging to the back. And I was delivered to Whitfield to spend the week there with my aunt, the school week, and then return in the weekends.

> Was that shift to your father .... Most contemporary sociologists would think that this was a pretty traumatic thing to happen to you, was it a significant thing to you?

Yes, it was. I was used to my mother and all the surroundings, first thing. I hadn't really lived in the city since I was two which was when my father went to war and I, also, as is quite understandable I think, didn't approve of my new mother-in, my what she's called, stepmother. And well, we didn't actually fight, I just regarded her as not relevant 'cause what did she have to do with me. And so there was that sort of tension that, from the age of about twelve on.

> How do you come to get to Scotch College?

I went to Lee Street State School, North Carlton, when I came to Melbourne, where the headmaster had a reputation for, well, picking out some that he thought might make it and giving them good coaching and teaching. So I used to walk from Fitzroy to Lee Street State School, North Carlton, and Mr Empey, the headmaster, had me under his wing a bit for a couple of years and so I got what was called a State government scholarship. I think I came sixth in that for the State. I mention that only because when I got the senior scholarship later I came first, so things improved.

(5.00) And that gets you to Scotch College.

That took me to Scotch College, with all fees paid to Scotch College, yes.

> Tell me a bit about Scotch College. As you see it in your life, significant? [inaudible]

Oh, major. You can imagine, after those years in the bush I wasn't really opened up much to the world. I improved, of course, in that respect with a couple of years at Lee Street State School in Carlton. Supposedly, I don't know whether I was rough and crude or what, but I didn't feel any bumps when I moved into Scotch College. It must have been a pretty democratic sort of set up, I think. And to some extent I was fathered, or taken under the wing of, the head there, a bloke called Bill Littlejohn, who is a name in teaching history in Victoria. And I don't know that I was dressed, as I see some of the old pictures, I don't know that I was dressed as smartly as some of my colleagues at school, but I just never ever felt any discomfiture at the school.

> That's interesting in the light of what some .... What Manning Clark says about Melbourne Grammar. ...

Mm.

> ... and some others [inaudible].

Mm, yes. Well, I don't know that my manners were good, or that I'd been taught to hold the knife and fork properly, not that that concerned you if you were having pies at lunch.

Were you good at sport?

Not particularly. Well, I liked sport but, well to summarise it, I - something crude, not requiring science, was my best go at sport, and so I was always in the ruck in the football team. I got my house colours. And my best in the school team was to be captain of the second eighteen.

You set your sights on going to university, or that's a cumulative effect of just doing well at examinations?

That emerged because when I went to Scotch, when I went to Scotch the first day at the age of fourteen, or whatever it was, and even in the first year, this world was just all opening up to me. I hadn't shaped my mind up about anything. But with the encouragement of teachers 'cause mostly I was dux of the class, or second. Another bloke who, named Menhennitt, Cliff Menhennitt, who later became a judge down here and died some years back, and I were sort of neck and neck each time in the class. And so, inevitably, I, with the encouragement of teachers, yes, I began to think university-wise because they began to talk to me all about senior scholarships later on.

Tell me a little bit about Melbourne University. I realise we are heading towards the war, but ...

Mm.

So what do you do at Melbourne University?

I went, I got, rather .... My university became very mixed, meaning not top of the class and that sort of thing because although I had first place in Victoria for the closed senior scholarships, I didn't have any money and you have to live as well as go to university. So for that purpose I used the Students' Loan Fund and I think I had £100 for the first year and the second year, lined up for the second year. Bill Littlejohn had decided that I would make a good teacher and wanted me to stay on at, become a teacher at Scotch and knowing, I think, well I'm sure, knowing that help with funds or with that which caused funds, the need for funds was a good thing, made me a housemaster in the school house at Scotch College with, where another bloke named Fleming - F A Fleming who later became vice-principal - was. And so that solved my where to live and eat problem, but I found that going to university, trying to be a junior teacher and a housemaster, just was not possible to fit in in twenty-four hours. And so, in the long run I had to stop. After about some months I had to stop teaching including stopping teaching of young David Derham who I saw again during the war. He became Sir David Derham. He was Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University and who surprisingly, to me, used to always seem to get ten in English and I then I discovered his aunt, of course, was Enid Derham. Many years later I asked him about was he getting any coaching at home for these essays I gave him.

(10.00) So I moved, then had to decide to break away from teaching and used the Students' Loan Fund for a start at Melbourne University and became editor of *Farrago* there, and the editor of the Melbourne *Argus* in those days, Curthoys, was very keen on getting university

students. He'd got Alan, ... He'd got Ross Campbell, a bloke named Ross Campbell who later became well-known in the literary world, the funny literary world. And Geoff Hutton who, though a couple of years ahead of me, had also been editor of the *Scotch Collegian* which I was, also. I was editor of the *Scotch Collegian* and vice captain at school, and I was lured, offered, made an offer to go to the Melbourne *Argus* and so toward the end of the second year at university when I was editor of *Farrago* I was, I decided, considering that the repayment of £200 from the Students' Loan Fund faced me and this, unbelievable as it may seem today, haunted me with the thought that I will be the rest of my life paying this off, and I cannot, really cannot, go adding up, adding on to this. And so I took the opportunity to go to be editor of the Melbourne *Argus* and be paid, and pay off the Students' Loan Fund. A journalist's life was pretty busy then so I didn't have any time to pursue, or to make marks in the academic world from there on.

So how long does it take you to complete that degree?

I completed it all except for two subjects by the time the war started, or really, by the time, as a journalist, I moved on - quite a good offer of being assistant editor of the *Sunday Mail*, leader writer and all of the rest of it in Brisbane, and leader writer of the *Courier Mail* and such. And I left and went up there about 1938 and so by then I still had two subjects to go and it was a bit complicated to do that from Brisbane, so I went to the war minus two, BA minus two subjects. And it was a very ordinary BA. I didn't shine [inaudible], I had to scramble around, didn't shine or anything because I was doing journalism as well. And I in - I've just reminded myself from looking at some of these dates. In 1945, I must have started somehow at the end of '44 .... Anyhow, with Jim Cairns who was the Director of Studies for the army, I managed to get, the university agreed to me doing one more subject instead of two. I suppose they thought I learnt enough in the war to make up for one subject, and so I finished it in 1945, with one subject.

Are you in the Militia?

Ah, yes and no. Not a quibble, but sort of, is perhaps better because at Scotch they had a cadet corps and I went into the cadet corps, of course. And was given a commission in the cadet corps which to the best of my knowledge was a sort of, wasn't regarded as a real lieutenant, but it was a cadet corps lieutenant. And so I was that, always carried that on when I was a master at Scotch, a housemaster. And so I was in it to that extent. Will I carry on with this point?

Mm.

And so when the war started, I went in with two splendid Irish mates up in Brisbane, to enlist on practically that day. And they happened to be in front of me and they went in and told their story of past experience - none, oh no none and went in and went through. When I came up and told my story and said, 'Oh well, yes, I had a bit of time in the cadet corps. I was a lieutenant in the cadet corps'. And so the man said, 'Well, you can't come in, you've got a commission. You've got to wait till someone calls you up'. And here were my two mates in and me left lamenting. So two days later I flew to Melbourne and went to the 5th Battalion recruiting office where my father, in which my father was in the 5th Battalion during the war and became its RSM and won a Military Cross as a non-commissioned officer which was a bit unusual. And I enlisted there about, oh, when was it? It was early in September - August, September, October - early September, yes.

Right. Well, I notice you've got a bit of a low number so you must have been fairly early.

Yes, not as low as his, though. His in the first world war was number twenty-four.

Mm.

In the Australian army.

(15.00) How conscious were you of that first world war experience and, you know, that ANZAC tradition of [inaudible]?

Very much, and very strongly because my father was at Gallipoli. As I say, he must have had some keenness which was transmitted to me because he was in the Victorian Scottish and, as I say, his number was twenty-four which means he must have been in almost before it started. They didn't have B and W in those days, I think, so he was twenty-four in the Australian army as far as I know. And ANZAC Day at school was always a major thing, both at the State school and at Scotch. Scotch in particular had the first world war people's names on the board and a very moving ceremony each ANZAC Day, addresses given. So I was highly conscious of ANZAC Day and in - from university and journalism would still be conscious of it because of assignments you'd get for ANZAC Day, to write articles in preparation for ANZAC Day and so on.

What about empire? Were you a conscious empire person in a way that so many were then?

I may have been then, but I don't recollect it. Yeah, I think I, then, this is in the '30s, early '30s, yes, I think, I say yes, only in the sense that everyone was. That's with some exceptions, but in general people were, regarded the empire as a fundamental thing that was right and had been, or was good for the world as well as good for you. So, yes, I was then, but by the time the war came up I didn't see myself, I didn't, can't recall that I ever had the feeling that I had to go to the war because it was for the good of the British Empire, to save the empire.

Mm.

It was ...

Yeah, yeah.

Mm.

Just a bit more about motivation.

Mm.

Other than ANZAC and empire, why are you joining, sorry, planning to enlist?

Yes. Well, ah, because I'd observed Hitler's movements, plans, successes from his point of view for quite a long time. As a journalist I couldn't fail to, seeing that I was writing, if only

.... The war might have been stopped if only he'd been sent a copy of one or two of my editorials. That would have put him in his place. And so this was, I was very much aware of this and more than most, I suppose, because of this association with journalism and making comment on world affairs and thinking about it very much, sufficiently to write about it and express opinions about it. I was very conscious of what I, as I saw it, Hitler was going to do to harm the world.

Tell me a little bit about that process of enlisting in Melbourne.

Well. It was easy to enlist along with the 5th Battalion. Oh, and I of course, said nothing whatever about previous experience this time, I had learnt my lesson. And within a day I think, was shunted out to Puckapunyal where I was switched from the 5th in the process, very quick process of about twenty-eight hours, to go to headquarters 17th Brigade, General Savige. And there, although someone must have discovered I could read and write, I was given as my first job working on the battalion switchboard. I suppose they had no one else who'd ever worked a switchboard either. And fortunately I made, really failed in that job because one day, I hadn't been at it long - the second or third day, when the battalion cook from one of the battalions, I forget which, wanted to get in touch with the butcher in Melbourne because something was troubling him about supplies, and unfortunately for me and my future reputation as a switchboard operator, Blamey wanted to get in touch with General Savige. And I succeeded in getting Blamey in touch with the battalion cook and Savige being left in the air. So, not long after that I was made a corporal and switched to the 2/8th Battalion.

Did you have a choice in going to the 2/8th, or were you just sent there?

It just happened.

Mm. Why were you made a corporal?

I suppose 'cause they found I could read and write, and they did by then know that I'd been involved in scouts and Somer's camps and so on and perhaps organised a few things. And they may have discovered that I had also been assistant editor of a daily newspaper, or Sunday newspaper and leader writer for another one. They probably thought that it was worth trying me out and went into an infantry platoon as a corporal. But the next day, I think .... Oh, and soon after, soon after that was made, by the end of December which was about seven or eight weeks, I'd been made the sergeant, the platoon sergeant, and as I said, I didn't realise they happened at the same time - I only discovered later and also became an officer.... became a lieutenant. I knew I was a sergeant some time before I became the lieutenant but when I've seen the dates of them, they've come together - sergeant one day and the same day a lieutenant.

(20.00) You were about, what, twenty-seven at this time?

Twenty-seven, yes.

What's your age in comparison with the others there that are coming in to the 2/8th?

Er. Some were older. In this platoon there would be blokes there who, one or two who obviously had understated their age. There was also at least one who'd overstated his age. And I would, they seemed to me to be on the whole of an age, I didn't feel a misfit in either for the upper ages or lower ages, it was such a mixture of ages. And among the officers, there was, for example, one named Arthur Bryant who in due course, when we got to the Middle East emerged with first world war ribbons, so he wasn't the right age either.

> There was certainly a tendency in that 6th Division for a lot of men to enlist who had either been children or just too young for the first world war ...

Yes.

> ... and either junior or some determination made on, certainly determined not to miss the second time.

That's right. Yes, there were. One of those such was in fact with us in the battalion. A lovely old fella named George Graham, an old fella, he wasn't all that much older than I was, I suppose. Oh, he was, must have been just about thirty-five. He was, I think, head of the splendid family up in Rutherglen-Wahgunyah area who ran, who were head of some big vineyards up there. They owned the big vineyards. I don't know, oh, yes, I think they call them Graham's Vineyards. And he, although not first world war, would just been on the edge of it, and, gosh, they were disappointed when they got to the Middle East because they went through the battalion and picked out these ones they, we, I suppose we'd call old boys, and formed them into a guards battalion. And George went in and so did Arthur Bryant who already had ribbons, and George and Arthur, and George had been upset for the rest of his life about that.

> Tell me a bit more about how you come to be a lieutenant.

Mm. Well. I wasn't put through any, in fact I didn't even do, I didn't do any officers' course at all. I was just, on the something of December, gazetted as a lieutenant, so it was sort of in the field and maybe, and I think, illegally 'cause I don't think you can have two commissions, even if the first one is a cadet commission, I've discovered since. So, I was just made that, and also, of course they wanted officers, even if they had to, they were a bit raw, they wanted officers because here were all these blokes. And one, to me, one of the most significant things, oh well, most pleasantest, one of the pleasantest things in the whole war, I think, for Australian soldiers was, here was this bloke with these thirty-odd men from all sorts of walks of life. Some had been old 'sussos' which everyone called us all, and some hadn't. Some had been very, in reasonably good jobs. And when I was made, I was platoon sergeant, and you couldn't ever have had it in the British army, I don't think. Then next day, I arrived with two pips on, up, and they had to salute. And did they salute. [Laughs] They treated this as if this is one of theirs and they'll make bloody sure that he gets the right treatment, and even to the trouble of, one of my blokes nearly having a fight with one from another platoon who hadn't registered that I'd gone up one, and he was threatening to knock his block off if he didn't salute. [Laughs.]

> Just make a comment on this because there's some controversy about it, on the extent to which those men in the 6th Division were unemployed. You had to have a guess on the sums that you were reserving.

Yes.

What was the percentage?

I would say .... Of course, this is an utter wild guess, and I would say about ten per cent might have been on the dole. They would have been sussos, on sustenance, it was called, that's right, sustenance. But it was really a small percentage. And one just has to, one would only have to go through the names of people who served in that first lot, who were in the 6th Division at the beginning or were very early, to see when they emerged again in real life, if you didn't know in civil life, if you didn't know what they were before, to see what then they resumed, the sort of jobs they then resumed, which were big estates or big farms or juniors in a big business on the way to being judges and lawyers and leaders in the community.

(25.00) What are you doing in the training, your particular job?

In the?

In the training?

Ah, training?

Yeah, at Puckapunyal [inaudible] the training.

Oh, I see. Straight infantry stuff. First, drill which is the basis of learning discipline and 'smartening up' as it would be called. There was 'form fours' and - that's how we started off, with fours. We got to threes later - keeping in step, being able to put on a good show when the march was on in the city. All of which was, as I, I *was* doubtful at the time, but all of which is highly significant in teaching a unit to act as one. At the same time, a shortage of arms, but rifle range drill and bayonet drill, grenade throwing and all the things, yes, machine-guns, that's right - not to any great extent because the supply of such things was very limited, and you had to share them out with others.

When do you move on to, say, battalion level exercises?

I don't think we had any before we left Australia, or perhaps we did, because we were, we left rather later than the 6th, or do I mean the 16th Brigade. We didn't leave till about May, I think, so we had the period, we had in effect four months here. And 4th, 5th [inaudible] .... We were the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th, of course in those days were the four battalion brigade. But I don't think, we didn't ever have any, I can't remember any brigade exercises which would be necessary to bring in into battalion. But company and battalion exercises, yes.

The men and yourself are keen to go overseas?

Oh yes. They had that in mind from the beginning.

When do you get first indication that you are going to go?

Well, we thought we would be going to go when, of course, we heard, we had the marches of the troops who were going to go because quite a few corps troops, I think, who'd, quite a few who enlisted for 6th Div and were, and shaped up as corps troops instead, went early. I think

from Melbourne there were some who went. And we were all a bit disgruntled that we were being left behind. And, well, from then on we regarded it as, we regarded going abroad as on, but we knew nothing official, and just kept assuming that very soon it'd be.

Say a few words about Mitchell as you knew him.

Yes. Well, Mitchell, was such a symbol that most of us didn't even question or think about his capacity to run a battalion. He had plenty, he knew what he was about. We knew, some of us at any rate, knew about his earlier troubles with the Lands Department where he'd, something funny about money, not being paid back into the till, or, having been borrowed, or some funny story about money in the Lands Department, going on, I think, before the war started. And Mitchell, but Blamey wanted him to be in it and Mitchell wanted to be in it. And we considered ourselves to be one of the very lucky battalions because we had a bloke from the first world war. And not only a bloke from the first world war but a bloke who, at the age of twenty-six, was Colonel Mitchell, DSO, 2/8th Battalion. And one didn't question, didn't dream of questioning things about him. And there was nothing visible to make us want to question it, anyhow. So, he was just regarded, as he was highly regarded by the battalion from the beginning because of this background. It didn't enter anyone's head to question it. I, of course, this is where you wanted to carry on to this point, but if it's about Mitchell in general, I of course, became aware later in Palestine, and being close to battalion headquarters in the desert, and close to battalion headquarters once when one of the big full colonels from ....

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

This is Tape one, Side B, of an interview with Mr Allan Fleming on 2 April 1990. End of identification.

Yes. So the full colonel from divisional headquarters visited and he was rather surprised that though he was visiting a half-colonel, that is a lieutenant-colonel, it was a rather full colonel nevertheless. [Laughs] And the discussion they had - I gather, I wasn't quite on the scene - but the discussion they had was not very promising for future happy relations. And old 'Mitch' had broken out in one of his binges and this, of course, spread him, spread his reputation, certainly in the upper echelons, and the upper atmosphere. And his relations with the hierarchy suffered considerably because this happened a few times, and they weren't sure whether he was fit to carry on. If anyone had taken a vote in the battalion, of course they would have much, they would have had the full half-colonel, rather than the full full colonel.

What about the selection of your NCOs and so on? You could say how this process goes on.

Yes. Well, our, it was highly democratic, I should think, no not democratic, because it didn't go to vote at all. It wasn't even refined and skilled. Take my own example, I went in as the sergeant and then became the platoon commander as we've discussed. And I looked, kept, when it was a question of filling a corporal or a lance corporal vacancy, I made a recommendation and that was about that. Someone could gainsay me further up the line but they couldn't in practical terms, because they wouldn't know the blokes as well as I did. And I

shouldn't be there if they couldn't rely on me to pick the best blokes. And no one argued about it in my experience. Now, that's perhaps, well, that's perhaps partly right. They didn't argue about it with me or I think usually didn't argue about it with the higher-ups but you would hear grizzles and groans among them saying 'That bastard, fancy him being made a corporal', you know, 'Jimmy Jackson would have been much better'. You did hear that, but the mistakes weren't sufficient to be a hindrance I think to morale, ever.

Tell me about getting the news to go overseas and do you get final leave?

Yes, we did. In my case, I was planning to get married to my splendid wife and even though it went on till the 4th of May, or whatever the date was when we departed, embarked, it was too sudden and we didn't, we weren't able to get married in short. And so she, with a, got hold of a friend and she had some money at that stage that would help her, and she got the last passenger ship that went into the Suez Canal, and landed. And when I, we got there in our ship, the *Dunera*, I was getting off at Kantara proudly leading my platoon down the gangplank and marching off with my head up and chin out, and in fact, oh yes, I'd been an officer then for about four months, that's right, and there sitting over in a, on one of those bales and things that hang round always at landing ports, there was a blonde waving to me with her friend sitting beside her and that was one of my major, most difficult decisions. Was I as a stern leader of men landing in a foreign country, to race off and pick up a girl on the shore, or was I to keep my face to the front and march on? After a little while, I decided the sergeant could probably handle things for a little while and raced across. [Laughs.]

(5.00) You'd win points with the men, no matter which way, which direction you acted.

That's right. Yes, exactly. So she, and we got married subsequently in Jaffa in Palestine with three of my journalists really, old mate journalists to witness and help with .... Ian Fitchett who died not long back, finished up with one leg, not from the war but who did war correspondent. He was a lawyer by training, so he was able to assure the Jaffa people who were a bit nervous about the pros and cons of all this, that all was well legally, and to sign some affidavit or other. And John Hetherington and, Fitchett, Hetherington and Chester, no Chester Wilmot wasn't there at the time, anyhow, one other well-known journalist from Melbourne's, the Melbourne, oh, the Australian scene, who were the witnesses.

A distinguished group, weren't they?

Yes.

I should remember the bloke whose diaries have just been produced.

Moorehead.

No. [inaudible]

Oh, the poet.

Coor[?] used to let his name fall out of his head.

Yes. Can't think.

Oh, all right. The one about the dead, 'The dead of Tobruk and', so on.

Oh, well, I, perhaps have missed that.

[inaudible] were similar, I think ....

The book, mm.

Put the book together [inaudible].

Oh?

And his diaries have been published. I'm occupying good tape with my inadequate reminiscences.

Well, I should, must know that. I knew all, practically all the journalists within reach on this side ....

Oh, [inaudible] I've stupidly forgotten his name. Okay, tell me a little bit, you went over on the *Dunera*.

Yes, that was the 2/8th ship. And we were escorted by, well, we didn't notice it very much but we were escorted by an Australian ship, I forget which one it was. And it was reasonable comfort - the usual goings on at, Singapore or wherever we called in for the first stop and so it was a painless voyage, really. Or, not entirely because it's a bit hard to cramp as many troops as that into a ship and make sure that somehow they were interested and occupied and so on. And don't get up to *too* much mischief. Inevitably they must get up to some mischief.

You have boxing tournaments, those sorts of things?

Yes. That's right. And probably, I think, firing, or throwing things, letting things float off over the ship and have a shoot at them.

Alright.

And sports, yes.

Right. Where do you go into camp after you ...?

We went to Gaza, just near Gaza and established, I think, we were at Gaza briefly before, in a ready made camp, one that was waiting for us, and then set up our own camp at Kilo 89 which was not far from Gaza. And that was the battalion's headquar... - that's where the battalion operated from until it, that's right, took its first moves, two stage move, up the desert to get into the act in North Africa.

When you come into contact with these other battalions, and the battalions that are making up the 17th Brigade ...

Yes.

> ... battalions from by the other states, what do you think of yourselves, relative to these other battalions?

Oh, we thought we were, our morale was pretty high, we thought we were pretty good. We could march better than they could and so on, that sort of thing, and we had a CO from the first world war. This morale was very high in the 2nd - the 2/8th Battalion was very proud of itself. It was taught, I suppose, rather like our ANZAC tradition, but it was taught much more easily than other people might be able to teach it because we had one of the ANZAC blokes there.

> Say a little bit about the style of the training that you were going through at this stage.

Oh, well. This was getting down much more to tin-tacks, the real thing. We assumed and the 'powers that be' must have known that we were going to be used in the desert and so we were taking this training rather seriously; when I say we, I'm sure that the privates did as well as the majors.

And, oh yes, and in due course when we were changed to three battalion brigades and 'Red Robbie' took over as our brigade commander; Mitchell acted for a short time before Red Robbie took over. And again, supplementing what I said earlier about Mitchell, he, I'm sure, rather thought that it would have been appropriate for him to have been a brigade commander, but he didn't ever have the opportunity as far as I know. And I suspect that the item that, the trouble with the full colonel and the half-full colonel would have made some of that difference, in fact might have made a lot of the difference.

(10.00) So we trained, and I remember when Red Robbie took over, in furtherance to the question of how we were, what we did, how we took it, that he, of course, had been in the Lighthorse in the first world war, in and around that area and he - and it turned out to be for our good though we thought he was an old bastard at the time - sent us on long marches across the desert with full pack and so on. Indeed, one of them was from Gaza to Beersheba. And I don't know whether that's thirty miles or forty miles but the way .... We couldn't just go straight, and I think it must have been, it was between thirty and forty miles, anyhow, for a day's march with full pack, carrying all our gear and belongings, oh, not all our belongings, we didn't carry them. Oh, we must have carried some sleeping bag, sleeping thing. Anyhow, I, with our battalion - that is, I with my platoon - was made the lead platoon to steer the way, use the compass and make sure we were going on the right track and so on, and march off in front of the battalion which meant that no matter how much pain you began to feel there could be no question of limping or crumbling. And three miles before we got to Beersheba, I can remember hearing crackling sort of noises going on, and it was some time before I realised that this was simply my bones rubbing against one another, all the fluid had gone out of my legs and ankles and so on. [Laughs]

> De Castella syndrome.

Yes, that's right. But we did really serious exercises, digging, ones that sweated, you sweated out digging trenches and attacking and a lot of those sort of long, tough marches. And we did become tough, there was no doubt about that.

Tell me about meeting that, people in that countryside.

Mm. The 'wogs'.

Yeah, well, the Diggers[?] are great tourists in many ways ....

Oh yes.

[inaudible]

Yes, yes.

And just sort of spreading out through that country town. And yourself, you're in a different category because your wife's there, but you're travelling, meeting?

Yes. Well, we didn't get .... Oh, perhaps I'm wrong. I don't know what I'm comparing it with. There was a reasonable amount of leave, I think. But you'd just get about two days at a time, so you didn't have much time to get up to too much mischief, or three days perhaps it was. Round about, the first and closest contact with the wogs, 'western oriental gentlemen' - that's a very flattering name, as distinct from disparaging - would be with the hawkers coming around the camp. And also with, whatever they were, coming around the camp so that a rifle would disappear, there one moment, gone the next. And they were splendid, splendidly expert thieves as well as 'talk the leg off an iron pot' and sell you something for ten dollars that was worth sixpence. But they, the troops rather, they keep, the troops put their boots to their bottoms quite often, but, oh, rather enjoyed yapping to them.

You see anything of the Jewish settlements?

Yes. Many went to, visited Jewish settlements, I can't think of the names, Rehovot, there were quite a few Jewish settlements that the troops went visiting. In the case of my wife, for example, she stayed at Sam Azgour's Ritz Hotel in Tel Aviv which was bombed once or twice eventually. He was a Jew running it and then later she stayed in Jerusalem and the troops went to Jerusalem quite a lot, and indeed, that was perhaps the most interesting to them of the leave centres. It was later, when they were closer to the places, and namely, by places I mean Cairo and Alexandria, that they had the real treatment from the - oh, such as they'd heard of from their fathers probably, who went on leave to such places.

Mm.

The brothels and the girls in the streets and so on. And they were all heavily lectured about how to behave with their, I forget what the kits were called, anyhow, with their leave kits with all the, 'save you from a fate worse than death', 'worse than death' medicines and things, pills and condoms and such. But they thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

(15.00) Several of the blokes in their reminiscences just talk about the amount of alcohol consumed, they ....

Yes.

Was there obviously a lot of drinking among the troops?

On leave, there would be, but not as much, not such as you've just seen as would lead me to describe getting boozed and unconscious for most of the time, as a prevailing occupation. Troops used to be very interested to see around and about and they really would get hold of one of the wogs and a guide and go around looking at things. They might get a bit thirsty after that and get boozed for the night but it was noth.... It was not, it was far from being a grog fest every time they left the camp.

The VD figures are fairly high, and I can't remember the actual numbers. Were they high enough for you to notice that some blokes, you were losing blokes out of your platoon, say, [inaudible]?

Well, I don't remember any one of, I just don't remember any one of ours getting it. So either none got it or it wasn't a major thing. No, I can't remember. In fact it didn't come into my head that that many got .... I know many got VD, yes, but I don't remember it, briefly.

Yes, interesting, that it doesn't affect you as a platoon commander.

Mm.

When do you realise you are going to be into action soon?

Mm. Ah.

Have you had warning?

Oh well, we knew we were on the way up to, we knew because the desert fight had started with the British troops up there. And we knew that we were, before long, when we started to move up to Mersa Matrûh first I think, yes, I think it was Mersa Matrûh first stop. We knew that we were in for it before long. We weren't too clear when but just from the attention being given to all sorts of details that previously hadn't been so urgent, and the urgency given to them in the attention, we knew it couldn't be far ahead.

Lead me into Bardia.

Well, we were the .... We didn't have a major role in Bardia, we were right back in reserve and it was the second or the third day in Bardia that we were brought in to clean up some things on the outskirts, or pockets that hadn't been primary objectives in the first attack. And we, and so, I, yes, I, put me in the spot the first time because I had to guide the battalion, find the way. Oh, I by then, had become battalion intelligence officer.

Yes, I should have asked you. Yes, how do you make that transition from platoon commander to intelligence officer [inaudible]?

Mm. Ah, well.

The transition from platoon commander to intelligence officer.

Oh yes.

How does that come about?

Well, it came about just overnight. I was called up to see the CO who said, 'Fleming, you're to be intelligence officer from tomorrow'. And this was with Bardia and whatever was beyond, a matter of a week or so away. And I wasn't too sure whether I'd been sacked from my beloved platoon and brought to this mysterious place called battalion headquarters or what. But the best explanation given to me was that, 'Well, sorry to take you from your platoon, but, you know, you've been in the scouts and in the cadet corps, it mightn't have been so important, the cadet corps, but as a scout you certainly had to learn to use a prismatic compass and find your way around in all sorts of country. Now, we want someone who can be sure to find the right way, find the way in the desert, or we'll be in trouble. So, and remember you've got to keep a war diary and all these other things. So we decided that it would be a good thing if you came to battalion headquarters as the battalion intelligence officer.' So, it was as informal, as out of the blue and as unsought as that. I, of course, was upset at leaving my beloved platoon, but it was an interesting job and I'm rather sorry, still rather sorry that I just didn't stay with my platoon but there it was.

(20.00) And in the official history it talks about the second half, clearing coastal wadis.

Oh yes. This is in Bardia?

Mm.

Yes, well, that's the sort of thing where Italians were still tucked away and [inaudible]. People who'd led, our people, our soldiers who'd led the way in and done the first fighting had had about enough of it by the second day, of course. I don't mean they couldn't have gone on but it was sensible then to bring in the, give them a breather, and bring in the reserves, and so that's the sort of thing we had to do. Go in through the coastal wadis and clean up. And I, my job, was to get in front and with a compass, and I think we went in really early in the morning and I hoped that I'd find the way in. I did, I found a way in that time. I think it was when we were going in to Tobruk I got off-course a bit and the CO finally had to say, well, we'd better go in here anyhow. I was really put to shame - boy scout training and all.

One, what about as intelligence officer it must be one of your duties to be leading the battalion prisoners?

Ah. We didn't in fact do it that way then. I say that *then* because later in Greece, yes, it was, we got a couple of Germans. I'm not sure who else might have got prisoners but we got two Germans in the first of the élite Adolf Hitler gang. And at this stage there were just so many hordes of prisoners that there was no - it would have been a waste of time to face up to them and start seeking intelligence among them. If, at a later stage, that wasn't, even in Greece, yes, at a later stage in Libya that wasn't quite so because when we got further along the line and we were out as the lead, as the battalion in front, and I had to take the advance party, of course, and the Italian prisoners we got we certainly did interrogate ourselves before sending them back to the proper place at brigade. In fact, before the, to show you the dangers of intelligence work so-called, because it wasn't intelligence work in the usual sense. Your job was to be out, was to guide people into, or, when the battle started, to be out, spread out you blokes among the companies and to be, and have maps prepared beforehand and know all

sorts of information about the country and pass it on, which might have sounded a bit like an academic occupation. Before the Libyan show was over my little section of about eight people, one had been wounded, one was wounded in Bardia, in Tobruk, two, and a little bit later, one lost his leg and another one was killed, and another one was wounded, so it wasn't so safe the occupation.

> Tell me a little bit about behaviour in battle. You must be pretty apprehensive before you first go in in Bardia.

Yes. I think I probably have rather a vivid imagination and I, my picture of what happens when you go into battle was probably very largely based on what I'd heard of the first world war, when our men in hordes went across ground swept by machine-gun fire and shells blowing up everywhere and so on. And that's what my picture was of battle. And I, to this day, and even certainly to that day, could never understand how it was possible to go across machine-gun-swept, or small arms-swept country, with a shell lobbed in every now and again, without getting killed, or to lose a large part of yourself. And I didn't, well, at long last it had happened, I didn't greet it with particular joy at all, because unfortunately I'm not a brave man. I could see, when we did get in, and bullets were going in all directions, which wasn't the case when we first went into Bardia because Bardia was rather a soft job for us. When we did, I could see the noise of - I discovered the difference between a cracking noise and a whistling noise, and the whistling noise, okay, that's when a ricochet or something like that. A cracking noise means it's just gone past this ear or that ear and I, was scared, I was frightened and I didn't want one of those bloody things to go through me, and I could see them. You know, you could see them, a sort of bee swarm coming straight at you, or something, your mind plays tricks like that. And I didn't enjoy that part of my military occupation at all, although, but you accept that you have to put up with it.

(25.00)I remember in Tobruk being, I was more out ahead of where we were, where our people were going was just over there. And, of course, in the desert you can have a machine-gun a long way away and it's so flat that it can be upsetting someone, I don't know, half a mile if that's reasonable, something, quite a long way away and you haven't a chance of seeing where it is from that distance, if he's well tucked in, hidden away. And I was flat on my belly because one of these machine-guns had suddenly opened up away over there on the left, and I was trying to dodge it, and here on my right came some of our blokes, a reserve platoon perhaps was being moved, was it that was being moved up and the platoon was in line, not line ahead but line abreast. And in it was a bloke I knew, it wasn't my old platoon, but I knew as being one of the champion league players, league football players, down here in Melbourne. Splendid tall sapling of a bloke, strong, healthy, big bloke and, but he'd come in as a reinforcement and hadn't been broken in quite as much as the other blokes and he had his rifle across his chest, and bayonet, moving forward, abreast with these others on each side of him. And, they didn't know, 'cause, that this machine-gun was going, because they couldn't hear, with all the noise of the battle they couldn't hear it. And I yelled out to them from my position, swivelling on my navel, close to the ground, 'Look out, machine-gun over here', and sort of waved. And they didn't hear me, and then I heard this bloke say, 'What the bloody hell's that cracking noise?'. And almost he got to the full stop 'cracking noise' and down he went and his rifle flew away and he went down flat, right flat on his face, with a bullet right across the front of his, just below the forehead, just as if it, across through his eye area and was blinded. It didn't kill him but he was blind for the rest of his life, this splendid athletic type. Well, that's the sort of, that's one of the images of this sort of occupation that's fixed in my mind.

Mm, mm. Tell me about Tobruk because, are you in that great advance?

Mm.

So you were actually in the front of that advance which was exacted on 21st of January?

No, we weren't in front. I wonder if this bit would be interesting before I leave Bardia.

Yes.

To put it in reverse. We were going in at the tail-end and there wasn't much, a little bit of bullet firing here and there. And then I went past a hole in the ground which contained a machine-gun emplacement on a swivel, and was going past and I heard a crying sort of noise. And I was right at the rear of the battalion now because I'd got them to some point and they were spreading out and going around while I was here. And this, and I moved over and there was about a twenty-four or twenty-year-old 'eyetie' boy, or the back of him and his head was away from me, with his head drooping down over himself, groaning. And I said, I made some sort of noise and he looked around and his face was all smashed in, just about ruined, except that he had beautiful blue eyes. You could see still these blue eyes. And I had this uncontrollable instinct to get out my first-aid stuff and go and help him. And I started to move towards him and noise somewhere up front, 'Come on, come on, come on, we've got to move on'. And they were waiting for me to do something for them. And I let him go a bit and then moved a bit closer to him and again came this call. And I remember looking at him, almost unable to bear that I should leave him and for my own self-defence saying, 'Sorry, but you bastards started it, after all'. And then going off and just left him to it. Sorry, that was, thinking of what happens when the bullets are around.

You asked me about Tobruk. We didn't .... We were not in the lead, we were not - we had the worst, or the biggest fight in Tobruk but we weren't the first in. The perimeter was split open by people, our other battalions, I think the 5th, the 6th, some of those, or 7th, breaking it open and then another came through and spread sideways on each side and then we were to go straight up towards the middle. And we ran into the toughest set up of dug-in tanks and so on, and had quite a to-do there, quite a battle.

You give me what you in particular did on your own. Respective comments on it.

Mm. Well. I saw these, of course, moved up, was moving up with them. I wasn't, I was freelancing at that stage, I wasn't with battalion headquarters because I was doing all sorts of things, and perhaps guiding part of it in some of them. And then this tank emplacement, oh, not tank emplacement, series of tanks partly dug-in, opened up and our blokes didn't quite know whether it was machine-guns or, and then suddenly realised it was tanks just dug into the ground. One of my most vivid pictures of this was Don Campbell who'd been, who was the captain of, the OC C Company, and who was a bit of a 'pom', he spoke with a pom accent, you know. In those days they were called poms when they came out here ....

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

This is Tape two, Side A of the interview with Mr Allan Fleming on 2 April 1990. End of identification.

We were talking about co-operation with the British forces ....

British forces, yes. I can't remember, I know, oh, we had British artillery and tanks but not a great, not a wealth of tanks. In the Libyan occupation, indeed, the tanks were mainly out ahead, paving the way for the next step and I can't, I saw British officers and people around, troops around but I don't remember having anything to do with them. In Greece, also, I didn't have anything directly to do with them as far as I can remember, but our battalion did. Oh yes, I did have something, that's right. I'm thinking of toward the end, in the last day and a half in Vevi in Greece - when I say in Greece I'm thinking perhaps of Vevi Pass. The confusion of who was where was considerable, that is, not only where the enemy were but where different bits and pieces of our battalion was. The Germans pushed us, pushed that company back and then at a later stage, there was a counter-attack and the Germans were pushed back and so on. And meantime, of course, we had artillery and machine-gunning controlled not by us but from the division, or brigade, I don't know who did it mostly. And, it was even screamingly obvious as I read now the war diary, our war diary, and the brigade war diary, and the divisional war diary, further back they mostly hadn't a clue what was happening to us or where we were and what time things were happening. And I'm not sure what the source of advising the machine-gunners where to machine-gun and the artillery where to artillerise, but our gunners once at C Company headquarters, where Bill Robertson was, and a shell, one of our shells, landed clean on the battalion headquarters, the company headquarters there and blew their communications set to pieces.

And I do, an occasion where New Zealand machine-gunners - because we had New Zealanders helping us - were, I was, when I was in this situation on the flank, noticed that New Zealanders had just let fly at what were in fact our troops very much to the front and where Germans had been but our blokes had knocked them back and now they were getting a belting from New Zealand machine-gunners. And I had to, I made signals and sent a bloke over to tell them to lay off there and shoot somewhere else. Also some of the ranger battalions, a ranger group with a, had a, became visible having been overrun by the Germans and they were at the front end of it. And I directed them where to go to be useful because they also were firing at the wrong thing. Firing, indeed, too, upon some of our people. So that's not quite what you meant, I know, but it was an example of having to do with our co-operating troops.

Do you want to bring this in here at this stage, or at the very end because of the criticisms of the 2/8th ...

Yes.

... have been made.

Yes.

[inaudible]

Yes, I'm very keen to bring that in. I propose to, as you know, to try to mark the fiftieth anniversary by having produced something that will give a rather different story. And I, the, Gavin Long's history, quotes a division as having been disappointed in the performance of the 2/8th Battalion and it quotes the most untoward statement of any that was made by any brigade commander about any of these units in the Middle East, I should think, and it's quoted by Gavin Long, rightly, because Vasey wrote this in his war diary, something to the effect that 'The 2/8th Battalion was completely disorganised. The something else, and then .... A large percentage of the troops had thrown away their arms. And the CO was completely exhausted.'

(5.00) Well, now, just take that literally, 'The 2/8th battalion was completely disorganised', now what the hell did he expect was happening? He agrees and so does Gavin Long and Gavin Long emphasises, the 2/8th Battalion was in a deep salient, that is, almost surrounded. Vasey had ordered and the 2/4th Battalion to withdraw at a certain time when the 2/8th was fighting up to its neck. The rangers were overrun, they were the ones on the left flank between us and the 2/4th, so that the 2/4th and the rangers moved from the left flank, taken back, pulled back. What on earth did Vasey think was happening to us? He could only have thought that we'd disappeared or gone home, or something, or resigned. And we were supposed to withdraw that evening at, I forget, the time changed, but at the time when we were still fighting, everything on our left flank that was friendly to us had gone and we were in a position of having Germans to the front, Germans to the right because they had come in from the right where the Greeks left, and not only that but Germans behind. We saw German Very lights, white lights, going up two miles behind, and what was left for the 2/8th to get out of was a small space, if you think of an oblong box, a small space at the bottom of the box to the right, about half of the right, area to the right. And the 2/8th under fire from the Germans from their back, their side and their front and their right had to get out through that.

Now, they didn't start getting out until they were overrun, that is, they were overrun by German tanks with infantry beside them which just moved on, completely ignoring the ridiculous 'boys' rifle fire' that we were able to give, all the machine-gun fire, all the rifle fire, made no difference. And they just moved on amongst us. And I'm not quite sure what the procedure is in such an occasion. There's only one procedure I suppose and that is to surrender, put your hands up and surrender. But our blokes, except for in the front on the front slopes - this had all happened early in the piece, rather earlier in the piece, but we were sticking till the last, as required, and everyone else had disappeared and we were still sticking. Inevitably, it led to us being overrun because what, once the Germans had decided to come on, what the hell was to stop them, nothing to stop the tanks, nothing to stop their troops that were following the tanks. And so, I'm not sure whether you were supposed then to form fours and march out, or whether you go like hell, or what. Surrender is one of the alternatives.

And of course, across the way, 2/4th who were highly respected by us and very, always felt good if the 2/4th were around, one of their companies was moving back, oh, ahead of us but authorised to and told to, and the whole company was taken prisoner. They ran into a group of Germans who had them covered and so they surrendered, and became prisoner.

Well, now, Vasey says nothing about that. He doesn't, he seems to accept that alright that you hand your arms over to the enemy. Now, if our blokes who chose to try to get out to fight another day, well, they could have surrendered, but who chose to get out and fight another day, found in many cases that they were just so stonkered, and they were, as our medical officer could vouch for, and some of them clambering over the rocks and down the rocks and

up the side with a tank popping at them, or the machine-guns popping at them, found that they just couldn't make it if they carried, took their rifle as well. Well, do they, therefore, sit and surrender with rifle, or do they leave the rifle and get out with themselves, themselves being something of use for tomorrow? And this is the sort of thing, ridiculous situation that I have subsequently learnt, of course, from Vasey's comments and so on, happened there.

(10.00)'They were disorganised and a large percentage threw away their arms.' Now, that's a lie for a start. It may not be a lie, it may be an innocent mistake, the only recorded bit by Long that seems to come from the scene is a 'and many threw away their Brens and even rifles'. Now there couldn't be many throwing away their Brens because there weren't all that many Brens in our company. And also, A Company was the company that had most of, a larger part of itself, over carrying food and so on up to the front. Apart from one platoon which had been sent to fight behind the two companies under heavy attack, and whose commander - a sergeant - won the DCM, not presumably for throwing away his arms or those of his men throwing away theirs. And it's hard to judge where this came from and that's why I am really trying to get at where it came from. Now, there would have been a check later on, because when the companies, the battalions assembled later on, there would have been the question of lining up and who had rifles and who didn't, and how many new rifles did they have to reissue. So I suppose somewhere down the end of the line there's that check. But so, say they did get out without, they couldn't get out with their rifles, was it a good thing for them to get out without them because they were just stonkered? And that is perfectly clear, that they were stonkered, when they went up the hill three days before. Now ....

> When were the troops themselves aware of this criticism? Did they know of this until it came out in the official history, or were you ever or [inaudible]?

Mm. It was this, they would have known it, of course, if .... I'm sure some did, I don't know if any would have thrown away their arms, it would have been obvious that many came out without their arms. Of course, they spread out all over the countryside and didn't reassemble until the following day, and even later than that they began drifting in, having saved themselves to fight again. So I don't think, the battalion wouldn't have been conscious of this until much later. And fortunately, many of them probably have never read the official history anyhow, so they're unaware that they're supposed to have thrown away their arms.

'And the CO was completely exhausted.' Well, shiver my timbers, the CO couldn't move around in a carrier and I notice that General Dougherty who was on the 2/4th was able to, his carriers worked there, and our muddy, rocky, whatever it was, CO didn't, he was on his feet all the time. The CO at the age of forty-eight had been at it just the same as the troops had, moved up to the front and moved this company here and another company there. And I, yes, at the point of this, that's the point, I'd forgotten the point, I helped get to their feet many tough nineteen year olds and twenty-one year olds who were just so stonkered from the goings on that they were just, they were semi-conscious. And that corresponded with the experience of Colin Diffey who wrote, who was the writer in his war diary of telling, and it's quoted by Long, telling some, a group of people, a group of soldiers to get rid of their equipment, including presumably rifles. And the reason was just similar to mine that they were lying down, they'd had it, they just couldn't move any further. So he stirred them up, got 'em together, got them onto their feet and got them to get out to fight again another day. And that happening to twenty-two, very young 'uns and they're astonished that Mitchell was completely exhausted. And indeed, I would, I feel, I would have thought that at that time Vasey was then, if he'd been doing his job because he hadn't seen, he hadn't been around to

see the 2/8th Battalion since the to-do started. He did see the 2/4th quite often, several times. And moreover, early in the afternoon of this climax part of the battle, the communications which went through the rangers who had been overrun to brigade were, of course, cut off. So Vasey did not know what was happening and the battalion worked it all out for itself. And how Vasey would be in a position to even comment about it, I don't know, and how distinguished General Mackay would be able to make similar comment, I also don't know, because they didn't know what was happening. And they, if you read the 6th Div war diary and even the brigade war diary, it seems that every time there's a German attack it was stopped by artillery or machine-gun fire, or machine-gun units. Funny thing, I can't make out what the 2/8th was doing there, most of the time, you know. And it's certainly the case that they came out with a rush, those who were strong enough, got out, I wouldn't waste time with the tanks shooting at you, except that I came out, I came out along a gully because I was late, being the rearguard and watching the long reports.

I was rather, very late in the piece, lucky to get out and was coming along the gully and there was a tank up the end and there were machine-guns spread around. They could all see me because .... But the bends in the ground gave me a bit of shelter every now and again. But I was getting out, running the gauntlet of all this stuff because they reckoned that I was a good target. And I came across a Bren gun lying beside the edge of the gully, and I thought, well, I don't know whether someone got bumped off who was looking after this, or should have taken it, or who dropped it, gave up or gave it away, or what. But I, you know, be a good soldier, I ought to take this out with me. I picked it up to take out with me and within, within seven or eight yards I knew - I stay with it, or it stays alone and I get out. And it was just, I suppose I was feeling a bit stonkered. I was fit and strong most of the time I'd been there, but I really, it really was, I had convinced myself the case. 'If I carry that out I won't be getting out with it'. I mean, 'I won't be, I'm just not going to make it'. It wasn't mine but it was just a chance experiment. And so that's the way that, that's some sort of slant on the story.

Does the 2/8th fight again on the way back down?

Yes, they did. They formed ....

Oh, by the way, in leaving that point, one of the most astonishing things to me is to think of something that Vasey and Mackay must have both endorsed. That is, the three officers of the 2/8th for that battle won Military Crosses, the sergeant who led the platoon across to the counter-attack, won a Distinguished Conduct Medal which is some award, and two others won Military Medals, a very extraordinary thing to do without, when you've thrown away your arms. Anyhow, that ....

Sorry, I jumped away from your question. Oh, yes, it did. Further down the way when rifles, when the battalion had been re-equipped with rifles and Mackay recalls sixty only being available, with arms, and Vasey recalls about forty or fifty men with arms being available which I'm sure doesn't represent the cross-section of the battalion as a whole at all, just the ones they happened to get. Oh, um, Col Diffey, the man I told you was on the way of getting out, got the, rescued these blokes on the way out, saw Vasey, visited Vasey on the way past, reported to brigade headquarters and told him, and told him what had been going on, and said, told him, also, about arms going, couldn't get out without some of them dropping their arms. And Vasey seemed to accept it, said Col and Col gives his own .... Col, by the way, not one to crumble in the face of the enemy having won an MC already in North Africa. He gives his

version of Vasey agreeing with him, that is, that it was better for the soldiers to get out if that's the only way they're going to make it.

Sorry, jumping over the place on this one. As you can tell I'm, I get a bit worked up over it. But yes, further back, when they were, those without rifles were equipped they formed a chiefly anti-paratroop. Their biggest contribution was to form an anti-paratroop unit with 2/8th Battalion officers and men. And they were also placed on the left flank in the Aliakmon defence system with the 2/4th Battalion. They, I don't know, there was no, I don't think they had any hand to hand stuff fighting again but I say that to compare it with fighting and shooting at Stukas.

(20.00) And past, and after the last big bash by Stuka I was out of it, didn't see much first hand, 'cause I got into trouble with a Stuka, or the Stuka put me into trouble, by getting a big Stuka piece of bomb was, I was able to observe strangely enough, didn't break properly, it broke, about one seemed to be about one-third of the part of the casing of the bomb and it hit the rock that I was against which took some of the force of it and then hit me slap on the, sideways - on the chest. Which felled me a bit and I wasn't too badly beaten up but anyhow it got me into hospital so I missed the close-ups of the battalion from then on because I went back that way.

How did you get back, evacuated out of Greece and so on?

I went in a, I think it was a hospital ship that took me to Crete and I was put in a ward in Crete. And it was in Canea and as you know later on half the battalion which is, which was, got into Crete because their boat the *Costa Rica* was sunk, along with our war diary and a few things, or initial war diary. And they landed there, I was in Canea when I heard that they had come and I buzzed off from hospital to try and find them but I couldn't so I went back to hospital, at least there was a bed and some tucker there. And the hospital was a tented one. And I was again taken out by, this time for sure, by hospital ship on the day before the paratroops landed. So the judgment was very good, especially as this was where the paratroopers broke their codes, certainly codes that Rommel would have imposed on them. And, came into the ward and it turned out to be this ward and let fly on each side with Tommy guns, so, the 'Big Fella' was watching me that day.

Did you go back to Alexandria?

I got back to, yes, I got back safely to Alexandria. I got into an Australian hospital for a while. It didn't take me long to recover but, even today though I get, must have been a hard .... I was a bit ashamed of myself because I wasn't bleeding and gory and so on but it was a bit of a bump.

Now, how do you get into this air support [inaudible]?

Mm. Well, the, ... Firstly, in my peacetime, in peacetime in Melbourne I had learnt to fly a bit, nearly, within an ace of going solo but didn't quite because I moved to Brisbane. And that's one, they may have, someone may have discovered this on my record, or they may have said, if, after the belting these people got by Stukas in Greece, at least they ought to be interested in army/air co-operation. Goodness knows why I, anyhow, we got back to El Arish, I got to El Arish eventually and was, they were sending Australians to various schools at the time and I - they were all the time, silly to say that - but they sent me to this Army/Air

Co-operation School at um; I think it was Ismailia. And another Australian had been sent there, too, a bloke named Jim London because some Australians who'd been ALOs - air liaison officers - in Australia and had training beforehand were up the desert with the British, working with British squadrons for the, with the British army. One of these was Ike Whittaker, Major Whittaker, who was, I think, one of the first Australians killed over there. He went west in the Mediterranean somewhere or out on a, before we went to Greece, quite early in the piece.

So I was sent for the three to four week school at Ismailia, Army Corps, Army Air Co-operation School, and I'm sure Australians, the Australian army was taking very seriously the question of army/air co-operation, especially as we'd gone a bit further on the war and not only that the Germans had beaten us up, but we were getting a few more aeroplanes ourselves and ought to know what to do with them.

(25.00) So, what I did, my course didn't lead me to be an air liaison officer, it led me into this army/air co-operation that, I beg your pardon, into this air support control activity and I was the first person, there were other Australians there before Greece who were ALOs, air liaison officers working with squadrons, and even from this course I think someone ahead of me, maybe it was Jim London, did an air liaison course and went off as an air liaison officer. I went off as a, er, the operations officer for the Air Support Control System, or unit which was an Australian unit.

And tell me, what did you actually do?

Mm. Well. If you are, let's do it by making a contrast. If you are an ALO, thinking of the two aspects of army/air co-operation we carried out with the army. If you were an ALO, air liaison officer, you lived with the squadron and worked with them and you'd get intelligence from them and brief them on things of interest to the army by living with them. This other thing that I went into was just coming forth, it was just being born as, because it involved a much more extensive application of the force of air to assist the army, air-borne artillery style - strafing, bombing. Doubtless lessons learnt from the Germans. And in this unit comprised Major Malloy who was a signal, a regular army bloke, and indeed, he'd been in Greece as a G2 of the 6th Div. He didn't go to the course as far as I know but he was a signals officer and the weight of this first unit - I don't know whether it was the first allied unit but it was, I don't know of any other British unit formed at that time - was on the signals side. Malloy was a regular army signals officer. He was the major in charge of the, he was the OC. I went in as the sort of operations officer, well, I suppose because I'd been infantry and seen what happened in army/air operations. And then a signals officer who was in charge of the signals part of it, as such. The signals part of it would have comprised about sixty signallers and these, they must have picked about the best sixty Australian signallers that you could get, NCOs and privates and signalmen. They were really top notchers.

This unit, Malloy OC, myself operations officer, signal officer in charge of the signallers and the signallers went out to each, to army format - we were divided up into smaller pairs or thirds, er, threes and went to brigades and divisions and from there - and they were an essential part of the set up which had also air force signallers to the rear with air force units. And you had a total network which made it possible, army to communicate with air, air to army, criss-cross and around about. And also to help direct support very close up, meaning a brigade talking to the air and bringing it down right in front of its offence[?].

That was an ideal that wasn't achieved because firstly, when we did get up the desert we were, this unit with 125,000 British army which was mainly British armoured, New Zealanders and Indians. On the other side was Rommel with 125,000 on the inside and the area of operations was in a desert area about 100 miles by fifty miles, or sixty perhaps, and they were a hammer and tongs shemozzle. And it was almost impossible, and what with dust storms and bad weather and such, it was very difficult to tell from the air, almost impossible to tell whom was whom anyhow. So it didn't get much of a go in the sense that the conditions were not very good for it, but it was just impossible in those circumstances for you to get organised air support to come down right in front of a brigade. The identification problems were too great. But it did, it went a long way toward achieving its purpose.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

> Identification: The interviewer is Hank Nelson interviewing Allan Fleming. End of tape identification.

Thank you. We were talking about, I was telling you about the attack against these dug-in tanks. And Don Campbell, who was OC C Company, and he was marching ahead in the good old English tradition, right ahead of his company with his face to the fore and looking neither to left or right, and the men following along behind. And he got a bullet right through the forehead, it was just, just bang like that, in the old English tradition, over he went and was killed, of course. Another man Van Sitters was killed with one right through the heart, not long afterwards. And that, and Russ Willmott, won an MC, he clambered onto the tanks and started shoving grenades in through the cracks, he managed to get there close enough. Bill Robertson, Lieutenant-Colonel Robertson, from MC, from Greece, MC from Greece I mean, later became George Vasey's GSO1 in the Shaggy Ridge in New Guinea. He was there as a company commander. He was badly wounded and taken off. And eventually, they, someone then having got that far then turning and going right along the line of 'em, rather than having to charge straight at them, they were cleaned up. And then the next move was ....

I moved on from there, we were going, trying, making Fort Pilastrino the major objective and it was interesting. We had Allan Coombes who was a company commander and ex-policeman and he was a real tough character, was Allan. He'd fight anything just for the fun, love of fighting. I don't mean he, perhaps he fancied bullet fighting so much but at least he behaved as if he wasn't worried about anything, and used to hoe into everything. Well, we nearly had a fight of our own afterwards 'cause he did capture Fort Pilastrino and said so but unfortunately for his argument, Major MacDonald with his company captured it also. It happened to be from the other side of it. They were all about the same time. We nearly had a brawl and a fight.

And then to show how - this is applicable to Greece to some extent much later - to show how one can really get stonkered, absolutely worn out. And I, my goings on always had to start before the others 'cause I had to go out do the recce, or usua... - often have to do the recce and then come back and be prepared. While they were at conferences on how to capture the place and so on, I would be out finding the, fixing marking the way in leaving my blokes as guides and such, and come back and then have to, and come back and go out and do it all over again. And we were, I was moving across, again, some open ground and it got pinned by machine-gun and with Harold Austin, a bloke from the Western District, a great big broad-shouldered

fellow, I don't know how the hell he ever missed being shot, don't know how you'd miss him. But, and again machine-gun came from a flank and I, we dropped to the ground and I had a bush just in front of me. Between me and the machine-gun was a bush about eighteen inches high with some straggly dry leaves on it. And this machine-gun was knocking bits, a leaf would every now and again be knocked off the bush by this machine-gun which was advice to me to keep myself very closely down to the ground. And it must have been gone on for quite a while, 'cause I went to sleep, and, while these things were falling on me. And Harold Austin, when it stopped, Harold Austin got up first and we were both going to go on, he raced across to me, he thought I'd had it but I was just asleep.

(5.00) That day, I think it could be the 2/8th march of something like twenty miles ...

Yes.

... and fighting for something like five hours, must have been just extremely exhausting.

Yes.

And just physically exhausting.

Well, that's, fortunately is relevant to the point that I have just been illustrating. It really was, to the extent of making you, sending you semi-unconscious. If you stop for long enough, you become, a tiredness that is really unconsciousness almost.

So you take a lot of casualties.

Yes.

What, over 100 casualties?

Yes.

What's the impact of that on the battalion?

They're proud of themselves and sorry for themselves. But they're sorry for themselves because, old Jimmy Higginbotham's not there anymore, he's dead out there, two or three others have got holes through their legs or arms or chests. This is thinking of, say, from just a section or a platoon point of view, when I say two or three. In fact quite a lot were in total in the battalion. And they've had to walk, if they've been, say, the second wave, they've had to walk across areas where there were maybe some of their mates from the other companies with black covers or blankets over the top of them, presumed dead, as the man would think. Or if not, well then pretty badly hit. And yet you can't say, alright, I'll stop and I'll go and help 'em. You've got to get on with it and leave it to the stretcher bearers. So, and this was their, Tobruk was their real test because, as I say, Bardia was a cleaning-up operation which involved a few casualties but it wasn't a real showdown knockout fight the way this was. And the effect .... Also they would, when the day finished, be stonkered from the point of view of tiredness as we've just been discussing.

In the intelligence section have you got that sort of coherence that also you would have, say, if you'd been with a platoon, you would have had a very strong ...

That's right.

... group feeling. Is the same thing happening with the battalions?

No, it doesn't and that's one of the disappointing things about being with the intelligence, being running, or being the battalion IO. You have this small team and when the battle starts, or - they do various roles at the beginning such as, especially with the guiding-in and doing, and before that going out into the no-man's land, the area, and registering where shells fall most and so on, hoping they mustn't register quite on you, and making a map of the shell falls so that we can better guide the battalion in without getting too many casualties. But when the battle starts, I'm, say, at headquarters and they go, each one of them goes out each of them - one goes out to each company, that's what I'm trying to say, and then others are called upon to start mapping something else. It's a matter of dispersing, not, you don't act as a body at all; of course. It's hard to see how you could anyhow, but you don't. You don't sort of reassemble really until either by chance or until the thing's over almost.

How much rest do you get before you're moving on to Derna or wherever?

Well, in this case, in the case of, I think, for Derna we only had about a day, or it was almost the next day. Because Red Robbie was steamed up and quite rightly, this was the Rommel tactic, of course, only done on a smaller way by Red Robbie, push on as soon as, just take a deep breath and push on, keep right up against them. And with our brigade, that was certainly the case. We were never even allowed to think that, and that having been known, you never draw a deep breath and take a week's leave. The blokes are on the run, keep them that way, and they won't be on the run if you allow enough space between the two of you. So, we raced off and we were in Derna and around Derna before, I can't remember how long it was, but it was just a sort of continuing thing almost. And it was in Derna, in my case, in the IO's case, only one company went out to try to stop, get through a certain, get at Derna through a certain direction. And I went out with 'em and found myself coming back with them, guiding them back in the dark with compass and so on 'cause my old mate Mick Dwyer who was with the company had been, had got a bullet through the chest and was in trouble, and so I came out as their guide showing them, finding the way out in the dark. Came back with them when they had to get out, when they were withdrawing.

(10.00) So, and then, after, from Derna on I became, I again had to take in a sort of advance party with my sergeant and corporal, on for the next move behind the tanks, keeping up closely behind the tanks. And a company of the battalion came also, and it was there that my two blokes were out, captured, grabbed an Italian motorbike and were more enthusiastically exploring than I'd told them to and they ran across a mine and that killed one and blew the leg off the other bloke. And we pushed on, and were, indeed, in due course held up by an Italian ambush, well, the mobile armoured people ahead of us were first and we copped it because we were just not far behind. And that's the occasion when Alan Moorehead got, was in a truck, determined to be first into somewhere, which was frequent, 'I was first into ....' After this occasion I began to get very cross about hearing that expression in a journalist's copy because in this case he was going to be 'first into', but what happened was that he ran into the

ambush and his driver was killed, that was British army, and one bloke of ours was killed, and I think one wounded trying to get them all, unscramble them out. So I took a poor view of it.

> Do you ever get involved in the, this sort of, apparently a zig-zag raid on the way into Benghazi?

Yes. That's right. Yes, well, this was at the beginning of the approach to that, the road took a right hand turn, no, from our point of view it turned sharply to the left, and the ambush had been set up right on the road corner, and held everyone up of course, while then the Italians up sticks and raced off in the direction that we couldn't see. But we weren't from there on involved in other than peaceful pursuit, hell pursuits, because I don't think we had any fighting from there on.

> Where do you ... [inaudible]

To, ah ....

> ... where you come out of?

We came back to, wait a minute now. We came back to, oh, came back to Mersa Matrûh again, all the way back through the desert which gave me a chance of going through Tobruk for example, as IO, as an interesting off-shoot, perhaps, in the activities of the IO. We stopped there long enough for me to make sure that every company commander and his officers went the rounds just to make sure that what they were writing for me in the war diary which I had each officer write rather than .... The normal war diary is '8.30 enemy bombs, 9.30 a brigade commander called, 10.30 ...' - tells you nothing. And I had the things, as Gavin Long expressed appreciation of it somewhere, I had the story written from each company's point of view and then headquarter company which had a variety of people, whether they disagreed or not, if that's the way they saw it, then I collected that and put it in. So we did that on the way back.

> Have you got a NCO typist to handle .... How are you physically doing the diary?

Most of it was, there was an NCO typist at the battalion headquarters, yes, but most of the diaries were hand-ritten. I could, of course, type, having been a journalist. But I didn't undertake one of those. [inaudible] I can't remember now whether I kept a typewriter within reach for any of my own purposes. I think perhaps not, because if you're tapping away at a typewriter, other than when you're sure the enemy is a long way away, you never quite know what's going to follow.

So we went back slowly, drawing breath and reorganising and patching things up and getting ourselves together again to go to, to go back toward the Suez. And I can't remember now, because I took off ahead of the battalion, I left the battalion about a fortnight ahead to go to Greece, you see, with some of them with the, in fact the advance party. And I can't remember now where I took off from for that. I think it was Alexandria, and I can't remember whether the battalion had got back into Palestine or was still on Libyan side of the Canal. Can't remember that.

(15.00) Who goes with you when the advance party goes in?

Ah. I had a serg... a platoon, a, the transport officer and a couple of sergeants.

> How good is your knowledge of the higher parts of the strategy at this time? Are you apprehensive about Greece right from the start? You know, are you picking up things from ...?

Mm. I, my recollection, well, it's more than my recollection, I'm sure of this. We didn't know enough of higher strategy to think that this was any more than a useful thing. Seemed to be from all respects, in all respects a useful thing to do. That we, the Germans were going to descend upon the Greeks, they hadn't yet. The Italians were already into Albania and that here was the war in Europe. We were going to be part of the war in Europe and we were going to stop the Germans getting into Greece.

Now that's, of course, ridiculous to think that way. But I've only realised, mostly of late years, when I think of war correspondents, for example, I have a friend living not far away here who was a war correspondent in Europe. We didn't see, what one forgets is, we didn't see newspapers every day. We didn't have any picture of what was happening in the world as a whole, not as good a picture as people at home would have, because we wouldn't really get the - oh, we had the 'something News', *AIF News* or something like that, which we'd see reports. But that was a very different thing from seeing a newspaper with pictures and so on as you would do if you were at home each day, and from all parts of the world, the news from all parts of the world. So we were, I say we, we at battalion level, not very full bottles on the world picture, especially the sophisticated side of the world picture. By which I mean what one subsequently learnt that Churchill was offering help to the Greeks beforehand and the Greeks, Papagos wouldn't accept it because he felt that would encourage the Germans to come and attack them and give them an excuse, and then eventually that changed and they said, they did want help because the Germans were obviously going to descend upon them. This we didn't know about, and we, when I say we, I'm of course speaking, claim to be speaking for a lot of others, but I'm damn sure when we were shunted off to Greece we thought that .... This is of course, we'd be round about for a fair while and would really be doing some good for the cause.

> So what's your job?

In Greece?

> Mm.

Well, firstly, as the advance party, I went right up to north of Greece pretty early in the peace and did a circuit around with others of the same, people from other battalions. And from Veria across from the west, from the east toward the centre and then down again, having in mind guiding the battalion around, up there in due course and .... Because I don't think anyone would have been quite clear at that stage whether we, our troops when they arrived would be going by train or bus or truck, or what. That was part of it and, of course, the transport blokes' job was to organise the transport to .... Our transport came early I think, yes, that's right. Transport came early, they got that over early. And also we had separated from the battalion but went operating throughout the whole of the Greek campaign, Jock Adams and his boys who were anti-aircraft platoon who'd been put out to work on the ships, helping with the anti-aircraft [inaudible], coverage of the ships. But they weren't with my party,

though. I've since, I'm a bit, it's, I've since read somewhere that the party was more than that but I can't remember the other people and what they were doing 'cause after all it's .... Next year's fifty years of ageing brains.

You don't have very long before you're involved.

That's right.

In Greece. If you could, or, keep on going with this particular story.

(20.00) Yes. Well, that's true. I had, when I think it's, how short my time seemed to me and I was there about ten days or a fortnight before the rest of the battalion. And I was still, sort of grinding my teeth and finding bits of sand in it for, even when the battalion got there. Well, the battalion arriving, the battalion arrived there within - I had two or three days in Athens, about - maybe it was three or four - and then they were in trucks, railway trucks for a start. Some of them so recently dolled up for this purpose that they were still sticky from the tar and so on put on the floor of the trucks. Out of those into transport, out of the transport to be dumped, to wait until someone made up their mind which way they ought to go next and so on. And were on the move for four to five days, was it? So that add that to the time they were in use, it's almost, in Athens, it's almost only seven or eight days, say eight to ten, let's .... That, between the time they are in fact spluttering and scuffling the sand out of their mouths and trying to find a shady place, and sitting in at 4000 to 4500 feet with snow and sleet in an area where carriers and food could scarcely get up to them, when ....

But when they get there, there are the Germans. You'd look down and, 'You see 'em? They're down there', all in this .... Be jealous, beautiful comfort of this, all this mod con transport driving them right up to the place where they were going to come and have a go at you. And tanks and trucks and whole mod cons turned on. And here are our blokes, by now, having arrived at the, after three or four false starts, sent over to Veria, pack up again, go across to Xinon Neron, dig in, now undig and go on up the mountainside. And I, of course had to do this twice. I had to go up the mountainside to see where they had to go and then come back and get 'em and then go up again myself, while the company commander worked out their positions and so on.

So here, I'm trying to make the point of the suddeness of this change, and not only was it a sudden change, but, in temperature and climate, but when they were about, just about worn out by it, and our medical man, as you can see from the war diaries, was pronouncing twenty, thirty or something of them physically ill from altitude anoxaemia because of the speed of the change. And others just sheer ill exhaustion. They were up on top and not only was it a question of being up on top where they couldn't dig decent holes because there's rocks and not sand anymore, and they couldn't get their food up and they couldn't get their extra accoutr... er, gear up, but they looked down and there's the enemy ready to fight. And indeed, they were, that evening there was fighting when German patrols came around before our blokes had even finished scratching what they could out of the rocks.

And what are you doing?

Well, my first business was to get, when we finally got to the place where we were, where it had been decided we would now fight. First they thought we'd be fighting in Veria. Of course, when the Germans chose not to come that way but through Florina now we are, and I

was, of course, always in the sort of lead truck to guide and help as much as possible to get there in the best possible time. And at Xinon Neron when we dug in there, I had already been up to the mountain top to see where the place was and when the company came, and back, and when the company commanders were taken up with the CO and the brigadier and so on to finalise the sites, sighting, I came back as I said earlier to pick up the battalion and I did the, I led the battalion or guided it, well, led, went in front of the battalion and guided the battalion up the mountainside again and showed them where they had to go and where they were being allotted. Then, of course, it was .... I've never done so many varied jobs in my life really, it didn't seem to have anything to do with the time we were in Vevi Pass with being an intelligence officer.

(25.00) My blokes, one of my blokes went out to each one of the companies with, and we had to from there on try to prepare maps of where our positions were, once they were settled in so that they would be able to hear .... The space, the distance of two and a half miles was such that it was a little difficult to understand, even for the companies that were there, where the others were. And to be the link, my blokes, to be the link with battalion headquarters as to what was happening in that area. And before it was all over, in my case, I had, and the Germans had come round the flank and we were trying to get ammunition to our people up at the top and we couldn't get it up because the carriers - which were supposed to, seen as the ones that would be our God saving, well, save our lives, would take it up - well, they simply clogged up in the mud and rock and just didn't move any more. So A Company which was on the right had to provide working parties. And every, my job, I was told to grab anyone I could see in sight within reach of battalion headquarters and form working parties to get ammunition up on their shoulders, or on anyone who could find a donkey, on the backs[sic] of a donkey, and get it up to the battalions, to the companies which were facing the Germans, all except the right hand, extreme right hand company, were facing the Germans in terms of fighting, in fighting terms, night and day, but not continuously. The Germans made forays and then big attack and then got knocked back and then they'd lick their wounds for a while and then tried another way, and so on. And that was an ammun.... And I remember, myself. I'm sorry, I'm muddling this a bit, but when the Germans came, overran the British who are supposedly our left flank and there wasn't left flank anymore, it was Germans, that's the ranger battalion which was not meant to be a heavy battalion to fight German tanks and Germans, and the Germans went over them and so our left flank became a front as well, with Germans moving down where the British had been, British rangers had been, and shooting us from the side.

Well, therefore to take ammunition up to the blokes who were shooting from the front you had to run the gauntlet of streams of small arms and later tank fire coming in from your left. And I, this was a performance I didn't like at all. We managed, Tom Lowe the transport officer getting a, finding a mule that was strong enough to carry a good heap of ammunition and going and getting it up to the front while the Germans were, having a crack at you all. What do they call it? 'Fire-swept ground', all the way up to the front.

That was one aspect and then there was the question of trying to, no, I don't think, I didn't ever buy into the food carrying up, but with the Germans now on this flank, there was another job to do, and I was seeing that, this is by now the, this is getting on to the last day, I'd, I was assigned to form a rearguard over here to the left where the Germans were already firing at us. This was obviously going to push in there closer, and it had to have something to stop them there, after the companies had gone out to give the companies a chance to get out. And again, anything that was loose round the place I grabbed and formed as part of this rearguard, and

had operating there for some hours, using what we'd have called in the desert a 'sanger', a long wall of stone and so on to shelter us as much as possible. So I had a most varied occupation there. [Laughs.]

Two things occur to me that I should have asked you before, and I didn't. When you mentioned the sanger. There was an incident at the stone wall with Italian prisoners surrendered and then hand grenaded ...

Yes.

And then the Italians are shot. Where were you? Were you ...?

I didn't, I wasn't close to that. I was within reach of that but didn't see it, I heard of it. Because there was, it's quite a breadth of frontage that you have, the battalion had by then, narrow compared with Greece, but still one where you could be even one third of the way along it and if that happened at the other third, well, you just couldn't see it and didn't know what was going on. In any case you would be watching your own end of it, too, so I was in a part where that .... I was not in a part where that happened. And it's related perhaps to your earlier question about prisoners 'cause I, I don't think we took, I as IO took any notice of prisoners there was so many of them being pushed out and around and back. And any information you got from them now would be a bit late to have anyhow.

Have you got any comment on that, that you picked up from other people, to add to that story?

No, I know from a battalion point of view, the story was told as a just thing to do. That, if these bastards were going to line up and surrender, and then try sneaking a grenade out now and again, well, it's about time that the word was passed aro... word reached .... I don't know how it reaches them if they're dead, but it didn't kill that many. It was just a very angry retaliation.

Well the other thing that I should have asked was just about co-operation with the British forces, often the artillery use.

Yes.

With British and so on.

That's right.

Tanks?

Yes.

And you must have been involved in this to some extent as intelligence officer.

Yes, well, in, I don't remember ....

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A

> Tape Identification: This is the continuation of an interview with Mr Allan Fleming on 2 April 1990, being done in Melbourne and the interviewer is Hank Nelson. End of tape identification.

Thank you. We were talking about the, what became, what started off as being called Close Air Support Bomber Control which all really explains what we were talking about, I think. What it was supposed to do. It was the control of bombers working closely in support of ground troops. However, that was a mouthful so it was changed to 1 Aust Air Support Control, 1 Australian Air Support Control. We were attached to the 30th Corps of the 8th Army. The 8th Army comprising two major units, two major formations, one the 30th Corps commanded by then Major General Willoughby Norrie who later came out to South Australia as Governor, there. And the Chief of Staff was, of the British army side, was Cavan who later became Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

So, we went up to do our patriotic duty, working with the British, and we were, we the headquarters were placed side by side with General Norrie's big armoured control van and our signallers were dispersed among the brigades, in operating units, among the brigades and divisions controlled by Willoughby Norrie. And we were doing, we thought, really useful work, us with two station wagons, one for Malloy and myself and the driver and the other with the signallers to send messages from our side to the, putting them into the air support net, calling for air supports and getting information and so on, and I became concerned because having been in the infantry one resents the journey[?] going to a corps headquarters ....

And I thought that being close to, being linked with corps headquarters for a change was a very safe way of doing my duty in the war. And then, blow me down, I began to discover all sorts of things that happened to the infantry were happening again, with shells whistling past and so on. So I told our signallers to pack up 'cause I was sure we were going to advance shortly and just .... So we were all sitting ready for move and then without any word to us the doors of the big ACV slammed shut, and it just swung around and disappeared in a cloud of dust in the desert. Fortunately, as I had told my blokes we were going to advance we chose to retreat again, but at least we were ready and went off following it.

And not long before that General Cunningham who was commanding the show, the British show, had been landed in a Blenheim bomber to talk to General Norrie and he just got out by the skin of his teeth. They managed to get the Blenheim bomber off through clouds of dust and it just about cleared our ACV by about ten feet and scampered off - or no, Blenheims don't scamper - flew off to, back for, to army headquarters, but just made it with now the tanks .... It was rather like a round up of rabbits in the inland to me, you know. They have rabbit drives every now and again. Well, here were the Germans with Rommel at the lead, in the lead, and I really mean in the lead, too, going like blazes, charging away at these British tanks on a narrow front so that the British didn't quite know how many there were, but where the Germans were impinging, they really were pressing. And we fled off, *we* decided it was very brave of us to follow Willoughby Norrie and not to confront the enemy. And we stopped, caught up with them - by now the German tanks were visible in the distance and things were landing around everywhere - and left and right, as far as you could see, was dust rising from the British forces going for their lives back towards Egypt.

(5.00) And we were asked by General Willoughby Norrie - I beg your pardon, we are talking of the army - we were told by a messenger from Willoughby Norrie to halt our vehicles and would we send a signal on our radio set, that's our second vehicle, because theirs wasn't in order. And so we said, certainly sir, and we were standing at the back of it with our troops, er, our signallers, sending the message when slam went the door of the ACV and off went the big truck once again, the big van once again. However, we faithfully had the message sent and the message began, this is - how typically British this is. The message began something like this, addressed to General Cunningham and headquarters army, 'Some slight disturbance caused by enemy' and then got on to some other rigmarole.

So by the time we'd sent it the van was out of sight, we managed to slam the back door of the station wagon and set off and there was confusion everywhere, still, getting worse. And we got separated from the station wagon, from the signal station wagon, and raced over a rise somewhere and not too sure where we were going except that we had enough guide by where the dust was rising most to follow that, and found ourselves then suddenly being coursed by a tank, by coursed I mean C-O-U-R-S-E-D as if you were a greyhound chasing a hare, from a distance which obviously wasn't ours, or at least wasn't friendly because it was firing at us. Then we swung a bit left which was counter to the way, the direction most of the people were going and ran into .... Another snout appeared over the sand dunes and let fly at us from a tank and so we swung further left and there we saw some of our own vehicles tucked away in a wadi - a sort of a gully in the desert we call them, we call it a wadi. And we raced over there and swung ourselves into this wadi with the, there were two of our vehicles there, thank goodness. Except that their, the occupants of these vehicles, when they saw us surge in, had their mouths wide open but they had their pistols out. And our mouths opened wide, too, because we were, instead of being in our own, they had been our own vehicles but now they were owned by Germans.

So here we were prisoners with the Germans. And they took the driver away fairly quickly and Malloy and myself were carted off to a place nearby which turned out to be General Ravenstein headquarters. General Ravenstein being the commander of one of the armoured divisions controlled by Rommel. And as we got there, we had just been carted over there when a, just, at least we saw some evidence of the effectiveness of our air support because some bombs landed on this area and it blew up about two or three ammunition trucks, thoroughly spoilt forever about half-a-dozen Germans, left a few more wounded and in trouble and fortunately, it may sound contradictory, but fortunately for me I got a slice across the arm which produced a very nice squirt of British blood and was useful a little bit later because a six-foot-six German with -eyes, and a Nazi type, you could see it a mile - and eyes with that soft gentleness you get in a glass bottle of pale blue, came toward me and put his revolver in the sensitive part of my stomach and seemed as if he was going to take his revenge out on me. Fortunately, this time, from the distance came another order sound and this was a much shorter and pleasanter-looking German who turned out to be a senior captain, thank God ... that is he had superiority over this one who was planning to ventilate me. And he told him to buzz off somewhere, I suppose, it must have been in German. And it turned out he was a rather gentle schoolteacher of about forty who spoke English not badly and seemed to take a kinder view of us, and was very upset about me, my British blood squirting, and we got that fixed up.

(10.00) And then we were moved into a caravan nearby, not the size of the big ones where the commanders lived but one that was sort of Ravenstein's food and comfort van. And we were

put there, put beside that and then eventually allowed to get in and sit while another bombing came over and caused a lot of trouble.

And then we all moved off. The headquarters moved off further across the desert, obviously moving further toward Libya, toward Egypt, because of the success of Rommel's drive and we stopped, oh, a few miles further on. And we were put in possession into an ammunition truck - that made us quake a little because every time bombs came over they blew up an ammunition truck - and in charge of two blokes. One was, one was, had relations living in England.. He came from South Africa but he was a German and a Nazi, so he was in charge of the truck. And the other bloke was a little buck-toothed bloke who was called Meecosh. He had some other name but we couldn't work it out, so we called him Meecosh. And they were our guards.

Now, why should we have been put in, carted round in an ammunition truck, why as prisoners of war hadn't they sent us off and got rid of us? The answer I think, and have thought since, is because it was extraordinary to see two Australians out there when the Australian army wasn't supposed to, two Australian officers, when the Australian army wasn't supposed to be anywhere involved in this campaign, and that if there was an extra Australian division which had suddenly come up and the Germans didn't know, well, this was pretty important news. And so I, they, that's why they placed us, I think, in a truck and kept us there for days - they didn't send us back to prisoners' cell[?] - with this English-speaking pair around. And perhaps it wired for sound, for all I know, or they had it was wired for sound possibly, to hear what Malloy and I were saying and what we might have that would interest them about our possible Australian division. I'm abbreviating this, strangely enough, it could go on for hours.

But that night we were put out to sleep beside a big gun, one of those, I forget what they were called, those great long snouts on a caterpillar moving stand, and they were ack-ack as well as anti-tank. And we were put out to sleep and it was very cold in the desert, apart from the weather being bad, it would have been *really* cold. And of course, we had just our greatcoat each and lucky to have that, too. And we were lying on the desert tossing and turning at night, but it was convenient for the Germans because they had a guard on, sitting on the top of the gun who was there ready to let fly should there be any change in the fortunes of the war. And again, in passing, the gun was pointing directly across the, into the British side, across the border, where as I subsequently learnt the Indian, staying and working with the Indian division was an old mate of mine named Chester Wilmot who was, as we discovered later, at, must have been exactly there at this time. That night it was, as I said, freezing cold and the German got .... We were tossing and turning and suddenly we felt comfortable again because we each had a blanket. The German had got down from the top of the tank and given us a blanket each.

The following morning we were with our, under guard in the ammunition truck again when two or three motorcyclists came in to talk to our friend who was running the van. And they presented him with something which he was very scared about, very worried about. It was a bottle and it had, it was marked as high explosive, with four Xs on it, and he was very worried about that. But it was, had things in English on it and we thought, gee .... He proffered it to us to explain so we explained that yes, it would be very bad for him, he should really let us, we knew how to handle it. And so Malloy and I had just finished cleaning up this bottle of XXXX when we were nudged by the Germans around to, and said, 'Rommel, Rommel, Rommel', and you could see that Rommel was Kingdom Come for them, he was, really had high marks. They really regarded him with reverence and awe almost, and with a certain, and

with a sort of adoration as well. And there, coming across the desert up to see Ravenstein, obviously, was this little van, this little Volkswagen-type van with Rommel-glasses on and his, that cap that bumps up in front, hanging onto the windscreen - the desert was fairly flat and level there - and drove in, with about three or four motorcycles in front of him, three or four behind him, and moving over to have a session with Ravenstein. And, as I subsequently learnt later, that night Rommel had, who was really in front of his troops with his armoured stuff, as I said earlier, had spent the night - we didn't know this at the time - he'd spent the night in a position near the wire with the Indian division on one side of him, and I'm not sure which similar unit was on the other side of him. He was there in the space between so that he could, and his two men with him, could overhear the British talking. He'd got away quite early in the morning and they hadn't realised he was within reach of them.

So he came, Ravenstein had a very comfortable, splendid van, rather like Willoughby Norrie's which had been, as so many of their things were, captured from the British. And he was standing beside that having a session with Rommel about the fortunes of war obviously and Rommel .... And now and again our own air force was still causing people to duck, well, though Rommel didn't, was too dignified to do that, I did. And Malloy and I, were within reach and were told very soon after, very soon, that Rommel - I nearly said that Rommel would like to speak to us - we were told to go over and speak to Rommel. And I can't remember for sure the extent to which Rommel spoke English or not. There wasn't, Ravenstein as I recall spoke English, but mostly I think of it as Rommel talking. And we were asked, of course, he said, 'You Australians move around a lot', something like this, instead of being silly enough to say what's your rank, name and number. And we said, 'Oh, yes, we do'. And he said, 'Oh, and your unit is, where is your unit?'. And we said, our name, 'my name's Fleming and I'm a captain' and this, and so on. And 'I'm VX3359'. And that didn't get very far, so then he said, 'You know, you Australians are very good fighters', and I said, 'Well, I'm glad to know that. You Germans are quite good, too, I think so'. And then he said, 'And you know, but you know we will win the war. You will not win the war'. And I, thinking that well, he's known to be a, to treat prisoners reasonably well and I didn't think there would be any risk, and I said, 'Well, I'm sorry, sir, I don't think you will win the war, and I think we will win the war'. And then I carried on to say, 'And also, to help us we have a very, we have a secret weapon'. And I turned round and pointed at the XXXX bottle of beer. Now, I'm not sure how you would translate the expression on his face, whether it was unwillingly surr... or whether it was pain, or a sort of grimace, or an appreciation of a superb wit, I'm not sure which of these things it might have been. It showed a sort of not .... It broke up the stern lines of his face. And he, by the way, was a little nuggety bloke, just the way he looks in the pictures, a little, tough, nuggety fellow, and sharp as a tack. 'Ah, so', that, having settled the fate of the war in that way, Rommel then went off to deal with other more important matters, and we were all stacked up and carted off across the desert. Us, carrying again, being carried in the back of the ammunition truck which made us nervous because .... And our bombing came over and it was really fascinating, not quite enjoyable, of course, but fascinating to see that .... To think, the way we were belted up in Greece, and the way they'd stop all trucks and jump out beside the truck and get to some shelter if you could find it. Here, bless their souls, the Germans were doing exactly the same thing every time our bombers came over.

We had in mind that if we could, we'd have another sort of bir, get another sort of bir in the desert, you know, B-I-R. They have those wells of long, ages ago, they were built there and stayed there for, to catch rain for the travellers across the desert. And we had hoped that we could slip out the back of the truck some time if one of this, some of the bombing was on and

get into a bir. But it just didn't ever happen that way and there was always another truck behind us, close enough to make sure we couldn't do this.

(20.00) So, we were carted around this way for days and then finally we were taken to just outside Ed Duda, was it? The 9th Div, 13th Battalion I think was still in Tobruk and we, the Germans were determined to capture this area and they got stuck into it, a splendid attack - tanks and things going around everywhere as usual. And our ammunition truck was taken there to provide some help and we were asked to ammunition, to help ammunition, unload the ammunition 'cause they were in a hell of a hurry. Oh, well, we folded our arms and said something rude and I think they thought, well, probably that's about as much use as these blokes would be to us and so we were sent up a gully to a wadi to join, to go into a big area, or taken up a big area, quite a large area, which showed how confused this great battle had been, and of course, it was one of the big tank battles of the war. This thing had been going on, raging for a week or more. And it comprised a New Zealand hospital that had been overrun, a lot of, it was also used as a prisoner place, as an ammunition supply place, it was just a bit of everything that had finished up there. And we were taken up and put under control in, or put under guard in this along with quite a group of New Zealanders.

And somehow we had never accepted from the beginning that we were going to be taken back to Germany by this mob .... We were going to get away one way or the other. Fortunately some of the, most of the New Zealanders were like-minded. And Malloy had put a compass down his leg when first captured, and it was held by the gaiter at the bottom and they didn't know we had it. We were minus a map so I set off, wandered around the place and saw a German officer's tent and slipped in the side and managed to find a map in there. And was just coming out when a bayonet appeared around the flap of the tent, and I can't - this is quite honest - I cannot to this day quite work out how I managed to get out of there. I did. The bayonet was followed by an eyetie guard and I don't know whether we had a conversation, or whether I did something, or whether - he couldn't have done much I suppose, otherwise I wouldn't be here. But anyhow, I got out with the map and we ....

And so we had a map and a compass and these New Zealanders were interested. We decided on a plan which was, with the New Zealanders, a plan. As there were trucks parked obviously, there had to be trucks there parked all round the place. And the idea was the nearest, or the second nearest one, so that the first one goes into the [inaudible], that's the one we'd pick, try to slip some, make sure it had petrol in it, if not, get some petrol transferred into it during the day when things were, distractions were going on, and with in mind that the flap of it would be hanging down and loose for the night, and into that would get all those who were in the plot and that .... The idea was that, as every, you know when it was dark, there was always a - we'd noticed the first night - there were always trucks, convoys going past making that rrrrrrr noise through the desert and they would frequently come by. Some would stop, some would come by and carry on. And our plan was that we, at 9.30 we would want to leave a bit before 9.30 and hope that a convoy would come before then and we'd hitch on at the end and, out of sight of the camp, we would swing off left and go in the opposite direction.

And 9.30 came and there was nothing, nothing doing. So we decided we had to go anyhow, when suddenly a convoy sounded, and there we were. We started up, swung round, got at the back of this convoy, about 100, 200 yards out in the dark, turned left, did about fifty miles south with our beautiful compass and map, must have gone over minefields, German camps, God knows what we went through because we couldn't really see clearly. If any German

noises sounded, I was one of those who called out 'Heil Hitler', which seemed to keep them at peace. And then swung toward, then swung again toward Egypt, having gone due south about fifty miles. And then - and that was a terrible day, fog, lowering morning, lowering and lowering, couldn't see anything, we had to stop. And the wire across the desert, of course, had only a few openings, if you didn't hit an opening in the wire, our beautiful compass, it was stuffed. We couldn't see a damn thing. And then, at a crtical - well, not a critical, I suppose, no one else could see us - when the murk lifted and there right in front of us was the opening in the wire. So three cheers for the Big Fella and we went through the opening in the wire, still not sure, of course, whose army was where, got through it and then found there were three tanks again on ridges, keeping their snouts up, grinning at us the way a tank does if you've ever had one at you, that thing that swings the gun around looks like a set of false, iron false teeth around the front of it. And they didn't shoot at us this time. And then in due course they watched us warily as we came in and, all was well, no shooting and then we stopped because tents and things started to appear in the distance. And bless my soul, we were at 8th Army Headquarters.

(25.00) And we were immediately, nearly immediately, raced off to see Auchinleck who'd by now taken over, and Cunningham having been replaced by Ritchie, Ritchie having been replaced by Auchinleck. And we were raced over to talk to Auchinleck because Malloy had known him actually, funnily enough, in regular army days in India, when Auchinleck was a British commander. And Auchinleck wanted to know from us, having as we'd lived with the Germans for eight or nine days, where they were getting their supplies from and so on. And so we were able to tell them a lot that was useful there. And so end of that adventure, which must be rather rare in the sense, not only of Australians talking to Rommel, but in the sense that here were two people who had discussed the fate of the battle with a field marshal, or he nearly was, a full general over that side, on the enemy side, and went across and continued the discussion with the other side. So there's that story.

How long do you stay in the Middle East?

After that we, the battle was ended temporarily, not long after that. Our unit was, had been at work still, and we came back .... It was now December, yes, and we came back, that's right, went back to Palestine, oh, and it was decided we'd come back to Australia in, was it early 1942? That's right. This had all happened in the October, November, December '41, after Greece, that's right. Most of this - that was a packed year wasn't it? Greece, first Libya, then Greece, then Crete, then this one, for us. Of course, no other, very few other Australians were involved in this battle. In fact, I think we were the only ones.

And then on the way back to Australia, or when we landed here, I forget when it happened, I was made OC of the, Malloy, in place of Malloy, I took over as OC in the unit. And we got back to Australia in, oh it might have been in April, I think it was probably before that. And we were posted, the unit was posted to Red Robbie's Armoured Brigade up at Singleton where I .... This is where I, I'm not sure we were too popular there because the poor old Armoured Brigade, bursting to have a go at things, couldn't, nothing happened, and Red Robbie, who was terribly keen on his boys from the Middle East - I suppose, I'd been in one of his [inaudible] and one of his units in 2/8th Battalion under Robbie, too. And he had a complete parade, Armoured Division had a parade and who was put in front of the parade to lead the parade but the 2/1st Aust AL Secti... the Air Support Control Unit. Not very popular, I can assure you.

You go to be an instructor at this RAAF school of army/air co-operation.

Oh, yes. I wasn't long with the armoured division because I was shunted over to be an instructor at the RAAF school, for the obvious reason that I was the only bloke around in Australia who'd ever been involved in this Air Support Control system.

And what's the ...? Are you lecturing?

Yes. Lecturing, running demos and that sort of thing. There was another army instructor there. Irvine Andrews from the UK, who'd been more on the air liaison officer side - he was one of their first VCs in the UK - was an army instructor. And then later Sammy Hall - 'cause I was only a captain, oh, I think I'd been made a major, yes, I'd been a major by now, and usually the army bloke was lieutenant-colonel. Sammy Hall, an army signaller, was there for a while. Blake Pelly, the group captain, air force, DFC, was the air force, OCO, commander of the school, too, because we were an air force school.

You must now be starting to change your presumptions about where you were going to fight. Your experience is desert and so on.

Mm.

And so where you ...? Are you getting information about the Japanese [inaudible] and about the south west district? It's a completely different terrain[?].

Yes. But it was still at the stage where it required a lot of sorting out. And the application of what, for example, the application of what we had run into in both Greece and, well, we didn't - I wasn't involved in applying army/air co-operation in Greece - but the application of it to the desert was very different from what, of course, it would be in New Guinea where the Kokoda Trail was still, and Japs were still to be pushed up from their sudden thrust, and pushed back to the north eastern coast.

So when do you actually first go to New Guinea?

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE B

Identification: This is Tape three, Side B of the interview with Mr Allan Fleming held on 2 April 1990. End of identification.

So when, do you get to New Guinea with that New Guinea air liaison group or did you get there before that?

I went to New Guinea as CO of the 1 Aust Air Liaison Group, yes, which was in April '43 or thereabouts, and after the time as instructor, and spent about ten months or so doing that, I think.

Where were you physically located?

Physically at Moresby but with about thirty or forty officers spread around the island wherever there were air force squadrons. And, in my own case, although physically located at Moresby taking, doing quite a bit of stuff over the enemy lines and round about. It was an interesting example of the problems of adjusting to air use for, as part of a total operation of army/air. And I imagine that the New Guinea campaign was one where you could really say that the army and the air force were doing a combined operation all the time. You captured an airfield, so that aeroplanes could land there and supply, with air dropping or whatever, troops further on. And also to have fighters there, so that they could beat up the bombers that came to bomb your troops. And the next phase, the air force wanted some, wanted an airfield over there, so the army went to capture that while the air force was .... It was utterly inter-connected all the way, I think. And a massive thing when you add all the American, as it finally developed the American air force to lead all the army operations.

But an early, interesting aspect was the, that in New Guinea, New Guinea Force issued an instruction, I wasn't at New Guinea Force, I lived with the air force, with General Whitehead, the commander of the 5th, Advanced Echelon, 5th Air Force - and New Guinea force issued an instruction - saying that their officers were not to fly with air force without permission. It had in mind, very much, I think, probably had in mind, that people who were on - well, I don't know, what would people fly for though? They had a mate who would take them across the sea to the other battalion across the way or something like this, but anyhow, this led me to issue an instruction, of which I didn't send New Guinea Force a copy, to all members of the air liaison organisation saying that 'you are expected to fly if and when possible and if and when acceptable to the air force and within reason', meaning not every day, 'with the unit to which you are attached'. It is not very likely that we will get much co-operation from the air force to assist the ground troops if we showed that we were not willing [to] share their dangers with them. I didn't dare send a copy to the New Guinea Force in case they already had intended this instruction to apply to our people as well. And, indeed, there were quite a lot of, a very large number of ALOs and officers who were killed.

Talking, I think, of - we were talking of the instruction going out to ALOs about various things. Well ....

I was just going to ask you, how much actual flying did you do, yourself?

Oh, yes, that's right, we're getting up to that. Well, I would do about, at least once a week, would go out. Or perhaps not, once a fortnight, 'cause once a week, once a week would have been forty or fifty missions, about forty or so missions but I didn't do as many as that, twenty or thirty I did in the period I was up there. And some of our ALOs did as many as seventy or eighty.

And what sort of things would these aircraft be doing, that you're in?

Well, one of the most, *the* most interesting and most exciting ones I would, if I cover that I would give, it would be applicable to all in general, was that if one pictures New Guinea, there's the big river about, the, what's the name of the river?

(5.00) Markham [inaudible]

The Markham Valley, yes, thank you, that goes along and then if you picture Lae at the end of that and then up top is Madang, and then way down south is Moresby. Well, we were at a

stage once where the Japs were building a road down the Markham, down the Bogadjim Road starting about Madang and just drop it, see it in the mind and drop it on the map, southwards toward that valley area to assist their movements and operations in there. And they still - or did I say, *we* had captured Lae, and of course, had our big headquarters of the air force at Moresby and at other places round about by then. But the Japs were considerably interested in the Bogadjim Road and for military purposes, military and air purposes, wanted to beat it up and stop it, and slow it down. So it was decided that there would be a beat up of the Bogadjim Road, dropping, going southward from Lae, from Madang, and the US air force was, plus the RAAF task force, were turning on about a 100 bomb, 100 to 110 bombers, at least 100 bombers and strafers; they would bomb or strafe, mostly both. And to cover them, 'cause the Japs were still very busy up along Wewak way and such, to cover them there would be about 100 or so fighters.

So we set off. Wonderful armada. It didn't all, it sort of gathered together up near Madang and as we got close to Madang the number of aeroplanes was doubled because the Japs had obviously decided to beat up Lae and had also a cover of a similar number of fighters. And there must have been, there were at least three to four hundred aeroplanes, I think, all swirling .... They met about the same time, around about this Bogadjim Road area above the Bogadjim Road. Well, while the fighters got stuck into it up above, we, I was in the lead aeroplane, a Mitchell bomber/strafer, and my bloke's realised there was nothing he could do about that lot, he'd get on with his business. So we got, swung over Madang and got onto the Bogadjim Road and zoomed down the Bogadjim Road bombing and strafing anything in sight, with all the others peeling off and coming around behind. And we got out at the far end and started off, nothing more, as I say, we could do anyhow.

We started off for home, which was to go along the river valley and then turn off right to come to Moresby. And we were doing that fine and I was very happily thinking, well, the rough stuff's over, all those blokes are busy with something else, and we were driving along and I suddenly realised that another bomber was driving along beside us, about fifty yards away, it seemed to me, or perhaps, it must have been more, about 100 yards away. No, it must have been less than that, too. And then I just casually looked, then looked back to the pilot and went straight on saying something. I looked hard again, and bless my soul, I was sure there were little slant eyes and funny faces over in that aeroplane. And bless my soul, there were. This was a Jap bomber on his way to bomb Lae which took you in the same direction for a while before we had to peel off to go to Moresby. And we were flying along side by side and he was, these little eyes were staring across at us, flickering backwards and forwards, and then his mates in front. And our bloke, I said to our bloke, 'I hope you blokes don't think you've got to fight. Bombers don't fight bombers, do they?'. And he said, he looked and he wondered and fortunately he agreed with my theory that bombers never fought bombers and he muttered, 'Oh, well, poor bugger's probably got a wife and kids at 'ome, same as I have, so we'll call it a day', and swung off and went, came down to Moresby. [Laughs.] That'll perhaps give a picture of what that part of our life was like.

Interestingly enough, talking of something that sounds slightly theatrical, the bloke who was the Chief of Staff, Chief of Staff at the 5th Air Force, along with Whitehead, was Colonel Merian C. Cooper. Now those who are much older than you would remember that when the King Kong series began the man, one of the two, who created King Kong was Merian C. Cooper, film producer. And so this was the bloke who was Chief of Staff of the 5th Air Force, with whom I had a helluva lot to do, and he'd be .... Again, illustrating this way you worked, all the pilots would be gathered there, [inaudible] commanders, and we'd gathered in

Whitehead's headquarters big room there, briefing room, and Whitehead would be telling them this tomorrow, and for sure, he'd finish up saying something, 'And the only good Jap is a dead Jap. Take 'em out'. This would be Whitehead, and round, skirting round the edge of this group, muttering - 'cause he was always untidy, he used to have one sock on frequently and he'd go down to his colonel assistant's office and pick up a pipe, it would then turn out to be the colonel assistant's pipe, and he'd walk round smoking it. And he would be running around the edge of this group saying, 'And General, tell them not to bomb the Australians'.

(10.00) How did you generally get on with the Americans?

Wonderfully, oh yes, with this good li.... And old, well, 'Coop', for example, a messenger would come to me when I was trying to sleep about three in the morning and I'd be asked to go up, would I go up the hill and see Colonel Cooper. So I go up, muttering nasty words, and here'd be old Coop out on the verandah, he didn't, I don't think he ever slept. And he'd be there with his pipe and he'd say to me, 'Colonel, I've been thinkin' about that operation today, our operation today. What do you think of putting so and so? Do you think that if we did that, the Japs would do this?'. So we'd start on it.

And so I found it was really pleasant. They were, they really were all for getting on with the job and they made a remarkable difference to our success in the long run, success in New Guinea. And indeed, rather, obviously they thought we weren't too bad, because they wouldn't, if any squadron arrived without one of, without an ALO, they didn't ever take any steps to get an American ALO, they demanded to have an Australian ALO. And they wanted to, when they left, if they had to leave later to go to other parts of the area, the operating area of the Pacific, they practically always asked could they have their Australian ALO stay with them. And we sent, was it six, or something like that, I nominated to go to America by request and teach ALOing there. So we must have got on well.

> What about with some of the major landings? Were you there when, say, [inaudible] and [inaudible], which ones of those, those amphibious landings?

Yes. No, I had come back. I didn't go on any of those in New Guinea, I forget what the time relationships were, but in my ten months, after my ten months was over I went back to be G Air. Well, I suppose really the head army/air bloke with Advance Headquarters. But before skipping. Our blokes were, our people as a whole were involved in units but we didn't have the equivalent of the Borneo operation which was really the final climax, the refinement of all that we'd been learning and building up to. And you're probably, are you referring to that later, or will I mention that now. Perhaps if it was, we could mention it now, would I?

> Alright, yes.

I was out of being CO by then and went back and had become involved very much with dear old General Berryman, had sort of adopted me somewhat, and kept me hitched to him for army/air matters after I came back from New Guinea. He seemed to feel that I ought to be the sort of a channel to his bloke from keeping sure that this thing worked well for the rest of the war. And I used to supervise, coordinate the thing as a whole whether I was there or in Melbourne, or other places. And the climax of all .... It doesn't mean to say I was the God Almighty sent to, as a gift to these people, they were all a splendid group and Tim Cape, who later - regular army bloke - who later became major-general, post-war, had a lot of credit for it. He was G1 Air New Guinea Force when I was up there as the CO. He and others shaped

the Borneo landing operations, the whole three of them which used air, army/air co-operation to the greatest degree and to the greatest effectiveness that we had ever achieved. Oh, appropriately enough of course, because this was the culmination of all the experience we'd been having, and expensive in terms of lives, it cost lives.

And where were you by this, and where were you when [inaudible] went wrong, where were you?

(15.00)I thought I was going to be the architect of a bigger and even more splendid operation because Berry, meaning General Berryman whenever I refer to Berry, had been assigned to be the planner of a bigger, was one of the major operations for Australia in the war, it would have been, which was that we were to, Australians were to get, come in at Aparri in the north of the Philippines with vast air support and down, maybe parachute support to move down the middle of the valley that goes right up and down, north and south along Luzon starting at the north end at Aparri. And we spent, I spent months, people like Brigadier Bell who, as he became later on, Bertram, quite a well-known, regular army people. Well-known in the sense that they were regarded as pretty high in their profession. I was hooked in as, taken into it all as the, although I'm a bit of a mug, the only courses I ever did during the war were mortar, pistol and grenade and the army co-operation, I didn't even go to staff school. Though all these blokes were well, heavily trained in staff work and such, and I was to be the air planner and so on, which was a big part of it, of course, because of the nature of the operation. And Borneo and all the rest of it was going on or being planned while we were tucked away doing this other thing very secretly. And I always had a sneaking feeling that, quote, 'I shall return', unquote, surely Minthy[?] was going to be first in to lose honour and he was really going to let the Australians come in here and do this, meaning MacArthur. And sure enough, in the long run the whole damn thing was cancelled. He decided, MacArthur decided to go in some other way and I didn't get involved in it. So that's what I was very much involved in.

Where were you doing that?

Ah, Hollandia, Morotai, and then finally up to Leyte itself, Leyte Gulf. Our one and only daughter was born when I was at Leyte and but by then, of course, Luzon was being, they were ready to go to Luzon. And so that wonderful, it would have been a wonderful operation for Australia, but it wasn't to be.

Yes, all those forces were just diverted weren't they ...

Mm.

[inaudible].

Yes. And so the culmination of all our wartime efforts and army/air co-ops and its developments and, indeed, we were, I think we had a lot to show people elsewhere in the world. It was in Borneo that's when the major demonstration of how good we were happened. And it was very successful. And that was due to the other blokes who'd been leading the band in it. Tim Cape as I say, with all his splendid ALOs, Alan Binnie who was killed up there, a bloke with one arm from the first world war, got an MC in the first world war, became an ALO in the second, and he was finally killed just at the tail end up there. So, I, my part had been included from a distance, running, developing the policy for army/air co-operation because all the books that -s the only books that would have been prepared were about a two

to three year old pre-war one on army/air co-operation. Since then the Brits had produced some more to cope with their air support control system I talked about, but we had no policy relevant to what was our system in the south Pacific, south-west Pacific and I arranged at one stage for all the ALOs to come from New Guinea to spend a fortnight at Chermside and we had a school where we built our doctrine from our experience and had it all written up and sent around.

I'm not sure I've got all the sequence right. After you come back and you're in the school and lecturing.

Yes.

Then in New Guinea.

Yes.

Then ....

To Advanced LHQ in Brisbane.

So that's Brisbane.

As the head, as the, well, as the head operational staff officer on behalf of Berryman for the supervision and development of the air liaison organisation.

And that's about the start of 1944?

Yes. And then I had a break at LHQ briefly, I think, but then went on to this Forward Echelon, it was called, For Land, Forward Echelon, it was various names, which was various planning headquarters. Forward Echelon from about 10th September '44 until, and yes, that's right, and then in May, yes May '45 I came to LHQ, saw the end of the war on, out at LHQ, meaning in Melbourne which was nice and handy with a daughter not long born and a wife haven't properly seen. That was a kindness extended to me, I think, but anyhow the army, the army/air operation things were just about petered out it didn't matter so much. And also, I was, a chance to put down closing thoughts.

(20.00)I remember being asked before leaving to note, to say would I write something that would help for the future of my experience army/air co-operation. And I said that, gosh, I tossed and turned over this for a month then finally I realised the essence of it. Next time this sort of do is on the circumstances would be different, the aeroplanes would be different, all would be different. I tried to think of what was the fundamental thing and I chose to say that, I mentioned what I just said, that there's no reason giving any detailed proposals about anything, but the vital thing is, there must be opportunity for our regular army and others, if they are in training, to be trained along with the other services for at least twelve months in a common school. They must get to know one another personally at a common school. And after the war when I'd gone, when I went into Defence as Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation in '47 I, and was leaving, I made the same proposition to Ted Hicks that, then I was to go in and run the integration co-operative part of Joint Services, joint service stuff.

Some questions that we ask everybody. It's pretty clear, well I assume it's clear, your career was transformed by the army, or your experience in the war?

Ah.

Because what you do subsequently is not what you would have done had there been no war.

That's right. It was, it took .... That's precisely right, really because I left, when I did get out I went straight into journalism again, straight back for about eighteen months. Was a sub-editor at, oh, no, not .... Took over the special writer on the Melbourne *Sun* and so on, because I wanted to be in Melbourne and not Brisbane. And while there, was doing the war trials in Japan, beginning '46 when I was phoned from people who knew me in the army and said that they are advertising the head of the Joint Intelligence Bureau in Melbourne in Defence. Well, they all thought that I ought to apply for it, so I did, not quite knowing what it was all about really. But I, near enough I suppose. And so I went into the Defence in '47 as was appointed to it and went in as head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation.

Some ex-servicemen, those, the early units remained particularly important to them and their affections are for those early units, and I suspect that that's true of you.

Very much so. Yes. I hadn't thought of it quite like that but I had to leave the 2/8th Battalion, and as you, as we've traversed in the story, that we traversed, in, toward the end of 1941. After, of course, the most stacked period of the operations that it had been involved in. Indeed, I had more than it had because I got involved in that air support thing, too, in the same year. And I then went off to all this air business. I still regularly am in touch with the 2/8th Battalion, their dinners and what have you. I help them with, I helped them in the production of the history that they themselves wrote on the 2/8th Battalion. And, yes, that's so. I must say that our air liaison organisation has turned out to be a very active and close one. And we're in the throes of producing, in connection with the War Memorial it will have to be eventually, we've got our history. Because if you read, look in the indexes of our war histories and try to find all about air liaison, air liaison organisation, the ALO, there's damn all.

Mm. I tried to brief myself for this and ....

That's right.

It was pretty scarce.

Exactly. Well, we now, someone who wants to do a PhD and is going to, wants to write a thesis. I could show you on the way out, what a stack we've got.

(25.00) Major Maloney who was a regular man who went into this ground liaison stuff after the war, did some immensely painstaking, and immensely productive work and there's stuff that thick, a volume that thick of manuscript with pictures and God knows what, dealing with it from the earliest days, air liaison organisation, and we have taken, got copies of it from him and we're writing stuff, and contributing to it, writing stuff to add to it. That's why I've got it here at the moment. And it's not going to be something any one of us could ever settle down

to do. But for someone who has to do a, wants to do a PhD either at the Defence Academy or somewhere else, there would never be a better start point than this heap of stuff that's there ready for someone to take over and put together in a volume which .... Well, my argument is this. Berryman, and I've got various documents from him including my, things he wrote to me, citation and such, said it was one of the main, it was - this army/air co-operation - a major factor in the success of the Pacific war from Australia's point of view. And where is it represented in the history?

Two sentences, actually.

Here's the whole heap of it in there.

Did you join the RSL?

Yes, I belong to, I belong to it though in a perverse sort of way because when I came back down here there's a club in Toorak - sounds a bit toney - called 'The Heroes' because someone was there one night and went home and his wife said, 'You've been with those bloody heroes, again', when he was coughing and spluttering and staggering around the house. And they were going to, he told the story next day, and it became 'The Heroes' - but it's the Toorak RSL. And I left it .... Joined it also because I have so many mates there, Charles Spry, for example, whom I have known from the Joint Intelligence days when he went to ASIO and he's DMI and such. And so that is .... I don't know that I had joined the RSL before that. Anyhow I belong to it now.

Do your closest friends come out of wartime experiences?

My automatic answer was to be 'Yes'. I'm just thinking hard to see whether that's slightly untrue, but that's, I think, that's not so, no. They are.

Journalists would probably be both, wouldn't they? Some of the journalists you would have known both ....

Yes, that's right. No, they certainly are the wartime, that's right. I mean, the people from the joint things, organisations I've been involved with and God knows I've became involved with .... I was a demonstration of the art of how to do things when unqualified because apart from the Joint Intelligence Organisation, I had the .... Where did I go after that? Oh, yes I became a trade commissioner with no qualifications and then Assistant Secretary, First Assistant Secretary in Trade Department with no particular qualifications except having been a trade commissioner. And then head of, head of the Department of the Parliamentary Library, with no qualifications as a librarian, which the librarians soon let me know about. And then to the National Library, unqualified. Oh, and then, what's the connection between the National Library and undertaking to organise the Australian system for VIP protection and counter-terrorism? You see, there's no connection between these things.

Um. Stan Arneil in that remarkable book of his war diary, Stan Arneil was on the Burma trail [inaudible]. And there's a section where he says, you know, while he deplored it all, there's a strange way in which he says he wouldn't have missed it. And I think that that might be a common reaction of ex-servicemen, deploring the devastation, the loss of life and so on.

Yes.

But as a personal experience, there's something that attracted them all, having gone through it.

Mm, yes.

They then would not have missed it [inaudible]

Oh, yeah. I couldn't have borne it had I missed it. And that, of course, is a judgment made through having been in it and known what I would have missed. If I hadn't been in it, I suppose I wouldn't have known what I missed. But, oh, no, gosh, what you learn about yourself as well as learn about others. I wouldn't have missed it, no, I wouldn't, couldn't have borne to have missed it.

Have you written any of this autobiographically at all? Have you [inaudible]?

Not autobiographical. I've written articles. I have ... I don't know that I've got it here, but I've written, I've got samples of them up above I think. Oh, no, I had stuff written about some of this [inaudible].

Oh, there's the ....

There's some of it. And I have yet another, I have had really intended to write more but I did write for the war journal for the journal we had, wait a minute, what was it? Yes, we used to have it once a year, the *AIF News Journal* or something like that. And I wrote a short story based on Vevi called 'Hills Like Home', that was done in 19.... I think I might have done it, must have done it during the war. And after the war I have written, I wrote a short story for the *Canberra Times* short story competition quite a long way back which was published among the first six or so - it didn't win one of the prizes - called 'Fair Hair, Blue Eyes' in quotation marks. And that's the development from that story about the Italian whom I expected to be dark and yet turned out to have the blue eyes and fair hair, and relating it to, oh, giving it a twist to ....

Another thing that bothered me a lot then, was to the peace marches which turned out, which turned out with the peace marchers fighting the police and sticking sticks and staves into horses' sides and such things which made me feel they ought to be guided in a slightly different way. And so this was to talk about the, this having happened and then me being in a peace march where I said to someone, 'Go easy' and he gave me a hit across the head and the....

END OF INTERVIEW