



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE A

Identification: This is an interview with Ken Bussell, B-U-S-S-E-L-L, and the date is the 9th August 1990, and I'm Daniel Connell. This is side one, tape one. End of identification.

Ken, if we could start back. If you could tell me, where did you grow up?

In Caulfield, Melbourne, Victoria. I was born in 1922 and lived all my life up till 1967 in Victoria.

If you could tell me a little bit about your parents, about your family?

My father was a superintending engineer with the PMG's department. My mother was a housewife. Ah, my father particularly was involved in his earlier days, early days of radio, with the installation of the ABC regional stations in Victoria and he was also involved with the first line over Bass Strait to carrying cables.

And where did you go to school?

I went to Melbourne Boys' High School at South Yarra and was lucky enough from '35 to '38 to have, to be involved with what has since been talked about as the `golden years of education' in Victoria. You just couldn't fail with the teachers we had. They were absolutely marvellous and most of them wrote the books that were used up until the 1950s. So I had a very happy education at Melbourne High - played a lot of sport, did running and cricket and so forth and had a good life there.

What were those teachers telling you about what was happening in Europe? Or what were you finding out about it, not just from the teachers but from the newspapers and anyone else?

As a matter of fact I particularly recall a study I had to do around about 1935 on the Spanish Civil War and found out, you know, that the Germans were involved, the Italians were involved and the Russians were involved, and that was probably my first real knowledge of Communism versus Fascism and Nazism.

As war approached, that perspective that you had the Far Right in conflict with the Far Left - and also there were countries like Britain and France involved of course as well - but how important was that perspective Far Right versus Far Left in terms of your understanding of it as to what was happening in Europe?

Not very important at all. Um, I don't think I was a political body, you know, from a young age, as certain people have been. I took a - I think - a fairly general interest in what was going on overseas and particularly feeling that some time - and talking with my parents - that we would be involved, but I wasn't politically minded at all.

what about your parents? What were their political attitudes?

Um, they were very very - fairly - very conservative. They didn't discuss politics very very much as I recall. The events of the day, of course, they would put into political perspective, but we weren't a politically minded or politically discussing household.

> What about involvement in community activities? You know, what today might be Rotary and the Lion's Club and things like that, or the church groups, that sort of thing. Was your family much involved in that sort of thing?

(5.00) Um, not really. Um, my father was, he told me many many years after he died - oh I'm sorry, delay that.

> Well some people do say that sort of thing.

(Laughing). He told me many years after my childhood that he'd been invited to join the Lodge and he determined not to do that because he believed that there was, in the PMG's department, he believed and knew that there was a strong Catholic/anti-Catholic movement and he didn't want to be a part of it and believed that he did the right thing. And he never encouraged me in my adult years to go into Lodge or anything like that.

> Yes, Victoria was particularly prone to that Catholic/anti-Catholic split in just about every major institution, wasn't it?

That's right, and of course it blew up heavily with the, um, DLP and the ALP in Victoria, you know, in the fifties and sixties, or fifties particularly. But, no, we, my parents weren't churchgoers, but I was. They encouraged me to go to church but they didn't take a great interest in church. And I became active in the Anglican church near where I lived and I was browned off after a while because it was a very interesting situation. St. Mary's, Caulfield, was the - more or less - the mother church of the district and had a canon in charge, whereas our little St Margaret's was a daughter church, and we had a very good vicar - or several very good vicars - but no money because it all went down to the mother church. And I found the power of the church rather frightening and rather left church for a while, in fact for a few years, until my children needed to be encouraged to go to church and I took it up again, and I'm now a fairly reasonably active churchgoer.

> Were any members of your family - uncles, father - involved in the first world war?

My father wasn't. He had varicose veins and wasn't allowed to go to the war. He was heavily involved in the Garrison Artillery which was more or less before the war - 1913 I think he was involved with the Garrison Artillery, until about early 1914. But, oh, I think I had ...

> What happened in 1914 that caused him to leave the Garrison Artillery?

Ah, well, I think the main thing was that .... No, sorry. He didn't leave the Garrison Artillery but war broke out in 1914. He was still in the Garrison Artillery in 1915, I remember that - well he told me that - and then he was transferred inter-country and he spent several years at Beechworth putting in new telephone exchanges and so forth - Beechworth, Victoria - and he wasn't able to get to parades and so forth and I think left it for that reason.

Sorry, you were talking about uncles and cousins?

I think we probably had his brother - he was not in the war - in the first world war. I think I had an uncle - who is now dead - who was and a couple of, and, oh, wait a minute, I'm getting my timing wrong. As a matter of fact I think I had one uncle only that was involved in the war. That would be correct.

Was he someone who had an influence on you in any way, more than usual?

No he didn't. No, he lived in Melbourne as we did, and I saw him well after the war and got to know him. He was a builder after the war. Saw a bit of him, you know, in my formative years but never ever discussed war or anything with him.

(10.00) So, from what you were saying earlier, you left Melbourne High School in 1938?

That's right.

What sort of work ...? What happened when you did leave, not necessarily work?

Um, yes. I decided I didn't want to go to university. I matriculated but I didn't want to go to university. I wanted to go to work and I had a feeling what I wanted to do. I'd done fairly well in chemistry and physics and I decided I wanted to become an industrial chemist. And I started work at Felton, Grimwade and Duerdin's, January 1939. I spent six to nine months in the factory and learnt a lot. And then I was ...

Sorry, what was the position?

It was just a - I think - a junior factory chemist for which I was paid the magnificent sum of twenty-three-and-sixpence a week.

What did you do?

Oh, I worked in the bond. The bond was an area of the factory - this crowd was a pharmaceutical industry - and the bond was where the, all the medicines were made up for - containing alcohol - and the alcohol was denatured and we had a customs officer who controlled the use of the alcohol in all the medicines - and I was involved in anything from making up the tincture of glycyrrhiz which is a licorice mixture, to sweeping the floors and polishing the containers.

Just for the sake of the transcriber, the tincture of - what was that again?

Glycyrrhiz.

Could you spell that?

(Laughing). I don't know whether I can now.
G-L-Y-C-Y-R-R-H-I-Z - which is licorice in Latin.

Right. So you were there for how long?

I was in the factory for nine months, then I was moved to the laboratory where I wanted to go. I'd already started a Diploma of Applied Chemistry at Royal Melbourne - well now Royal Melbourne Technical College - and I was allowed, I was the first person that worked in the factory allowed off for a half day a week to go to school. And I did my practical one - chemistry - in the morning and did two or three nights in the evenings for about six years it took, with all sorts of things happening - the war and so on like that. But I then in 1942 I was ...

Well just before you get to 1942, um, well 1939, the actual declaration of war. What was your feeling?

Matter of fact, when I was thinking about the question, er, similar to what you've asked - I really didn't, I can't remember that I had any great feelings. I went to work. It was September of the year I'd started work and I was involved at work and we probably talked about the fact that we would be involved ...

You weren't .... Quite a lot of people thought, `Oh, here's an opportunity for me to get out of the rut that I'm in', or other people thought, you know, `I can get away from my wife and children'. There are a variety of ...

That's right.

... ambitions that people harboured, not all of them noble.

Well, I think you're right but at the outset - in 1939 - I was only seventeen ...

Sorry, I'm not suggesting you had a wife at seventeen.

Oh no. (Laughing). I was seventeen and had started night school, could see that I wanted to complete a tertiary education, naturally, and also I hadn't been involved in scouts or air - junior air corps - or anything like that. I had been involved with the YMCA. I was a member for a number of years at the Y.

Not the Militia either?

No, no. And so that I think personally my determination to become involved was not taken right at the outset of war. What really happened is that ...

(15.00) Did you have close friends who did have that, who did want to join up and perhaps subsequently did?

Well we, yes, my mates - all seventeen year-olders - we'd all gone to work. Some were in banks and so forth, and they knew that they were going to be called up, whether they joined or not, and I think that probably made a difference. I was .... At that stage it wasn't determined what was going to happen as far as reserved occupations and so forth, but I was less involved in determining what I would do immediately than some of my other friends. A couple of them joined up, oh, probably within about a month of the outbreak of war. And, but I .... At

that stage, round about late 1939, after the war had broken out, the company that I worked for became Drug Houses of Australia - because of amalgamations and so forth - and they determined that they were going to start a developmental section to do pharmaceutical and chemical research which I was very interested in. And in early 1940 I was seconded from the laboratory to another building in West Melbourne which was just being set up as a laboratory. It had been an old, um, malt works, and it was a shocking place. But the person that had the greatest influence, I think, on my future at that stage was Russell Grimwade, now - well now dead. But he was a man with a vision and he .... In 1938 he went overseas with the intention of trying to get German or Austrian scientists - and particularly pharmacologists and so on - to work for the Drug Houses developmental section which he'd planned and was using his own money virtually to do it. And as a result of this he recruited a Jewish doctor from Vienna who was one of the most brilliant scientists I've ever come across and he came out here as a result of the *Anschluss* with his mother and father. And I was lucky enough to be, to work for him for about six years.

What was he telling you about what was happening in Europe?

He was very very silent. I don't think I ever heard him make a comment out loud about Hitler, about the Nazis, about what was happening over there.

Did it strike you as strange? At the time, I mean?

Well here again, you know, we were only young and we didn't really know what was going on. Communications were not like they are today and I think there were .... I've seen his face at times when possibly we were discussing something in the paper, a major item like, you know, `Bombing of London' or something, and we would - the lads in the laboratory - we would, you know, be `those so-and-so Germans' and so forth, but he would walk away or keep right out of discussion. He just didn't want to be involved. Probably that's a telling thing when we've heard so many times - and we're hearing now - you don't want to be involved. I don't know, but he was a very fine fellow and his motives were not for me to judge.

You obviously had a lot of admiration for him at the time.

I did.

But Jewish people generally, in Australia at that time, were, you know, there were ambivalent feelings about them. Now, in the place that you worked, what was the sort of feeling among some of the other people towards him?

Well, I believe that most of the people .... It was only a very small group that worked there and they admired him - admired his knowledge. He was a very very friendly sort of fellow - not obsequious, but friendly and he would go out of his way to help people. He'd go down to the factory and, if needed, work in the factory, you know, and we were working in the laboratory.

What we were doing is developing chemicals in the laboratory, pharmaceuticals, which we believed would not be landed in Australia because of their overseas production and we had to do the research, do the pilot plant, experiments in the laboratory, translate those to larger pilot

plants and then into full production. And I was very fortunate that I was working on the bench producing phenobarbitone which - or luminal, as it's called - which was the major sedative used all over the world, and the word was from the government that we wouldn't be landing any more after middle-1940. Actually, we, I think we landed it right through - but that's another tale.

But I was involved in the first laboratory work and it was the first stage we'd ever done a synthesis like this, which was a seventeen-stage synthesis, and translated it into pilot plant. And then we built a plant - or the engineers built a plant - and I ran the plant in 1945 which, you know, a lot of people .... I was very lucky.

Now, why didn't I go to war? Um, in 1940 the Medical Equipment Control Committee chaired by Sir Allan Newton, decreed that we were a company - just as ICI was a company, Monsanto was a company - that was going to produce the pharmaceuticals needed for war and that they would be number A1 reserved occupations. So I immediately ....

Before I heard of this I heard the rumour, and I went to try and join the air force. I wanted to be in it, you know, young fellow. I was four times. I got through a medical, I got through several applications and was knocked back by Manpower every time because they were a wake-up to, you know, who they would let go and who not. I got to the stage where all my mates were going then and I thought, `I'm going to be home here', you know, `I should be in it'. I tried to work the system so that I went to the recruiting - RAAF recruiting - depot when the Manpower bloke was out to lunch, (laughing) but they wouldn't buy that. So, in one way, when I realised it was not on - I couldn't get into the services - I was virtually told by the Manpower fellow not to come back or he'd put me in under section so-and-so of the law.

But also I have to admit that one of my main reasons for not pressing it any further and accepting it was the fact that I was doing a job that I felt was important - I was very interested in it. And I was doing my course at night. That was another reason that you didn't go if you, you know, not wanted to go. And so the result of that, I saw the manager and I said, `I've tried. I have to admit I've tried.' He said, `Well', he said, `you're here for the war', and that was it.

So the next thing I thought of was, `what can I do?'. I didn't want to be a fireman or anything like that so I joined the VDC and that was one of the best things I ever did also.

> Now you joined, I remember looking at your papers, February 1942, which is the time when the VDC was drastically expanded?

That's correct. February was the time .... As a matter of fact the Americans had landed - or the first Americans, I think there were a crowd of `techos' from Guadalcanal came in first - and that probably, that and the fact that Curtin had taken over at that time and more or less indicated we were at war. For the first time we really felt that it was on for young and old. And with the Americans landing here and, you know, that gave me an extra incentive that I would be also doing outside work, something, you know, rather fairly important - or we hoped it was going to be important. So I joined the VDC with two other friends ...

(25.00) Just before we come to the actual joining, had you .... It was quite important in Sydney - a movement called the People's Army which had support, oh, right

across the political spectrum. The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, on I think the 29th of January has got a very strong editorial in favour of them. Now, was that a significant thing in Melbourne? Do you remember that in Melbourne at all?

Not really. Um, Doctor Moore, you know, has referred to the New Guard and so forth, which was a bit earlier than that, but ...

The New Guard was a right wing ...

Oh that's right, that was, that was the, the name in '32 wasn't it, 1931?

That's right, but the People's Army, there were a lot of communists involved in it, but there were people like Billy Wentworth involved in it as well, and you wouldn't call him a communist. He was a, it was an interesting .... I mean, I think one of the reasons why the Federal Government expanded the VDC is that there were a number of reasons why they didn't want the People's Army to get going.

Right.

One, they didn't want armed forces out of the control of the Government and secondly they weren't too keen on the idea of armed civilians. Their status in the event of an invasion was a bit strange - legal status. But I was just wondering, and there was quite a lot of publicity in Sydney, but I was just wondering whether you heard anything in Melbourne?

Well not really. It might have been there and I might have been so .... I was pretty heavily involved with work and night-school by 1942. In fact, I hardly had time to scratch myself, and I took on the VDC mainly because it was one Thursday night and weekends where I did have the time.

Well just going back to joining, you mentioned that you went down with a couple of friends. Could you just tell us with as much detail as you can remember the actual day of, you know, the procedure and the discussion before you went down? I mean, why the VDC rather than the fire force which you mentioned before?

Well, I believe that, there must have been publicity - now I'm thinking about it - there must have been earlier publicity about the VDC. The other reason probably would have been that these fellows were, had joined the air force - both of them - and they were waiting to be called up and they didn't know how long it would be, and they didn't want to become too involved in something else and then have to pull out. And it was probably a fairly ephemeral discussion which .... I think somebody else said, `I've joined', and you know, it might have been an older person and we got the information - could have been through the RSL because some of our friends' fathers were in the RSL - and we ....

I went down to Bentleigh which was a few miles from Caulfield where I lived, mainly because the Ormond RSL and the Bentleigh RSL were involved in C Company. But the first

actual night was at the headquarters of the 5th Battalion in Lancox Street, Brighton, which was not very far away and we all went on our bikes, I can remember - rode down there - and paraded in civvies and were told that, you know, we would be inducted in reasonable time but not told what we were going to do, but to report next week. And we reported next week to be pushed into trucks and we went down to form C Company at Bentleigh.

I'll just turn the tape over.

END TAPE ONE, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B.

Identification: This is side two, tape one, Ken Bussell. End of identification.

Just before you joined, what did you think that the VDC was actually going to do? I mean, you could see what the firefighters would do - they'd put out buildings if they caught fire with bombing et cetera - but what did you think the VDC was going to do?

Well in 1942, ah, here again I think I should say that probably the major thing was, that fired us, was the fact that the Japs were coming - were in New Guinea - and the word was that Australia was their final and ultimate target and I think probably that was - I've just thought of it really - a really major reason. We thought, `Well, if we're going to be invaded we want to be on the end of a gun, but the right end'. So that probably was a formative factor. I think generally the people around me knew from February '42, after the invasion of - sorry - after the very heavy invasion of New Guinea, that we were in a serious position and nobody was going to come and pull us out. Well the Americans were here but they were starting to go back then - or getting ready to go back - and the whole country was on a wartime basis. We had, you know, the troops were everywhere, all the buildings were taken over, the blackouts were on and we were, we were at war.

But we still had a whale of a time as young fellas, you know. We used to get on our bikes on a Thursday night with rifles over the shoulder - when we had rifles. We didn't get uniforms for about six months and they were the grass .... We were called grasshopper greens and as a matter of fact you could get into a fight very easily with the army if you were on public transport in our grasshopper greens. They wondered whether we were prisoners-of-war, or whether we were `chocos' or (laughing) or what. But then we were issued, finally ....

The green uniforms were beautiful uniforms. They must have been officer material for the Italian army, I think, really. It was lovely. And then we got back to the old khaki serge, you know, which crackles as you put it on. We had rifles issued in 1942. We were pretty late with rifles. In fact we were issued firstly with rifles from Canada because the .... All our rifles were sent over after Dunkirk to Britain and so forth and we got these Canadian rifles which were alright. But I was lucky enough to be selected for a sniper school at Williamstown race course and was issued with great ceremony with an old 1908 long Lee Enfield I think 1908 stock, 1912 barrel.

It had been owned by - it was owned because he got it back afterwards - by a member of a gun club up at Swan Hill in Victoria and you wouldn't believe that I wrote to him and said I

had the gun. He was on the farm. He couldn't go to war, and he .... I was also issued with the Mues sight - gun sight - that he used and he told me, `How was the windage?', and how to do the clicks and so forth on the Mues sight, and I won several battalion shoots with that information. It was a beautiful gun and I saw that he got it back after the war.

(5.00) Just going back a little bit - okay, so it was a Thursday night - you've mentioned how you and your friends would cycle down there.

Yes.

What would happen? What was the normal routine, say, in those early months in 1942 - the normal routine on Thursday night?

Well I would have ...

... as you cycled up to the gates? Would the gates be closed?

Oh I see. Well, yes, as a matter of fact, we met in, underneath the Bentleigh football ground grandstand which was where the players changed and so forth when football was on. It was a very big room. We were, would cycle down, mainly. This was early in the piece, it was, ah, autumn. When it got into winter, we thought it wasn't on because we were in a blackout and bicycle lamps weren't too good in those days, so we went by train from Caulfield down to Bentleigh. That's when we used to be picked on. But we'd come to the gate and there would be a guard on it but it was fairly relaxed. We probably didn't, or remembered sometimes the password, or said, `G'day Jack', and he said, `G'day boys', and we'd ride through and parade.

You'd parade, what? I mean, how many people were involved?

Oh, we, the company at its highest number would have been 120. It was part of .... There were four companies - A,B,C,D - in the 5th Battalion, and we were virtually based right from the start on an infantry battalion. We had light machine-guns in some other companies and so forth, but we were mainly foot sloggers and ...

With full-time officers or part-time?

No, part-time and these were mainly first world war fellows. Now the thing that I got out of the VDC - I think I should put it down now - was experience, learning, friendship, comradeship and they were some of the finest fellows I've ever met in my life. They were .... The company was a combination of reserved occupation fellows. We were almost the youngest but there were fellows .... Matter of fact the fellow I'd love to get a copy of this sometime, he is now ninety and he was the general manager of one of our major - oh, Nylex - in Victoria. And these fellows were in their, roughly in their forties and so forth. They were all holding down big jobs but - and that's why they didn't go away to war - and the rest of the company was first world war soldiers from France, from Gallipoli and they were mainly our officers. Ah, the fellow who was our platoon commander was a Jock Denovan who was with the Black Watch in 1915 - won the Military Cross, was a tremendous fellow and he was one that would not allow sloppiness. He ran the platoon like a Black Watch platoon and if we were messing round or fooling round, Jock used to come down like a pack of cards. And he was a very fine fellow but he wanted perfection and we worked into a very very good unit,

mainly on infantry work. But our commander - the OC - was a builder by trade and also he was involved in the RSL, and of course most of these fellows were. Most of our officers were RSL fellows from Ormond or Bentleigh or Caulfield in major positions and did this as part-time. Now our Thursday nights were involved with map reading, with infantry tactics, patrols. We used to go out into the wilds of Bentleigh - which were wild then, and they're all built up now - and we'd raid Marriott's vegetable farm and bring home a few carrots and so forth to put in the pot, you know. It helped rationing (laughing). And it was still, you know, a `Boys' Own' adventure to a large extent. But suddenly the powers that be decided that they'd - sorry.

You're going to talk about the changing over to the artillery?

Yes, yes.

Just before you do that. So the relationship, for example, between ranks and officers ...?

Right.

What was that like?

Very good. As a matter of fact, I notice Moore has said - and I disbelieve it - well, I don't know actually - he said there were two definite VDCs. Now it might have been up in Sydney or it might have been in Queensland but as far as we were concerned the guys were officers that you would go anywhere with or behind. They were leaders but they were friendly, and everyone knew - and I'll refer to this later - everyone knew that we were volunteers. And I think the relationship in our particular company - and I know it was the same with the other companies because I knew all the guys - it was a feeling of friendliness, learning together. When we went into artillery it was certainly learning together, and a feeling of comradeship, and we were doing a job. Even though we were just training for something that we didn't know what, really - but we were going to be trained for it. We knew .... We threw hand grenades, we did this, we did that, we did rifle shooting, we did machine-gun practice and all that an infantry company would do.

Emphasis on, say, operating as a fairly formal larger unit as a company or informally?

No. More informally. We were really guerillas, or used guerilla tactics, formed small groups. In fact ...

Any sabotage training?

Yes, yes. Very very light.

Using explosives?

Yes to a degree, but our engineers did .... As a matter of fact, we didn't as infantrymen. The engineers ...

As a chemist, that's the sort of thing that they might put you into.

Oh, as a matter of fact I can still remember us having tear, having gas drill and I was asked as a chemist to produce the tear gas, and I .... As a matter of fact we were working with benzyl chloride, and we used to work in the laboratory until our eyes were streaming so much that we had to go outside. It was a so-and-so.

So what, did you take some of that along?

I took that along and it worked very well and we found out that some of the gas masks must have been built in 1840 (laughing) because it went straight through. But, oh no, I think we had a fairly all-round training for guerilla-type warfare.

(15.00) One of the things mentioned in your notes is that you participated in fundraising efforts for war bonds with US Army bands. Was that now or a bit later?

Ah, that would have been 19 - probably 19 - no, as a matter of fact we did .... Oh, it starts to get a little bit hairy. '42 it would have been because the Marine Bands were out here and ...

Could you describe that in some detail?

Oh they were marvellous. Well I think it was for one of the Austerity Loans, you know, there'd be loan number one or two or three, and not only us but anyone that was in the war effort - Air League, nurses, VADs - would be notified that there would be a war rally and there'd be bond selling - maybe at Caulfield racecourse. So we were more or less told that we would be appearing at Caulfield racecourse on Sunday afternoon or Saturday afternoon, full dress, `Polish yourselves up fellas', you know. And when we heard that the Marine Band would be there, you know, that was great - and some of the marines too. Air force - they would be in it. And it was more or less voluntary work - but voluntary `you do this'. We .... I can still remember parading on up the main street of Bentleigh on a Sunday, Sunday lunch - oh, no, it would have been Sunday afternoon, that's right. About three pm Sunday afternoon - beautiful day - and we had the biggest Marine Band I think that I've ever seen - I've seen a few. I think that we had 140 players from the little fella that rings the triangle to the double big `woof woof'. Oh, as a matter of fact I could have marched behind the Marine Band with all gear on - rifles, bayonets. I could have marched (laughing) you know, from there to Sydney behind a Marine Band. They were a tremendous crowd. They were more than a military band. They were a symphony orchestra virtually. And, oh, those were funny days. And along the kerb there'd be volunteers selling bonds and people'd be buying bonds, you know. The marines, the marine band would open their pockets or something, but they were, they were good days.

You mentioned at the beginning getting a few odd comments - particularly from other soldiers - in your green uniforms. The attitude of the public, how did that change? Or how did it develop? How would you describe it, say, in '42 - the VDC?

Well I would say early '42, maybe - well, late '41 or early '42 the VDC wasn't very well known and you were raising the point about publicity. I mightn't - I can't remember but there must have been some publicity because when we first joined in February '42 - when we were

on our bikes and so forth - we'd get a hoy, you know (laughing), if people could see us. But I remember talking to a fellow and he said, `What's your uniform?', and I said, `It's the VDC'. `The what?' I said, `The Volunteer Defence Corps', and I talked to him to the extent that he joined. But the knowledge wasn't great at that time. But I would say by middle of the year '42, or late '42, the VDC was very very well known, to a large extent probably from these parade, er these war bond parades and so forth. They seemed to be an integral part of the deal. If we were going to be invaded ....

We were told, round about middle '42 - that's before we went into the artillery - we were told that someone - we never ever found out who it was - had decreed that if the Japs landed in Westernport Bay which they reckoned they were expected to do - Westernport or Port Phillip, bomb er, gun Port Phillip to close it if they could - that the VDC would be first in on the beaches while the troops moved back to prepared positions. So we were going to be sacrificed virtually. Now I've heard that from a Queenslander who was told the same thing up in Queensland. We were to hold if we could, hold them with machine-guns, rifles, hand grenades, while the regulars - regular troops - moved back to form themselves for a counter attack. So we thought this was great fun, you know. We didn't ever think it was going to happen. I don't know what would have happened if it had have happened, but well - that was our role and I think it was a reasonable role because we were older people. The good, fit troops would have been able to produce a reasonable counter-attack although, you know, at times one wondered how many of the Japs could get ashore and how many we would have at a particular spot. It's a problem at the moment for insurgency up in the north. But it's interesting that, oh, long after the war I talked to a fellow at St Lucia - university - [sic] who had been in the VDC and he said that round about the same time they were told the same thing. Was round - when was Coral Sea battle?

(20.00) May.

May '42?

Hm.

It could have been about that time because they were worried about a few ships being scattered and coming down - and submarines and so forth - and it was suggested that there had been ships down round Westernport and round Bass Strait. So it was, you know, not an unreasonable thing that they could have been landing craft or troop carriers that could have come round the corner and into Westernport.

There was certainly a lot of submarine activity around the end of May, early June, that week where the subs went into Sydney Harbour and shelled Newcastle and Sydney Harbour.

That's right, yes.

There was a group of five submarines operating up and down the coast. Did you hear about those very much?

Not really. There were a lot of rumours and so forth but we heard about them more when we joined - when we switched over to artillery and were operating down on the shore, on the

coast. But no, I think we were very interested in the Coral Sea battle because it was a pretty important battle and .... But no, I don't think we did because we were still an infantry unit and - except that we were told about this business that we would be transported down and would have to hold - or to whatever happened. We didn't know whether there would be submarines down there or whether there were landing craft coming in or what. But I think it gave us a bit of a feeling that, you know, you're right in it now. And not very long after I think round about the, towards the end of the year - suddenly the powers that be decided that maybe the invasion was over (laughing) the head and that there was a great necessity for the regular troops - artillerymen - to get relief because they'd been, ah, particularly in '42 they'd been .... The coast artillerymen had been virtually stuck at their guns for almost twelve months. So, in order to - also to reinforce overseas - we were told in, you know, five minutes that we'd ceased (laughing) to be infantrymen and we were going to be artillerymen.

Well I was thrilled about that because of my father being in the artillery and I can remember going home and saying, `I'm going to be - I'm into the coast artillery'. And he told me all, you know, how to do it and all these sorts of things (laughing). And we paraded at Bentleigh, continued to parade at Bentleigh for a number of weeks - probably ran into a couple of months - right towards '43, at which time we were told the basics of coast artillery, what the guns were and so forth and did a bit of fairly boring training and so forth. Um, being told that they were setting up a training station at Beaumaris, or Sandringham, which was not very far away and on the bay - Port Phillip Bay - and that's where we were going to do our training. And I think we started to do that in early 1943. They had six-inch, two six-inch naval guns set up there in what was the Sandringham Yacht Club's major building (laughing), and we used to ....

We were transported down there from Bentleigh. We used to parade at Bentleigh and then get on trucks and down to Sandringham and the interest lifted particularly. Even the old soldiers who had difficulty in working some of the equipment and so forth, and also particularly on the range-finder and doing maths and so forth like that - were a little bit hesitant and a bit out of it - and they cheerfully became the gun numbers, you know, bringing up the (laughing), ammunition and so on. But anyone that had reasonable education and was in tertiary or whatever, were pulled out immediately to develop battery observation post activities.

I was one and two other young fellows who were more or less the same educational standard and several of the forty-year-old army types and a few of the older types who were still right on the ball. We formed a team that were intense, had intense exercise on the range-finder from a couple of delightful AWAS. And they were the attraction. The Thursday nights were terrific for the young blokes particularly because they weren't bad. Matter of fact I took one to a dance in 1943 - before I met my wife actually - at St Kilda Town Hall. However, beside the point.

They taught us the range-finder because that's what .... They were artillery ladies and that's what their job was. And the .... I had a fillip really because I felt I was using my intellect more than I was being an artilleryman - although I didn't mind that - er, being an infantryman, that's right. I didn't mind being an infantryman and had fun at it but it was a little more which I could handle very easily and so I delighted in it. And we trained Sundays, Thursdays still, on these guns and under a ....

The gun sergeant was a first world, er, second world war fellow. He was at El Alamein in the big artillery barrage there and he was tough, and he didn't mess around whether we were volunteers or not. He was tough and he wanted us to learn it the way it should be - 'course we were a bit more advanced and playing with big weapons not just broomsticks or rifles. And - Corfe his name was - and he had a great influence on me also I think, because we became very friendly and he became interested in what I was doing at work and so on like that and we used to chat together - because he was trying to pick up his life from the Middle East and he didn't know where he was going or what he was going to do and this was just an interim thing for him. But he was the man that really taught us, you know, coast artillery and how to handle it.

'Course we had searchlight squads out of, not .... We weren't searchlights we were guns and D Company - I think D Company and B Company - provided searchlights. And I suppose the first practice shoot that we ever did we were all as nervous as kittens. You would have thought we were going to open an opera or something, you know. First night nerves we had.

I'll just put on a new tape and we'll hear that there.

Yes.

END TAPE ONE, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A.

Identification: This is side one, tape two, Ken Bussell continued. End of identification.

Right Ken. You were about to - go on.

Where was I?

You were describing the first shoot and how nervous you were.

Yes. Um, because the guns that we were using were six-inch naval guns, if we had have shot even dummy six-inch projectiles, the whole of Sandringham would have been shaken apart. So what we used were pitot tubes which was a cylinder about, well definitely an inch in diameter which was fed down the barrel, packed at the sides with other cylinders and it was then able to fire a one-inch projectile. And out of a six-inch naval gun a one-inch projectile sounds funny but it was tracer and the exercises went very very well because we could see the target - see the shot and so forth.

But that first night we thought we were going to have the whole thing blow up in our faces. I was off the guns - I was at the battery observation post - and I know the fellows were really excited and really nervy. Anyway, we got our shots away alright and had a limited success. The targets used were - they called them `Hong Kong' targets. They - and I'll mention these later when we're down at the coast - but Hong Kong target was probably about - well, we only ever saw it from about two thousand yards - so they were about five foot in diameter and set on a horizontal platform and towed by a naval vessel of some sort. And they'd put out a tow rope at about half-mile and then they'd radio in and say, `Right, you're on your target now',

and we'd fire at it. Well, I think we hit it once or twice in our first few shoots, but it was always a good night.

After we got over the initial shock and so forth the company became a reasonably good artillery team, but we'd never fired the big ones and everybody was very excited about, you know, when we would ever fire the big ones. Well I don't think it was until about - would have been about '44. We'd been training all this time. Oh, yes '44 it would have been because we had camps in '44 and '45 down at the heads in Victoria. We went to our first camp which was an Easter camp, took over the area from .... There was our battalion - it was a battalion exercise so we had the lights and two companies of gunners - and we relieved the regular troops - regular RAA - down at the heads. This was at what is known as Point Nepean, and there was another crowd over at Queenscliff on the other side of the heads and they were doing the same thing at Fort Queenscliff. And we took over for Easter and about a week afterwards.

It was pretty exciting because on the Nepean side there were about 8000 troops - ladies and gentlemen - and it was a concentration that you've never ever seen in your life. And we often worried about it after the war that if the Japs had have come in with a heavy they could have bombarded hell out of Nepean - opened the, breached the peninsula and also killed about 8000 troops in one go. Knocked it right out. Anyway we were up in Happy Valley, which was at Fort Pearce which was one of the gun emplacements and we had to take over the guns, do drills and so forth and I think we did probably about four or five shoots during that period. And then we had the final shoot which my (laughing) famous story of the inspector of artillery comes.

Could you tell us that story?

Yes. We were at Fort Pearce. I was up in the battery observation post. The target was at about 5000 yards - Hong Kong target - and it had gone, done its first run left to right and gone out of .... We'd tracked it and got all our distances onto the guns and the guns were trailing it. This was six-inch ammunition by this time - dummy, but six-inch. So, the OC stood down the gun crews while the target went across, turned and came back and we were told .... The gun crews stood down and our commander - battery commander - stood two or three of us down and said, `One track'.

So someone was tracking and someone had just come off it - Jim - I'll just call him Jim. He's dead now but fine fellow. And Jim was an inveterate pipe smoker and he lit up his pipe and he was sitting down outside of the battery observation post - sunny day, beautiful day - and smoke was coming up and so forth. Suddenly - we knew that the inspector of artillery was going to check our shoot - evaluate our shoot I should say - and suddenly here he was - or we took it to be - a colonel with a couple of captains and, you know, brass all round. And he looked down at Jim who was puffing away at his pipe and he said, `What's the target range, gunner?', and Jim said, `Oh, I don't know'. He said, `Oh, oh it was about five and a half thousand yards, oh, about five minutes ago', and the fellow went red. His hat nearly came off and he swung round and walked away. And Jim sort of said, `What did I say?'. And we didn't hear anything - the shoot went off and we didn't hear anything until we were paraded for the assessment.

And this colonel stood up and he said he'd never seen such an undisciplined body of troops in all his life. We were off-hand, too relaxed, the shoot was fair and he said he would never ever want to see a performance like that from Australian soldiers again. And we started to get a bit hot under the collar but not as much as our OC did. And our OC dismissed the troops immediately and we knew something was on, and we heard later that the OC had told the fellow that the next thing we'd do was to get the trucks out and go back to Melbourne and he could stick his army (laughing). Sorry about that.

That's alright. [Inaudible].

But he pointed out to him that we were volunteers, that we were giving up our annual leave to go down there - we were volunteers first, second and third and if he wanted artillery troops to do the job we'd do it, probably as good as regular troops, and he'd better come to the night shoot two nights later. And anyway, our fellow really told him off. And the night shoot two nights later was a perfect shoot. The searchlights came on at the right time. We blew the target out of the water with the first shot (laughing) so it was abandoned after that because they didn't have another target. So it was a perfect shoot - hundred per cent perfect. And the end to the story was that the colonel since wrote an apology - a written apology - to the troops and said he'd been out of turn, which was a nice end to the whole thing. He's dead now too. But, oh, those shoots were terrific. Right, going on to '44 now.

(10.00) Yes. In 1944 it must have been getting a bit difficult in some ways for the organisers to keep you all together.

Yes.

The urgency's gone off hasn't it.

The sense of urgency had gone. I really think it had by that time. In '45 we had our last .... We had another two camps in '45 and did the same thing but I think we were, we'd kept up our expertise pretty well over those years.

How did they .... I mean, you mentioned you were volunteers before. There's always a tendency after the initial enthusiasm's gone away to think, `Oh God, it's a cold night tonight' - not to go along. Now what was done about that particular problem which can become really pervasive?

That's right. Well as a matter of fact, we .... As a matter of fact when our OC said he would march us off he was bluffing because we were operating under wartime emergency acts and we had to parade or have a very good reason why. A lot of the fellows just weren't there because they were working overtime in factories and so forth like that.

What 'd happen to you if you decided - not when you're on, say, an exercise where you're all away for a week and you're operating as an official unit - but you know, just an ordinary Thursday of an ordinary month and you decided not to go - you wanted to go to the football, either the football, cards or something like that?

Well actually ...

Would you be fined in a civilian court or what?

Oh no, no. We were not subject to sort of civilian operations. No, matter of fact that's an interesting question. I've never had that before, but I ...

Must have been some people who didn't come along?

Oh right. Well I can remember .... As a matter of fact in amongst the papers I've given to the Memorial is our attendance book, I think, which was meticulously kept up by our company clerk and he would indicate absences. And I think the OC did parade people quietly - or their platoon commander - and say, `You know, you've not been here for four weeks Jack, what's wrong?'. Jack says, `Well I've been working, you know'. Well that's fair excuse. But I wasn't ever sensitive to anybody being thrown out or dismissed or anything. They just went away (laughing) I think. I'm sure there were some, there was ...

There were plenty of people going AWOL from the regular army, so I can imagine the VDC.

That's right. Well I think it was a situation where if you felt that you were in the wrong thing you just disappeared quietly and nobody sort of worried too much. I think that would have been the answer, but I didn't ever come across it because our particular platoon and so forth were a very very well-knit unit, and you'd ring a bloke up and say, `You coming tonight?', you know. `Oh yes, yes. I'll be there.' Or if he didn't turn up you'd ring him the next day and say, `Where were you?'. `Oh, I was sick' or something like that.

So in other words they were using sort of group loyalty between the soldiers rather than officers telling ordinary soldiers what to do. It was a matter of peer group rather than hierarchy?

(15.00) That's right. That's a very good description. Peer group comradeship I would describe it as because we .... When we were doing our exercises, okay it was with not live ammunition but we had live charge and so forth - cordite and so forth - which was very dangerous. Matter of fact we set fire to the bushes in front of the gun one day because of the fire out of the barrel. But you were depending on the next guy - your mate - just as the troops would be depending on their mates at El Alamein or anywhere else. Okay, we were at, we weren't fighting a war realistically but if your mate dropped a hundred pound projectile on your toe you weren't very pleased about it at all. We learnt the team spirit, particularly on the guns, because you know, your gun numbers are very important and they have to know exactly what they're doing all the time. So we, I think, finished up fairly good gun crews - particularly in the observation post too. You're getting your commands down from your battery commander who's a floor above. He's watching the target and so forth.

And everybody had a job to do. You know, one was getting lateral distance and one was getting longitudinal distance from various points so you could give him absolute information to fire over a certain point. And that also encompassed a tremendous amount of comradeship and also teamwork. So, you know, we really became quite good teams and it's all exemplified, I believe, in the fact that we, I think, were the first or the secondwar time VDC organisation to form an afterwards association because we had made such good friends that

we decided to carry this on. And that was started in 1946. And that is a completely different era because we were at peace. People .... I think of probably about 110 to 120 that were demobbed in late '45, round about a hundred joined inaugurally the VDC Association that we formed down at Bentleigh. And we used to have .... We had a smoke night and so forth and a wild night and the comradeship continued. And it was .... What I always got out of it was the depth of comradeship that developed during the war but continued during peacetime. And, you know, I've .... The fellow that I write to every few week, every few months, and he writes back to me, was one of those - the fellow from Nylex. And ...

You mentioned that finished in 1975 in your notes. Why did it finish?

Oh, because the - I suppose the fellow that was the major instigator and continuer of the whole thing died. He was the company clerk I told you about and he was a meticulous fellow. He was the transport manager for Nestles chocolates and a very meticulous man and we were friends for, you know, right since I joined right through until he died. Immediately after we were formed into an, or formed ourselves into an association - which would have been early '46 - someone had a bright idea. One of the members said, `Well look, I've got a place up at Warburton in Victoria' - which is a holiday place forty-eight miles from Melbourne. `Look, you can bring all your equipment, tents and so forth' - of course we had a stack of equipment - `and come up and have a week, have Easter'. We reckoned Easter Parade was our parade. So we, as an association, went up there. I think something like fifty or sixty went. We got transport from Ted Worrell who was our transport officer during the - the battalion transport officer. He ran a trucking business. We had transport. We set up tents. There were a couple of huts or houses on this property - a main house and a couple of outhouses which we turned into a canteen. We had a whale of a time. All run under military lines. We had, you know, reveille. We had chores for everyone. You know, everybody had to pitch in. We had ...

Parade?

We went on parade, particularly Easter when, you know, from the religious point of view. Easter Sunday we always had a parade - even when we were down at the coast we had a parade on Easter Sunday. And this just strengthened the friendship because we saw people under completely different circumstances - not under the pressures and stresses of war. And this carried on. The next year we couldn't go back there and someone had the bright idea to say to the army, `Can we use the old WAAF Barrack ... er, `Wasery' that we used in 1945. And after a deal that ...

What's a Wasery?

Where the AWAS lived. It was called a Wasery. (Laughing). These were the signals girls.

Can I ask why it was called a Wasery?

Oh I think just because of the AWAS - Australian Women's Army Service - and, you know, AWAS, or WAS's live in a Wasery (laughing). So we asked the army and they came good, and of course because the area was a military area - and it's only in the last few years been demilitarised and is now a national park down there - we had to guarantee, you know, we'd go under government guarantee to the army that we wouldn't knock anything about and so forth, but we used all the buildings. And we did that from 1946 to I think about 1953. We had

about seven years and what we did was we used to go down there and mainly fish, you know, off the rocks. Keen fishermen and great fishing contests. Fish and drink actually (laughing). And that went on for years. And those Easters really kept the association together I think. After it was finished - after the army said, `Well bad luck, this is it. We're doing this and doing that and so forth. Your days are numbered', and I think it was about 1951 or '2 that we finished - we used to have an annual holiday up at this company clerk's place up in the hills. We'd have a day up there and all the women and children and grandchildren by that time'd meet, and the women got on very well. They didn't even know each other before the association was formed and nowadays, you know, my wife still gets letters from wives of other VDC people and that has gone on, although it's just about finished now. Um, I think I've just about talked it out.

END TAPE TWO, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW.