



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Interviewer	Martin, Harry
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Description	Norman Thomas Marr as a lance sergeant, 2/4th Australian General Hospital, interviewed by Harry Martin for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is tape one, side one of an interview recorded on 19 September 1990 with Norm Marr of 2/4th Australian General Hospital.

Norm Marr, where and when were you born?

I was born in Murrumbeena on 5th March, 1918.

Tell us something about your family, what your mother and father did, what sort of people they were.

My father was a carpenter and worked all over Victoria really and as such we moved all over Victoria. We were .... I was born in Murrumbeena but we moved when I was about six weeks old to just outside of Ballarat, a placed called Buninyong. I was there for a couple of years and then we moved to up in the Mallee to a place called Watchem until I was five, and then we moved to Williamstown where I grew up and where I've had an association more or less ever since.

What sort of man was your father?

He was very quiet, very much, a very quiet, gentle fellow. He never drank or what have you but he went to sea when he was a boy. Had about thirteen trips to England. He came out from England actually when he was seven which is now about 101 or 102 years ago and he grew up in Williamstown as a boy. His father was a windjammer skipper. And we now have my grandfather's - all his papers, all his master's certificate and his pilot certificate for Sydney Harbour and for Newcastle Harbour and so forth. And he commanded a ship here in the bay for quite a while. My father never enjoyed very good health. He was very lightly built, complete opposite to me.

You say he was a gentle man, yet it's a time when for many people parents could be very strict. It was a period of discipline and smacking if necessary.

Oh, he'd be strict to a point but he was never that violent or ...

Harsh person.

No.

What about your mother?

Mum was a country girl and had a very hard life as a young girl and I think at the age of about eight she was working on a farm and she was, at the time my father married her, she was a doctor's receptionist. But she was a very practical person. I can remember when we were up in the Mallee in the bush we'd be little kids running around and we'd get snakes down among the chooks and mother would be down in a flash and by the time Dad got home - because he'd be away working on a farm somewhere building something or other - she'd have the two or three snakes hanging over the wall or on the fence. She was a very game and very practical, as I say, person.

How many children in the family?

Seven in our family. I'm the middle one.

Was it a turbulent childhood or did you all get on pretty well?

Oh, we got on pretty well really, we still do. I've lost one brother just recently, my younger brother, but the rest of the other six are still alive, and we get on pretty well.

What about religion, did that play an important part in the family life?

Well, it did in some of the children. I'm not religious myself but ...

Your mother and father were they?

My mother and father weren't really religious but as mother used to say, 'Well, it's not going to church that counts. It's what you do outside', and she wouldn't hurt anybody or she never did a wrong thing really. She'd always try to help.

(5.00) I can remember during the depression if somebody came around and we didn't have much ourselves because Dad was out of work as usual in those days in the '30s, early '30s and that, she'd always find a feed for a stranger, you know, someone down on their luck.

Well how did the family get by if your father was off quite a bit?

Well, we battled on. He was, as I say, a carpenter and he used to build different stuff. He would, had a, building gramophones, you know the old cabinets and that, and he and another fellow went into partnership doing that. They just did whatever they could to earn a pound, you know.

Did the depression years create a sense of social concern? Was it the sort of family where you'd sit around and discuss the issues and the politics of the day?

Well, we did, they did discuss politics of course because Dad was a great Labor man and later on in life we used to have a few, not arguments exactly, but discussions on the different things because I was sort of swinging. I didn't want to go along with what they did. But we did discuss it to a point but I think everybody was just trying to survive in those days. I know, myself, I would have hated to been a parent back then.

What about the traditions of ANZAC and the experience of the first world war, did that have a part in the family sort of traditions or beliefs? Did you have people who went off to war and so on?

No, my father didn't. My father was away during the Boer War, at sea, and I can remember him telling me he tried to run away in South Africa to go as a bugler but they grabbed him on the wharf and put him back on board ship. Well then by the time the second war came around he was married with three or four children and course he didn't get away.

So did the term ANZAC, did that have any particular significance?

I think to all growing children in those days, we had it instilled in us a respect for the ANZACs and a respect for what they did. And Gallipoli and all that sort of thing was - everyone knew about it. I mean, uh ....

Did you think of yourselves as British, because there was a period when Britain, Empire was ...?

Yeah. Well, my father was of course English although you wouldn't know it because he was out here since he was seven so he had no accent or anything and he looked on himself as Australian, you know. He never ever referred - although it was always the 'home country'. And even in, we thought of it as the home country when we were young.

What about schooling, where did you go to school?

I went to school at Williamstown.

State School?

Williamstown State School, which was the school my father attended and I think members of our family are still attending, like some of the cousins, grandchildren and so on. They're still attending down there.

And from State?

State, no well, I didn't - in those days - I didn't go on from State School. I finished, I think I got my Merit Certificate at State School and then went to work. That was the depression times, you just didn't, as soon as you could get a job you got one.

Did you have any particular aspirations just before the work period what you ...?

Well, we did but you sort of got those knocked out of you because there was just no work at all to get and whatever you could get, you'd do it.

What would you have liked to have done?

Well, I don't know. I'd have probably gone into accountancy or something like that but anyhow I finished up working as a grocer and I worked at that right up till the war.

When did you first start to get a sense that there was trouble looming that might involve you as a young man?

I think, I reckon round about 1936, '37, it looked pretty bad over there. The papers were full of Hitler and whats'name name and it was the talk of the lads, you know, it looked like it would be on.

With the ANZAC tradition then was there a sense, well, young fellows were anticipating the possibility of having their go as it were? Were you keen to go?

Yeah, well, I think that most of my friends would be of that opinion, like that it was just a matter of time and we'd have to be in it because it looked as if nothing could stop a war coming.

(10.00) So just prior to joining up what were you actually doing?

I was, as I say, I was a grocer. I worked for my cousin who had five grocer shops and just prior to the war I was managing one of the shops but I, previous to that, had joined the Volunteer Naval Reserve as a naval cadet.

Why did you do that?

Oh, just thought, you know, that would be good. It was good fun and we used to have our nights and we'd go down to the rifle range and shoot, and go out boating with the cutters and so forth, and we had a lot of fun as kids.

So how did the actual entry into the army come about?

Well then when I got, that would be about, I suppose I would be about seventeen when I was in the naval cadets. Well, when you get girlfriends and what have you, you sort of tend to drift away from that and ...

What the notion of going away to sea, you mean, taking you away from your girlfriends?

Yeah, well, you didn't want to, so you sort of lost that little bit of interest in that. Well then when the war broke out, the sort of thing was there you were there going to volunteer, well I joined up in March 1940 and posted to Puckapunyal.

Tell us about the join-up procedure, what do you recall about how you went about it? What was the actual moment when it happened?

Well, first of all they were calling for volunteers and I went up to the barracks in Footscray, near the football ground there, Footscray Football Ground.

War had broken out at this time?

Oh yeah, war had broken out. I went up there and the 6th Divy was just about full and they were lining up for the 7th Division because I know I went up to the recruiting depot, May - it'd be a bit earlier than that, be about early April, I think - and I had to wait for some few weeks to get the actual call to go in and then they marched us through the streets.

Did you do a medical and so on?

Well, we did later on. Didn't do a medical there. We went from, they just signed us up there, that's at Footscray, the drill hall. And then a crowd of us, there would be about thirty or forty all in civilian clothes, and marched down Barkly Street, Footscray ...

Did people clap?

Oh yeah, old ladies were crying and jokers were yelling out and what have you, and of course the wags in the crowd were in and out of the pub, have a drink and continue on and catch up to the column, you know. And then they put us on a train and took us out to Caulfield Racecourse.

Was the march an emotional experience? Was there a sense of really being there now?

More or less, I should think, that you felt you were probably doing your bit. But it surprised us with the old ladies. Of course, they would have had previous experience in the first war which we didn't have - we were only, I was only a child when it finished - and they were ... been thinking back I should imagine to what happened in the first war. And they would have seen plenty of these things happening and the fellows not coming back. But of course when you're young you don't think of the worst side - although you do, but you don't dwell on that part of it. But then they took us to Caulfield. Well, then from there they tested us, give us a medical, and ...

How extensive was that?

Oh, fairly extensive, a fairly extensive medical. And I suppose they would have spent an hour on us. And then we were held there and then ...

Were you all made to strip?

Oh yeah, yeah.

Now, that's an experience that a lot of young men would - the times were such that morality was rather different and stricter. You didn't feel embarrassed?

(15.00) Oh no. Most of us would have played sport. I played lacrosse at Williamstown and of course with showers and all that, that didn't come into it at all. No, there wasn't that, that wouldn't be a worry I don't think to anybody. Might have been to the odd one that had never been about but I think most of the boys couldn't care less.

So after the medical?

Medical, then we were issued with uniforms.

What was the uniform?

Oh well, the first one was we had our sort of 'giggle suit', you know like a light suit and then ...

Can you describe that? What did it consist of?

Oh, it was just like a pair of overalls really; a bit of a jacket and a pair of light trousers.

Cap?

Yes, the old forage caps. And then we went on then to - in a couple of days we had, we were dished out with our proper uniform and boots and what have you, and we moved off up to Puckapunyal.

Just before that move, in those first few days, did you go home each day, or?

No, matter of fact I went home the first day because I had a date with my girlfriend and I purposefully didn't sign the attestation papers because if I did they'd get me in. But if I hadn't signed, well I could go home, so I had a date and I didn't sign, so I signed the next day.

Was your girlfriend worried?

Oh no. Well, I don't know, she might have been.

What about your parents? Were they concerned?

My parents, well, I think Dad was a bit concerned because he'd seen what had gone on in the first one but, well, it's just one of those things that you do. But then we went up, as I say .... We had to sleep just in the open stands there, we had no tents or anything. You just slept on the seats in the Caulfield Racecourse grandstand.

You had blankets?

Oh, they gave you a couple of blankets.

Was it cold, or enough?

Oh, it was damn cold. It was May, late May, so it would be getting, starting to get into the winter. And as I say, then we were shipped off to Puckapunyal. Well they were - I didn't know what I was going in, what unit or whatever I was going in. I just went in. I would have been whatever unit they put me. But apparently at that very moment they were forming the 2/4th AGH and I found myself in Puckapunyal and I was one of the originals of the 2/4th. I was there, I think, on the second day that it was formed. I'd be in about the first seven or eight men in.

Were you briefed about what the purpose of the AGH was? Did anybody say what this was all about?

No, they just sent us up there and when I got there that's what we were and they said we're a medical unit and that's it. So then we were looked after by one of the units that were already esconced [sic] there, they were in operation, the 2/5th Field Ambulance. And they fed us for a certain amount of time.

How was the food?

Oh, reasonable, not like home but it was reasonable. Then we eventually took over the hospital when we got enough numbers. Like men were coming in then, from then on, all the time. Might be, in my lot there was only four or five but after that they'd be coming up in batches of twenty or thirty and eventually we would have had 150, 200, there. Then they brought the sisters up and doctors and they started to form the actual unit.

In that period before you had the numbers and were set up what were you doing?

Oh well, I was, being a grocer, of course I got the job of looking after the food and I used to have to look after the rations. And that's what I finished up as, the rations sergeant of the unit eventually.

Were there immediate pressures with that? One might suppose you'd made mates here and there and every mate is going to think I've got a friend who's got access to the rations and maybe put the hard word on you for this bit of extra tea or whatever?

Oh no, they knew that you couldn't have any friends in that business because you were .... Everybody had their ration and everyone had to get their ration and that was the way I looked at it. Nobody got any favouritism. Anyway it was all cooked in bulk so really there wasn't much you could give anybody because it was all bulk stuff, bulk vegetables, bulk this and that and the other thing. And it was all cooked by a cook. When it got to the cookhouse I don't what happened down there but I mean they might have had a few mates.

How were you billeted at that time? What were sort of quarters?

(20.00) We were billeted where they had tin huts and it was freezing.

How many to a hut?

About thirty or thirty-five. And of course it was, as I say, we were coming into the winter and it was freezing! The doors never closed, it was like the door would be open that much, see the bottom of the door was that ....

About eight inches or so.

And we'd be sleeping on the floor. Yeah. And of course the wind would just, the cold freezing wind would just come in under the thing and you'd be sleeping on, what they had then was a palliasse - like a big bag filled with straw. And you all got a palliasse and you all went down and they had big pile of straw and you filled your palliasse up with straw and put that on the floor and then you had your couple of blankets. And you'd go to bed fully dressed because it was freezing.

What time were you up in the morning?

We were up about six, half-past six.

Would you shower at that time?

Yeah, we used to have to have cold showers; there was no hot water. And you'd just run around and sort of try to get warmed and dive under the shower quickly and get dressed.

How did most fellows react to this? One would suppose they'd complain but was it good-natured or were people a bit annoyed?

No, I don't remember them ever really being annoyed. They took it all as a joke. We built sort of braziers, you know, with coal and what have you, and we used to stand around those and have a cup of cof..., a cup of tea before breakfast.

Could you take leave during that period?

Well, we had leave. As a matter of fact I was a bit fortunate because the first week I was there my sister was being married in Melbourne here and I asked them for leave and they said, 'You've only been here five minutes', but I said, 'Look, I didn't organise the marriage, it's being married this Saturday'. 'Alright', so they gave me leave. Of course luckily then there was the very few of us there.

What was the manner of the people who were in charge of you in terms of the way they'd address you and organise you? Would they run you around? How were you regarded?

Oh no, I would say we were respected in that they didn't - discipline was firm. I mean, you couldn't step out of line but I think even those people were feeling their, you know, getting their feet too, so that although quite a few were permanent soldiers or they'd been in the Militia and they became the sergeants and so on because they knew the ropes. And I remember our warrant officer, a chap called Jack Morris, I can remember in June when Dunkirk happened, he said, 'Oh gee, the war's over before we even get there'. Well, we worked out it wasn't over but that particular fellow - oh, he was a fine chap - he was our RSN originally and he finished up where we did in Tobruk and as a matter of fact his brother was my boss in the - he was the quartermaster sergeant, or the WO really, WO2 - and him and I and another couple we went on holidays in Tel Aviv - this is later on in the piece - and we had a great time. And he wanted me to go with him to his unit but I would have had to drop a stripe and I wouldn't do that. So another chap went. They went to Java, were taken prisoner and he died on a troopship going to Japan, the Americans sunk the troopship so Jack Morris never survived the war. If I'd have gone with him I'd have been a POW too.

Going back to the arrival of the medical staff, in those days doctors had a very established place in society and were much respected. Were they superior in their manner?

Oh well, I would think so but a lot of them were great fellows. As a matter of fact now we have a wonderful rapport with them, like the unit association - our unit as 2/4th Association is still going strong after all these years. As a matter of fact I'm immediate past-president.

(25.00)I was president last year and the doctors are all tremendous, you know, they're really part and parcel of the unit and a lot of them used to come down to the sergeants' mess because later on, as I say when we got more established we had our own sergeants' mess and I was a sergeant then, and a lot of them would prefer to come and have a few drinks at the sergeants' mess than drink in the officers' mess.

Yet in those days the class distinctions in a way were rather more apparent, and they were also apparent through speech. Was there a tendency for officers to speak in a very correct fashion, rather like British officers do today?

Oh yeah, yeah, although most of them were very down to earth, there was the odd one that was a bit hoity-toity but most of them were very down to earth, although everyone respected them because of their rank, one, and because they were doctors, two. And by the same token they respected the men.

So they were friendly rather than aloof?

Oh yeah, well, they weren't, most of them weren't real looking down on the troops. There was, I think, a spirit of co-operation was there.

Were there some who were superior though?

Oh well, some had their noses up in the air a bit but we just took them in our stride, we never let them worry us at all.

What about the nurses and matrons?

Yeah, well ...

How was their relationship with the rest of the troops?

They were, well, I didn't, being in the quartermaster's side of things, I didn't have a great deal to do with the nursing staff as such, but they were all right. Some of them were a bit hoity-toity, but the big majority of them were nice girls, although they were out of bounds to anyone under officers, you know, you couldn't take a nurse out.

So how long were you at Puckapunyal?

I arrived there in end of May or early June and we left there, sailed on the *Mauretania* in end of December.

Now in that interim period did you begin to get some rank?

I became first of all a corporal and then a sergeant.

Why? How was it that you became a corporal? What was the reason for it?

Well, because of my being a grocer and being used to handling foodstuffs and what have you, it was just a natural progression that I, and being also I suppose had the advantage of being in there early and I was given the job of looking after the rations and I just continued on and then when - they call it the steward's store in those days - but when that was formed I was given the rank of sergeant.

What did that mean to you?

Well it meant a difference in pay. Actually, well I was like an unpaid sergeant, I was a lance sergeant, and that means that you're a sergeant in rank but you only got paid as a corporal. But it meant the difference of about four or five shillings a day in pay - a lot of difference.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: This is side two of tape one of an interview recorded on 19 September 1990 with Norm Marr of the 2/4th Australian General Hospital.

What did the rank mean in terms of relationship with your mates and other soldiers?

Oh well, I should imagine some of the dyed-in-the-wool were a bit crooked on the sergeants as they always said but I think deep down they weren't. I think they just liked to say that. But my own fellows that were under me, we all respected each other and I never had any moment's trouble with any of my fellows.

Was it a formal relationship? Would the men address you as 'sir' or 'sergeant' or by first names?

Well,'sergeant' they would say but we worked as a team and if we had something to do, if we had [inaudible] truck to load or whatever I'd pick up the first box and say, 'Come on boys, we'll get this loaded', and away we'd go. I never stood on that I was the sergeant and they were the privates and by that way we got on very well. I never had any, or very, very little trouble with ...

Some trouble?

Maybe with an odd, when you got an odd bod in that didn't understand the routine you might have to jump on him.

Give us a circumstance, what kind of thing might have occurred?

Well, you know, you'd ask them to do something and you'd find out it wasn't done and then you'd go down and kick his tail, say, 'I asked you to do so-and-so, why didn't you?' and you'd go on and then you'd rouse him up. And then I wouldn't need to because the boys would say to him, 'Look, if you don't pull your weight, he'll get rid of you', and that'd be it. But mainly I had, I suppose, about half-a-dozen fellows over the period and I had them for long periods of time and we all knew each other and they all worked very well together. Like, I had a corporal as well and him and I were the greatest of mates. He died about ten years ago. After the war we visited each other, we both went to the air force after we came back to Australia. We both went to air crew and we were good, great mates. There was no sergeant and corporal, it was just Ronnie and Norm, we were the greatest of mates and we finished up that way right to the end of his life.

When you were made a sergeant were you briefed as to what this meant? What the lines of your authority were? What sorts of disciplines you could use in order to keep people in line?

(5.00) Oh well, you more or less knew that. You'd been in the army long enough to know that you had a certain job to do and it was entrusted for you to do it as the sergeant and that was it. You had to make sure that those rations were got from the DID, from the different places we had to go to the depots and brought and then distributed to the various kitchens in

their proper quantities. And then you'd have to order ahead which wasn't easy because with the hospital you've got a floating population. You might have a lot in today and not so many tomorrow and you had to order three days ahead and you'd have to put an order for what you reckoned you have and so forth. They gave us a little bit of leeway being a hospital because we didn't know, we could have, say, 200 in beds today and overnight they could bring sixty or eighty in, so that .... Of course when we were more or less in action in Tobruk it was a different story. They didn't stand on too much ceremony there as far as what you had and what you didn't have. You just got what you wanted more or less.

> As to this business of discipline, inevitably in a group of men you'll get some who are natural-born larrikins who just don't take authority very well. Did that happen? Did you get some who just got themselves into trouble?

Oh well, yeah. Not so much me in particular but some of the cooks were villains but ...

> What do you mean by that, in what way?

Well, they were, they had no respect for authority at all. But when the chips were down and we needed them they were there. They were great fellers but they were just born happy-go-lucky, couldn't care less to a big degree, but when things were really needed, when we'd get a load of wounded in or something like that, they were on the job.

> Was there a military prison at the end of the line? Was there an assumption that as a back-up ...?

Oh hell, yeah, and many of the cooks spent twenty-eight days in the military prison, too, particularly overseas a few times, there was a few of them got sent to ...

> What do you know about the conditions in those places?

Well, I had to take a couple down - another sergeant and myself - to one of the, hand them over, and before we more or less, the truck practically pulled up, there was a sergeant MP, 'Where's the prisoners? Right. Out, on the double.' He had them doubling before they practically got off the truck, so they were tough and they didn't want to go back. Any of the boys that got that, they didn't want to go back into prison because a lot of them were run by the English. And if you know anything about the English MPs, they're rough people. They can play it hard. Oh! Yes, they'd do anything. They were rough. I can remember an instance - this going in to Tobruk again - we had two wounded Italians, they only had flesh wounds. And after we treated them and might have had them a couple of days, I don't know, I had the job of taking them down to the military police to hand them over. Well, I handed them over and, before the poor fellow got off the truck, they'd hit him over the ear and of course, there was a mate of mine who was killed later, him and I were really savage on these military police because we said, 'Look, they're poor, inoffensive blokes. We put them in the back of a utility, while we sat in the front and they're POWs and we didn't put anyone in the back to guard them or anything.' They were inoffensive and there was no need for them to hit, no need whatsoever, but they just had to show their authority.

> Why would they have English officers for an Australian military prison, even at Puckapunyal or in Australia?

No, this is not in Australia, this is in Tobruk itself, in the Middle East.

Oh, I see. Well, what do you know about the conditions of the military prisons in Australia?

In Australia. Well, I think they were tough but I don't know that we'd ever sent any of our blokes, not to my knowledge anyway, not here in Australia. I don't think there was anybody sent to prison.

(10.00) What about the logistics of the tasks you had? Were you quartermaster as such by this time?

No. See, we had different sections. There was the quartermaster who was - he was a captain - and then we had a WO2 who was under him and then we had the various sergeants for the different sections. There was a pack store where when people came in with their - all their gear would be taken and put aside, if they were wounded or whatever, put aside, or sick or whatever.

Just going back to Puckapunyal, just ...

This is Puckapunyal. Yeah, well, they'd be sick in that case, there'd be no wounded in that way, but there'd be a pack store then there'd be the clothing store which would look after uniforms and all that type of thing, there'd be another sergeant in charge of that and then there'd be the quartermaster's office. See, there was quite a big section. Well, when you're looking after a hospital we were, say, 600 beds, there's a lot of people we had to look after.

Was it a difficult job as such for you? I mean your job.

No, not really. I mean, I'd had the grounding in handling all the stores and that, it was no big deal really. I mean, there was a few things you had to learn of course because the army - you had to fill in certain forms and so on and so forth but you just used a lot of commonsense really.

What were the basic supplies in terms of the mainstay as to food and so on?

Well, in Australia we would have had meat and vegetables and jam and that type of thing.

Was there much tinned food at that time?

Oh yeah. Well, you'd get a bit of tinned food but overseas, course, it was practically all tinned food - bully beef and what they called 'M and V', meat and vegetables in a can like a dog food can. That's what it tasted like too.

What did fellows think of the food, at Pucka anyway?

I think they were quite happy. I think the food there, not like it is today, I've been to some of the army establishment, the food today is absolutely fabulous, but it was very basic, it would be stew or whatever.

Was there a ration of beer as part of the ...?

No, no beer. Beer for the sergeants and beer for the officers but the men didn't have beer and a men's canteen until we came back from the Middle East.

So what did they do for entertainment while you were at ...?

At Puckapunyal, they had a picture theatre there and of course they played sport. They played footy and cricket and what have you.

Were you briefed fairly regularly on the war? Were you kept in touch in a way that you felt you knew what was going on or was it all a bit murky?

A bit murky, we only got what was in the paper. We didn't have anything as such. The officers wouldn't have known any more than we did, they could only read the paper.

Were there a lot of rumours going around about when you were going and where you were going?

Oh, that was on all the time, yeah. I suppose from after about two months we were there we were going to be sailing any time. It took us, as I say, from, about six months really.

There was a syndrome called 'Pucka Throat', did you get that?

I didn't get it myself but we were the hospital that handled all that, and we had hundreds of cases go through with Pucka Throat.

Did you have friends get it?

Oh, a few of them in the unit got it but I was lucky, I never ever got that. But the hospital was nearly full with this virus or whatever it was.

When did you first hear then that you were finally going overseas? How did that come about?

Well, we were, see, we knew we were going overseas because from the time that we joined up for and also from the time that we were there we were packing stores. We had, one section of the quartermaster's section were in Melbourne. At South Melbourne we had a big storeroom there, a big warehouse really and we packed all the stores. We'd get the stores from the stores depot and eventually we'd build up what they called the establishment of our stores which were blankets and beds and all medical stuff. And then they had a medical section in Pelham[?] Street which built up all the doctors' instruments and all that type of thing.

(15.00) But what about the ... when did you get the official word, 'Well, this is it, we're' ...

We were given leave, a final leave at Christmas time 1940 and told that that was our final leave, we wouldn't be home again.

Was there a sense of excitement?

Oh, of course, we were all keen because that's what we joined up for, to go away.

How did most fellows feel about being in the hospital? Were there some who felt, oh no, they wanted to fight and ...?

Yeah, well, that was the case.

What about you? How did you find it?

Well, I thought, 'Well, I'm here, I've got a job to do, I'll do it the best that I can'. It wouldn't have worried me had they put me, wherever they'd put me. I mean I went in there prepared to go wherever and seeing as that's the way it fell, well, I just accepted that. But what happened later on, is when we came back to Australia they put us up in Redbank in Queensland and we got a bit restless then and they came round for volunteers to go into the air force, into air crew, and quite a few of us joined up and transferred from the army to the air force.

Well, going back, you're about to depart, you've had some leave, what happened then?

Well, then they took us to, we had to report back to Puckapunyal and then the next thing they put us on a troop train and took us down to Port Melbourne and we boarded the *Mauretania*.

Were there fellows able to smuggle some beer en route, on the train? Was it a bit of a celebration as well?

No, I didn't see any beer but, well, some of them might have had it, but in those days I wasn't a drinker myself. Oh, I'd actually started to drink in the sergeants' mess, of course, I think that's the ruination of people. But I don't remember them being, drinking on the train, because they wouldn't have been allowed for a start.

How did the *Mauretania* look?

Magnificent. Huge. Huge. From the wharf looking up it just looked a massive thing. Massive. It was a beautiful ship because they hadn't had time then to really turn it into a troopship. I know we went aboard and, as I say, being a sergeant too, we were in cabins in - I think all the boys had cabins - we were up fairly well, on a good deck. I think we had our own bath [inaudible].

How many to a cabin?

I think there were four in ours, but oh, beautiful. The dining room - magnificent! Chivers marmalade. Home-made, they'd make their own bread rolls.

So it was a civilian crew, was it, rather than ...?

Civilian, oh yeah. It was just the crew of the *Mauretania* come more or less straight out from - they used to run between New York and London.

Did they give you normal ship's fare or did they have army food?

Oh no, we had beautiful meals, beautiful meals. The only trouble was it didn't last long enough. We were taken from here and then we went in convoy, there were I think five ships in our convoy. There was the *Mauretania*, the *Acquitania*, the *Queen Mary*, the *Dominion Monarch* and the *Awatea*. And we were escorted by destroyers and what have you right across and then we went to Fremantle, had a day's leave in Fremantle. And then from Fremantle we went across then to Colombo.

When you were leaving Melbourne had word got around?

Oh yeah, the people more or less knew. There were quite a few down at the wharf. And I can always remember one chappie's parents had got a boat - whether they owned a boat, they might have, I don't know - and they were going round the ship in the boat saying goodbye to their son who incidentally was killed in Tobruk soon after we got there. A chap by the name of Norm Forster. But I can always remember that boat going round and round, waving goodbye to their boy.

(20.00) Was it a noisy farewell?

Oh yeah, there were .... It was supposed to be secret of course but everyone knew.

On the voyage to Fremantle, and then after Fremantle, how were the days conducted? Were you given ...?

Oh yeah, they had drill and they had different lectures and things like that were done. And of course the boys used to play two-up and crown-and-anchor and all that sort of thing - not supposed to, but they did.

How was the voyage across the Great Australian Bight, was that a comfortable voyage?

Well, it was a little bit rough but you're sick for the first day but after that you're pretty right.

Was that your first trip to Fremantle?

Oh, what first boat trip?

Well, had you been to Fremantle before?

No, I'd never been to Fremantle, no.

What was the feeling in Western Australia?

Oh look, they were the greatest people that I've ever met in my life. We got off, as I say, we stopped in Fremantle and then we got the train up to Perth. And in Perth you couldn't buy a drink, everybody was absolutely wonderful, they were marvellous. One chappie bought three of us, took us into the dining room of the hotel and bought us a meal - didn't know him from a bar of soap. And you couldn't buy a drink at the bar, and honestly, they were marvellous. One of our chaps said, 'Oh, I know a girl in Perth', so he said, 'I'll ring her up'. So he rang her up, 'Oh', she said, 'I'll have to get in touch with Harry'. That's her husband. So Harry knocked off work, brought his car home, when he saw how many there were he said, 'Oh, I'll have to

get on to Joe. We need another car.' So he rang his mate and his mate knocked off work and they took us everywhere - all over Perth in these two cars.

Was it a similar farewell in Perth? Did word get around again?

Yeah, well, I think it was a bit quieter because there weren't the people, there might have been some Western Australians joined the ship, I don't remember that, but from what I can remember it wasn't like it was in Melbourne.

As you were on your way to Colombo, was there a concern about submarines?

Oh, there was talk of it but I don't think any of us worried much about it. It wasn't on our minds anyway. We were, we had quite a good voyage really.

If your conditions were pretty good, were the officers then in first class of the boat?

Oh, they'd be better still. And the other men did all right too, they were okay. But of course then we got to Colombo and they transhipped then, from those five ships. Well, the *Mary* didn't come into Colombo, that couldn't get into Colombo Harbour and that went round to Trincomalee on the other side of the island of Ceylon. And I'll never forget it, the ships lined up and the *Mary* took off on her own and she sailed straight down the centre of the other ships and off into the distance and of course she could really move along, and she went off on her own without escort because she was so fast I don't think that any submarine or anything could catch her. And of course she went round there and they transhipped. Well, then we transhipped into a little ship called the *Nevasa*, and then we went from the *Nevasa*, in that *Nevasa*, we went through to Egypt.

Did you have time ashore in Colombo?

Yeah, we had a day ashore in Colombo. A very instructive day, too.

What do you mean by that?

Oh well, it was a lot of fun.

What did you do?

Well, it depended on what you wanted to do. Some of the blokes went looking for girls but that didn't interest me, but we went round, went to look at a lot of the different sights of the different places and that. Oh, we just had a real good day in Colombo.

How were conditions aboard the *Nevasa* then?

(25.00)Well, the complete and utter opposite to the what's-his-name, excepting that in the morning they had the Alaska stewards and being a sergeant we had a cabin of course, and they would bring you a cup of tea and a biscuit. Well, we never got that on board the *Mauretania*, but the food ...

On the *Nevasa*, you mean?

No, on the *Mauretania* we didn't get that but on the *Nevasa* we did. But the food itself was pretty poor.

> Incidentally, did you have to involve in the loading, off-loading of equipment and so on between ships?

Yeah, some of the stuff we did but a lot of the stuff was loaded by other units, you know. But anyway, we got on - there's a little story attached to this *Nevasa*. We went, as I say, to Port Tewfik and that. Years later I met my wife and we were married and when I was in the air force I was home on leave one day and I was looking at a book and a photograph fell out and it's HMS *Nevasa*, and I couldn't wait for my father-in-law to get home. I said, 'How the devil did you have that?'. He said, 'I come home from the first war on that ship'. And I reckon that's a coincidence because there was hundreds of ships. I think even in that transhipment of those five there were about thirty ships that took the rest of the contingent and I happened to be on that one particular ship that he'd come home from the first war on. And I thought that was a tremendous coincidence.

> How were conditions for most of the troops in the *Nevasa*?

They were reasonable I think, but I think they were in hammocks. It was a bit of a comedown, but still you were going to the war, you couldn't expect to go first class.

> How long did it take to get to Egypt?

I think somewhere around about four weeks altogether.

> What were your expectations aboard ship? Again presumably there'd be rumours. Did you feel you were going to be dropped in the thick of it, or did you know exactly where you were going?

We knew that, we knew what was going on and we knew that we'd be put somewhere to group and to get organised because it's not easy to organise an hospital. I mean, like, you've got to have buildings for a start. You've got to have all your equipment and what have you, so we knew that we'd have to group first. We were taken from there, we were landed at Port Tewfik, and then we were taken up to Cairo by train. Taken off the train in Cairo and taken down to English barracks and given a feed. And if you ask any of the boys in the unit they will always tell you what we had to eat.

> What did you have to eat?

We had beautiful .... We had - they had a hot plate - and they had these eggs and they were doing these eggs on the hot plate. Well, it was absolutely delicious, you know, and we always remember that particular day. They marched us through the streets of Cairo, gave us a feed and then after a while they marched us back onto the train and then we went up to Alexandria.

> What was the attitude of the local population when you marched through the streets?

Oh, they seemed to be all right. They just ignored us more or less. I mean, they didn't, they'd probably seen plenty of troops marching through the streets. I don't know whether they'd seen too many Australians.

Were you armed?

No, we were non-combatants, we weren't armed at all.

Had you had drill as such?

We were drilled as far as marching and all that type of thing's concerned but see, we weren't issued with arms because we were not supposed to have arms.

Had the Commanding Officer Speirs travelled on the ships as well with you?

Oh yes, he was there. They were all there.

Did you ever meet him at that early stage?

Speirs? Oh yeah, I knew him.

When did you first meet him?

Well, I would have dealings with him at different times in the unit. Different times, different things would happen that I'd have to report to him or do something or other. I didn't have a lot to do with him but I would have met him and he would have known that I was Sergeant Marr.

How did he strike you?

Oh, he was good old bloke, really. He was very proud of his unit and his boys and he was a pretty good bloke.

While you were in Cairo did you have an opportunity to get out to the pyramids?

No, see, we only, we landed in Cairo railway station, they bussed us from there down to the, I think it was Allenby Barracks, and from the barracks back to the train and then the train up to Alexandria. Later on in the piece some of the boys got leave and went to Cairo and then they saw the pyramids and what have you but I went to Tel Aviv on that trip and I didn't go to Cairo.

Did you meet British troops in that time?

Oh yes, plenty of them.

The British, even today, still the officers have a very, very 'pukka' manner, did that impress you at the time?

It didn't impress me at all! I had many an argument with the English officers, particularly later in the piece when we came back. We came back and we stayed in Ceylon for three months and the way they treated the natives, oh, absolutely terrible, I thought.

In what way?

They treated ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: Side one, tape two of an interview recorded on 19 September 1990 with Norm Marr of the 2/4th Australian General Hospital.

You were about to relate this incident.

Yeah, well, we went down to pick up some rations and they had this little native, small enough to be a boy. He was thin, little tiny fellow, and the English people were in charge of this depot. And I remember they had to load some potatoes, a sack of potatoes, and this little bloke he could barely lift them. And I said, 'Boys, go and give him a lift, take them off him', so they went and took the sack of potatoes and chucked them on the thing. Well, this English officer, he came over and he got into me. He said, 'You this and that and the other thing'. He said, 'You've been here five minutes in the colony and you've ruined the native population'. So we said, 'Yeah, well, it's better than what you do to them. Treat them like dogs.' And it went on and on and on and on and he was going to report me and I said, 'Righto, well, the person you'd talk to Colonel Speirs and my name, it's Sergeant Marr', and I gave him .... I said, 'My number is VX177488. You just go ahead and report.' So when I went back I went and saw Col Barnet who was my captain. I told him. He said, 'Don't worry them. 'Darts' will fix them'. We used to call Colonel Speirs 'Darts' of course - that was his nickname. He said, 'He'll fix him up'. So I said, 'Oh, they treat these poor little black fellows something terrible'. Oh, and they weren't too happy about the Australians at all.

Did you ever get to hear how Colonel Speirs responded to the British in that way?

Oh yeah, there was a few times that people had been, and he's told them off. He said, 'I'll deal with my men'. Oh no, he was very supportive of his own troops, you know.

And were there ever any fights between the British and the Australians over incidents like that?

There was one big fight in Jerusalem with the Pommy MPs and the 6th Division.

Were you there at the time?

No, but I heard about it later. As a matter of fact we got into .... The sergeant in charge of clothing store was an ex-policeman, a big fellow. He was [inaudible]. He was another one like, we were of such a close-knit mob that after the war we were mates, their wives and my wives and we'd all come and visit each other and so forth. We'd see each other every two or

three weeks. Anyway, we went to a dance in Jerusalem. There was this 'Big George' and a few of us went to the dance. I was quite interested, I just wanted to dance, I didn't want to drink but the rest of the boys had had a few beers and the dance finished and they shut down - they had a bar in this. It was the Jewish Returned Soldiers' Club really. And they'd shut down this bar and 'Big George' who was a shrewd bloke, he said, 'They'll open that bar up after for these MPs. We'll just hang about.' And I said, 'Oh, I don't think so, George.

(5.00) I think we better go.' So we all went into the toilet, came out, and as we walked out the door, there's a line of MPs from there to there out the door. The only way you can go is out the door. So everything's alright and I said to George, 'Come on, we'd better go'. And then one of the MPs said, 'Get', and of course he was a corporal and George said, 'Are you talking to me, Corporal?' because George was a sergeant, he was about six-foot-two. And he said, 'Yeah', and of course a bit of an argument ensued. He said, 'Well, come out man-to-man'. George said, 'You'll do me, son'.
So they walked down the path and we all stopped in the little foyer and all of a sudden there's something wrong. So I off and went out and here's George lying on the ground and about five MPs had got him with a baton as he'd come round - there was a hedge - and they were behind the hedge and they just hit him. Well anyway, I was absolutely cold sober, I wouldn't have had a drink at all and I talked me way out of it. I said, 'Look, I'll get him home', and I got all the rest of the boys together and I said, 'Come on'. So we were going down the street and along followed two or three of these MPs and a couple of Palestinian policemen who are English soldiers anyway, originally they would have been. And they caught us up. And I thought, 'Oh, this is going to be trouble now'. So we had the pay sergeant with us, he was a little bloke but a very proper little bloke and he pulled himself to his full height of about five-foot-one and said something or other to this bloke and this big policeman just looked down on him as if he was a fly and went whack and sat him on his back. So I thought, 'Oh gee, this is going to be right. We can all finish in the 'boob'[?].' So anyway I finished up, a taxi came along and I grabbed the taxi and I pushed them all in and they were sitting on each other and everything, but I got them back to the barracks.

Was your friend hurt?

He had a bit of a bruise on his head. Anyway the next day he went down to the Australian military police and, funnily enough, he knew the chap that was in charge of the Australian military police because they were Victorian policemen together, when they were younger. And the chap said, 'Well, there's not much we can .... We were supposed to have men there as well and we were short-handed and we didn't send anyone there, sort of thing, and there's not much I can do for you but I'll keep it in mind.' But I don't know what happened after that.

What about the incident with the 6th Division that you referred to?

Oh, with the 6th Divy, the same lot of MPs apparently had had a bit of a blue and the 6th Divy really went right through the lot of them. They cleaned up .... No, I think that's what they lookin' .... That had happened a month or so before we got there and I reckon that's why we were in trouble there because they were lookin' to get their own back.

How serious was the fracas?

Well, it was - no weapons or anything were used but plenty of fists and what have you. But I only got that second-hand, I mean I wasn't there but I know there was no love lost between the Pommy MP and the Australians.

So when did you get to Tobruk?

Well then, we got to Alexandria and they took us out into the desert awhile where they were building a barracks or a hospital really and we were going to set up there. We were there, er, I suppose, for about a month. And the next thing they said, 'We've got to pack up. We're moving up into the desert.' So away we went. We went down to the wharf and here's this little tub there and I looked, I thought, 'Gee, we can't be going to go in this'. Sure enough aboard we get. In the bow of it, I could see where it had hit something and you could see inside, one of the plates had sprung open. So anyway they said, 'Oh, but the Med's pretty calm, it will be alright.'

(10.00)This was the *Knight of Malta*, wasn't it?

This is the *Knight of Malta*. So of course we get on board the *Knight of Malta*, and I'm in charge of the rations. We got all these rations piled up, not that there was much. There was only tinned stuff. There was M and V, no, not M and V. There was bully beef because we couldn't use M and V because we had nothing to cook with. We had bully beef and we had herrings; a bit of other stuff there - had it all piled up. Anyway, we get out into the Med. and the greatest storm of all time broke out and we were supposed to be forty-four hours I think and we were going to land in Tobruk. Well, this is well before the siege was on of course. This was when, that was going to be our staging point and then we were going to move on. And anyhow, it finished up after about three days at sea we'd only got as far as Bardia and about two o'clock in the morning we hear crunch, the boat's aground on the reef. So we didn't know where, of course it was pitch dark and all we can feel is this thing hitting the rocks. Talk about mad Australians but all the boys, the troops, they were down in the hold. Now they had about this much water swirling around all the time ...

About a couple of feet.

A couple of feet of water and conditions must have been terrible. Anyway ...

Where were you?

Well, I was up - we had a cabin. But in the cabin there was, I was on the top bunk and the bottom bunk was covered and it was lapping the top bunk, the water, that's how much water the ship had in it. She hit the reef. So anyway, dawn came and of course we look out and here we are right on this reef, there's a surf running and there's a beach and nothing else, just desert. I thought, 'Oh, this is good'.

What did you mean by that reference 'talk about mad Australians'?.

Oh yeah, well, we got back to that. Every time the ship would hit the reef they'd all cheer. (Laughs) They weren't in bad enough trouble, you know, but they'd cheer, 'You beauty', they'd go. And of course they didn't know where they were, neither did we. And anyhow, I can remember the, as I say, the dawn broke and here's, oh, we'd probably be best part of quarter of a mile off the beach on this reef and the ship's sort of breaking up. We thought,

'Well, this is good'. So they finished up, they got a lifeboat off for a start with a crowd of blokes on it and they paid out a line and they got the line ashore and then they pulled that boat backwards and forwards and took people off. Well in the meantime they had to get food for them so the food's all down in the hold and the hold's in about this much water. So they called volunteers, all right, I'm the sergeant so I've got to be number one volunteer, so three of us went down anyway and we threw up stuff from the hold and then we put it into these type of raft things and let it wash ashore.

Was it hard work? Was it getting hot by this time?

Well, no, it wasn't all that hot but it was very uncomfortable because you were in about a couple of feet of water, paddling around. They eventually got enough food ashore to feed everybody and then eventually of course we got on the lifeboat and got ashore. And then I think they rustled up a meal or something and then we had to go, I think it was fourteen mile, across the desert to the coast road. Eventually a truck came along and then they went back to Bardia and they organised then to pick up, send trucks out to pick the rest of us up and (15.00) they took us back into Bardia.

We stayed there at an English CCS I think and eventually then they organised trucks after about a week or so. Well, of course all our equipment was aboard this ship so .... I had a crook heel at the time, it was from the march I think. I changed me boots, put the wrong pair of boots on and of course when you march across the desert that was the end of me feet. Anyway they eventually got all the equipment off the ship for a lot of effort. There was a major job to salvage all the equipment but they got it off eventually and got it onto trucks. And then they had trucks and they took us back and we went up to Tobruk eventually. Camped outside of Tobruk at Fort Pilestrino and we were there for probably a week or a fortnight and then trucks then took us up to a place called Barce, near Benghazi and we established a hospital up there.

I gather around that time you'd come across Italian supplies that had been abandoned, including quite a bit of wine and that. Did you have the good fortune [inaudible]?

Oh yeah, we got on to that. That more or less came a little bit later when we came back into Tobruk, into the siege, this one big warehouse full of what they call *regoarwa*[?] water. It was like a mineral water, beautiful to drink, and spaghetti. Spaghetti by the dray loads - stacks and stacks of it, and then they had this chianti in a sort of a wicker cover. And of course there was one incidence[sic] while we were back in Bardia of one chappie got onto this chianti and they were drinking it out of the pannikinfuls and he'd had a real night on this and he'd completely passed out. And he never came to the next morning so we had to get the doctor.

The doctor came back and the doctor looked at him, lifted his eyelids and said, 'He's in a coma.' He said, 'He'll sleep it off. He's not in any danger but he's out. He's going to be out for a day.' So after this chap eventually woke he crawled to the door and looked outside and he said, 'Gee, I'm on advance party. I supposed to be going.' 'No', we said, 'that went two days ago'. So that's how bad he was. We eventually, as I say, got to Barce. Well now, all the way up Tobruk area and all there's just desert, there's absolutely nothing. And you go up and you get to Derna which is not too bad, a little bit, a few stems of grass and what have you. Well, then we went up this escarpment and we looked down and here's this place called Barce

and it's a farming area and it was just like a picture. You've no idea - green fields. We thought we were looking at a mirage. And as we drove up into the, where we were going to take over these barracks it was lined with gum trees. Well, we all got homesick. Just Aussie gums on both sides of the road and we thought, 'Oh gee, this is terrific'.

Anyway we got up there and it rained like hell and it was mud but, oh, it was lovely. It was a lovely place and the Italian people were still there, civilians, and we bought food. The army paid, we didn't say, 'Well, we're the conquering mob, we take it off you'. They had the local mayor and he would have like an officer with him and they sort of ran the town. They just didn't come in, occupy it and kick everybody out or whatever. They let them do their own thing. The only thing is the ladies of the village saw Australian soldiers coming along, they'd chase their daughters inside pretty smartly. We thought this is heaven up here. But then all of a sudden ....

We used to get the Italian POWs from the prisoner-of-war camp coming down and there'd be a truckload and where a truck of (20.00) Aussies might have thirty on it, there'd be sixty of these blokes, stacked in like sardines. We were allocated, in the ration store, two or three of these fellows, you see, and they couldn't do enough for you. If you give them a tin of bully beef they would polish your shoes, wash your shirts, do anything, you see. That was good, we enjoyed that. Had a few wounded trickling in from the front. This went on for a short while and all of a sudden one day they said, 'We better get going, the German Panzer Division's just down the track'. So of course the Germans had started to move in. So of course we had to retreat and that's what we did. We came back into Tobruk and, funnily enough we took over an identical Italian barracks. They were built to plan exactly the same as we had in Barce, we had in Tobruk. It was the Italian barracks. And we set up hospital there. We set up hospital there and then we had a second section down on the beach which was for medical cases, like for dysentery and any medical condition. The part where we were in the barracks we kept for surgical cases. They did all the operations and all that type of thing there. Well, we'd only been in Tobruk for a few days and we could hear the guns getting closer and closer and closer, and the next thing we know - we had some sisters with us for a few days - and the sisters were packed up and sent out and the next thing we know we're trapped. The Germans have surrounded the place.

What was the feeling at the time the sisters were being moved out?

Oh, the sisters didn't want to go but we didn't want them to stay either because it looked like getting very sticky and we didn't want the responsibility of sisters there. You'd be worried all the time.

What was your general feeling? Was there a feeling of anxiety that you were likely to be overrun?

Well, we thought it was inevitable that we'd be POWs. I mean it was, we were trapped in there. The word was that the Germans had gone on right around us and had gone right on down nearly to Alexandria and we were just in that pocket and there were Germans everywhere else.

Had there been bombing to that point?

Yeah, but not to the extent that it was later on. The sisters left and, as I say, then the siege more or less started straight after they left, within two or three days, we were cut right off and then the bombing started. Well, then it went on and on ...

How did that first bombing affect you? Was it ...?

Well, it was funny you see. Early in the piece you looked on and you saw them bombing the harbour and so forth but when the bombs start to fall around where you are it becomes a different story. There's a funny story with the cooks. The cooks - we used to cook - they used to have a big Sawyer stove. I don't know whether you know what a Sawyer is.

Describe it.

It's like a big copper and they had this copper. And they'd be loaded underneath with a bit of wood and of course you boil up whatever's in it. It's just like a copper, going back in the '30s and that Mum boiled up the clothes in. Anyhow, I can remember one of the cooks there and an air-raid came on and people started to run and this cooks there and he's stirring the stew and he's saying, 'Look at them run, like rabbits', he's saying. Two days later he was the head of the queue of the runners because they'd dropped a few very close and of course that made the difference. He could see what the damage they could do, you see.

Did it start to unsettle you? Did it affect your nerves or did it make ...?

Oh well, it didn't do your nerves any good but I mean we were there, that was our job and you learnt to put up with it. After a while you could, you'd tell if a plane whether it was any trouble to you or not - just where he was flying and so on. And if he wasn't over you, you said, 'Well, he's no worry', but you were looking for the next one.

(25.00) There were stories about bromide in tea. Was bromide being used in tea?

No, never in its life.

But it was believed.

Believed, yeah, but never. Well, I never ever saw it, never heard it and I was among the food part all the years I was in the army and never ever.

VD was a matter of some concern at one point in time. There was 4.8 per cent ...

VD was definitely there. I remember I, we came out of Tobruk, we went on leave and one chap said, 'Well, I'm going looking for a girl'. I said, 'Well, you go for your life'. And another fellow and I we went off, had a day, went and had a meal and what have you.

Why weren't you chasing girls? You weren't married at that time?

No, I wasn't married but I just wasn't interested. I had a girlfriend at home and ...

Was VD a concern for you as such?

VD was, my very word. I'd seen what it could do.

Had you been warned? How?

Oh yes, we'd been warned and we had, even in Puckapunyal, now this is right early in the war, we had a VD section at the back of the hospital.

What had you seen it do?

Well, there was, you know, so many blokes had got it. And I thought, 'Well, this is not for me'.

What were the sorts of effects you saw of it in the early stages?

Well, I didn't see any actual effects as such except that blokes got taken to this VD hospital and that's the last you saw of them. Whether they were discharged or what they did to them, I don't know but I don't think we ran that. There was a VD unit that ran that.

There were some fairly, what now seem to be primitive sorts of treatments for some venereal diseases. There was a type of umbrella that was inserted into the penis and then was scraped along the urethra. Were there stories about these sorts of things going around?

Well, you know, you were supposed to go to this blue light place and all this sort of thing but it just didn't interest me. No, I suppose I'm just not ... Like, I had a girlfriend and I was happy there and I didn't want a bar of that.

You were telling us a moment ago about a friend, off he went [inaudible].

Well, getting on to the VD side. Off he went and the sequel came a month or so later, we were then sent up to Jerusalem and we had a hospital in Jerusalem, we had two hospitals actually we ran there, the Italian hospital and the German hospital. We'd taken them both over. He was a sergeant, too. The next thing we knew he was on his way out, he had VD, and he died very, very young, he didn't die over there of course but he was sent back to Australia and discharged. From what I gather he didn't make old bones at all, he died very, very young.

By this time had you seen any Germans, either as patients or ...?

Yeah, in Tobruk we did, oh yeah. We used to get them. We had one chappie, a German pilot. As a matter of fact he was taken prisoner by our sergeant cook. He raced out, the plane crashed down and he raced out and grabbed him and brought him in.

What was the feeling towards him? Was there a sense of anger? I mean what was ...?

Oh no, no. No, we talked to him. As a matter of fact that fellow, he was only a young bloke and he said what amazes him - he spoke reasonable English - was that we would come from 13,000 miles away to fight for England. He couldn't understand that, that Australians would come all that way to fight for England. And we said, 'We're sort of part of England', and he

just couldn't have that on at all. We used to have quite good discussions with him. And then we also had a few other .... I remember one big infantryman that we had in, wounded, and oh, he was a nasty piece of works. He was the real Nazi and he was going to fix us up when his friends got there. Within a few days he reckoned we'd be all prisoners. And we said, 'Well, by the time that happens you'll be in Alexandria', because we were going to put him on a destroyer that night.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: This is side two of tape two of an interview recorded on 19 September 1990 with Norm Marr of the 2/4th Australian General Hospital.

I gather there were quite a few Arab children who picked up things called red devils, booby traps, did you see any booby traps or the results of them?

Oh, booby traps, yeah, there were plenty of booby traps. Yeah, we had a few of them up around Derna in that area there where there were a few Arabs. See, there were very few Arabs in Tobruk. In the early part they had a few Senussis but they shipped them out later on because they were frightened of sabotage and all that sort of thing. During the latter part of the siege we never had any Arabs at all.

Did you have any friends who got picked up, booby traps, or injured?

No, but I remember we used to try to get some sleep, we had a wadi which - you know what a wadi is, it's like a little valley - and in the side of it we had a dug-out. And we used to go down there and there was a field bakery just around near us and also there was the ack-ack gunners, they were on the wall. Well, some of the field bakery fellows had been walking along this track and kicked a booby trap. What used to happen, they used to drop them of a night and they'd drop in the sand and they used to paint them and sprinkle them with sand, of course once they dropped in the sand you couldn't see them, and they'd go up. They were like a 'thermos' bomb, they used to call them. They were about that long ...

About the size of a thermos flask.

Yeah, that's right, that's what we used to call them - thermos bomb. They had a pretty powerful blast. Well, if we saw them we'd let the bomb disposal crowd know and they'd come and let them off, blow them up.

Were you curious about the hospital? Were you able to go and see what was happening in the hospital or even witness operations?

Oh yeah, I went in there a lot, oh yeah. I never bothered about the operations. But I remember one time we'd been badly bombed and there was one chap there with a wounded leg and I helped to carry him up to the theatre but I never took an active part in that medical side at all. The only time was early in the piece, we used to go down and stretcher-bear and take the wounded on board the destroyers, and that's the only part, but mainly I was there looking after food.

(5.00) Was it sobering to see so many men being badly wounded?

Oh well, it didn't do a lot for your confidence but I mean, still you were there you just had to put up with what came along. I think the worst time was the time when they told us we were coming out and I had about a week to put in and I knew that I was going to come out on, say, a fortnight's time or a week's time, well, I thought that week, I morally had knocked off in that week. You sort of get fantasies then, I think, but prior to that if you hadn't have been coming out, you'd have just carried on the same as you were. You were anxious to a degree. I mean, of course you were. You were laying there, I remember one day they dropped a string of bombs, you could feel them hit and then the next one hit and I thought, 'By gee, this next one's going to be close', you could pretty near tell where they were going to fall. And another sergeant and myself were laying on the floor and it fell and it would have fallen from here to just outside the fence out there ...

Twenty metres or thirty metres.

Well there was that brick fence there, well that took the blast but we were only within feet of it.

Did you have friends whose nerves were affected by that sort of [inaudible]?

We saw a few. There's a story went that one particular fellow, he went to the medical officer and he said, 'I dunno doc, I've got spots in front of my eyes, black spots'. And the doctor looked at him and he said, 'Yeah, you know what they are? They're ships and you're not on one of them.' (Laughs.) But I can remember one time I was talking about people being really out of it. I'd been over to the beach hospital to see how they were going over there 'cause we had our, my corporal, he was over there looking after that part of the rationing and I was at the main part looking after there. And I'd been over to see how he was going and I'm on me way back and they started, a big raid came on. And you don't stop in the truck, you dump the truck - it was a ute really - and I got into a bomb hole and down the other end of the bomb hole - you know, it was only just from here to there - there's a chap down there and fair dinkum, he was absolute, he was gone a million, like he was absolute just a jelly. And I just felt that sorry for him, I thought, 'Well, what can you do?'. And I said, 'You better come back with me'. 'No, no, no, no.' It was a funny thing but you, where you were all the time seemed for you to be the safest place. If you were somewhere else out on the perimeter it wasn't as safe as where your home base was. And we used to get the infantrymen come in with something wrong with them. They might be sick or anything, have a touch of the 'flu or have anything but all they wanted to do, they didn't want to stick around the hospital, they wanted to get back to their unit because they reckoned that was too sticky around there because they used to bomb us every night, you see.

How clearly marked was the hospital area?

We had a big red cross right in the middle and from the air you just could not miss it but they deliberately bombed it. One particular time they picked the two of them out, they picked the town and the beach. And the beach, there was one ward which was dug in, it was like a sort of semi-marquee type of thing, well, all that was was just a hole in the ground - everything gone - men, everything. And then at the same time they bombed us at the what's a name and one ward was all completely smashed in. We lost quite a few patients and we lost Major Schwartz and a Major Chambers, Mickey Hanemann, he was one of the orderlies, and this

Normie Forster I mentioned earlier, his parents had a boat going around the ship, he was killed too. They were all killed on that one particular raid.
(10.00)

What about the actual evacuation? Was that a difficult process?

Getting out?

Yes.

No, because the navy were marvellous. They would come in, say, at midnight and you'd be down at the wharf waiting for them to come - well, more or less a wharf, you'd call it a wharf but it was more or less a jetty - and the harbour was absolutely littered with sunken ships and all sorts of stuff. And they'd come in there and right on twelve o'clock you'd see this grey shape pull in and it'd be a destroyer. He'd pull in, we'd load the wounded and what have you, and at one o'clock they'd pull out again. They were absolutely like clockwork and they were fantastic. It's a funny thing, I was out yesterday at bowls and a chappie brought his diary in and he's a navy fellow. And I come out on the *Napier* which is an N class destroyer and this fellow was on the *Napier*, and he was on that ship the night that I went out. We'd talked about it before but he said, 'I'll find my diary and I'll get the actual date'. Well, I got my diary and we've compared diaries and that was right, the night I come out he was one of the sailors on board the ship.

How long did the voyage to Palestine take?

Oh, it was only just overnight, more or less. They got out, like ...

Did you have any sleep? Did you have berths?

Oh, cripes no, just laid on the deck. You were laying on the deck like that and the water's flying by this far underneath you. Matter of fact one ship lost a few Australians, they did a manoeuvre and they slid over the side. But oh no, they took us back out then. And I reckon it would be overnight, like in the dark because they'd come in the dark where the Germans could get at them, they'd be in the dark and then they want to be a certain distance out by daylight so that they were in range of our fighters then to protect them on the rest of the way to Alexandria.

So when you got back to Palestine the Australian nurses were then rejoined ...

Well, they were in hospitals then in Alex and in Palestine and all over.

What was the effect on the morale then to have them back?

Oh yeah, that was good. Well we then operated as a proper hospital because the boys had to do everything that the nurses did without real proper training, like the nurses had had four years or five years or whatever it was nursing training, well, the blokes six months before had been plumbers and whatever, and they had to become nursing orderlies.

You wouldn't have been directly affected by that but was it apparent during that period that things were pretty difficult in the operating theatres and [inaudible] things?

We were lucky there, too, that we had one chap in the operating theatre who was a registered nurse. He was a theatre nurse actually but he was a male nurse. And the funny part about it was all the sisters were lieutenants or officers, he was a corporal, and yet when it came to qualifications, he had more qualifications than some of the sisters but because he was a male he would only be a corporal, and yet all the sisters were officers which to me was a little bit wrong, but still. I think that chap became a doctor later on.

In Jerusalem it snowed apparently around Christmas time.

Yeah, we had two feet of snow. We were there right over the Christmas period and it was freezing. As I say, two feet of snow but it was a pretty sight, absolutely beautiful.

Where were you billeted?

(15.00)

We were billeted, there was a sort of a building now, I've forgotten the name of who had it before us, but it was like an old stone building and we were billeted in there. Then we had the hospital and we had the sergeants' mess and I had a - there were two ration stores actually which we'd taken over from the Pommys. It was an English hospital had had it before we took it over.

Did you have access to extra supplies either in terms of clothing or food to make up for the cold?

Yeah, well, the food was much better there because we could buy from the local people. We used to buy chickens and all that type of thing for light diets and for the patients' side of things the meals would be a lot better. In Tobruk we had the chicken but it was tinned chicken, only for anyone that was on a really light diet, that had probably stomach wounds or something like that, well, they'd make up these little chicken meals but when we were in Jerusalem itself, we could get fruit, bananas, and fish, chicken. I used to have buy all that, and talk about ...

Who were you buying it from?

Well, the Arabs and shrewd men, I tell you.

How did you go about this? I mean, how would you know what were fair prices and who could you turn to for advice about where to go, what to get ...?

Well, no, well, they were sent to us, this is the thing you see, they were sent to us by the British. These particular people would have a contract and that contract would be done by the British Army and they would come to us, and then we'd say we want so many chickens and so much of this and so much of that and so much fish, and give them the order. But the actual pricing side and all that was done by the British Army.

Now, I had an instance in Jerusalem with the supplier, one particular day when I'd been there about a week, this chappie came and he said, 'Have you got your books?' and I said, 'Yeah'. He said, 'Well, I'll send a car and we will come and compare the books and make sure everything's right'. I said, 'Righto'. So out comes a car and take him to this place and he gives me coffee and so forth and then of course he comes up with, 'Now, the other sergeant and I' - he meant the British sergeant - he said, 'he was very good. We got on very, very well. Now what you do is, I give you x amount of chickens and you sign for y amount of chickens and so on and so forth.' And he said, 'And the difference, you have half, I have half', and so it went on. I said, 'Oh, yeah. I don't think I'll be in that.' So anyway I reported it when I got back, I put a report in of what had happened. Now the fellow's name that had the contract originally was a bloke called Azuni[?] and when I'd reported it, they said, 'I'ts all fixed up. There's another contractor got the job. His name's Elsidi[?].' So I said, 'Oh, yeah'.

But the funny part about it was that the same fellows delivered the stuff, and I reckon that somebody higher up were in a cut before me and it's just that I was too honest. I just couldn't have lived with myself if I'd have done that. And they used to do all sorts of things, like they'd bring the chickens in and there used to be fire buckets, and they'd dip the chicken in the fire bucket, fill it half up with water, make it weigh heavier and all this. So they did that for the first day or two and I thought, 'Well, there's something going on here', because I didn't know what they were doing. I said, 'These are soakin' wet, these chickens'. So I kept an eye on them and when the truck came I had a look, and they were dipping each chicken in the thing and then put them back in their box. Of course it would add a few, just to the pound. And then they used to get the fish and we'd be weighing the fish. We had a counter, we had scales, we'd have one lot of fish that side, weigh it, put it that side, and this chap would give one of the fish a push, my bloke would bend down to pick the fish up, he'd grab two fish from that side and put them on that side, reweigh them. Anyway, I finished up I straightened them up, I used to stand there and watch everything. I never let them, took me eye off them for a minute.
(20.00)

Would you get things like flour that would be sand, or those sorts of dodges?

Oh no, all that sort of stuff would be all right but they would try every trick in the book. We used to get hands of bananas and they had a - the butcher's shop we used to go to weigh them - and they knew that that scale had a place where it stuck. And I used to look at this when the records came; each hand of bananas used to weigh practically the same amount, and I thought, 'Gee, that's funny. There had to be some difference.' Anyway, I went around and what used to happen, they used to put them on the scale and they'd pull it down and it would stick at that point and it would be about that much over the weight. So, as I say, for twenty-five pound, they'd be getting thirty pound every time. They were up to every trick in the book, every trick in the book. But apparently this sergeant, that was the English sergeant, he had a flat down in the town and a girlfriend, all supplied by these Arabs. So, you know, there was ....

Did you ever encounter dodges like that, either at Redbank or later in Borneo?

No. Well, it was a different set-up there because we were all right through the army then, we didn't have any sort of local purchase in that way, it all came through the army.

Weren't there ever any scandals of people though who had access to stores who were using it for the black market?

Yeah, well, there was a little one in Redbank with one of the cooks I think, pinched a bag of rice or half a bag of rice or something and sold it on the black, but a minor thing. He just wanted some beer money and he got into a bit of trouble but normally it didn't. But I mean, it was most difficult, once you'd issued the stuff out, what the cooks did with it, well, that was up to them like, it was up to the sergeant cook then to make sure that that was all used and cooked and so forth. Once we signed it out to the cookhouse that was our job finished more or less.

Did you suppose there was some funny things went on with it?

Well it could have gone on but, I mean, I didn't find any of them out but I don't doubt that they could have happened, but not in my time anyway, not that I could find them.

What was the feeling when Japan entered the war and then Singapore fell and Darwin was bombed?

Oh, that was .... We wanted to come home then. We didn't want to be stuck in the Middle East still. We wanted to get home to defend Australia more or less, so we were dead keen to get back home. I think that was the general feeling right throughout that this is the place where we needed to be.

When you went to Ceylon were you on the *Gogra*, one very slow ship called the *Gogra*?

No, I was on the, oh, the name of that ship. It's the one ship I can never remember the name of. I remember every ship that I've been on except this one and I keep forgetting the name of it.

Was it a bad ship?

Oh, it wasn't a bad ship, it was an average sort of, just an average ship, it was nothing special on it.

In Ceylon then, I take it you went to Ceylon?

Yeah, we were in Ceylon for about three or four months, four months.

Did you or any of your friends get affected by tropical diseases or malaria?

Yeah, I had dengue fever and quite a lot of people got dengue fever.

Had you been lectured to by Major Sewell?

Yeah, the Major, yeah, he laid down the law as to if anybody got dengue fever, he was going to use it as a self-inflicted wound and the first bloke to get it was himself. (Laughs). He didn't serve with us over in the Middle East, he joined us there I think.

So describe the effect that dengue fever had on you.

Well, it's the most enervating thing you've ever seen, it really is. It just takes every ounce of energy that you've got out of you. You feel like nothing on earth, and I reckon for two months afterwards you've got no energy whatsoever. Oh, it really lays you low that.

How long were you crook for?

(25.00)
I suppose I was in hospital for about ten days and then I was crook for quite a while after that.

Did it stay with you after you came back to Australia?

No, I've never had it any effects of it since.

When you came back to Australia was there a perceptible difference in the mood, the feeling of the place from the time you went off?

Oh, it was completely different we found. Like we got back here and there's girls in uniform and all that which hadn't happened before we went away. The Land Army was on the go and the women in the air force and the army, and so on.

What about with the Americans? Did you have any run-ins with the Americans?

No, not me personally. I got on pretty well with them really. We had a bit of mix-up with the men in Redbank. They used to come down to our sergeants' mess and they were a good crowd of blokes we all reckoned.

The sergeants' mess at Redbank got a bit of a name for frolics I gather.

We had a lot of fun there. We had a lot of fun, particularly with my mate that I told you, this policeman fellow, when he locked himself in the mess one day and got all the cooks in there, filled them up with grog. But he was ...

He was getting revenge on their bad cooking or what was the [inaudible]?

No, he was very, very popular with - he was the regimental policeman too, it finished up. He got out of the Q side and he became the regimental policeman. He was very popular with the colonel, he could do no wrong, George, and he was a great bloke though.

How did you find Redbank as a place while you were there?

Oh, it was alright early in the piece, I suppose, but it was, you know, nothing to do there.

Later on didn't they introduce educational programs and that sort of thing?

Oh, they did, just as I left. As a matter of fact I - Rupe Goodman who is Dr Rupert Goodman now, who was, I think he was Director of Education in Queensland or something like that. He became the Education Officer just before I left and went to the air force. Well, he gave me and a couple of the other boys that were going to the air force a refresher course in maths because we'd left school at a pretty young age and a lot of the maths we'd forgotten and he gave us a, which was a good help to us, too, in algebra and all that sort of thing, and

trigonometry and different things. And it sort of helped us when we started because we'd have been behind the eight-ball if we hadn't had that, because a lot of the air crew thing was maths and all that type of thing.

Did you go on to Borneo?

No, as I say, I left. Because we looked like as if we were going to be there forever, Redbank, and I decided, they came around looking for volunteers for the air force, so myself and a few others decided we'd give it a go so we went and I left the unit then of course and was discharged back at Caulfield, discharged and sent into the air force and went down to Somers and did initial training down there.

Did you have any sense of sorrow at leaving the AGH?

I did, yeah, because well I'd left a lot of mates there. But at that time there was a big movement of our fellows were moving out, different ones were moving out in the different units. The fitter fellows were going into more active units and it wasn't the same as it was when we were original.

You've indicated that you still have a lot of friends that you've maintained good relations with from the war. Was it the friendships that because of the circumstance that you might never have developed otherwise, do you think? Was there a very special feeling about the time?

I think you go through a lot together and you rely on each other a lot in different things, and you just share the experiences and I think it just brings you closer. But the trouble is now that a lot of them have passed on of course, but we still have our reunion and as a matter of fact in a fortnight we're having a dinner at Studley Park here, receptions so we still stick pretty well together.

END OF INTERVIEW