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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Title	(860581 / VX33985) Miller, Alfred Ernest 'Alf' (Sergeant)
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Description	Alfred Ernest (Alf) Miller as a 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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Transcript methodology

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: this is tape one, side one of an interview recorded with Alf Miller about the 2/4th AGH on 7 October 1990.

Alf Miller, where and when were you born?

I was born in Auburn, Victoria, 25th February 1919.

Tell us something about your parents. What they did for a living, what sort of people they were.

My father was a metalsmith. He worked for the Victorian Railways and later, leading up to his death in 1940, he worked with the Government Aircraft Corporation.

What sort of person was he? Strict? Formal?

Yes, I'd say he was strict. He was a good family man. He worked darn hard. There were five in our family and he had our home out in a new area beyond Camberwell and, as with most people those days, he looked forward to getting the title deeds about the time that he'd be expecting retirement, about sixty-five. In the depression he'd not been on the permanent staff of the Victorian Railways and so about 1931 he lost his job.

He started up a fruit business which meant that he had to go into Victoria Market in the early hours of the morning - I'd sometimes go in with him - midnight, one a.m., buy up a load of fruit and vegetables and these he would deliver on his rounds, getting home six or seven p.m. in the evening and unloading and working darn hard. He, really on reflection, worked tremendously hard for his wife and children.

Before the depression he'd been an active football and cricket umpire and he used to go up to the country. Friday night he would be off on the train. He didn't get city matches and I can still recall going through various parts of Victoria and coming to a place - I'll recognise the name and think of my father when I was about eight or nine.

Was he a disciplinarian?

Yes, I'd say that he was. He was a strict person. He'd been a member of a large family and he was one of the older members of that family and he carried through to his own family a modified degree of strictness such as I imagine he knew himself. But I'd say that he was fair according to his lights and the expectations of the time, remembering that I'm now seventy-two, nearly seventy-two, and I'm talking of times, the 1920s and 1930s.

What about your mother, what sort of person was she?

(5.00) She was a softer person than my father. I suspect that my father thought that she was too soft in the bringing up of a family. I suspect that he thought she was too soft with me but that's only a supposition. He was, I think he felt more comfortable with my brother and sisters than he did with me.

Where did you come?

I was second. I have an older sister.

> Was it a religious family, one where you'd go to church every Sunday and perhaps Grace at the table, that sort of thing?

Yes. My father and mother met, I understand, as Sunday School teachers at their childhood church in Burnley. The family was involved, my brother's family, was involved with the church and I can recall as a child hauling a long way on foot, perhaps a mile and a half, perhaps two miles, more, to go to church, walking the plank over creeks and things like that.

Then when our own church was developed in this outer eastern suburb he was one of the early workers and became a member of the vestry and a member of the choir. My mother was working furiously supporting raffles and bazaars and all this sort of thing to raise money for the erection of a little timber-framed church.

> Was it also a family with an ANZAC tradition, where other members had gone off in the first world war?

Yes, my uncle, after whom I'm named, was my father's younger brother. My father didn't go to the war and I suspect that this was something that he regretted. I did hear that it was in deference to my mother's wishes that he didn't go to the war. He'd been in the Militia and I recall a photograph of him being, I think, at Broadmeadows or Old Seymour, and there he was in his uniform.

But my uncle not only went to the first world war but he was young enough to enlist, no doubt winding his age clock back a bit, in 1939 and he went to the second world war and ended up as Regimental Sergeant Major of the 2/5th Battalion and winning the Military Medal in Syria. He was quite a soldier. And another younger brother still of my father had been in the Militia during the wars and was a captain in, I think, the 14th Battalion Militia and he went across on the outbreak of war and became a company commander with 2/7th Battalion and then he became a major in the 2/7th Battalion, captured in Crete and spent the rest of the war as a POW. He was MID, both of those are dead. I must say that I think that their wartime service, or my uncle's wartime service, the first world war man, certainly influenced me.

> With your father's fruit delivery business, was he able to make a comfortable living, or was it a fairly poor sort of circumstance like that for some, many families at that time?

(10.00) No, we never wanted for food on the table and the home was secure. And it's in this regard that I say my father was a good man and he worked very hard indeed and responsibly to see to the needs of his wife and children. So much so that, I mean, we didn't need for clothing. It was all on the hand-me-down system within the families, as was so common. I remember at our State primary school, a request was made that if families had spare shoes at home could they bring them to school and these were then shared around among the families that didn't have shoes. And of course there were no opportunity shops those days, soup kitchens, but no opportunity shops.

I remember speaking with Jack Dyer at a Sportsmans' Night at Fitzroy fifteen or sixteen years ago and Jack told me that he, growing up in Yarra Glen, used go barefooted to school through

winters and icy paddocks and so forth. That was the way it was but no, we didn't have money to spend on non-necessities but we were clothed, fed, housed, decently cared for.

What about your schooling, where did you school?

I went to Hartwell State School to sixth grade and then you had to sit an entrance exam. Box Hill High School had just been opened the year before. There were only a handful of high schools in Victoria at the time and I was able to get in and I was there for three years and then my uncle, not one of those I mentioned but my mother's brother, was an accountant and he was secretary of a big flour milling concern and he came to live in our road. And so it was decided that I should leave Box Hill High School and become a full-time student with the Hemingway Robertson Accountancy Institute. And so in due course I went on to complete my studies in accounting.

When I was just on sixteen I became office boy in a chartered accountants' practice in Collins Street, Melbourne and I was there for about three and a half years. The pay wasn't anything to write home about. I think I was probably on about two pounds five a week, perhaps it wasn't even that much. I was about twenty I think and I went to a job with a manufacturing company as a clerk. In due course I went to a job as assistant cost accountant and that was in 1938 and I had joined the Militia Army Medical Corps and it was from that position that in 1939 I went into what amounted to almost unbroken service for the next six years with the army.

What made you join the Militia Medical Corps?

At this manufacturing company I joined there was a man there whom I befriended, or we struck up a friendship, and he was in the Militia Army Medical Corps and it seemed an attractive and interesting prospect and so I joined. I then found out that this little company of not particularly well-trained people we were, but its job was to provide primary back-up medical service to the forts at Queenscliff and Point Nepean and Fort Franklin over on the Portsea side. I must say that my particular bent, I think, is to be a supportive rather than a fighting soldier.

(15.00) Was that so, even at that young age?

Yes, that became pretty apparent to me. I had a sense of compassion that I recognised in my nature and the more time I spent in army medical circles, the more it seemed to me to be the kind of thing that satisfied my nature.

Had there been any particular influences? Any philosophers or people who'd incline you towards these attitudes?

I had grown up as a church boy, Sunday school, senior Sunday school classes, Bible study, and I'd been confirmed, and I think that from my mother came, perhaps an emotional, but certainly I believe a compassionate streak in my nature. I don't know that I'd have enjoyed being an active member of, say, an infantry battalion or in some situation where I was bound to kill if I could.

For a lot of young people the first world war had left a legacy where the notion was, war maybe provided an opportunity to show one's valour and manhood and was great adventure and excitement. On the other hand of course there

> were those who saw it as a period of appalling loss and carnage. Had you been exposed to analysis of the first world war that actually made you see it in that light? Or how did you see the first world war?

As a child I had been exposed, especially at the primary school, to ANZAC Day talks by returned ex-servicemen and this picture would be presented of the cliffs of Gallipoli and the awful, ah, the awful struggle that went on there and the stories of trench warfare. I don't think at that stage of truce when Turks and Australians and others went out and collected their dead and exchanged cigarettes and so on. No, I went from the impressionistic influence of ANZAC Day talks at school to being very admiring of the returned soldier with his quite large returned soldier's badge. I regarded them all as heroes and I don't know that I realised to any great extent the awful carnage of France and box barrages and sleet and ice and the appalling conditions of the Somme and the Western Front. I don't think that came till later on.

I don't think that I was unaware of the horror of war. I believe that from the time I joined the Army Medical Corps my thoughts very clearly became directed towards supporting and sustaining. I wasn't a pacifist but if I had a choice I preferred to be helping the maimed and all the rest of it than causing the death.

> What about at school where inevitably you get conflicts between boys, would you find yourself watching the sort of scraps that occur and wondering why they would do it, it seemed unnecessary, or did you get caught up in that sort of pattern of behaviour like most boys?

(20.00)I can only remember one incident when there was anything of an attack by one on another. I don't remember any of my peer group either at primary school or at the high school being involved in fights and brawls.

> What about in terms of attitudes, then, did you pretty much share, do you recollect, the attitudes of other young people or did you express views that may have tended to make you stand out a little bit and people wonder what's this person all about?

I did say that Box Hill High School had just opened. It opened in 1930 so its sixty years' old this year. I went there in 1931. They were depression years and you were darned lucky to have the chance to get in. The masters, I believe, were a splendid bunch of people, certainly J.H.Charles, the Headmaster, was something of a legend even in his second year and he had a wonderful band of teachers. It was an all-male teaching staff and it was for boys only.

I can honestly say that it was a school which seemed to experience no brawling, where people behaved themselves, and where people worked jolly hard. At that time you needed Leaving Certificate or Leaving Honours for university matriculation and I remember that boys would go from Box Hill High, we only went to Leaving there, and then they would seek entry to Melbourne High School for Leaving Honours. I am aware of the fact that from Box Hill High there have been some very, very fine people come into the field of public life in Australia.

> What sort of training did you do with the Militia?

Precious little. There was drill of the type that all units did: formed fours and marching in decent order. In terms of practical training, surprisingly precious little. You learned how to lift a person on a stretcher by numbers. It was very elementary and anyway ...

How did that work, sort of, one, this position, two, lift, and ....? How did it work?

You'd have a squad of men and you'd have a stretcher standing by and a person needing help. You'd then march to the stretcher, get the stretcher, march to the person. On a command lift, taking care that head and back and legs and so on came as one so you weren't putting undue pressure on any spot and maybe severing a spinal cord. All this, the old sort of stuff about you carry a person who's been knocked down on a door or in such a situation that their spine's not able to move around and you do more harm than good.

But then, I can remember down at Queenscliff at a little place called Crows Nest where we went for a shoot in 1939, and it was about Easter, and there my little unit was to look after the gunners who manned the six-inch guns at Fort Queenscliff. These guns incidentally fired the first shots of world wars one and two across from Queenscliff over towards Point Nepean, pulling up ships that were trying to run the gauntlet of the Heads after war had been declared. And of course the shots across their bows pulled them up and these ships were interned, or turned over to use by the Allies. But we had to look after people who went sick and we acted as nursing orderlies and that sort of thing, fetching and carrying and doing what we were told.

(25.00) Were there any incidents or accidents where you had to make special use of your rudimentary skills?

Not at Queenscliff, but when war was declared on September 3rd, 1939, being in the Militia, dispatch riders were around the same day calling us up. We were called to the drill hall. I'd changed my address and had notified the unit but the dispatch rider didn't call. In classic army fashion, the change of address hadn't been noted, and it wasn't until sixteen days later that I, with others, was paraded as a deserter before the commanding officer and I wasn't shot at dawn, or boiled in oil, or sent to Coventry, but ...

Were you taken aback though?

I was most indignant. I was terribly indignant but anyway the colonel in charge of the field ambulance, he was a first world war officer and he was just cold and scathing. I must say that while now, and long since, I've laughed about it, I was indignant at the time, yes, for sure.

Were you hurt that there was some sort of slur against your name? Were you concerned that it might be heard around the community and other people might look at you askance?

It's interesting you say that because it never occurred to me. In fact in 1946 I was awarded the Australian Army Efficiency Medal so I don't think there can have been any extant record about my being paraded as a deserter for not answering my country's call.

Incidentally, had the story of Simpson and his donkey from the first world war had any importance to you?

I believe I would have known in 1939-40 of that legend. If so, it would have promoted in me the same kind of feeling that I have had all the years since I have known it.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

> Identification: this is side two of tape one of the interview recorded on 7 October 1990 about the 2/4th Australian General Hospital with Alf Miller.
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> Having joined up, had you discussed some of these feelings you had about the sort of role that you felt best likely to perform with other members of family, that is, a more compassionate view about what your role might be?

No, I remember being frustrated that I could not offer myself for the AIF. I was in the Militia but my parents had separated and ...

> Was that a blow to you?

Yes, but I felt that it was the only thing to preserve peace or the prospects of peace in my family and I, of course, had to commit myself to being one of the mainstays for the family.

> Had it been a violent crisis? Had it got volatile?

Yes, distressingly so, and I felt for my mother's peace of mind that this is something that just had to happen. And so ....

> You were saying that you were disappointed that you couldn't join the AIF.

That's right. So we had a separate household from that of my father. The months ticked by and I, early in 1940 having spent by that time several months at Portsea with the Militia unit and some time at my work. There was this phoney period after Hitler had swept through the Low Countries and into France and things went strangely quiet for months and months, during which time Hitler was cogitating about trying to make a Channel crossing. Anyway, I wanted to join the AIF but wondered how in the world I could do so when my mother and, to a lesser extent, my younger brother and two younger sisters were dependent on me.

> Why was there that concern? You wanted to go overseas, was there a sense that somehow service overseas was a more valuable contribution? What was it?

(5.00) I didn't see Australia as being exposed to attack. I felt that Australia's future depended on the outcome of what was going on in Europe. I had read, in maybe about 1938, an article that pointed to the huge development and growth of the Japanese Imperial Navy but that I put at the back of my mind and I did feel that, as I say, Australia's future lay in what happened in Europe. And so I thought that service in Australia would be a pretty tame sort of affair that would make no contribution to the final outcome.

I learned that as a five bob a day private, fifty cents, if I allotted four shillings, or forty cents of it, to my mother she could become entitled to a like amount from government as what we

would call today, a lone parent's pension. So that came about and in June 1940, much to the distress of my mother, I went for a medical exam for the AIF. I was turned down then because of tachycardia, a too-fast pulse rate, so I went back to my unit and talked this over with a medical officer and he said, 'Well, just relax and take some sort of medication beforehand, but just relax'.

I did that and I went for another medical examination at the beginning of July 1940, was accepted, and one of the 3rd Garrison Company Militia medical officers had gone across, he was a surgeon whom I greatly admired, Major Marsh Renou, Marshall Renou - he used to be an Alfred Hospital surgeon - and he'd gone across to what was known as the 4th Australian General Hospital AIF which was forming up at Puckapunyal. And so I asked to be allocated to that unit. I had been allotted to, I think, the 3rd Machine Gun Battalion. Anyway, approval to my allocation came through and early in July I went to Puckapunyal and there joined the unit with which I remained for the next five and a half years.

> Did the notions of conscientious objection ever come to you? Was your concern about the nature of violence such that you entertained that idea, or did you regard defence of the country, or defence of one's person as perfectly proper anyway?

The very thought of being a conscientious objector was repugnant to me, as was the notion that I might end up being conscripted. Those two prospects were absolutely abhorrent to me.

> So having joined up at Puckapunyal then, what extra sorts of training did you start to get as far as your medical expertise was concerned?

Well, at Puckapunyal the 4th AGH - the 2/4th, and the 2 in front of AIF units that came about later on - but 4th Australian General Hospital was operating the camp hospital for the total Puckapunyal area and of course there were thousands of men there: 2/14th Battalion, 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion, just to name a couple of the outstanding ones. The several large wards of this camp hospital were full all the time we were there so it was a question of being gradually absorbed into the operation of a medical facility.

(10.00)The term medical orderly covered anything from bed pans to hanging onto limbs while quite complicated surgery was done. People were exposed to the assisting roles in a total field of medical and surgical work. And of course there were specialist jobs such as in x-ray and pathology, there were pharmacists. The whole gamut of tasks that went to maintaining, if you like, the household of the hospital.

By the time we had left Puckapunyal we knew quite a bit about the rudimentary nursing training of, say, a first year nurse undergoing training without a lot of the theory but with the practice involved, so much so that when we ended up at Tobruk in February '41 and with the nurses of the 2/5th Australian General Hospital and I think 2/1st Casualty Clearing Station having been captured in Greece, it was decided that, much against the will of the women, they would not be allowed to stay at Tobruk. So having just arrived at Tobruk and been there for a couple of weeks, they were shipped back to Alexandria. So accountants and postmen and butchers and theatre orderlies and hospital orderlies and clerks and bakers and carpenters and all the rest of it had to be formed into a team capable of supporting a major forward hospital in a war zone. And that's exactly what happened. There were chaps who became most proficient theatre orderlies, able to help surgeons such as Charles Littlejohn and Thomas

Ackland and so forth, and a whole range of great physicians of the Melbourne pre-war scene. There was this great melding of a functioning hospital out of most unlikely beginnings.

> Did you enjoy the period at Puckapunyal? Was it satisfying or did it become tedious? How did you find the period?

It was darn hard work. It was bitterly cold when we got up there in, 1st July I think it was - maybe a few days later. Winter had officially been in progress for about a month then. Puckapunyal was a mud heap. It was cold. Climbing out of bed before six in the morning and standing in an ablution block that consisted of a concrete slab and a sheet of iron that finished about three feet from the floor and about six feet from the ground, and the wind would howl down from the big hill in Puckapunyal and you'd be trying to shave in cold water with steel razor blades. It was a cold and miserable sort of business.

(15.00)We went there and we slept on straw palliasses on bare boards for quite some time. It was a hard, hard slog -four of the nearly six months that we were there it was a hard slog - for probably about four and a half months of that time. It was interspersed with occasional weekend leave. You'd go by truck into Seymour and get on the train for four bob return ticket and of course I was on fourteen bob a fortnight so that left ten bob to have an uproarious weekend. I was keeping company with Lois, my wife of today after forty-seven years of marriage, and there wasn't too much you could do except perhaps jump on the train and go for a walk along the river at Princes Bridge and maybe have an ice cream and that was about it.

It was a constant business during the time at Puckapunyal. A whole series of injections of anti-tetanus, of paratyphoid A and B, of vaccination against smallpox and so on and so on. There were toughening up exercises and there was the period of what was called the 'Pucka throat' and just about everybody went down with this. It was an infective thing that gave you something like a throat full of broken razor blades. And there was another thing called 'URTI', upper respiratory tract infection, and this just flattened the whole camp. It swept right through Puckapunyal like a raging forest fire. And one way and another we worked darn hard.

There's this about a medical unit, as compared with, say, a front-line unit, that is that the front-line units, and I dip my lid to every one of them for the role they were prepared to take on and stand up to, but once they were out of the line, sure there was refitting and retraining but there was also football and all the rest of it. With a medical outfit you worked in peacetime or when you were on active service. There were always people getting sick and being injured and so the job goes on.

> Did you have any bad injuries, mishaps, with training with weapons, all that sort of thing?

No, we weren't involved with, personally a medical unit is not involved with weaponry, but so far as others were concerned I don't recall very many training accidents of other units, of fighting units, with weapons. Of course there were accidents but it wasn't on anything of the scale, for instance, of air force in training accidents, no.

> What about relations between the staff, yourselves and the sisters, and the doctors? Was it a formal sort of relationship, or first name basis, how did it work?

(20.00) No, it was a formal kind of thing. You had the doctors and other commissioned people. I think really the only two commissioned ranks in our unit, non-medical commissioned ranks, were registrar which was, if you like, an administrative officer of the unit, there was the quartermaster and pharmacist. There were only three commissioned ranks in a hospital at the time. Generally speaking, except if you're working closely in association with a commissioned rank, well then, relationships tended to be formal, certainly in our unit it was. As the years passed, friendships formed, and these had nothing to do with rank.

Now so far as the women were concerned, trained nurses went in as staff nurses or sisters and then there were senior sisters so the basic nursing rank for a trained nurse was a lieutenant and three pips for a sister and then the matron, as the senior nursing role was called then, was a major. The officers in charge of the surgical division and the medical division were lieutenant colonels and the commanding officer of the whole outfit was a full colonel.

It was, you can understand, that working together for as long as five and a half years, close relationships of respectful friendship occurred between non-commissioned ranks and privates and officers of both sexes. And again, I don't know, the social morés of the time, respect played a big part and you lived your lives according to those perceptions.

Did you get either upper respiratory tract infection or Pucka throat?

Yes, I had both. I remember I was working in the medical reception room at Puckapunyal and feeling absolutely ghastly until finally I had to say, 'I'd like someone to take my temperature, or I'll take my temperature and you can read it' and I was about 104. So I was shunted forthwith into a hospital bed where I can remember feeling absolutely chilled to the bone, with a shivering rigor and so, anyway, that passed.

I can remember that in order not to get out of kilter with the program of injections I had my, I think it was an anti-tetanus injection while I was lying, feeling pretty wretched in bed and it nearly lifted me through the roof. I fancy a bit of methylated spirits tracked in with the needle and - anyway, that was that.

Later on I contracted something like quinsy - it has to do with the tonsils - and I can remember one noble sister trying valiantly to put some condition on me and build me up after I'd had this thing and no sooner would she run this egg flip into me than it was up again, flowing in the opposite direction. Anyway, that took a few weeks and finally in 1952, at government expense, I had my tonsils out at Echuca. Puckapunyal was a place I was glad to get away from and finally to get on board the train at Dysart siding en route to Port Melbourne on 29th December 1940.

Presumably you knew then you were going overseas, did you feel you ought or ought not tell your mother?

Oh, my mother was, early on, accepting of what I was intent on doing and in fact had visited me at Puckapunyal on Sunday visits. During that six months at Puckapunyal Sunday visiting was quite in order and friends and relatives and girlfriends and family and so on could come up and if you happened to be off or if you could arrange to be off for a few hours, well, you could go out and sit in the countryside and have a picnic lunch. She had accustomed herself to the fact that almost certainly I'd be going overseas.

(25.00) Were you allowed though to actually say that you were going overseas, as long as you didn't say where?

We didn't know where we were going anyway, so it was really a question of not saying when we were going. All we knew was that - I'd need to check on this - but I think we'd handed over to the 7th Australian General Hospital perhaps a month or so before we actually departed from Puckapunyal. So all we knew was that transport overseas would probably be on in the near future but precisely when we didn't know.

It was obvious that at that time great ships were being loaded around Australia. The *Queen Mary*, in fact was in Sydney and all of Sydney knew that the AIF were being loaded onto it. And then anyone could see the *Mauretania*, which was about a 37,000 ton ship, was loading at Port Melbourne.

I know that the day we left people were hanging out, waving to us all the way along and at Port Melbourne I know I spotted my mother and Lois. We'd arranged that we'd have a bit of yellow crepe paper, I think it was, or yellow balloons or something, so that we had a chance of catching sight of each other. There were people crowding the railway line as the train moved on to the lines along the pier at Port Melbourne.

> To that point, how were you impressed by the nature of army life, and the rules and regulations? Was it a matter of just supposing and accepting that necessarily there'd be a certain amount of stuff that didn't make a lot of sense and seemed petty, or was there an impression that this was an efficient and impressive force?

Very impressed to see, for instance, the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion marching as one man down the camp road and I can still hear the band playing as they marched out on a route march or marched back. And likewise the 2/14th Battalion. The pride that was shown by these men in their appearance and bearing was something to really excite. Me, I thought, well, that's a fine body of men. They're volunteers and they're doing what they believe that their honour, if you like, compels them to do.

Now, turning to our own unit, there were those with temporary authority, the very small minority let it go to their heads and they were small czars. I can remember later in the war, up at Morotai, by this time we'd been in uniform for about five years and many of us were tired, really tired, and it was in the tropics, never particularly noted for feeling very alive, it's a draining sort of business in that climate, and apparently there was a bit of grumbling in the unit. Anyway, the new CO, George Swinburne called the senior NCOs, of which I was one by that time, together and wanted to know ...

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

> Identification: this is side one, tape two, recorded on 7 October about 2/4th Australian General Hospital with Alf Miller.

You were saying there was this concern about a bit of grumbling that was going on.

Yes. The CO asked for opinions on reasons for it. I advanced the thought that one fellow who was a bit obnoxious, you know, should grow up, and without mentioning names at that time, or now. There were people who in the rather gentlemanly atmosphere of a pretty top grade military hospital with volunteer physicians and surgeons and staff that there was an expectation of decent conduct and if people had come from a scratchy sort of grade six primary educational standard and had a little bit of temporary authority that quite often it would be a bit too much for them and so things could become a bit irksome. But by and large we had our jobs to do.

I had, by that time, become sergeant laboratory technician working with two superb people. One, the pathologist, was Dr Vincent Rudd, he became a leading Sydney pathologist and Dr Tom Gregory whose exalted rank was sergeant simply because the world war one staff establishment didn't allow for a laboratory technician who happened to be a doctor of science and former director of a university bacteriology department. It was after Tom Gregory had been commissioned and had become major in, I think, a malaria investigation unit, I had been promoted in Jerusalem to - I can't say to take his place because no one could take Tom Gregory's place - I was promoted to his slot. Later on I was recommended for commission but that was several years later.

At the time you'd boarded the *Mauretania* had you begun to develop any particular interest in pathology?

None whatever. I scarcely knew how to spell the word.

Where did that come then? Let's go where - generally we've got a reasonable amount of detail about getting to the Middle East via Ceylon and so on. When you arrived what were the first things of particular interest that happened to you?

We arrived in Port Tewfik in Egypt, it would have been January '41 and then we went by rail briefly through Cairo and on after a meal and a few hours to a place call Abd El Kader.

Was that January '40?

'41.

'41.

We having left Australia on 29th December '40. Abdel Kadir was out of Alexandria and Abd El Kader was a stop on the line that ran through El Alamein to Mersa Matruh. And here on this vast plain outside Alexandria the 7th Division and British units were like flies.

(5.00) Anyway after being there for some weeks we boarded a ship, a little, about two thousand ton, ship called the *Knight of Malta* at Alexandria quay. I think it was a Friday and before we set out there was a storm brewing and this ship was bucketing up and down even at the wharf. Well, on we went and we spent the next few days bashing into a storm off the

coast of North Africa and there was not anything like cabin room for the several hundred of us on board.

I don't know, perhaps thirty of us were in the forehead hold which had to have its hatchway left off so that we could get air. This storm ended up bucketing down great spouts of water. As the ship's bow would go down so water would come rushing into the hold. We were there on our kitbags and so on and ended up in no time vomiting like mad and turning ourselves inside out, vomiting into our mess tins very delicately for the first hour or so but then the mess tins started floating away on the water as it rushed backwards and forwards. You can imagine the contents of the mess tins going in all directions as they hit a stretched-out foot or something like that.

Anyway, we went right through the night as this thing tried to maintain steerage way, and next morning we got up via the hold ladder and stairways upstairs had been carried away and furniture was smashed up. Quite frankly I think we probably had the better part of it down in the hold rather than being up top being hurled around more violently. Anyway, we went through that day and the ship seemed to be going up and down in the same spot but still it was pointed towards Tobruk where we were to, well, that was our destination. We were on the heels of the 6th Australian Division which had gone up by land and had collared about a quarter of a million Italian prisoners who were very glad to be out of the war.

Then a friend and I, when night fell, we'd try to dry a blanket or so between us up on pipes up top. There was nowhere where you could try to grab some sleep so back we went to the hold and tried to make ourselves a spot where you could stretch out and have a bit of sleep. And it was in the early hours of that morning that I heard a grating, then the ship went over on its side and we'd run aground. We learnt later that the captain had aimed for the one spot on the coast where had a chance of beaching the vessel rather than its being impaled on rocks and to that end he did a pretty good job.

Anyway, we got off in lifeboats dragged backwards and forwards on a rope. The crew had got ashore in lifeboats and they passed the lifeboat backwards and forwards by a rope and so we had to pick our time to leap into the boat as it was up on the top of a wave near the rail of the thing and so we got ashore. We didn't have any casualties but my mate was in one of the lifeboat trips that turned completely turtle and he was underneath the thing with the boat on top and dragged out. But he survived that as he survived stepping on a booby trap at Tobruk, but that's another story.

> Tell us about that while you're there, just in case it slips later on. What happened to him?

(10.00) Well, I can take this almost in sequence. We plodded off across the desert. We couldn't take any gear with us of course. Once we were ashore that was it. And so off we went and we stretched by the end of the day from horizon to horizon it seemed. While this suited military tactics in presenting a small target, that's not all bunched together, certainly it was just the way it happened because there were those who set off at a good pace and those who dragged. So we ended up getting to the Bardia-Tobruk road which was a pretty bombed out stretch of bitumen that stretched from the border of Egypt to round about Tripoli. It was Mussolini's huge delight to have this desert road.

Anyway there we met a tanker. I thought it was a British petrol tanker but it turned out later - I only heard this in April this year - it was an Australian petrol park company's petrol tanker but it had empty four gallon tins - when I say empty, they were four gallon kerosene tins that were carrying water. We'd exhausted our water supply coming across the desert, just a water bottle, it was about fourteen or fifteen miles, and spattered with shrapnel and all the rest of it from the advance up the desert. So we slaked our thirst with a mixture of petrol flavoured water.

The message must have got back to Bardia of our predicament and I don't recall how we got the rest of the journey into Bardia but we arrived there and the Free Poles were in possession and they treated us royally to Italian canned fish steaks and mineral water and Italian cognac and there were a few casualties from that.

Then we seemed to spend the next few days at a British Casualty Clearing Station, a tented thing, outside Bardia. The fleas were absolutely thick, you could watch them jumping on your legs if you sat on a stretcher. You'd see these little flicks of dust and then you'd look at your legs and they were covered with fleas. And of course fleas carried relapsing fever and all sorts of things so I was darned lucky to avoid getting anything like that.

Anyway, half a dozen of us were selected by Major John Horan, and he became Lieutenant Colonel John Horan and lives in Camberwell these days. He is by way of being a good friend. He's a very devoted churchman as well as a brilliant physician. He became the medical officer of my ward at Tobruk and subsequently I remember lending him a pullover when we were both sick in Ceylon, and then post-war we've exchanged greetings and good wishes on many an occasion.

Well, we were selected, half a dozen of us, to go up to a place called Barce, near Benghazi. We started off in an ambulance which got us as far as Fort Pilastrino outside Tobruk, another tented casualty clearing station. We stayed the night. Lance, my friend of the shipwreck lifeboat turnover - he'd grown up in the same suburb as I and while I didn't know him in peacetime he knew my sister and he recognised me when I landed at Puckapunyal and we were great buddies right through till the time of his death a year or two ago.

Anyway, we went for a bit of a poke around, Lance and I, and we were looking at some Italian fixed artillery pieces. I think they were anti-aircraft guns and the Italians had put a round in the breech and something up the spout and fired it with the result that the barrels of the guns were twisted in all directions and ruined. Well, Lance and I became separated by distance. He was going in one direction and I was going the other - we were just prowling around - and I didn't know till I got back to camp that Lance had kicked a bit of sacking and there the Italians had left booby traps. Anyway, in the resultant explosion Lance had damaged toes and round about his middle and he was shipped out pronto to Alexandria. I thought that was the last we'd see of Lance.

(15.00) Did it give you a start? Did suddenly the notion of what the war was about seem a bit more real?

Yes, it did. It had been becoming more real from the time we got on the *Knight of Malta* at Alexandria. We'd passed out under the guns of great French battleships and British warships and battleships in Alexandria Harbour. The French warships had been interned, if you like,

with the collapse of France and they'd been rendered immobile against the possibility of Vichy French activation. And so we'd seen all this military hardware and naval might there.

When the *Knight of Malta* ran aground we'd been aware that sea water harboured submarines. In retrospect we felt that the rough conditions probably made it as difficult for submarines to score as it was for the *Knight of Malta* to battle against it. But we were aware of the danger of enemy aircraft and so on - we had been coming up the Red Sea, wearing tin hats and so forth.

First of all, seeing these guns twisted in all directions, yes, war had passed that way. Then of course, walking across the desert from the shipwreck the desert was splattered with lumps of jagged metal from shrapnel bursts and shell bursts and the like. When Lance had kicked this booby trap, yes, it became quite clear that we were getting close to the business end of the war. And then of course when we were at this Fort Pilastrino which is five or six miles out of Tobruk. Tobruk at the time was being pasted by Italian and, well, I would say, probably mainly Italian aircraft, generally high level, but the coloured Australian and British tracer rounds were very spectacular indeed and that was just a few miles away.

Well, on we went. We had to leave the ambulance at Tobruk and somehow or other John Horan was able to get us onto a truck that took us up through Derna, a beautiful little Mediterranean port in Cyrenaica, and we stayed the night there. I can remember a British quartermaster lieutenant coming to us and pleading, we had no nefarious intent but he asked, 'Please, would we not steal anything', so apparently the 6th Division reputation for 'scrounging', in inverted commas, had preceded us. Anyway we left the place intact and went on next morning.

I can remember on the heights outside Derna there was an airfield on which stood scores of burnt-out Italian planes. They must have really been caught with their pants down. They were just tubular frames and standing there absolutely burnt out. Well, on we went to this town called Barce which is perhaps thirty or forty miles north-west of Benghazi. There we set up 4th Australian General Hospital in what was a former Italian barracks.

(20.00) These barracks buildings were absolutely ideal for hospital use. The tented hospitals in the desert were absolutely the pits. They were alright for a very short time but then the *khamseens*, the Saharan *khamseens*, this wind, this dust-laden wind blowing either violently or steadily meant that the canvas allowed talc powder to filter through. And you can imagine operating theatres in a tented hospital.

I remember we slept in this casualty clearing station on the way up through Pilastrino and I happened to be one of the first awake in the morning and there were these waxed mummies of figures lying, and all that could be seen were eye sockets, two tiny little holes for nostrils and if the soldier was asleep with his mouth open, you'd see a slit. And this under, I don't know, an eighth or a quarter of an inch of fine talc powder. It was a most weird experience.

Whose casualties had they been?

That was on the 6th Division advance up the desert from Egypt against the Italians when the 6th Australian Division plus British units, I think there were New Zealanders also and Indian troops in the first push up the desert, late 1940, December 1940. The 6th Division and their

allied units were accompanied by field ambulances and casualty clearing stations. The one we stayed at in Bardia I think was an Italian casualty clearing station.

These were Italian bodies then, that you'd seen, were they?

No.

I'm sorry I thought you said you stumbled across this line of - these were people sleeping. I'm sorry I had the impression for a moment that maybe these were bodies that the sand had blown from.

No, they were our party en route up to Benghazi and they looked like dead bodies in a waxworks. No, these casualty clearing stations, as I was saying, these had been set up to look after the Allied casualties on the track through to - they'd swept right through Derna, Barce, Benghazi and they'd got as far as El Agheila, beyond Benghazi. And there they had stopped because England responded to the call from Greece or the need for Greece to be reinforced because the Germans were driving down through Greece and England felt that it had to make an effort to stop the German thrust. And so the 6th Australian Division was pulled out and I believe it was a pretty hopeless situation from the word go - too little, too late. The desert force was greatly denuded in order to bolster the Greek defence, and we know the situation, the 6th Division was pretty well wiped out. I've mentioned an uncle of mine who was caught up in Crete. The 6th Division pretty well had to be rebuilt.

(25.00) And of course Rommel seized his opportunity, the German high command had been absolutely appalled, disgusted by the wholesale failure of the Italian forces to stem the onwards push of the Allies in their first attack through the Western Desert. Rommel, who'd been a very successful general in the early, 1939-1940, campaign in Europe was sent across the Mediterranean and he, with elements of what was to become the Afrika Korps, went about establishing a very aggressive force beyond El Agheila and then started feeling out what had been left in the Western Desert, or beyond the Western Desert.

And so we'd only been at Barce operating the hospital there, looking after the casualties left behind when to our astonishment, because you never know beforehand what's happening, but you learn later the reasons for what overtakes you. And so instead of hearing that we were to pack up and move further west into Tunisia or somewhere, we learnt that we were to retreat on Tobruk. And the reason for that was that German troops were assembling to our west and we just had to get out and get behind the perimeter defences of Tobruk on which what became the 9th Division and elements of British troops and Indian troops would fall back in about February-March 1940.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview recorded on 7 October 1990 with Alf Miller about the 2/4th AGH.

With the withdrawal of the Australian nurses what were the sorts of things in theatre that you found yourself doing that you hadn't previously?

I had been assigned to be a medical orderly. I was what was called a Grade 3 medical orderly, I think.

What sort of rank did that mean?

That was a private. I was then on six and seven pence a day. No I wasn't, I was on five and seven pence a day. The seven pence came about because we were under overall British command and at that time the exchange differential between Australia and British currency was, I think, twenty-five per cent. And so £100 sterling equalled $125 Australian and because we were on British command my five bob a day became five and seven pence a day.

I had been allotted to, I think, these two wards of this set up in this barracks building. The barracks was a huge rectangular thing. It must have had a dozen major buildings round a hollow rectangle and these, the individual buildings of these barracks, would have housed something like sixty or eighty men I think, sleeping on their small stretchers - just a steel or iron frame and looked like canvas stretched between. I don't remember a mattress but it was just to support the body. They had hanging things for their webbing and rifles and so on down the middle. Well, all of that was ripped out and these old Italian stretchers were the beds used in my particular wards. Better and higher beds that had been carted to the Middle East were used in the surgical wards but for medical patients they just had these serving soldier stretchers.

Now the routine there was if people needed to be fed, they were fed and if people needed to be washed, you could dress wounds, you could give out medication, you could see to everything that needed to be done. There were no lights at night because of the blackout and because with bombing attacks, any blanket tacked up to windows would have, that was regularly blown out and so on, so no lights. There was recording to be done of course. Records during wartime, you don't appreciate the absolute importance of them, and in hindsight from forty or fifty years on you appreciate the vital importance of things having been recorded in the lifetime of a service person.

(5.00) The nurses were pulled out, again I say, to their great dismay because they didn't want to go. There were four physiotherapists attached to 2/4th AGH and of course they had to be pulled out too. And so it was all hands to the pump and there were many pumps. I found myself in charge of two wards. What care and treatment the fellows got is a bit beyond my comprehension. They were fed, they couldn't each have access to a bucket of water or anything like that. The Italians had, they had water that came from bore water supplies and that was out at the back of the barracks building. People could go out there and do their ablutions. They could brush their teeth and wash their face and stuff over this running sort of a trough. But that water cut out pretty quickly. The Germans were very keen on bombing water distilleries, sea water distilleries and the like and I think that the bore water supplies must have proved inadequate. Washing in medical wards was not something that was freely available.

I remember that life went on in a madly busy way. I remember, at one stage, throwing some clothes into a kerosene tin in the hope that I would get to them to wash them and I did several months later and they were just a pool of sludge. We just wore boots and shorts, that was our garb. I do remember that occasionally I would get down to our beach hospital and there I had the chance of a swim in the sea.

> Did you get to the so-called Grey Smith Stand, I gather where the x-rays were done and from where you could watch in an almost comfortable position as the raids took place?

Yes, that Grey Smith Stand was over, it was really one part of the main theatre block and the x-ray department was close by there of course. It was possible from various parts of the hospital to just stand and observe. You would hear a gun, a long range gun called 'Bardia Bill' outside the perimeter and you'd hear it go 'boom boom' and then you could stand and watch the shell burst down on the harbour side.

I remember when a very valiant little English warship, I'm not quite sure what it was, it might have been a minesweeper, it was called the *Ladybird*. And I remember these Stuka dive-bombers came over determined to blow it out of the water and they nearly did. You could just watch the Stuka dive-bombers coming along at a height of, I don't know, 10,000 feet and then when they decided to come down on their great dive, they would come down at an angle of about seventy-five degrees to the ground and they would howl down with this great banshee wail and then pointing directly at their target, they would release their bomb, and allowing for a bit of curvature it had a pretty fair chance of being right on the dot. So we saw *Ladybird* being plastered. It settled on the bottom of the harbour but they still kept the guns firing.

(10.00) There was a water distillery on the far side of the harbour and the Stukas came over to plaster it and they missed but the very, very intelligent engineer officer got his men busy with sump oil and splashed sump oil all over the roof of the thing and made it look like a burnt-out hulk and thereafter it was left in peace. So there were things like this.

And then of course this Grey Smith Stand thing could lull one into a sense of security that was false because one day Bardia Bill didn't have the right trajectory set for the gun because the shell came whistling over our heads and it crashed into the hard rock and stuff several hundred yards past us and we almost felt indignant about that. That was, yes, part of the scene.

> With the increasing numbers of casualties did it at all challenge your religious beliefs? Did you ever feel, this just doesn't make sense to see all these young men smashed and wounded and ...?

No, it didn't. It didn't alter anything for me. I remember just feeling that, okay, we were, the various nations were locked in battle. I find the very concept of people going out to kill each other on the field of war, I find that really a staggering thought when you come down to tin tacks about it. But accepting that that is the situation, I just felt that right, it was my job to do my job to the very best of my ability, to relieve suffering where I could.

I wasn't by any means a skilled person in this regard. I remember one day a man whom I admired, he'd been brought in and you could grade them according to their acceptance of things as they were, on an acceptance of the fact that I was doing the best I could for them with what resources I had. And this man, 'Snowy' Glyde from one of the infantry units, had been shot laterally through the ankle and I'd made some sort of a cradle to keep the pretty dirty old Italian horsehair blanket, or camel hair blanket maybe, off him, off his foot. One day he called me a bit urgently and he felt his foot was warm. And anyway I pulled back things and yes, the reason for it being warm was that an artery had been eaten through by secondary

infection from his wound and was gushing like nobody's business. I didn't wait around to find an arterial pressure point, I simply pushed my finger in the bullet hole and yelled for a few guys to grab a stretcher, and while they manhandled Snowy onto it I walked beside with my finger in the hole in his thing and we passed him over to the theatre staff.

(15.00) As to my religious beliefs which were then not clearly defined, that was just the way I'd been brought up, and I was aware that we had a chaplain whom I greatly admired, Max Radford, who was later blown up in the South Pacific on a landing barge. He had, at Tobruk, in April or May 1941, suggested that I offer myself for ordination training and the very notion of that had moved me to laughter - well, not really, but I thought, 'Who, me? You've got to be joking' but I did ring Max up on the day I was being ordained in St Paul's Cathedral, November 1962, to tell him that what he had mentioned to me twenty-one years previously was coming to fulfilment. And I know it gave him great pleasure. He was a great man.

We had various people with whom, one of whom I'm still in touch with, and he became a Methodist and Other Protestant Denominations chaplain in 1942. He'd been an advanced theological student when war had broken out and it was decided to commission him after the Tobruk business and so forth. I became a groomsman at his wedding when we came back from the Middle East, and we've been friends ever since. We were up at Puckapunyal in May of this year, 1990, to jointly dedicate plaques and so forth for the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the unit at Puckapunyal.

> Did your own health become affected at all by the pressure of the bombardments? There were some for whom it got on their nerves and spent various periods in recuperation. Did that happen to you at all?

No. I found, that isn't to say that I didn't become edgy at various times, that during the height of the bombing and we were plastered over a period of months. On or about Good Friday, 1941, one of our cooks looked up at the sky to the west of Tobruk and he said, 'Look at all these planes'. And we went and had a look and it was like a great swarm of mosquitoes or, the sky seemed to be black as with a flock of birds, but these planes kept on coming and then they peeled off one after the other, and these were Stuka dive-bombers, the first we'd seen, and they were going for the front-line positions. Around Tobruk at a radius of about five to seven miles there was this perimeter defence line constructed in prewar years by the Italians. These Stuka dive-bombers really plastered the place and the sky to the south was just one violent dust storm of shell bursts and so on and so on.

Well, it was about that time that the German and Italian planes, mainly German because the Italians used to stay miles high, they came and they plastered this barracks building where we were set up. Whether or not we had red crosses set up at that time I'm not too sure. It was very early in the piece. The ward that I was looking after was hit and in all I think we lost about thirty-eight patients and we lost our eye specialist, Zacky Schwartz, and a senior physician, Jack Chambers, and Norm Forster and Mick Hanemann of our own unit, apart from patients and so on. So that was a sobering introduction to things.

(20.00) We picked up these bodies. I remember picking up a dead English intelligence officer in my ward. During the intensity of the bombing, being forced to, not forced but the requirements of the situation being such that you just had to keep going to do what had to be done, thoughts concerning yourself somehow fade into the background and this certainly enabled me to not have the breeze up too much.

When the sisters had been with us the rule was that there would be one person remain in the ward during an air raid. Well, okay, when the sisters had gone and if I were the only one on the wards the answer was pretty obvious, you stayed put, so there was a rock-sided air raid shelter outside in this hollow rectangle outside the ward and this could accommodate fifty or sixty people jammed in. And I had pretty good hearing and German aircraft, their engines had a sinister rise and fall note, 'Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm' and you could hear this coming from a great distance and it was only necessary to say, 'Alright boys, they're coming, better get to the shelter', and there'd be this exodus to the shelter. While you had the responsibility of other people, well fortunately, your thoughts didn't have to centre on yourself.

That was the way life went on for the key months of the attack by Germans and Italians, mainly by air so far as we were concerned but constantly against the perimeter defences by the Germans. It was as the Germans and Italians came to understand that General Morshead was a pretty astute fellow and he had some pretty tough characters under his command in Australians and Indians and the British artillery that things settled down after a few months. The navy were sliding into Tobruk harbour under cover of darkness with ammunition and food and mail and later on a bit of canteen supplies and so forth. And so that pressure on us of bombing, it went in fits and starts.

(25.00)I remember one night after I had been withdrawn from the wards to work in the pathology department I was sharing a billet, an old room, with a friend, Herb McConnell, who became a great friend, and I took his funeral on January 28th, this year. He died of cancer. Wonderful bloke. Well, Herb and Scotty Hamilton and I bunked in together. We had old Italian stretchers and if we could get hold of a mosquito net that was pretty handy because there was malaria in Tobruk too, and mosquito-borne diseases. I can remember this particular night, this plane came over and it droned around and around and around. He just wouldn't let us go to sleep. And then it happened. It released a thing and this chilling sound of something like a railway steam engine thundering out of the sky, and this we learnt later was a naval mine. They'd been intending to drop this in the harbour to have one of our destroyers hit it but it hit the side of the harbour and this thing went off. I've never heard such an explosion at that time or since.

Coming back to my leaving the wards, dysentery was one of the factors that could have caused the failure of the Australians and others to hold out the Germans, except for the fact that the Germans and Italians were also affected by bacillary dysentery. The ground of the desert was such that people, except for those in the concrete emplacements and anti-tank ditches and so on, on the actual perimeter, that people not in those situations but in the front line where it had been breached, they had to live, sleep, defecate in the same hollowed-out bit of two foot depth rock and sand. And the flies and filth were appalling.

Dysentery in the Middle East is not just diarrhoea, it is the shedding, when it attacks, it is the shedding of the lining, the mucous lining of the bowel. And I've seen a young Australian, a young man in his twenties, just shedding his bowel by the bedpan and going down to skeletal condition because we didn't have sulphaguanidine at that time. There was nothing we could do for him. And then suddenly the miracle happened. His body developed its own antibodies and his dysentery stopped and he stopped losing his bowel lining. This is not just rectum lining but up the large bowel and so on. Having developed his own antibodies he just got well, blossomed forth and he survived and it was one of the most dramatic and miraculous things that I recall seeing, health-wise.

> With all that, and that experience which has been so important to so many people who went through the war years, ultimately what sense do you make of it from a religious point of view?

I just recognise the fact that man is a frail animal. We've only got to think of yesterday's grand final football match and you see what happens as soon as someone does something the others don't agree with, and so there's an all-in brawl in no time flat. So that's the way it used to be, that's the way .... Thank God, wiser counsels prevail now because of recognition of what might happen - in Iraq in the present stand-off. It's only as man learns to control himself and heed the words and wisdom of a wise God that there'll ever be a real chance of peace insofar as human beings are concerned.

END OF INTERVIEW