



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Identification: This is side one of tape one of an interview about the 2/4th Australian General Hospital recorded with Geoff Morris on 8 October 1990 and it begins in five seconds from now.

Geoff Morris, where and when were you born?

I was born in Melbourne on 26th January, Australia Day, on the real Monday, 1920.

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

My father was an optometrist. He was a veteran of Gallipoli. And I was brought up in a very stable happy home with one brother.

Was your father a strict man?

I'd say he was. We used to think so. Not as strict as I was with my own kids. He was reasonably pliable.

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

Oh, my mother was a great person. She looked after us very well and used to give the family every support. And I'd say as kids we were particularly well looked after.

Was it a religious family? Was church a regular part of the way you lived?

It wasn't church; it was synagogue. But we were, I'd say, an average Jewish family. We .... Oh, I'd say we lived a totally normal life and were taught from the word go to mix in with all society. It was rather an odd thing, most of my schooling was at a Catholic school and in those days there were very few non-Catholics at Christian Brothers College, St Kilda, that I attended. And my father sent me to CBC St Kilda because he felt that the Catholic schools gave you much more discipline than ordinary other schools. And just to complete the catholo ... catholicity [sic] - I can't say it - but just to complete my catholic education I ended up two years at Wesley and my brother did the same thing, where we went to intermediate which was as high as you could go then at CBC St Kilda and then we went and did our leaving and matric at Wesley the last two years. Although when I come to think of it, no, my brother got a scholarship and went to Wesley two years before. He got it about the sub-intermediate stage.

Did that seemingly rather unlikely mix of a Jewish religion and a Catholic school upbringing create confusion for you or any awkward moments as a younger person?

Oh no, never. No. The strangeness wasn't so much a Jewish kid going to a Catholic school but it was just a non-Catholic going to a Catholic school. I suppose on an average there'd only be one or two in each class at the most would be non-Catholic in those days. And nearly all the teaching was done by the brothers and I've kept up a reasonable connection in later life with some of my ex-teachers and they used to come to me as patients. And, of course, now, the situation in the Catholic schools entirely changed where in my time there were two lay teachers in the school and now it's almost a reverse. There are only a couple of brothers and the rest are lay teachers.

With your father as a professional man, did that mean that in relative terms your family was reasonably comfortably off during the depression years and so on?

Ah, we were never badly off but my father established the optometry practice when he came back after the war in 1919. He established this practice in Chapel Street, Prahran, and he struggled for a long time.

(5.00) He was just beginning to become well-established at around about the time - maybe about a year before the depression - one or two years before the depression. But we survived the depression quite well.

Did his first world war background make the ANZAC tradition of particular importance or was it an issue as was not uncommon with first world war people, they often would rather not to talk about it at all?

I think we never talked about it. All my life I'd only ever had a couple of anecdotal things told me. He never really talked about it. Where I have kept a close association with our wartime unit - this was easy for me because I joined up from Melbourne and of course all our essential activities are in Melbourne with our association - but my father was a country boy. As a matter of fact he had a very interesting life. He was born in Scone in New South Wales and then went to Ballarat - his father was a jeweller - and they went to Ballarat for his early school days and then they went over at the time of the Kalgoorlie gold rush, they followed over there. And he had his adolescent years in Kalgoorlie and then he went to Perth and joined up from Perth. And he felt after the war years that so many of his mates had been killed he couldn't stand the idea of going back to Kalgoorlie and he decided - and his parents had shifted over during the war from Perth to Melbourne, Kalgoorlie to Melbourne - and he naturally came back to Melbourne. And he married, well, I think within twelve months of returning. He married in 1919.

Over the years did you get some impression as to what kind of war he'd had? Or did it always remain pretty much a mystery to you?

He used to tell me the army food was dreadful and as little kids if we didn't eat up our meals he'd tell us that if we ever went into the army, God help us. And one of my biggest surprises when I went into the militia, the first meal I sat down to in our camp at Mornington - I don't know what I was expecting but I was expecting we'd get more or less dog scraps - and when we sat down to an excellent three-course Sunday meal, I got the shock of my life. And, in fact, all through the war I've been very agreeably surprised at the high standard of food. Maybe I'm easily satisfied but I used to think there was very - even when we were on bully beef - I thought we were pretty well looked after.

As you were growing up at school did it seem apparent that you would necessarily follow in your father's footsteps or did you have different earlier aspirations?

Do you mean in regard to occupation?

Yes.

Well, I never wanted to be an optometrist. I always had in mind I'd like to go in for journalism. I'm not saying that because I'm talking to you. But it was rather interesting: they thought that if I did an arts course that was just something incidental and they said, 'Well, do optometry first. Then if you want to go in for journalism, do that later'. And, of course, as it turned out that I was very fortunate that I'd just completed the optometry course in 1939, so the war really fell at the right time for me, when I was just coming up to being twenty.

To save some future historian a bit of further research, it might be helpful to indicate the difference between an optometrist and an opthalmogist [sic].

An ophthalmologist. An ophthalmologist is a medical man who does, who completes the medical course first and then puts in a couple of years post-graduate studies and those extra two years can give him the degree in ophthalmology. An optometrist is a non-medical person. We're really para-medical and we have our own college where we do our course - this is only since the 1960s - reached full university status.

(10.00) These days our students do four years optometric science, a science course now. Then they qualify at the end of this four years. And, of course, there's talk these days of extending the course because the four years isn't quite long enough.

How did you come to join the militia?

Well, I joined the militia because everyone in 1938 could see that war was inevitable and I just felt it was a good thing to join the militia and see what it was all about. It was as simple as that. I think most - I don't know about most but a lot of chaps my own age, the ones that were over eighteen - they looked on it as a good idea to have some military experience. All my schooling there were never any cadets in my time so we felt as though, if war came, it

would be much better to have some sort of army background so you didn't get too much of a fright on getting into a new sphere.

So the fact that you'd been training as an optometrist, was that of particular consequence when you joined? Did that direct where you went in the militia?

No, not at all. No. I just went into a field ambulance as a fully-fledged private and just went from there. I was fortunate that I found out that there was a vacancy in the 2/4th AGH for an optical mechanic. Optometry wasn't recognised at that stage. It was just going to be the optical section of the hospital was going to be an ophthalmologist, an optical mechanic and then a corporal or something like this to do the office work.

During the militia period before you were incorporated into the army, what sort of training and that were you doing?

Oh, just more or less learning basic things on how to look after - or render first aid and ....

With the assumption you'd be a stretcher-bearer? Was that ...

Oh, that could have been. I don't think we thought about it very deeply. I was just in it and just did these things. One of my class mates joined up with me. He followed me over into the 2/4th AGH and unfortunately he got killed in Tobruk.

What was the process of moving over from militia into the regular forces?

Oh, you just volunteer to go over.

Where did you do that?

I .... Really, the great impetus to go into the AIF came from when France fell in 1940. I don't think any of us looked on the war as a real thing until May 1940. Once France fell we all knew it was going to be a long drawn out thing and we'd all be involved in it. And quite a few people, oh, there was a much greater impetus to join then.

Did you have any considered point of view about what the war meant in terms of its impact on Australia? Was it a sense that Australia ultimately could be threatened or was it a matter of just obviously rallying to the need of Britain?

Oh, it was just a matter of .... No, none of us thought Australia would be threatened. Maybe we did think that there could be conflict with Japan; I suppose we might have had that at the back of our minds. No, it was just a matter of they were the British empire days and I think we all had great pride in the British empire. I feel perturbed these days to think what has

happened. For example, when India was ceded in 1948, none of us foresaw that was ever going to happen. We thought we were fighting during the war to maintain the status quo. And I feel there's been a ridiculous swing around giving countries independence before they are mature enough to handle it, especially with New Guinea.

Did your father have any particular point of view or anything to say about you joining up? Did he express a view one way or the other?

I think in his heart he probably expected it but he never said anything much about it. I don't think my mother liked the idea of her little boy going off to war; in fact, I'm darned sure she didn't like the idea. But, oh no, they accepted it.

You had a brother, I think you said?

Mmm.

Had he also joined or was he ...

My brother's four years younger you see and he was only a school boy then.

(15.00) He had commenced the medical course towards the latter part of the war and fortunately or unfortunately he didn't have the opportunity to see any war service.

Well, when you then joined the regular army, was your professional training immediately relevant or did that come about later as to where you were posted?

No, it wasn't really relevant. - It was and it wasn't. - I knew I'd, I actually joined the 4th AGH knowing I'd be a sergeant mechanic. As a matter of fact one of my optometric colleagues told me, before I joined, never to expect commission ranking. And I said, 'Oh, it didn't matter, as long as I was doing something'. And as it turned out optometrists received commissioned ranking in - I think it was about March 1940. And there was a bit of an anomaly there because the fellows at home that had entered the army then as lieutenants - and there were about four or five of us optometrists not working as optometrists, or if we were, just given a certain amount of the work by the ophthalmologist who ran the department. It wasn't till we got back to Australia that we got the commissioned ranking. However, that was a bit strange I always thought. It must have come in while we were still overseas. We had to wait till we came back. We came back to Australia in August '42. Immediately we came back we got that commission.

With your joining up, did you then go to Puckapunyal?

Yes, yes. I went to Puckapunyal. I joined a bit later than most of our members because I'm hanged if I didn't - I'd been looking after a patient in the 10th Field Ambulance at the old Seymour camp. I remember sponging a bloke down who had scarlet fever and sure enough on the day I went along, I went to St Kilda Road to be interviewed by Major Matheson who was our registrar, and he sent me up and promised me I'd get into the ophthalmic section, and he sent me forthwith out to Caulfield Racecourse. And my family lived on Dandenong Road, and I was feeling dreadful, and, anyhow, on the way to the racecourse I decided to get off at home and go in and tell my mother how bad I was. And sure enough I went down with scarlet fever. And I was laid up for about five weeks at home with a nurse for scarlet fever and my one worry was that the war was going to finish. Or (a) the war might finish and I couldn't be involved in anything, or (b) the unit might go away and I'd be left behind. But, anyhow, luckily, as it turned out for me, I went to - I've forgotten exactly what month I went to Pucka - it might have been about July where I think the unit mostly went there in about May. And, anyhow, it all turned out all right because we didn't embark until December 1940.

When you didn't immediately turn up at the Caulfield race track, the army didn't instantly decide you were a deserter and send MPs to get you?

No. I don't know what would have happened if I - I just don't know. All I know is I've got an army number about 2000 later than most of the other blokes in the unit - that annoyed me. I wanted one of the earlier numbers that they had.

When you got to Puckapunyal did you then move into the ophthalmic area or were you doing general ward duties and so on?

Oh, just general outside work. I was pretty soon made a corporal and a sergeant - I didn't have to wait very long - but, no, it was just general duties. I don't think I - I personally didn't do any ward work. And there was no such thing as the eye department functioning at Puckapunyal. That wasn't called on to function.

So what sort of duties were you doing?

Well, just general duties there.

What did that mean?

(20.00) Oh, swinging a pick or just taking charge of just outdoor jobs that came up. There was plenty to do. I'm a bit hazy now on just exactly what we might have done.

Were you doing drills and so on?

Oh yes. Yeah, drills and route marches.

As you weren't at that point actually involved in the medical side of activities, did you do weapon training? Or because you were part of the hospital you never got into it?

No, no, no. Never any weapon training. The only time during the war I did any weapon training was some bright spark, when we were stationed at Redbank in Queensland, some bright spark had the idea that all these odds and sods in units throughout Australia should go down to Woodside and do a special month's course so that they'd learn what the infantry life was like. And it was all right for me because I was only about twenty-three or twenty-four but we had these then I thought what were the old fellows of about forty to fifty doing bayonet drill and doing all the arduous drills around the place.

Did that seem to make sense or was there perhaps felt to be almost an element of vindictiveness that we'll show these soft people what it's really like?

Oh no, no. It wasn't vindictive. It was just some political decision to - oh no, it wouldn't have been vindictive. It was just to try and give everybody an idea of what the other bloke's situation was like.

So how did you find the army life at Puckapunyal - the drills and the routines? You've said you quite liked the food, but overall, how did you find it?

Oh, I thought I was very much advantaged by my militia experience because it was just a carry on from my living in the militia camps. And I think that made it a lot more easy for me to adapt to. We had a bit of sickness up there where there were upper respiratory throat infections laid a lot of blokes low in those winter months. Oh no, they were quite happy days except we were all breaking our necks to get overseas. We had about three final leaves until we had the final one. We were always going and going and never leaving.

Did you get Pucka throat or upper respiratory throat infection?

No, no. I didn't. I was very healthy there.

So when news finally came that you were to be moving and you came back to Melbourne, were your parents rather worried when it was obvious that you'd be going overseas?

Ah ... you know ... Oh no, no. Look, every parent would - they all knew we would ultimately go overseas after - we were trained to do this. Oh no, they all knew we were going but the thing is you weren't allowed to tell them when you'd go.

Did you know? I mean, it became apparent that with the turn out that there was for the *Mauretania* that an awful lot of people did know ...

Oh everyone knew, yeah. We knew that's what we were being trained for.

But I mean the actual date of departure?

That's what we didn't know but we all would have liked to have gone the next day. There was no thought that anyone wanted it other than that because we weren't in the real war, or in any war.

To the point of going aboard the *Mauretania*, had you as yet had any work in the ophthalmic area?

No, no, no. We didn't function ... the ophthalmology department didn't function until we were in Barce in Libya and it was set up there, that would be when it first functioned and that would be in April '41.

What about the voyage on the *Mauretania* with the call to Colombo and so on, were there any particular parts of it that stay with you?

Oh, I thought it was magnificent. We had quite a smooth trip. I was a sergeant then and we were in what had been very palatial two-berth cabin converted into a six-berther and our meals were excellent. We looked on that as a very luxurious trip.

What about the elevation to the rank of sergeant, what did that mean in terms of your relations with other men? Did you feel that it necessarily required a certain aloofness in order to maintain authority or how did it work?

(25.00) Oh, I suppose it does to a point. Yeah, that's true to a point. Well, with my school mate - in fact, I had two school mates who were in the same unit - in our unit, and we were always. We got around together where we could but there was a tendency to find that whatever you might have wanted to do you got dragged into keeping with your own mob a bit. I don't think I ever had any trouble at any stage during the war with relating to other people.

Was the mode of address always fairly formal: private, sergeant or was it first name terms generally? Or a bit of both?

Oh, it was pretty formal in those days. I don't think I was often called Geoff even as a sergeant. No, it was pretty formal.

So what did that mean in terms of pay difference? How much extra pay were you getting?

Well, talking of pay, the most iniquitous thing that had ever happened in this country was that in the militia days the private got eight shillings a day and when you joined the AIF it immediately went down to five shillings. And you can just imagine the consternation that caused between the militia and the AIF, to think that the fellows who wouldn't volunteer to go overseas were getting their basic pay at a higher rate than those that had volunteered to go overseas which was ridiculous.

Did that ever lead to confrontations in pubs or real hostility?

Oh yeah, yeah. There'd be plenty. I don't know that I ever saw a fight over it but, oh no, there was great bitterness about it. But it was just one of those things. From my own personal point of view, my pay as an optical mechanic I think was about three, I think it was under three pound a week when I enlisted. So I was really a hell of a lot better off on my army eight bob a day where I didn't have to hand anything in at home and financially as a single bloke I was pretty well off in the army. We used to think as a lieutenant that - I've forgotten what the rates of pay were - but we used to think a lieutenant would be around about an equivalent of a civilian twelve pound a week which was pretty good money in those days when you think that the basic wage was about four or five pound.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape one of an interview recorded with Geoff Morris on 8th October 1990 about the 2/4th AGH and begins in five seconds.

So presumably you were aboard the *Knight of Malta* when it came to its - I won't say sticky end - it's ill-fated end?

Oh, it was a sticky end. Before we get onto that, things got rougher and rougher the further we got away from Australia because we had a - I'm speaking from a sergeant's point of view now - because we were all segregated, officers, sergeants and the other ranks below that and the other ranks didn't have nearly the good accommodation that the sergeants had and the sergeants were one or two tiers below the officers' accommodation. But when we transferred at Colombo to the *Knight of Malta* - to the *Nevasa*, one of the British-India boats - and conditions on that for the troops were sudden death. They were uncomfortable, hammock accommodation, and it was pretty rough and ready. And I've fully forgotten what our sergeant accommodation was but that was relatively okay. But we really felt we'd come down to earth with a thud when we got on the *Nevasa*.

But I can digress for a minute about the *Nevasa*. I often used to wonder what would happen on my 21st birthday. Well, I had my 21st birthday on the *Nevasa*. There would be about, oh, twenty-eight to thirty sergeants in the mess and anyhow having my 21st birthday they were all there and of course it was my job to shout them drinks and we paid the barman chits for these

drinks. And I had one round of drinks, you know, twenty-eight people, then another. The old barman's getting - oh, he was quite young really, he looked old - he was beginning to get panicky about whether I had enough money to pay for it ...

And did you?

Well, wait till I tell you. Then we had a third round and the bloke was jumping up and down wondering. You know, the total cost of those three rounds of drinks came to exactly five pounds. So I could have bought ...

It costs almost that much for a single drink at a flash pub these days, doesn't it?

It was all duty-free stuff but I can marvel at ninety drinks [inaudible].

What sort of fellows did you find were your fellow sergeants?

Oh, they were a good lot, a good lot. Oh, look, most people we had in the army were very acceptable. I've got a philosophy in life that if you're handling say a hundred people, well, there's got to be about three no-hopers in a hundred people in some way. They'll either be unpleasant, difficulties, or they some way fall below par. I think that's a nice estimate, about three per cent. I think we found that out in those army days. There were only about half a dozen blokes that you might find it difficult to get on with. I remember one chap in the militia days that he never used to take a shower and we often - he was a cook of course - and we pretty soon got him washed. We dragged him down to the showers yelling and screaming and put him under it and made sure he had a wash. But, by and large, I don't see much difference in people. You know, you'll always get one stirrer in any crowd but you learn to manage them.

When you say the fellow who didn't shower was a cook of course does that suggest that cooks were often a particular type of character?

(5.00) Well, I was put in a tent of cooks when I arrived late in the piece at Pucka. I got in with - we slept I think - we used to sleep eight to a tent in the militia and it was six to a tent at Pucka from memory, and I'm in with these cooks and there was one fellow - he was a little bit below par, in fact he never came away with us, he got discharged - but I never saw him take his clothes off all the time I was in the tent. He used to just strip down to .... He used to wear his woollen singlet and longjohns. He was really a cook's offsider, he wasn't a proper cook.

You said the army food was pretty good. It didn't give you misgivings about the food you were eating?

I never gave a damn about that. The roughest thing that ever happened to me with food was when I was at Caulfield, in transit at Caulfield. We used to have our meals in one of those rooms under the grandstand and you'd have your porridge first and then your bacon and eggs and whatever. And we'd pass up our plates and you wouldn't get the same bloody plate back. And I never had to put up with anything like that for the rest of the war. And we didn't like it very much, a few of us fastidious ones objected to having someone else's plate passed back. But it's rather funny looking back on that. It was only at home that we found that sort of treatment. Because when you're in transit no one cares about you much. But that didn't happen in transit camps when you were away.

If there was something like perhaps three in every hundred who would turn out to be no-hopers or difficult, presumably sergeants of the men who, in one way or another, got to pick up the problems associated with that: were there sorts of theories about how you deal with troublemakers that people with experience would share and say, 'Well, look, if you get a fellow like this what you do is this'?

Oh yes. If you had a fellow bad enough he'd get reported and put on a charge over something. And if this sort of thing happened too frequently well he could just be sent back somewhere else with his SNLR - services no longer required - and deal him out to someone else that way.

Did that happen with you? Did you find that necessary at any time?

No. I don't know that it ever happened in our unit to tell you the truth. I know of other people that got - had that happen to them. You might have .... Oh, most people that didn't measure up would be passed medically not fit for duties or something like that.

You often get another type of character who emerges who in general human terms may be a very fine person, the sort of person who's capable of even great bravery yet at heart may be a larrikin and just doesn't like to be told what to do.

That doesn't happen! No, you've really got me. You've seen too many bloody Hollywood pictures. No. Look. The larrikins don't make good soldiers. You ask anyone, infantry or anywhere. That's a total misconception. It's the better disciplined person that makes the better soldier. The larrikins are not worth tuppence.

Yet part of the Australian mythology is that as soldiers Australians were great larrikins.

No. Well, they might have to let off steam occasionally but that's different. No, I don't hold with that at all.

What about relations then between Australian soldiers and the British? Often there were run ins with British officers and they didn't much care for the British system of military government as it were.

Yeah, but that's a matter of just .... We were taught to be individuals. I mean, any Australian worth his salt doesn't just pay lip service to idiots giving orders. You stand up for your rights. That's different. I think the reason Australian soldiers are held in such great respect is that it's something to do with their bush upbringing I think where they had to make decisions on their own. But, oh, we got along well enough with the Pommies. It was the Yanks we didn't get along so well with.

In what way?

Because the Yanks were paid a damned sight more and they got all the girls. We had the drop on the Pommies because we were paid about twice as much as they were. The Pommies were very hard done by, from a monetary point of view, and the Yanks could lose us.

(10.00) Did you see any of these instances when there ... an idiot was giving orders and the men chose to ignore them or find a way around them?

Oh, no, not really. I don't think I ever saw anything in the nature of a revolt. No, I don't think I did. No, I don't think so. Of course, you've got to remember in a medical unit where the standard of education was higher than in other units, so that made a difference.

Did you also feel that you had a very particular sense of duty and cause?

Just because I was in the medical unit?

Mmm.

No, not really. I used to wonder at times whether I should have been in a combatant unit and not in the medical unit. I was wondering whether I was sheltering too much away from where all the action was going on.

Did that ever get thrown at medical people? Was that suggestion ever voiced?

Oh, it might have been to some of our .... We had one chap in our unit who was younger than I was - I was one of the younger ones in the unit of course, I was only twenty-one when I went away. This chap was eighteen and I was twenty, a big strapping bloke, good physique, and I said to him one day I said, 'Why didn't you get into a combatant unit? What made you pick out ...' - he had no medical - I looked on myself as having some sort of medical background - I said, 'You've got no medical background?'. And he said, 'Well, to tell you the truth, I joined

the - when I was in the staging camp I saw all the possibilities and the units you could go to' and he said 'I saw AGH written on the board I thought that stood for Australian General Headquarters. I thought that would be a good safe spot'. So that's how he came to be in the medical unit.

I think a lot of the fellows had some sort of leanings towards being on the medical side but I don't think they did it just to get into a safe place.

Did the question you were posing yourself then stay with you or did it ever resolve itself because of the nature of, say, in Tobruk or what?

No, Tobruk certainly changed it. Oh no, I felt I was in the sphere where I could sort of do most. You know, I felt I related to it pretty well.

What about aboard the *Knight of Malta*? How were the sergeants quartered?

They were pretty terrible. They weren't much better than anyone else's. We were stuck in a very confined quarters in the aft in the boat and I suppose you know by now we ran into this tempest and most of the time nearly everyone was sick as a dog.

Were you?

Not very bad, not very bad. I had about one bad day I think but I wasn't nearly as bad as most. But I forget how many bunks there were. There'd be about eight or more bunks in this very confined area and the damn floor was awash and we all off colour just watching our boots float on the floor. The ship listed remarkably really. We were just felt too crook to do anything about it; just watching our gear just swish-swashing on the floor all the time.

At the time of evacuation or abandoning ship, as a sergeant did you have any particular duties or responsibilities?

No, not really. We just had the .... This lifeboat was lowered and they rowed ashore and took a rope and then they had someone holding the rope from the shore and we just had the lifeboat then pulled to and from the ship. We were just damned lucky with that shipwreck because anything could have happened. It just happened that the ship got beached where there was a bit of real beach. We went back and unloaded all the stuff a few days later. We were there for some days unloading. Unloading was about the hardest physical yakka I did for the war where we were unloading this stuff out of the hole. The winch wasn't working properly ...

Were there any slips or injuries with lugging stuff about?

A few blokes might have got bad backs. No, I don't think there was any injury to speak of. A lot of the equipment was ruined but we got it all off. No, I can't recall any injuries.

(15.00) Where were you then to make or begin to have first an opportunity to make some use of your training?

Ah, well, in Tobruk I did because .... My superior Zac Schwartz, the major ophthalmologist, he got killed pretty well as soon as we reached Tobruk and he was replaced by a Major Scoles - Frank Scoles. And Frank Scoles said, 'You might just be down as a sergeant but I'm going to use you as an optometrist. And I was in a dicey situation actually because I'd completed the course in 1939 and I was not yet twenty and yet I couldn't register as an optometrist till 1941. So I really didn't quite know whether I was entitled to practise as an optometrist anyway. But, anyway, while Scoles was there I did optometric work. But I was largely used, in Scoles', time to go into the operating theatre and assist in the eye operations because we had no sisters. The sisters were all evacuated from Tobruk before it became too difficult. And so I had marvellous general experience of seeing eye surgery performed, and of course while you were in the theatre you saw all the other things going on on the same body or people all around.

Had you previously any surgery experience?

Oh lord no, not at all. But it's broadened my outlook on the ophthalmic field. We had .... The *Herald and Weekly Times* donated an eye magnet, a dirty big damn thing on a stand, and I don't know what the actual weight was but it needed three strong blokes to move the base of this electromagnet and we carted that damn thing around with us all through the war and to my knowledge it really only saved one eye and I suppose it was worth it because it saved one eye. But we used to bust ourselves moving this thing into the operating theatre or wherever it needed to be used.

I gather the idea was that it would help draw out fragments or splinters ...

Yeah.

But I gather there're also dangers that if it were used without absolute skill it could cause more damage than good?

Well, yes, to a point. But what generally happened .... Nearly all the eye injuries in Tobruk that we saw in the operating theatre, they nearly all lost one hand and one eye and that would be because they'd be picking up this lightweight booby trap, Italian booby trap stuff. It wouldn't be strong enough to blow their head off but nearly always had one eye affected and a hand blown off. That was a very general injury. But as far as getting foreign bodies out of eyes with the magnet, as often as not, the stuff wouldn't be magnetic. And then the other thing is, when you've got a penetrating injury into an eye, ninety-nine times out of a hundred the lens is opaque so that they would have needed a cataract operation to see after the

operation. But we did strike one in Tobruk where the fellow retained full sight. We were just lucky the way the thing went in. It had gone in more or less sideways and his eye was saved.

Was it disturbing the first experiences to be working with men who'd lost, as you say, maybe a hand and an eye?

Oh no. No, those things didn't worry me personally. Limbs coming off and corpses, that never seemed to bother me. I think if I've been left with a neurosis after the war it would be more the smell of burnt flesh. Of course when we were dive-bombed on that occasion where we lost half a dozen of our own personnel and quite a number of patients, the smell of burnt flesh just reminded me of the singed feathers of a plucked chook, that sweet burnt smell. I think it sort of stayed with me for ever.

With the eye operations that you were assisting with, are there any that still strike you as quite remarkable in terms of injury and things that were achievable or ...

(20.00) Well, I thought the most remarkable thing was that all the time we performed these operations in Tobruk - and we removed about sixty eyes in that time, that's in about six months - and we didn't perform an operation on anyone who completely lost their sight in both eyes. Although I believe one fellow when he was evacuated back to the 2/2nd AGH at Kantara, he did go blind after we'd seen him. But all the ones passed through our hands, not one of them left Tobruk totally blind. And, of course, that was largely because if they got a more severe injury they'd generally be killed anyway.

What was done with the eyes and severed limbs? How were they disposed of?

Mmm. Well, the severed limbs used to be burnt in an incinerator - from memory I think it was only a forty-four gallon drum - but they were all piled in there and burnt. Just how they were disposed of, I'm just not too sure. When we removed an eye, we used to keep them in Vegemite jars ...

Yuck.

... You've asked for it. And dissect them and just see where the injuries were and where the foreign bodies were inside the eye.

Did that, in fact, prove to be a useful exercise? Did it enable you to get a better sense of which way splinters may have gone on the basis of following through on those experiments?

Oh no, I think when an eye had a penetrating injury that was it. I don't think there was anything remarkable ever reported about that.

Did you have anything to do with the patients after the operations in having to break it to them that they'd actually lost their eye?

Oh yes. I remember I felt very sorry for one bloke who - he was nineteen. Now where we'd taken some months to reach our destination from Melbourne he was only a month away from Melbourne. He'd joined some crowd as a reinforcement and, you know, he'd only just arrived at Tobruk and he got this booby trap injury and, anyhow, he'd lost his hand and an eye and his first words to me were, 'Oh', he said, 'What am I going to tell Mum?'. I thought that was a dreadful thing to think of a nineteen year old where he'd only been away from home for a month and here he was wondering what he'd tell his mother.

Did you offer him anything?

Oh no. I've forgotten.

Were you also treating Arab children who apparently often ...

There were no Arabs there. No, there was no one there. We had a few Senussi stretcher-bearers - I'm not quite sure where they came from - we had some Italian POW hanging around there for a while too. He amused me once. He spoke reasonable English and he once wanted to see if he could be transferred back to Alex, which we thought was a bit of a cheek. No, there was no one else there.

Did you carry out any eye surgery on Italian POWs or German for that matter?

Yes. We looked after .... We had a ward full of Ger... I don't remember Italians in the hospital - we had a ward with Germans in it and one of those chaps was completely blind but he was blind when he came to us. We used to go down and bathe his eyes. From memory there were a couple of people with eye injuries we looked after.

What was the relationship then between the German POWs and those who were around the hospital? Was it a friendly one or ...

Just one of disdain. I can elaborate on one point. When Zac Schwartz got killed we thought we wouldn't be doing any eye work at all there. And we did do some routine eye work - I can get back onto that later - but ...

You were going to talk about one particular German.

Yes, I know. It's escaping me. Oh yes. When Zac Schwartz got killed our pathology major got hold of me and he said, 'You can come in and assist me in doing blood transfusions'. So for about a month - Major Scoles didn't come up as a replacement for about a month - so for

about a month I was helping with the blood transfusions and our Major Rudd was a very fastidious chap - he remained a bachelor all his life, he's still alive in his late eighties - and he used to very seriously ask all the blood donors whether they worried about giving their blood to a German.

(25.00) And there was only one case of a fellow who said he didn't want it to be given to, well, to the enemy and Major Rudd wrote on the bottle, 'This is not to be given to one of the enemy'. No, but everyone else, when the question was put to them, they didn't care.

Why was the question put?

Oh, I think Major Rudd thought it was fair enough for the chap to state what he wanted done with his own blood.

He felt there might well be some resentment if fellows later found that it had gone to the enemy and if they'd not known about it?

No, no. Not from that point of view but just from the point of view of the donor. I think as a donor, had I been a Jewish donor, I don't think I would have been too crash hot about giving my blood to a Hun. Wouldn't have minded an Italian.

Did that colour your attitudes towards the Germans? I mean, the knowledge about what had happen to Jewish people in Europe?

Well, you see, that hadn't happened then.

Well, there had been repression of Jewish people.

But just general repression. But what used to worry me, and I've never found out the answer to this day, because we all had our identification tags on us that we wore all the time and mine had a 'J' on it and I used to wonder whether I should chuck it away if we were taken POW because there was every chance in those Tobruk days that we'd been taken POWs. Because, you know, the Tobruk defence was the first time there was a successful stopping of the Huns. Up till that stage Britain had lost every damn thing it touched.

Hitler, of course, had spelled out his attitude towards the Jews in *Mein Kampf*. Was it generally known and understood what sorts of things that Hitler had at the back of his mind or was that not widely known?

Oh, it wouldn't .... I don't know when *Mein Kampf* was published. He wrote it while he was in gaol. I don't know whether that got circulation anywhere, I just don't know. But generally, as a twenty year old, you wouldn't be worried about what Hitler was writing. But, no, I used

to worry about whether I should throw away my meat ticket and just not advertise that I was Jewish. But I've never been able to find out whether Jewish POWs - and I mean there were a few - whether they were maltreated by the Germans or not. And I'm told they weren't. But I just don't know.

Even with the army filling in forms where often religion was one of the requirements, did that ever bring about odd moments that people were surprised, or cause any sort of confusion at all?

No, not at all. I'd say in my army life in my time there was no such thing as anti-Semitism. You know, I think when you're all in doing the same sorts of things, living the same sort of life, everyone's accepted at face value.

How was Zac Schwartz killed?

He was killed when there was a bombing, this dive-bombing, down at the beach. He was down at the beach hospital. We were split into two parts: there was the town hospital. And the beach hospital, and he happened to be down there in the other hospital. But, that was one of those unfortunate things.

To that point had there been any people you'd known well who'd been killed?

No. No. I met one of my Western Australian cousins in Tobruk for the first time in my life and he was a good soldier. He was a sergeant and he was actually taken POW later on at Alamein and he had a brother who was also in an infantry crowd and he'd been picked up in Crete when it fell. And both of those boys survived the war. But when I met him at home after the war I said, 'Now you've been through the war as an infantry bloke how many times have you actually lined up your rifle on someone?' And, do you know, he never had. He said the only times they went out anywhere near to killing people was when they were out on patrols.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: This is side one of tape two of the interview recorded with Geoff Morris on 8 October 1990 about 2/4th AGH and it begins in five seconds from now.

There were people who found that the bombing affected their nerves, they were unable to sleep and that sort of pressure got to them. How did you find that aspect of the war there?

Oh, it was pretty rugged. It took a lot of getting used to but I think we all got used to it. You had to get used to it because you had to look after the patients and you couldn't very well .... And in fact Colonel Speirs made sure he got the word around he wasn't going to put up with people running .... There was a great feeling of a necessity to run as hard as you can when bombs start falling around you. There's nothing worse than running out of the hospital ward and leaving all of your patients there where they can't move. And our chaps were pretty well disciplined on that sort of thing.

Did it ever happen early in the piece before people became accustomed to the realisation they just had to stay with it?

Oh, you learnt you had to do it. You realised you had to do it. One of the funniest incidents in my optical career was I was examining a fellow one day and had the trial frame and the lenses on him - and we used to work through the air-raids in our eye department - and I turned around to change the lenses and the fellow had disappeared. And, anyway, there was quite a long, probably about a thirty yard alley-way down to the air-raid shelter. I had to chase him down to the air-raid shelter and he's sitting in there shivering like a rabbit with the trial glasses and lenses still on him. But when you're subjected to an air-raid you feel pretty naked. But if you're on your home ground you can condition yourself to the environment that you're on and it's surprising how you can move around - it's just like a footballer being on his home ground I suppose - you can sort of move around and do things with confidence. But you found that if you were out visiting another area and not in familiar surroundings you'd feel much more nervous when the bombs started falling around. But, I think if you're in an accustomed environment you can ignore it pretty well.

During that period from March to September when there were more than 13000 casualties dealt with, what roughly for you was the break-up in terms of eye operations and that sort of work as against assisting in general theatre?

I don't know.

Was it a preponderance one way or the other?

Mmm. Give us the question again, will you?

During the peak period of casualties were you more often involved in assisting in general theatre work rather than eye work or would ...

Oh, the only time I'd get into the theatre was when there were an eye involvement. But there were plenty of eye involvements. I suppose the heavier the casualties the more eye involvement there'd be.

You said you were also doing quite a bit of ordinary ophthalmic work. What sort of things were you doing?

Oh, we were examining people for glasses and we examined quite a number of people during those months. But unfortunately there was no optical workshop equipment and we had to order the stuff from Cairo. And I think during the whole time we were in Tobruk there were only about five pairs of glasses ever came back for the patients.

So was it a matter of making notes that sometime hopefully in the future, the suppliers would catch up and they'd be fitted?

Well - but, mind you, it wasn't all wasted because you could classify people. You know, people would come to you where they .... Especially ones where they'd put it over getting enlisted becoming enlisted, with poor eyesight where they'd learnt off the chart and that sort of thing, where you could see whether they could really see or not.

Were there many like that?

(5.00) Oh, a few, a few. There were a few eye infections treated and a few cases of conjunctivitises and infective things that came up. Corneal ulcers.

What about post-operative infections? Was that much of a concern or was the dryness and the nature of the climate such that it was helpful in that respect?

Yeah, yeah, I'd say it was helpful. But, on the other hand, we didn't have them with us for long because they were all evacuated pretty quickly down to Kantara. We really, although we were a general hospital in Tobruk, we were really a clearing station. You know, we were just a large clearing station because the patients didn't stay long.

Apparently there were also lulls where there was time to do other things. Did you have any particular recreational activities or things you did?

No, there was nowhere to go! We had great fun and games. You know, you don't realise the wastefulness of war till you get into an active area. Now when there was that original push up from Bardia to Benghazi, we went as far as Barce - well, Barce's just a short distance from Benghazi - and, do you know, while you were travelling along the road, you'd never be out of sight of some abandoned equipment - all Italian stuff - but there'd always be something on the horizon whether it be a crashed plane or a cannon or any damn thing. And, I mean that was only a couple of brigades at work and on a few odd afternoons we used to just go out at random and pick up some of the Itie rifles lying around and - there was plenty of ammunition - and sort of shoot them off.

Were they ever booby-trapped? Was there a concern about that possibility?

Oh, maybe we looked carefully, I don't remember, but we survived all right. Yeah, it's funny you should say that. I don't think that occurred to us.

What about maintenance of the sort of equipment that you were using given the sandy conditions and the nature of the environment, did that present particular problems?

With the medical equipment?

Well, particularly with the ophthalmic equipment?

No. No. In a word, no. A lot of our equipment was damaged in the shipwreck where it got waterlogged and we had to do a hell of a lot of cleaning up and a lot of the surgical stuff got ruined too. The general surgical stuff got ruined by that salt water.

Was that a serious disadvantage as it turned out?

I don't know that it was such a disadvantage because I think we got hold of a lot of - captured Italian stuff which was quite good. I know we brought back, from Barce we brought back an excellent Italian trial case which Zac Schwartz commandeered and reckoned he was going to take it back home and use it after the war but unfortunately he stayed in Tobruk.

After you evacuated Tobruk where did you next then get set up?

In Jerusalem. Can't think of the name of it. At Beit Jirya. It was a staging camp in southern Palestine.

Going to Jerusalem for ...

I shouldn't have said Jerusalem. We set up at Jerusalem later, the hospital.

Going to Jerusalem for a lot of people, if they were at all religious by inclination, was something for many people which was quite profound. Did it have any particular importance to you?

Well, not to me. But, oh, there were a few people in our unit that were delighted to see all these holy sites.

Did you get to meet any Jewish people in the Middle East?

Oh yes. Yes, most of the Jewish people I met were very fearful of what the future was going to be because they really thought they might have ended up in oblivion. They all foresaw trouble - trouble with Arab countries and the Arab population. But, oh, I don't think I've got anything specific to say about that.

Well, for a lot of Christians visiting the classic holy places important to Christians, took up a lot of their recreational time where they had the opportunity to get around. What sort of things ...

Not terribly much. I don't know ...

Well, at least those who were of religious curiosity.

I don't think there were that many religiously inclined.

Well, what did you do with your recreational time?

(10.00) Well, the best thing we did: four of us hired a taxi for five days and went all over Palestine and Transjordan so I know all about what Amman used to be like. And we had a Jewish taxi driver of course and I thought it was a bit of a joke because his name was Joshua. And he said, 'My name is Joshua, a bible name', and he let us chaps know, 'I'll keep with you and take you to places of real interest for the five days you've got. But I'm not tolerating you going boozing up and going to cabarets. I'm just not going to do it'. He was a married chap with a kid or two. And, anyhow, he gave us a great time. He stayed with us and guided us round and we spent a couple of nights at separate kibbutzim and we really did see all around the place. We stayed at one of the earlier settlements at Lake Tiberias and we just saw how they lived in these places where the kids were segregated from the parents and kept literally in cages while they were being - they were looked after well but very confined - while their mother and father went off to work. They worked hard in these places. They were very clean. We ate in these places and the standard of food was excellent.

As the troops were going to be back in touch with civilian populations, were there special lectures about the kind of relations you ought to or ought not have with local people or lectures on VD and the perils thereof?

Oh yes, there were always lectures on VD. The behaviour was a damned sight worse in Egypt. I was sent down with Major Morlet who eventually took over the eye department again at Tobruk, and we went to Cairo to fix up the optical - buying equipment for all the general hospitals for their optical workshops. And we got this all taken to Tel El Kabir where all the workshops were and .... There were very few Australian troops in Cairo at this time. It was December, December-January period in '41-'42. But, oh, there could be some disgusting things that go on in Egypt and it was more under the surface in Palestine. You know, there's miles of difference between Egypt and what was then Palestine. In Egypt every one of the population would have trachoma. Trachoma is a severe form of conjunctivitis, very highly infective conjunctivitis that you get. It's really a neglected infection that kids get. If it's totally neglected, well then you get trachoma. We used to have trachoma in Victoria until, oh, about the last thirty or forty years. It was pretty well one hundred per cent in the Aborigines. I used to strike white people with it who'd lived in the mallee, in these sandy wastelands.

Were there effective treatments there in the Middle East?

Well, the ones were no longer infected. They'd just bear the scars under their lids. But if you averted any Egyptian's lid, he'd always have trachomatous scars. But in what's now Israel, practically you wouldn't get it because it had been treated for so long it had died out. And the same thing has happened here. The last white person, trachoma case I saw, was an old girl from Echuca who was about ninety. I saw her a long while ago and she'd only got it in the very early days.

Were there some Australians who picked up early infections of trachoma?

Oh, no. These wouldn't be infective; they'd all be ones that had been.

No, but I mean were there any Australian troops who just in the course of events picked up infections?

No, you wouldn't pick that up. No, that'd all be in the past.

What about V...

The little kids'd have it I suppose. They be in the active stage.

(15.00) Regarding VD, I mean, at one stage I think it was about four per cent of fellows managed to pick up infections. Did you know anybody who was infected and how they dealt with it personally, in terms of how they felt about it and so on?

No, I don't really. One of our blokes got VD and he got very quietly transferred to another unit and I never knew about it until some years after it had happened. It was kept pretty confidential.

During the Vietnam War there were rumours about incurable strains that would mean that fellows would never be allowed back to Australia, were there those sorts of rumours about?

No. I only really know of one case. Maybe there were a few more but they would be pretty well hushed up. They'd just be transferred somewhere and that would be the last. They'd just drop out of the unit. We had a fair turn around of personnel in the unit where people'd be moved from unit to unit for some reason. A few of them would get into combatant units where they'd be fed up with being in a medical unit. A lot of our blokes when we got home in '42, a lot of them joined the air force.

What about the briefing again between how you were to relate to local people. Do you recall any of those briefings? What sort of things were said?

No, not really.

Was there generally a policy that you oughtn't fraternise, was that the view?

No, I don't think we were dissuaded from anything. You were warned on the food; you were warned on not having anything that wasn't cooked and, you know, the usual thing of not having - not drinking the local water in different places and that.

Were there serious cases where fellows got badly ill from food or water.

No, I don't think there were. No, it's amazing how healthy we stayed. Can I get on to Borneo for a minute? When we went to Borneo we had a supply of bore water and when it first came through the pipes it came out a bright yellow. I thought it was rust in the pipes. Anyhow, I thought, once the rust goes away, we'd be right, it'll be clean water. But it never did. It was the colour of the water we were drinking. And that water had so much iron in it, or whatever it had, if you put a jug of this water on the table you didn't know till you drank it whether it was fruit cup or water. And if you had an whisky and water, it turned bright green; just like a lit up créme de menthe. And none of us had stomach troubles, funnily enough. A few of the fastidious chaps used to filter the water - and we were in tents then - and they'd just put a filter in a container and just have water filtering through this and you'd get about one cup of drinking water a day, filtering the stuff through. But I never bothered with that. None of - I don't think there were any stomach upsets there and why there were never any, I don't know.

In the Middle East did you boil your water?

No.

So having left Tobruk and ...

It was chlorinated but not boiled.

Having left Tobruk and set up again, what sort of cases were you then handling?

In Jerusalem, we had two separate buildings: a medical section and a surgical section in what had been the Italian and German hospitals in the old part, near the old city in Jerusalem. And we set up our eye department then and - but we still didn't have, at that stage we didn't have any - we had to contract out any of the prescriptions for glasses. They were contracted out to different army contractors and they were pretty slow getting the stuff out.

That was coming from Australia, was it?

No. In Jerusalem. They'd be supplying it from Jerusalem. Like, all that optical - all the spectacles would be from Cairo or Jerusalem. We didn't have an efficient total eye service till we were in Borneo and then we had everything functioning so that eighty per cent of what you prescribed could be supplied on the spot. The troops would just wait around for a few hours or a day or something and get their glasses on the spot. That should have been done at the beginning of the war but it took over five years for it to happen.

Did that lack then affect the efficiency of units, do you think?

(20.00) Oh, not really, because you'd only be seeing a small percentage of people. And, look, of the troops you'd examine, only a small percentage - see, you're handling youngsters - and only a small percentage of those would need glasses anyway. They'd come in presenting with all sorts of things but you didn't see very many - looking back on it, you didn't see very many unhealthy eyes during the war. It's surprising.

You mentioned before you're involved in buying equipment. How did that process work because presumably it would have been one of bargaining and negotiation? How would you know what was the right price?

It wasn't a matter of getting it at the right price; it was a matter of getting it at all. And we had a lot of dealings with some dreadful fellow who was actually in the Red Light district in Cairo. But he was very well-equipped with Zeiss lenses and God knows what. And we had to buy all his stuff, lock, stock and barrel. We had to buy an enormous quantity of this stuff with all the powers in the world that you'd never get around to using just to get the bread and butter stuff in it. But he was instrumental in us getting most of our equipment. And we got our edging stones and equipment and motors. I'm not sure whether we got them from the same source or not. I have an idea we got them from Alexandria but I've forgotten now. But there were about half a dozen army hospitals then and we got enough equipment, as we thought, to set up each hospital. But, certainly, when I said we didn't have a decent service till we went to Borneo, that's not true. We had a decent service when we were at Redbank, before we went to Borneo. For a couple of years we were able to supply eighty per cent of people straight off the reel with their glasses if they hung around for a few hours or come back the next day.

Were there any problems in the Middle East then of having enough money to get what you needed. Did it ever come to that that there was stuff there that you ...

No, it wasn't a matter of the money. No, it wasn't a matter of the money; it was the matter of getting the stuff at all. Just getting somewhere where you could have it supplied. I think that was the main problem.

For quite a lot of men who worked as orderlies in the surgical theatres at Tobruk, it was an experience that they valued enormously. When you were then reunited with the nursing staff, was it disconcerting to have to step back a bit?

Yes, in a word. Yes, the men resented being pushed aside and being put on very ordinary menial tasks when they'd been used to doing all the other work in lieu of the nursing staff. But that all simmered down and went along all right afterwards.

Were there any concessions to the extra expertise you'd gained during Tobruk?

No ....

As being getting to do things that previously ...

No, not really. I think once the nurses were back everything sort of fell into its right spot and I think the blokes realised that they were lucky, or unlucky as the case may be, to be called on to do it. The work was pretty rough in Tobruk. When Major Scoles came up to take over after Schwartz got killed, when he looked around the wards, he said, 'Oh Morris. It's just like the Crimean War'. And it did look .... the whole place had a totally ill-kempt look about it. I suppose when you looked back on it it was a bit of a shame that we couldn't retain the sisters there. Life would have been more liveable and a lot easier.

You had a white Christmas in Jerusalem?

Yeah. That was an unusual thing. The funny thing, I believe they had a white Christmas the year after but they hadn't had one for about seven or eight or nine years, something like that. When snow was still on the ground I was called to go to help with getting this optical equipment in Cairo and I travelled .... I left snow in Jerusalem and by the time I got to Cairo in the twenty-four hours, you were in a land where you had cold showers. It was just an unbelievable change of climate.

Did the cold present any particular sorts of problems in your line of work?

Well, your feet got wet, yes. In snow, no. All I can say is I pity the poor soldier who ever gets wet feet where you just can't get them dry. Once you were water logged you'd be in trouble.

What were your feelings then when it was decided that you'd be pulled out of the Middle East and heading back apparently towards Australia?

(25.00) Well, see, we were damn lucky because we were supposed to be .... We left Aden - Suez, we left Suez on the Friday the 13th March, and we were supposed to go to Java. But, luckily for us, Java fell while we were on the water and we got put off at Colombo. And we set up hospital at Colombo and we were there for three months. And none of us thought we would ever be only be three months in Colombo. And there was another anachronism about Colombo: we'd never seen a decent dogfight all the war because we didn't have any planes in Tobruk and when the Japs bombed Colombo - it was on a Sunday morning and we thought, 'Oh, what a marvellous air force we've got' and after a while we realised that they were Japs. And, oh, we saw some very spectacular dogfights. I remember one Jap plane getting hit, it was over the sea, and it just went vertically, propeller up, tail down - and just went, plunk, vertically down into the sea. But we never saw anything like that, we thought that was rather funny we should see that when we were virtually out of the war.

Were you anywhere in Ceylon where you were strafed or bombed during the period?

No. The bombs didn't fall anywhere near us. They weren't after us.

What about the sort of eye problems that you were dealing with? Were you dealing with very different sorts of cases there?

No, just routine stuff. I don't remember much about that. I got dengue when I was in Colombo. We were only there for about three months and I suppose I was laid low with the dengue for the best part of the month. But, no, we didn't operate very long there but it was just routine clinical eye work we'd do.

What was the effect of the dengue in your case as far as how developed the symptoms became?

Oh, you just get very feverish and weak and it takes a damn long time to feel right again after it.

Did you have any anxiety that you mightn't live? That ...

Oh no. Well, you wished you wouldn't live. Oh, no, you just feel miserable with it.

What was the treatment? Mostly just rest and care?

I don't remember medication. I suppose I had something. I just don't remember. I remember when penicillin came in. Penicillin came in while we were at Redbank and, of course, that made a very big difference to stomach injuries and all that sort of thing.

Tell us about the actual introduction of it. How did you first learn of it and what it was supposed to do? What was your introduction to it?

I don't know; I don't remember. All I remember is we got some and used it. I know penicillin fixed up .... I got dermatitis rather badly in Borneo - I reckon if the war hadn't ended when it had I might have been in a bit of trouble with dermatitis - and I got penicillin injections and, by gosh, it cleared it up pretty smartly.

How widespread was your dermatitis?

Oh, bad enough. It was over a lot of my body. All sweat rash really. Most of us had some sort of dermatitis. You'd only have to think hard and you'd sweat like a pig.

Was it actually painful as such?

Uncomfortable. The time I felt most debilitated in my life was .... We were in staging at Morotai from memory and we decided we were getting waterlogged so much with downpours of, these tropical downpours that came down most nights that we had to do something about the floor of our tents and we went to a coral pit - this was all voluntary work, it was all our fellow officers - and we got aboard a truck and went and picked away in this coral pit. And the sun wasn't out, it was an overcast day, but you couldn't, just literally couldn't stay swinging a pick without having a bit of a rest after about five to ten minutes. And you'd just be absolutely sopping wet. And we took it in turns to pick or to shovel.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: interview with Geoff Morris about the 2/4th AGH recorded on 8 October 1990 and continues in five seconds.

When you left Colombo and came back to Australia, did it appear that the country had changed, people had changed? Was there a different sense about?

Oh, I don't think so. I don't think the war had hit the place enough. Not really, not down this part of the world. Well, you had blackouts.

What about the American presence? How long before you were able to pick up that sense that there was a bit of discontent about the extra advantages Americans apparently had?

I think we were just aware of it and we ignored it pretty well. I suppose there were a few blokes who lost their wives to Americans but I never sort of got involved in that. In fact, I can't recollect that happening to any of our fellows.

> What about hostilities between Australians and Americans? Did you ever witness any fights between them?

I witnessed one fight on Grand Central Station in Sydney where one of our blokes was belting the hell out of a Yank and - he was as full as a boot - and one of his mates came up to him and he said, 'For God's sake man. We're on the same side you know'. 'Well' he said, 'If we're on the same side we'll bleed together'. But I think we got along all right with the Yanks. We were in contact with Yanks when we went up to .... Funnily enough we went up and stayed - our ship berthed at Port Melbourne - and we went up by train to the old Seymour camp where I'd been in the militia. And there was some relationship there with an American crowd. I can't quite bring it to mind but our first reaction was how we were so much better disciplined than the Americans were. We just felt there was just a bit too much amiability in an American unit and we just felt it wouldn't work.

> You never found yourself treating any eye injuries as a result of punch-ups, all that sort of thing, even between, say, Australians?

No. Funnily enough, no. I don't think we did.

> When you returned to Melbourne for some leave, what was your feeling at the time of the homecoming? Was it an emotional experience to come back and see friends, family again?

Oh, too right. Yeah. The only time I went AWL was from Port Melbourne. We were stuck on the ship at Port Melbourne and I knew that we weren't going to move till sometime late afternoon .... And this was in the days before I was married. I got engaged by proxy. I arranged my engagements with my wife from Colombo because I knew I was coming home. And I got my people to buy the ring and everything. And I thought I'd have to go and see them. And, anyhow, I walked down the wharf. No-one accosted me; I just walked through. So, anyhow, I got a cab and went over to my father at Chapel Street and my mother was there assisting.

> You were in uniform or civvies?

Oh no, uniform. And then we contacted my fiancée and she was at work and she came down to Port Melbourne and met me down there and when it came to getting back onto the ship, that was when the trouble started because they - although I had the colour patch up and everything - they reckoned they couldn't let me aboard because ...

> You hadn't left.

Yeah, because I wasn't on it in the first place. And I could see we had a lot of accumulated leave due to us and everything and I had thoughts of demotion and God knows what. Anyhow, I thought there was only one thing to do and I tore off for the lick of my life down the wharf and I outpaced my pursuers and got up the gangway before they got hold of me.

(5.00) But I found it rather amusing but I was a bit upset when I thought I wasn't going to get back on that ship.

Were there any repercussions?

No. None. Once I was back aboard I was all right.

Were there any parades then back in Melbourne? Did you march?

Yeah. We had some march ... Yeah, we did have some march through the city when we got back but I only vaguely remember it.

Was there a sense of pride or particular feeling that ...

Yeah. For sure. You know, we all feel a pride in what we've done. There's a great camaraderie builds up from living two or three years together. And our unit association is .... We've got a good - it's only death that parts us - we've got a good close-knit group and we do things for one another.

Incidentally, had you had experience with x-rays during the Middle East period?

No. You mean as what damage they might do or something like that?

Yes.

No, not at all. I don't think we were as conscious in those days of all the things that might happen. I think I've been brought up in a live and let live age. We got very - oh not very browned off - but we got browned off a bit with our long stay at Redbank. After having the active war period then we were up at Redbank for a couple of years. We found that a little bit hard to take.

Well, I gather that led to quite a number of people to look to go elsewhere. Did you consider that or were you ...

No, I was happy in what I was doing. I had my job and I was working hard enough and being happy with it.

What were you mostly doing at Redbank?

Examining eyes.

What sort of problems would you be getting by then. I mean, presumably ...

Much the same sort of .... Well, as far as I was concerned they were much the same sorts of things that you'd get in civilian life. Look, if I could just digress for a minute. There was one dreadful thing that happened optically and that was, they brought out a ruling before the war that anyone who was issued with army spectacles had to have ones that would fit under a respirator where they had to have flat sides so that no gas could get in the respirator. And if ever that was a stupid hide bound rule that was because when you analyse it the numbers of people that would need to wear spectacles during a gas attack would be infinitesimal. I mean, who the hell cares anyway whether they are a bit blurry or not when there's a gas attack? And it would only be a minuscule number of people that would want or need to wear their glasses in a gas attack. And everyone was subjected to some English manufactured respirator steel frames which no one would want to be seen dead in. And that was one of the worst inflictions that were ever made on army personnel.

So much so that when we bought stuff in Cairo we made sure we bought standard - this is the Australianism coming out - we made sure that we just bought Australian shell frames. And then when we came back to Australia, there was an Australian manufactured frame which sold for twice the amount of the English one. At least the English one, I suspect, did work under a respirator but the Australian ones with the flat sides, they weren't properly flat and they would have let the gas in holus-bolus. They were dreadful frames.

What was the mood then when finally it became clear that, after this long stay at Redbank, you were going to move?

I don't know how anyone else felt but I felt quite pleased that we were getting up into some action. We stagnated at Redbank really. We were kept busy. Our eye department did other things. We conducted clinics up at Toowoomba once a fortnight and every now and again .... I went to Kingaroy once for a couple of weeks. We were called on to fill in doing different things. But it's a funny thing.

(10.00) When you're culling out - after all, it's supposed to be selective getting people who are fit to serve in an army - but we often used to think that if you had no selection process at all you'd be just about as well off. You just wonder what the physical aptitude of the community really is.

How did that apply then in respect to the work that you were doing? Were you finding people that, on a fairly regular basis, who'd got through the ...

Yeah, shouldn't have got through.

Did you ever have occasion where you made it clear that somebody would, their eyesight was such that he just oughtn't remain in the army at all?

Oh, generally it would be a case - yeah, that would have happened a couple of times - but it's generally a case of downgrading people where you find .... And the army altered their standards now and again. They made one silly rule at one stage when the Japs came in, that anyone, regardless of what their vision was like without glasses, as long as they got normal vision with glasses, they could be class for action anywhere as A1. Well, they pretty soon found out, after about six to twelve months, that put in action and something happened to their glasses they were useless where they couldn't see the top letter of a chart. So they had to pretty soon change that around. Lots of fundamental things happened like that.

Evidently towards the latter period at Redbank there were special recreational and educational opportunities provided. Did you take advantage of any of those in particular?

No, I didn't. But a lot of our blokes did. A lot of our blokes pursued other careers after the war. I think I always harboured the idea during the war years that I might want to do medicine at the end of the war but I thought, damn it all, I'd married in the middle of the war, had a child and six years out of my life I reckoned was enough. I didn't want to do another six years doing medicine.

Had you married in Melbourne before you'd gone back to Redbank or when did you marry?

Yeah. I married a year after we came back; less than a year after I married. We came back in the August and I married the following May.

Did you get any particular concessions as to leave?

Oh, no. Except I think I got some, I suppose I got - No, I think I just used the leave I was entitled to. I don't think it was special.

Did your wife move to Queensland to be with you, or was that not possible?

She should have but she didn't (laughs). Oh no, other things arose where she couldn't do it, where she had an aged mother and this sort of thing, or a sick mother.

Well, notwithstanding the sense that it was good to be looking at doing something again, was it of concern to your wife the idea that suddenly you were going to be going overseas, to Borneo? Or was the feeling the war was pretty well over by then anyway?

We've never discussed it, funnily enough. I would like to record one other thing and that's all the hogwash spoken about the atomic bomb. Now, a few years ago we went to Hiroshima amongst other places and it amazed me that to learn that even to this day, or until then, less than 200 000 people were killed or met their deaths attributable to the bomb. Now, I think if you ask the man or girl in the street - I should say person in the street, shouldn't I? If you ask them how many deaths there were from the atomic bomb, they'll say, 'Oh, a million' or they'll think in millions. Now that 200 000 was a drop in the ocean. Had we thought when we were in Borneo that we would have .... Go a stage further - when the troops went to the Japanese mainland - and just think of the deaths that would have occurred, not only with our own fellows, but with the Japs. I mean, there would have been many, many millions killed and I think it's just utter rot and emotionalism, or stupid emotionalism, to talk about the atomic bomb should never have been dropped. It saved countless lives.

Apart from the concerns with dermatitis and malaria in Borneo, which were real enough, were there any particular eye problems or concerns you had there?

No. Except, where we got through the Middle East without seeing anyone blinded, the first case that - it was Major Henry then who was the ophthalmologist, who I've stayed very close with over the years. Although he's a Queenslander we see each other every now and again. And the first case he struck was someone who'd been blinded and that was, once again, through very light grenade stuff which didn't blow your head off. It's just enough to blind you. So the very first one he saw up there was a totally blinded bloke.

How did you find this stay in Labuan?

How did I ...?

How did you find this stay in Labuan as a posting?

(15.00) Oh, it was all right. An amusing anecdote: there was an order of Dutch nuns that had been POWs, and they were a great lot of women. They got around in those hats like you see on the old Dutch cleanser and they had heavy robes on. They were very practical women. They'd scrub a place clean and all this sort of thing. And the heat up there was most oppressive and our own personnel were getting into trouble - both the boys and the girls - getting into trouble for not wearing the proper garments all the time. The matron looked very keenly to see that the girls had their petticoats on before they came to work and so on. And, anyway, I tackled one of these nuns one day and I said, 'How on earth do you manage to survive in this climate with all this heavy clothing on?'. And she said, 'Oh Mr Morris', she said, 'Our thoughts are above that'. And it taught me a lesson in humility. I thought, 'Oh God.

You could probably get in a greatcoat and still survive if you conditioned yourself to say you'd do it'.

> When you're setting up in a new centre to work as an opthalmist [sic], were there special sorts of considerations you needed? Were there any special problems involved with the layout and setting up?

Not much. No. We had reasonably good equipment.

> In terms of the layout of tents and those sorts of facilities?

Well, in Labuan we had a big marquee and, oh no, it was all right. We had it sectioned off where at the back of the place was the workshop. We had a clinic couch there and the usual bits of apparatus. The main bit of apparatus we didn't have all during the war was a slit lamp which everyone moaned about. In this day and age, you'd never go far without a slit lamp because you can see the anterior of the eye so much better with a slit lamp. But by and large the equipment was all right.

> Where were you, do you recall, when the news of the war ending came out?

I forget what time of the day it came out. We were all absolutely stunned when that news was announced because none of us expected it to happen. No, we were just told one day that it was over. I remember the party we had in the sisters' quarters. Lady Blamey came up and attended that night and, oh, it was a very wild party. The place was half completed and we were all sitting around where all the floor boards were half put in and half not put in. Some recreation tent I think it was from memory, I've just forgotten.

> What do you mean by a 'wild party'?

Oh, not wild by current standard. We weren't ragers in those days. Oh, plenty of drink around and celebration. That's all. We behaved ourselves in those days.

> With that then was there then a sense of impatience to get back? Or did you start to see some of the POWs in Borneo?

Yeah. I saw - I was very upset when I saw the first lot of POWs. They came to us from Changi. I'm not sure that we didn't see some from Kuching. But these fellows from Changi, they'd nearly all be four or five stone weight. And you'd see one bloke who'd be about eight stone and you'd think, 'Oh well, he's done pretty well for himself'. But you'd find out the eight stone bloke had been about sixteen stone in civilian life. Oh, it was just pitiful. And, I mean we saw them after they'd been fattened up a bit. We didn't see them, I suppose, for the best part of a month after the war was declared over.

What about the effect on their eyesight?

Well, that was very interesting. Not many lost their sight. And there were two ophthalmologists at Changi: one was Major Claffy and there was Major Graham Orr. And Frank Claffy gave us a talk about it, to the both of us one day in our eye department, and if they got onto these cases of impending blindness smartly enough, with Marmite or Vegemite, there was enough vitamin C in that to save their eyesight. But it was surprising how few were affected overall. Of course most of the poor fellows died. But I've examined a few ex-Jap POWs in later life and you don't strike very many that are totally blind.

(20.00) Did you go onto Singapore?

No, no. We just - I just came home. We came home on the - I've forgotten now whether it was the *Wanganella* or the *Manunda* - it was one of those two.

Did you see any Japanese at all in Borneo?

No, I don't think I did.

Did you get to treat any local people during your time there?

There was practically no one there. I was amazed I saw a television program very recently on - we went across to Brunei one day on an army duck where we had a day out and there was nothing at Brunei at all and today I think it's about, 15-25 000 people there and all the modern oil paraphernalia around the place. It's quite a thriving place.

Did you go to the Gracie Fields concert?

Yeah. And the powers to be did a dreadful thing that night because we knew damn well it was going to rain like hell when it did rain, because it rained the same time every night. And we had to put up with all the makeshift artists before Gracie came on - and of course they performed before the rain came - and once Gracie came on, it rained like blazes and you couldn't hear her sing. She did her best but she was encased in a galvanised iron box-like structure where everything was pelting down like hell. It's funny when you think about it because we all would have got drowned like rats watching. But ...

You stayed on to watch nonetheless.

Oh yeah. Oh, no one left. Probably we couldn't leave because the trucks wouldn't go back with us aboard I suppose. I suppose you had to stay.

After you got back to Australia, how long before you were demobilised?

Oh, not long at all.

> Did the fact that you were married, did that have any influence in terms of ...

No. The long service ones they - I think they gave a fair priority to. It was early November. I think it was before Cup Day. I've forgotten. In November I was demobbed. Oh no, single or married didn't make any difference. It went on length of service I think.

> Did it seem strange to get up one morning and suddenly you were no longer part of the army?

I suppose it did. I suppose I was very relieved but it took me a while to settle down to civilian life. I know I came back to an eighteen months old child that I'd only seen a couple of times. I didn't know how you handled an eighteen months old child. I'd get letters from my wife telling me what a marvellous fellow this kid was and I just had visions of coming back to see a bloke in a blue serge suit who could speak intelligibly. But I think wives pretty soon pull you into line and make you realise the sort of world you live in.

> What about emotionally in terms of your child? Was there a sense that for quite a while this little person was a total stranger that somehow or other didn't really mean that he was part of you? Did it take a while to develop a sense of being a father as such?

No. Fortunately he was too young to know anything and I was too bloody silly to know much. You should ask my wife that: how did I adjust? I reckon we all adjusted all right. I don't think there was any problem there.

> But you said, apart from that, that generally you were unsettled for about eighteen months. What did you do during that period?

For eighteen months, when?

> When you got back. You said it took you about eighteen months to sort of settle down.

No, I don't remember saying that. I don't think I said that. No, we've misunderstood somewhere. No, it didn't take me eighteen months to settle down. God, I was back working - I had a holiday for a week down at Cowes, which was considered a holiday place in those days ...

> Did you participate in any victory parades in uniform?

Yeah, there was something. I've forgotten it now.

Did that in a sense sort of have a sense of ...

Finality?

Yes. Of putting, as it were, some almost theatrical end to a period that made some sense, that put it some sort of perspective?

I don't think so. We formed our unit association and we knew we were all going to stick together reasonably well with that, and have our annual or bi-annual reunion.

What about special entitlements in terms of the opportunity for further studies or special purpose loans. Were you able to take advantage of any of those sort of things?

Well, I personally - fortunately I was in the position where I didn't have to seek that sort of thing out but a lot of blokes did.

(25.00) I know when I got my war gratuity - you'll laugh when I tell you - but I managed to save, by the end of the war I had £900 which is a pretty fair sum in those days, when you consider that homes cost under a couple of thousand, I suppose - I've just forgotten - you know, a sort of a normal home in the 1930s would be you could buy a decent - quite a good home for 1 500 quid. But I think I got about 500 quid gratuity and that came through five years later. Well, we used that to have a holiday - we had two kids by then - used that as a holiday. It was the *Wanganella* we came home on. We went on the *Manunda* up to Cairns for a holiday so I used that for that.

Was there any sense that you'd disadvantaged yourself professionally having been away? Did you ever feel, 'Oh gee, if I had stayed on ...'?

Oh yeah, there was that. I didn't care though. Look, when you're young you don't care so much about that but I cared about missing out on the sort of things you'd enjoy between twenty and twenty-five. And my wife feels the same way. That we missed a lot of the .... Now, athletically, you see, I'd be at my peak at that time and being in the army you really miss out. I used to feel sorry for these professional athletes that - the chaps at the top of the tree - where they had their athletic careers cut by the war.

Were you ever made to feel then, again professionally, that the absence had led people not to have an adequate sense of what you'd done to serve your country, that somehow that wasn't appreciated, that ...

Oh, it never is. It's never appreciated but I don't think you care about that. It's what happens to yourself. I don't like politicians much because the thing - I've always had this feeling towards politicians because, when we were in Tobruk, you'd get a visiting politician who'd come in and pat you on the head and say, 'You're doing a good job, son'. And those buggers could go home. They'd be home within a few days whereas here we were stuck for the duration and you didn't know how long the duration was going to be.

> Yet, with all that, it's clear that the association and the friendships have been very important. So, in those terms, do you feel that perhaps you'd got something in your life with that that otherwise you would never have had?

Something invaluable. Yes. I think any chap who's seen overseas service, I suppose I should say army service, but anyone who's seen active service and been with other people in a time of stress - well, that can apply to civilian life too, can't it? If you're in some stressful situation you'll generally stay bonded to those people that you've survived with .... And I think that's how most of us felt. I don't think you give a damn about what other people think. I mean, they haven't got any idea of it. Look, our daughter, when she was about sixteen, one Sunday, she raced through the house watching one of these old English wartime pictures on TV and she said, 'Dad I didn't know London was bombed during the war'. And my wife and I were just amazed to think that she could have lived with us for sixteen years and not known that London was bombed during the war. So it's a different life.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW