



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

> Identification: this is Ed Stokes, prisoners of war, Don Watt, tape one, side one.

> Don, we've got a great sketch out here. It's going to be quite an interview, but let's go right back to the start, when were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born on the tenth of the eighth, 1918, in Victoria. Grew up around - started off in Box Hill and then eventually out to the country areas. Finished school in Rainbow at the high school with Merit at about thirteen and a half years of age. And from there I went out onto farm work as no other work was available about at those times because of the Depression.

> Rainbow's up in the Mallee country, of course. What was farming the Mallee like?

It was all on the wheat farming there. It was out on driving ten and twelve horse teams and driving into thousand acre paddocks which took quite some time to fallow or reap. About three years there. Then, I advanced up to Mildura where my father's brother was there, and he got me a position at the Irymple Packing Company, which is a dried fruits co-op.

> Yes, I know the area quite well. You were saying, in the early days, Don, that I think you were working for two and six a week as a young fellow. How hard was the work for a boy on a farm in those days?

It was very hard. You started - you was up about, in the season of wheat farming and all that, it was about five o'clock in the morning. You was up helping to feed horses, then I'd have to milk eight cows and so forth and everything before breakfast. After breakfast then go out and help with the team, or take things out like manure, or whatever they were doing. It might have been sowing, you'd be taking out grain. I was acting very near like a man - had to do a man's work.

> Yes, I was thinking of that, and in a way that seems to run through, that by the time the war came you were a very mature young man.

That's correct. Yes, I'd had all the hard aspects of life, coming through the Depression side of it where you had to work. If you did not, I mean, there was a hundred there looking for your job, so you had no alternate [sic] but work.

> At the packing company I think you got into quite a good position. Tell us about that.

Yes, bein' a hard worker I think it helped me a terrible lot because I did not know anything different. So the heads of the firm took particular notice of me and stepped me up in different positions. And at the finish they had me lined up to be out the front door of grading the types of fruit that was coming in from the growers. So when the war broke out my friend, Max Walloneth[?], he was the first one to join from the Irymple Packing Company, which we called the IPC for short.

I think by the time the war began, Don, you were actually basically finding the keep for your mother - helping her very much.

Yes, this was the problem. My father didn't contribute to helping with the family life of my mother and I, actually. Through the good graces of the IPC, they did allow me to rent a house at a very nominal rent. I used to do two shifts, or whatever it was to try and gain as much money as I could, because I had to live with the boys, and have enough money for my mother, and pay the rent to clothe mother and feed us. I wasn't going to miss out on my life altogether.

But you were still very much looking after her. And I think there'd been a very, well, both tragic and sad deaths of younger brothers before, so I'd imagine you were very close to your mother's heart.

Yes, very much so. We were not like a mother and son but more like two mates. So that's what stopped me from joining the army with Max, but the urge got so great that I felt, I wished, to go away with Max - and for a good reason. I could see things were getting worse and I thought it's just as well to fight it overseas instead of on our own doorstep, which it could have eventually got to. You didn't know what the process of war would have finished up at. So I finished up, I went down to join up. I went up to Mildura rather, to join up in December, and they said, 'Oh, come back in the New Year. It's too late in the year at the present moment.' So I eventually enlisted on the tenth of the first, 1940, from Mildura.

(5.00) The precise motives in enlisting, Don, were they - what was the primary motive? Was it patriotism, was it being with your mates, was it adventure?

No, it was patriotism, more or less. It was a position where we could see it could worsen. I mean, alright, we're a Commonwealth of England. England was the nearest approach once France was gone, if it had've gone, which eventually it did. Well, that put England in the number one box seat. Well, we had to protect her, too.

Stepping back a little bit, back a few years, Don. In the 1930s when you were going through your teens, how strong an impression did the general tradition of the ANZACs make on you - the Australians who'd fought in the first war?

A big impression because I had uncles who had been in the '14-18 war. My father had not enlisted but his brothers had and he had to carry on the tradition of looking after Mum and Dad, sort of thing. So I think he was very pleased that I joined, sort of fulfilled the family tradition, I suppose.

The Mallee country of Victoria seems such a long, long way away, such a different world to Europe, how conscious were you during those years in the Mallee, the late '30s, of the political developments in Europe? Hitler's rise to power?

It was very dramatic because when you think of it, of one man, what he did over there in Germany. How he really brainwashed the people to such an extent. And when I say I'd left the Mallee and was up at Mildura when all this happened, so when he'd .... Chamberlain went over there to try and stop this, and he signed a peace tract, but by the time he got back to

England, he invaded Poland, so what sort of man was he. I mean, you could not take any agreement from him in any one way.

> Did you and your mates, did you talk about events in Europe much? I mean the news on the wireless and in the newspapers, or not?

Those times you never got too much news. The old wireless was very low key. It's not like nowadays where the media - television, all things like that, you know more. But we got enough through papers, I suppose, and the wireless, to know what was going on.

> Well, taking the story on a little bit, Don. You were sent down to the showground in Melbourne, but I think that was just basic induction and sorting you out a bit. I think your basic training was at Puckapunyal. What were conditions there like?

They were pretty tough there. The barracks we were in were very cold and everything like that - not hot water, no toilets ...

> Outside latrines?

Yes. All we had was just the bucket outside type of thing. So you had your cold shower and it wasn't too good there in the winter, getting those cold showers. The boys really adjusted well.

> There was obviously, of course, a lot of parade ground bashing for any army rookies. How did you take to that general hit of army discipline?

No worries at all. I think we were used to disciplining ourselves 'cause of the way we were brought up. And at Pucka there when we went there we had to help clear the parade ground. I mean, it was scrub. We were nearly labourers until we got the camp into order, which we all did, and we all worked in as a team and we formed a very good body.

> At the time at Puckapunyal, of course, you were detailed off to be a member of the 2/7th Battalion. What do you remember of the actual formation of the battalion, of the people involved, the morale of the people involved?

We had a good morale. See, coming from Mildura we had the biggest enlistment. There would be - well, the battalion was very near ninety per cent Mildura. So in other words, I fitted in with half the boys I knew, or two-thirds of the boys I knew, which made it much easier all round for all of us. So we fitted in well and we did all our training, we did the marches, rifle range, digging trenches, the usual old routine, of learning the hard way. But one thing I must say, you don't realise, you think you're fit, by joves I tell you, I didn't know how weak I was, or how soft I was until I went into that army.

> That's an interesting point, because I was just going to ask you whether your background on the land - people often say it was the men from the bush who were the great Australian soldiers - how much that helped in your training as a soldier?

I think it helped immensely because you was used to battling it out. You didn't have to run into a shop and buy something, you was used to battling through whatever the conditions were - that helped us immensely there.

(10.00) What about things such as shooting? Were you a fairly good shot before you went into the army?

Oh, we did a lot of that out on the farm. That more or less was only our sport. The rabbits were in such plague proportions, we gained our knowledge in shooting by getting quite a few rabbits.

Well, just perhaps without dwelling on Puckapunyal too long. Are there any other aspects of your training that you think are important to mention - to highlight.

Yes. As you said 'discipline', there's a terrible lot of the boys weren't used to discipline. They suffered by it. Did a few extra chores to make up for it. They soon learnt. But once they got the idea that they had to do as they were told, and they all settled down, I'll tell you what - everybody pulled their weight to a hundred per cent. We formed into a very, very good unit.

That's great. It was on 15th April, I think - April 1940 - Don, that you embarked in Port Melbourne on the *Strathaird*, still in peacetime colours you were saying. Leaving Australia and of course your mother must have been part of this, how did that affect you?

Very emotional. It was emotional to see all the others. I had nobody down to see me off [inaudible] because my mother could not come from Mildura. But everybody else, to see them and see the emotions, it was very touching.

Had you had time to have a last leave with your mother?

Yes, I did. I had the last leave about three weeks prior. And that's when they closed camp before we embarked.

When you did embark, were you aware of your destination, or not?

We were not a hundred per cent sure. We were told two different places. Thought we might be going over to France and then we heard that an advance party had gone over to the Middle East to prepare camps, so we took that as really the initiative place to be going.

Well, the journey over, were you travelling - I know you travelled from Fremantle and then I think by convoy to Colombo. What do you remember of that period at sea?

We arrived in Perth, or Fremantle, and we had to stop there for two or three days until the rest of the convoy caught up. So from then on we headed out to sea and were picked up by the *Ramillies*, and quite a few other ships. We had the fastest ship on the convoy. We had a few old wood-burners, oil-burners, and things like that, so the pace had to slow down to be with them. So we arrived into Colombo, at Ceylon, and we had three days' leave there. From there we took off and we had to stop at Aden while the slowest ship had to go in to refuel. From

there we pushed through the Red Sea and came into the Suez where we landed at El Kantara, in Palestine.

I think you were saying before, Don, that you went from there to Beit Jirja. That was on 17th May '40, and you were there until about September '40 encamped. What kind of training were you doing there?

We did all the desert .... It was all sand and everything there, so we had to change our different manoeuvres because of sand and your weapons. You had to relearn, to protect everything, because when you're in action you can't have sand blocking your guns, or whatever. So we learnt very well there. One basic thing we did learn was water. We had to make do with one bottle of water a week; to learn to survive, which was the best thing that ever happened because when we were up into the front line, this became an asset.

When you said one bottle, you mean a canteen?

One little, [inaudible] little water bottle.

I think you said a week. Did you mean a week, or per day?

A week.

You would survive off one canteen per week?

Yeah, one water bottle per week. This is not all the time. We had trainings on this to see whether we could last, which .... We managed it.

Did you do other training such as route marches and tactical training and so on while you were there, or not?

Yes, we did long route marches. It was very hard too, in sand and one thing and another - hot and no water much. So you had to carry on. Sometimes we got short of water. We used the little tactic one then. We used to get on to the thistles - the prickly pear type - and we used to use them and cut them open and get the water from them. So we did a bit of cheating here and there.

(15.00) That's an interesting sort of bush strategy. The general camp life that you had both there, and in other desert camps, how comfortable, or otherwise, was that life in tents?

Oh, we were dug in about three feet into the sand. This life - you just adjusted. That was it, and so you accepted it.

Why were you dug into the sand? Was it for protection or to keep cool?

It's to keep cool really, and also for night. When the night - it got rather cool over there in the desert so you added warmth by being down below the wind level.

> That's most interesting. And what about leaves and so on in the period before you became involved in the active campaigns, did you have any leaves at all, or not?

Yes, we did. First up, the overseas base used to be in Jerusalem, so we had the first lot of guard in there, so that helped me to learn all about Jerusalem. The overseas base then was shifted down to Gaza. So when we went in on leave to Jerusalem I had a head start on most of the boys because I knew most of the places to get to, and got there quick. We had quite a lot of leave there, and also over in Tel Aviv. We used to go in on leave there. So overall, it was quite good.

> So there were some good times. Well, you were saying September '40 you were moved to Helwan, near Cairo, where the Australian forces were consolidating. And I think that October you went to Ikingi Maryut, near Alexandria. You were there till Christmas '40. What were you doing during that period?

First of all, when we went from Palestine, to Egypt, to Helwan, near Cairo, we were sent as advance party to set up camp for the rest of the boys when they came over. But alongside us we had the air force base where the English were in control. So a few of the Australian pilots came over there, and they thought they had to learn these new planes. They learnt very quick. After three days they started to fly solo. The Englishmen, they crawled to their bases because ....

> You were saying how the Australians got their revenge, if you like, by flying very low over these airstrips.

Yes, that's correct. It was quite humorous. One chappy, I never forgot him - the Aussie pilot - he chased this Englishman straight down along the tarmac. Came back and had another go and went straight through the hangar 'cause he thought he was getting out of his way.

> Talking generally for a moment, Don, the slightly larrikin aspect that Australian troops are probably well known for, and also this rivalry between British and Australian troops. Was that a very significant thing, or not?

No, it wasn't too bad. It was for a start but that soon levelled out. We became very good mates.

> Well, Christmas Day in 1940 you were near the front line at Bardia, and it was really from there that I think you began your first active patrols. What was the main function of the patrols?

The main function was - we did it all at night-time - to go out and find just what the perimeter was. What the strength of them - how you could approach it. We did about four or five nights on this and we gained enough to find out all the booby traps and the anti-tank traps. And we knew how to then delouse them - and we learnt very quick. So when it actually came to the time of going in, we had it all lined up.

So we had to go in then and cut the wires all around and then leave one man to lead the patrols onto these openings. And cutting the wires was quite humorous. I mean, you'd have

one man either side holding the wire while the other one cut it so it didn't snap and make a noise. But the trembling in some of the boys was at times, you know, it became it quite humorous.

> Those sorts of night patrols, where you're obviously getting very close to the enemy lines must, I'd imagine, have been quite tense though.

Yes, it was. One night we had a party of about thirty of us, and we got right to the lines. One of the boys made a noise with his rifle on the few stones that were there, and the enemy then opened up. They threw everything at us. Well, they all vacated - bar three of us.

(20.00) So we eventually got into the lines and we tried to get a prisoner. The work parties were going past and every time we'd go to grab the last one another work party would come. So we had Steve Anard[?], he was a fantastic officer, and he just wanted a prisoner. He was made lieutenant actually down in Puckapunyal. He came from the Duntroon College, and he was a terrific soldier. So he wanted to get this prisoner. So eventually we had to talk him out of it because it was getting daylight and we had to get back.

So on the way back we run into this other group that we didn't know who they were. We thought they might have been the enemy. The next minute there was a charge and one of the boys got bayoneted in the arm, and he sing out, 'Hey, we're Aussies, stop'.

> So you were attacking your own men?

Yes.

> On 3rd January '41, was the attack on Bardia itself, I think, involving the whole of the 6th Division. You, I think, were now in charge of a section. What do you remember of that early morning attack?

As I said, I was on the cutting of the wires for a start and then joined over with the boys and then we went into attack. I had two casualties, one on either side of me, both got shot in the arm, not serious - or one was. He was sent home to Australia. But I was very fortunate, it could have been me.

But when we went in, the boys went in as a team and I think .... We had leather jerkins issued to us, they were actually to keep us warm at night. And the strength of us going in, the Italians thought we had armour-plated vests. They couldn't believe it, when we captured them. They just felt the vests to see what we had on.

> And I think you were suggesting before that this actually deterred them. They were more fearful because of this.

Exactly right, yes. The whole trouble is, with a lot of the Italians, I mean, let's face it - they had some what they called 'black shirts' who tried to stir them on - I think the Italians didn't want to fight at all. So that's how we got so many prisoners in such a short time.

> Perhaps, that sort of healthy attitude to what's worthwhile in life. There was, I think, quite a lot of hand to hand fighting in this first attack, including bayonet fighting.

Yes, there was in the first one, 'cause when we went in they had trenches camouflaged. And a few of us went down them and got out and up, and there was bayonet charge in there. And I think the sight of the bayonet frightened them that much that they just put their hands up and give up.

> I guess this was really your first taste of full scale action, as against night patrols and so on. Is it possible to describe what was going through your head? How the whole process of attacking, killing, defending yourself, how it affected you at the time?

No, it didn't affect me at all, really, because the adrenalin was there and we had the job to do and it was self-preservation. It's either you or them, so you had no alternate [sic] but do the right thing.

> Sure.

That, I think, covered it.

> You were saying, I think, also that there were some booby traps and that you became involved in delousing them.

Yes. We had the anti-tank mines. They had them about thirty foot wide right around their perimeter. Well, we got in and knew how to do that. So what happened then, the tanks used to fire shots in and delouse a section, or we'd delouse a section to allow the tanks to go in. And it was alright for us, I mean we could walk on 'em and never went off. But then we got in further. As we went further along and we found booby traps - like a thermos flask. They would drop them from a plane and they'd land on the sand. And they'd set the level of the mercury off if any vibration of a tank or a truck went near them, they would blow the truck or damage the vehicle severely.

> That's most interesting, and where did you pick up the skills in delousing booby traps? Was that just a matter of trial and error, or did you have formal lessons?

An engineer showed us one segment of a booby trap, then we learnt to know where to go for. It was a matter of using a coin to go in, to stop the pin from hitting on the charge, so then we'd delouse it. We got used to doing them very smart.

> And did you see any men where it didn't work and where they lost limbs, or their lives?

Oh yes, there's a few got injured with them - got a bit careless. They had one booby trap was very dangerous - a few got injured on this. They had booby traps set up with cotton between in each one. If you walked into the cotton it would set the charge either side of you off. Quite a few got their - casualties - not killed or anything but just bad casualties.

> Serious injuries. Well, from Bardia of course your unit moved on through Tobruk, Benghazi. We might move on to where you stopped, and I think that was at Barce, I think it's pronounced.

Yes, Barce.

(25.00) I think from there you were detailed, with thirty-six other men, to go on to El Agheila with some British armoured cars. What was the purpose of this?

We had to go up as support for them, because they were a unit and they had to be guarded at night when they came back to their base - or no base, they made one up there. So during the day .... I was up there for nearly a week and we were short of water and then the trucks brought some water out to us and just took off. Anyhow over come some planes, and they were that low, I said, 'Right, we'll get them when they come back'. So when they came back we opened up and we got one. You could see it disappearing in the black smoke. Anyhow about three-quarters of an hour later, back came the German planes. They strafed us. They wiped out the British group, all the armoured cars were destroyed. They pummelled us. They machine-gunned us. And we laid low and they must have thought that they'd cleaned the lot up so they took off.

You were saying, I think, that there was no possibility of digging yourself in, or at least you hadn't, so you were in the open ground. How did you escape having a mass slaughter, if you had a number of planes strafing?

Must have been bad shooting on their behalf, because there was no other way of survivin'. Anyhow what happened eventually, we had no lines of communication, but some of the English were very smart and they got parts of their vehicles and made up something to send a message back. So that's the only way we got out of it. They sent the transport up to get us out of there, very smart.

Right. And I think this was already about a hundred miles ahead of the main lines.

Yes, that's true, yes.

After this episode of course, or in fact I think you were saying that really was, or marked the approximate beginning of the German counter attack, when the Allies then of course were pushed back across North Africa. I think the 9th Division moved in and you, in fact, had to give over your arms to them. Could you describe that?

Yes. When we came back from that episode there was the 9th Division up there. So we had to give all our equipment - arms and everything like that - to them because they didn't have enough to supply them back at Ikingi Maryut. So we were taken back but we were bombed all the way back by these planes until we got back to Ikingi Maryut. And they said we were going over to Greece. So we were there about a fortnight and got equipped and then we were put onto a boat called the *Cameronia*, about 1,000 troops or so, taken over.

Just stepping back for a moment, Don. On the way back or when you handing over [sic] to the 9th Division, was there any feeling of low morale, any feeling of failure, and any desire to stay on and fight it out in the North African campaign?

We wished to stop there because we had been trained to it and I felt that we should not have been taken out of there. I thought the 9th Divy should have gone over to Greece and Crete and left us there, 'cause we knew all the hardships that could be acquired by the desert.

> And you were saying that during the retreat back to Ikingi Maryut that there had been some very close escapes, do you remember those incidents, involving yourself?

Yes, there was a few trucks got destroyed. I don't know whether there was any killed or not. I think there was a few injuries and so forth, a few trucks got destroyed as I said. But otherwise we got out of it alright.

> And during the brief period in Ikingi Maryut, that was a little less than a fortnight, did you have any time to get away from it all, to have some leave, or was it just a matter of re-equipping and pushing on?

No, they gave us about three or four days' leave, so we went into Alexandria and then we had to come back and report and get re-equipped and everything ready to go.

> On those sort of periods between, well, in this instance, where you'd been in action and you had a brief leave and then you were off again, how intensely did people live? Was it a question of just living for the day and letting rip because tomorrow you could be dead, or not?

No, you never thought of that. If you start thinking of that, well, you might as well not be in it. No, you knew very well, I mean, whatever theatre of war you're in, there's a possibility, sure, but if you start thinkin' like that the morale would go down very quick.

> Well, the journey over to Greece, I think, to Piraeus, was just a couple of days and I think it was a fair weather crossing. You entrained on 14th near Athens, I think, or at Athens. I think there was some British soldiers already coming back from the front.

Yes, there was a trainload of them come back with quite a few injuries. And we thought, hello, what's going on here? It seemed unusual to be bringing a trainload, not just all injureds, quite a few soldiers. And they said, 'You're going up to a hot spot there, Aussie'.

> And did you have any advice from your officers as to just how hot it was already in the north of Greece?

No, they weren't aware of it either. Nobody was aware of it until we got there.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

> Identification: this is Ed Stokes, prisoners of war, Don Watt, tape one, side two.
>
> Don, I think you had quite a warm farewell from the local Greeks.

They were very good to us. We were only there for two days, or a day and a half or something, but they showed tremendous feeling towards us. We were very well treated by them.

> But on the journey north, I think you already came under air attacks. How regular was that?

Very consistent. We got up to a place called Larisa - right up about the middle of Greece - and this is where we really got - that's where we struck the German fire power. They sent planes. We had no fire power, so they just did as they liked. There was just Stukas - they had all types of planes, Junkers, and everything. They were just coming in, machine-gunning, bombin' us. They had everything to their own power, we had nothing.

> And I think there you were posted up to establish a fixed defensive position with your battalion, covering a road coming down from further north. I think it was there that a train of high explosives was set off. What do you remember of that?

Yes. What happened there, the drivers of the trains, they'd left. I just don't know what nationality they were now. They weren't Greeks. They'd left and nobody - they were too frightened to take the train so some of our boys had been engine drivers, so they got in and got steam up and ready to try and take it off. But in the meantime over came the German planes. They missed it two or three times but then they formed a line up and this time they got it. This was loaded with gun cotton and ammonal which - the force of it lifted the planes up to hundreds of feet up into the air. And we were about eight mile across, I'd say, up on the side some mount, and the full force of the explosion nearly took the air out of your lungs.

> Must have been a horrific thing to see. That kind of incident of mass destruction of valuable equipment, but most of all of men's lives, how did that affect you at the time? You and your mates?

No, I think we were used to it by that time. I mean, sure, you miss them. You always worry, wonder how he got on, was he hurt bad. No, the morale was altered.

> Well, the battalion, I think, was in this fixed defensive position. I think it was fairly rugged both in terms of altitude and terrain.

Yes, we had to have mules to take all our equipment up the mount. It was up into the snow. And we had to dig down into the snow. So we were in trenches there - wet, cold. We didn't like stoppin' there too long, which we didn't. We held the corner there very well. I mean, we had a few boys down close that any trucks came around or tanks, they were machine-gunned or grenaded. So if it got too hot we could see them coming across - thousands of Germans. So we said, 'We'll have to get out of here' because we had no transport. So we thought we better get out onto the road, until the transport came along and picked us up and shifted us further back to a place called Miloi.

> I think you were saying, Don, before you shifted out, there were these very heavy air attacks, in particular by Stukas with sirens. This had a marked effect on the morale, or the ability to withstand the stress of it for some men.

Yes, it did on quite a few. I had one chappy with me - he was a prisoner of war from the '14-18 war and he put his age back to join up again. And of course this other chappy, his nerves started to go on him. So the old chappy said, 'Look, we did this in the trenches in the '14-18 war. Just take his hat off and hit him on the side of the head.' Between the two of us, the poor man had quite a few lumps. So we had to do that because otherwise it meant the destruction of all our other boys around us.

So it was really just a matter of controlling his fear.

Another thing, too. At that time the Germans had infiltrated us around, so we had to use different tactics. One day we'd have a sleeve rolled up on the left and the next day it'd be the right. And we'd have to change all the codes of sayings so that they wouldn't know our ways of getting into our lines - we got about ten German spies there, out of that lot.

(5.00) That's most interesting. And I think you were saying, Don, that once you did leave Larisa that basically from then on it was a constant retreat, just stopping for a few days here and there to cover your retreat. During this period, and we move on through a place called Domokos where you held out for a few days, then to Brallos Pass. How did you manage with the basics of sleeping, eating and so on through this period?

Well, the food was very scarce. I mean we scrounged a little bit here and there, what we could, but we had no rations brought up to us, nothing like that around. And in this Brallos Pass, that one there, I forget how many .... It's a very steep mount, and you just circled around, and you could look down, and if a truck went over you could go down about twenty times over the same road coming up. But quite a few trucks did get bombed, and one thing, and as you went you had to push them into the side of the bank. And we were travelling by night with no lights, so we had to have persons walking alongside to guide the driver over the top of the pass. It was very trying because of these planes at us all the time.

Sure, it sounds a very difficult journey at the best of times. Well, by the time you'd got down to, I think it was Miloi, M-I-L-O-I, how well equipped were you and what was the state of your morale?

The state of morale wasn't a hundred per cent, because we knew that we had no hope of defending because we had no fire power, we had no air cover, no tanks, so how could an infantry beat a complete army such as the Germans were. So we had no alternative but retreat.

Was there much support from local people? Were the local people willing or able to support you, or not?

Well, on this route there was hardly any local people around because it's just a track right through Greece. And most of the villages were down closer to Athens or up in the top of the mounts, so we never seen much of the locals. Struck one here and there but I think they were too busy getting out of the way, too.

I think you were saying about, or on, 26th April you were evacuated to Kalamata, near Athens. I think the Germans were very close behind you there.

Yes, they were. This is where we had to try and get out, there. We had to walk out into the water, still firing and trying to stop them coming at us. And we got onto little rowing boats that took us out to a destroyer. That took us to the *Costa Rica*, which is the main ship to take us out.

> And I think you boarded her about 4 a.m., or had finished boarding about 4 a.m. that morning with about 3,000 troops. The German air power had obviously been the key issue in the Greek campaign. As you left, you'd only actually been in Greece for, in fact, less than a fortnight, what was the mood of the men?

We weren't too happy [inaudible] because the thing we were singin' out for - we wanted air power. We never had any. Even to see a plane would have even helped the morale of the boys because there's nothing worse than being fired on and can't return anything back.

> And I think you were saying things were in such a tight state that there were even crated-up planes in Athens.

Yes, there was crates of planes there. The poor devils down there never had a chance to even take them out to assemble, which I suppose is just as well because the short time we were in there they wouldn't have had time to assemble them anyhow.

> Well, let's just turn to the voyage on the *Costa Rica* because in itself it was dramatic. It was obviously important to get as far to sea as possible, as soon as possible. What actually eventuated?

Well, it was on our way to Alexandria. And we were about a hundred, a hundred and fifty-odd miles - I forget how far it was - past Crete and the planes kept at us all the time. We had gunboats there, trying to help us out, and destroyers all firing at planes for us. We brought down a terrible lot of planes but, I mean, the fire power of the - the flying power of the Germans was so strong because they just kept sending bases of planes over, one after the other.

Anyhow it got to the stage where the all-clear was given, and next minute this plane had switched its engines off and came down with the sun behind it and we never heard it or seen it. And as it got nearer it opened its engine and dropped the bombs which landed right alongside the *Costa Rica* which blew the plates off, just near the engine room. So all orders were to get on deck and be ready to ...

(10.00) Abandon ship. Was there any chance at all of the ship being saved, or not?

None. None whatsoever. No, they had corvettes and destroyers pulled up alongside and we got 'em all off. And the captain of the ship, he wanted to go down. So another - Frank Dyson and I said, 'No, you're not', so we threw him overboard onto the destroyer.

> Tell us about that incident, I think, it says a lot about both yourself and Frank Dyson, and perhaps also the captain of the ship.

What was happening, there was a few sick and some wounded fellows. We had to try and get them down, we couldn't leave them on board. Some were taken over on rafts - lowered down and one thing and another - and picked up by destroyers. So we tried to get the rest of them down onto the little destroyer there. So it left only the two of us there, and the captain. So that's when we decided he gotta come with us.

Tell us about what actually happened with the captain and yourselves.

He said to me, 'Look, I've lived on that all my life. Look, the rule is, you go down with the ship.' I said, 'Not nowadays you don't'. So it took about forty-five minutes before we got the ship unloaded which I thought was rather good. By the time we'd got out about three or four hundred yards away the ship started to go down, which - oh, you should have seen the swirlin' of the water as she went down. And the captain, he cried, he said, 'There it goes. There goes my home.'

That's very sad, isn't it? But you did manage to get him off. Just to sidetrack for a moment, Don. It seems that through this you were already displaying quite signifiant powers of leadership. How had those powers of leadership evolved during your time in the army?

I think most of us all had about the same powers. I think it was just a matter of doing it. Some were stronger, I suppose, than others, in applying what to do. Others just logically, just followed along, but they still all had the same powers.

You were saying, Don, that the destroyer you boarded was almost gunwales down in the water. Tell us about the voyage to Crete on her.

Yes, well, there was only about two inches out of the water, there were that many troops aboard - lucky we had calm water. We just battled in very slow and we got into Crete and .... If it had been rough seas, goodness knows what would have happened.

Could I just - the two inches out of the water - do you mean that literally or was it really that low?

Well, it might have been about three or four inches, I suppose, but it seemed like about two to me (laughs).

Anyway, she was right down in the water.

Yes.

When you landed in Crete, by this stage of course you were a corporal in charge of a section. And just for the record you were saying you were made a sergeant in the field although that promotion was never officially put through. Where did you disembark in Crete, and what happened?

At Canea, this is where the major shipping centre was. We were taken there and when we disembarked, we were taken out into the olive field. And then we dispersed around to different areas until we heard then that there was likely to be parachutes coming out to us. How they'd know that, I don't know. So over came the parachutes.

Could I just pause here. I think, from your notes in this period, you'd moved already to near Georgioupolis, is that correct?

Yes, that's true, yes. That's right, when we were waiting. We were waiting then for the German soldiers, or German planes to come over to drop their troops. We had to scrounge our own food and what have you. So I decided I'd have to get some fish to eat. So they had this creek there. So I threw in a grenade and thought, by joves. I dived in and the water was that cold. I didn't realise it was snow water. The fish only came halfway, so I got about three or four out and got up and run up and down the bank and back in again, got some more. And I said, 'That's enough for me'.

And those first few days on Crete, when I think you were obviously very tight on provisions and so on, were you able to get help from local people, or not?

They did not have much food but what they did have, they'd give you eggs and bread, as much as they could spare. We offered to pay them. They wouldn't accept it. But we used to leave the money there for them because they needed it more than us.

And after the move from, I think, Suda Bay over to Georgioupolis, I think there was fairly intense bombing and strafing by the German planes.

(15.00) Yes, very heavy there. When they started to drop the parachutes - they strafed us very much with the planes first, and then they brought the parachuters in. What they had, they had three or four gliders towed behind planes to bring 'em in, to land 'em at the aerodromes. And some of them were coming out on the gliders, some of the parachuters would drop out from them. The sky was just littered with troops, and they had all different coloured 'chutes and that. We got sick of shootin' so we gave them a chance to get on the deck. To find out what's going on. And we found out that the different coloured parachutes - they had ammunition and guns and what have you. So we didn't allow that to happen any more.

It must be a very difficult thing to shoot a man, say, in a parachute, when he's basically unable to defend himself. How did you cope with that?

He's defending himself. He's got a machine-gun. He's firing on the way down, too, so, you know, we had to return his fire, I suppose - help him out, too (laughs).

But you did say you stopped shooting them to give these men a sporting chance. Why did you do that then?

Well, we wanted to check what was going on with these parachutes. We didn't know what it was. Then we found out what it was, then we didn't let that happen again.

Well, after this parachute/glider invasion I think you returned to Suda Bay with about 200 other men. I think there you were surrounded on three sides by Germans. Could you describe how that incident developed? And also perhaps, Don, could you tell us how organised, or disorganised, this whole campaign was. Was it numbers of groups of different men fighting their own little battles, or was there an overall strategy - overall coordination?

No, see, there was different battalions dispersed all around Crete. So our battalion, we were down to Sfakia there, so we had to .... Sorry, not Sfakia ...

> Correction, that was down near Suda Bay.

Yeah, down Suda Bay. Well, when we got down there, we couldn't see any enemy around at the time. We looked over and we seen a kitchen - open air kitchen - nice steaming pots there. We thought, hello, we'll go and have a meal here. So we went over and explored it and had a look around. What's happened here? There's something must have happened to make them go, and we found out it was the English commandoes - they'd got taken off.

So we were just halfway into a meal and Maoris joined us, and they said, 'Don't look around, we're being surrounded'. He said, 'We'll have to go back and get back to our lines. When we do, we'll join in with you.' So we got back to our lines and the message was passed along. So then the bayonet charge was ordered. So the Maoris joined in with us and they used their Haka. So the Aussies joined in with that noise.

I think the noise and that put the fear of hell into the Germans because we went through, we pushed them back, oh, about five mile or something like - three or four or five. I just forget how far it was. Anyhow we got about 200 and took about two or three prisoners so we did very well.

> And your own killed, according to your notes, would have been quite slight - about ten killed, twenty-eight wounded. I think it was during this little counter-attack that you single-handed took a machine-gun post. Could you tell us about that?

No, Charlie Garth and I. We were over on the right flank, and there's a machine-gun nest up on the side of the little creek there - dry creek bed. And they kept pinning us down. So I said to Charlie, 'You better keep firing, I'll see if I can get closer to them'. So I went around, crawled around till I got close enough and I threw a grenade and got a direct hit on them. So Charlie and I then - we thought, we better get back with the boys.

> It was obviously a very dangerous manoeuvre. In this campaign, I think by this stage a lot of the officers had been wounded or killed. Who was really organising, coordinating the fighting?

I think it just became all one. We just went through in the line and just kept going until such times as an order came through - where it came through, I don't know. But anyhow we stopped and went back. But there was quite a few officers wounded and a couple were killed. I think one of the top boys behind sent the message out - one of the officers. So we regrouped and a few of the officers came back and struggled with us, who were wounded, and others went out and tried to get them away on the ships.

> Well, you were saying that from this encounter onwards - the encounter you've just described - basically it was a rearguard action, and nothing more while Crete was being cleared of Allied troops. I think you paused at a pass above a place called, Sfakia. What was your condition there, and were you being attacked?

(20.00) It took us days to get back there. It took nearly a week by the time we got back to this position. We'd take up a position, defend it, while allowing for all troops to try and get off the island. The navy there was takin' them off all night and getting away early in the morning so that they'd be out of sight by daylight.

So we had to do this rearguard and keep the Germans from advancing. They sent a terrible lot of motorbike and sidecars lined up with machine-guns and goodness knows what, tryin' to break through. But none of them got through. We used to disperse them and get them to one side and camouflage them so the others didn't know where they were. So we held out right back until we got to Sfakia. And we held out for about a week. We had heavy casualties there though. We were just about running out of ammunition and everything because of all the fire power that we'd used.

> I think you were coming under very accurate mortar and shelling attacks. How did you survive that?

The Germans had a terrific mortar, it was so direct. We never had anything close enough to what they had. This one was more like an artillery shell. They could pinpoint you down, it didn't matter where you was, they could do it.

We had one chappy, Shane Whelan, he was a terrific mate. Him and I were very, very close. One landed right alongside him and, oh, it wasn't a sight to see. So I took him back to the doctor and the doctor said he couldn't do anything for him. Poor Shane died in my arms. It was a shocking thing to see, especially one of your own mates like that.

> Yes, that must have been very, very - well, very hard, Don. If it's not too hard, could I just ask how, in the hours or days after that, how his death affected you?

I think you became accustomed to it. You become hardened to it. You'd seen so much of it, I think it became part of the process.

> In that kind of fighting, were you still, as you battled your way backwards and forwards across Crete, were you still fighting for the Allied cause, were you fighting for Australia, or were you simply fighting for your mates to keep your little band of men alive?

I think it got to that stage where we were fighting for each other, to help each other get out of the place, because we had no troops from any other nations there to help us. We had no fire power. We had nothing, so as a matter of fact it was survival. We were left to fight to a finish, as the sayin' was, which was told to us. So we thought that was it.

> You said something quite interesting before. You said, of this kind of fighting in Crete particularly, to quote: 'All your mates become one'. Could you elaborate on what you meant by that?

Well, we'd lived together and we had become all one because, as I said, most of us came from Mildura and we knew each other nearly like friends before the war. So you became closer. You become a very close-knit body. And anybody looked like in danger, he was helped out by his mates.

Is it at all possible, do you think, for outsiders to truly understand what you experienced, or not?

I don't think you could. I would never have thought that it could happen until it happens to you. You can't relate .... I don't think people could relate to it unles they'd been in these situations.

In terms of the intensity of feeling and action and events and so on.

Exactly.

That's most interesting. Decorations, it seems from the story I've read, or heard so far, Don, that you performed some outstanding feats. Were you awarded any decorations, or not?

No, never awarded any decorations. I never looked for any. We never looked for decorations. We were all a team. We were fighting for survival - each one helps each other, and you help all the rest of your mates. Decorations don't come into it when you come into theatres of war. Everybody else would have done the same.

Sure. What about the men who, perhaps through their physical make-up, or their mental make-up, or whatever, didn't have the reserves of strength or of endurance or of, perhaps, initiative and straight courage that you had, how did they fit into the picture?

There was only an odd few. You'll always get that in any field of life, even. But the majority of them, they all fitted into the same character as myself. I don't think there was very many weak links. There might be one or two but you didn't worry about that.

Did you help them along?

You didn't have time (laughs). No, you never had much time to help them, they'd just have to fall in and be behind with you and help as much as they could. They had the morale of us that kept them going.

(25.00) Well, those last days on Crete, obviously there was this hope that you would all be evacuated as an entire unit, but I think that failed. How do you remember that?

Yes, the message came up that they said, 'Right, we can take you off the island'. So they sent guides up from down the beach and time we got down to the beach one of the companies .... The guide had got lost because it was during the night, and we had to wait over an hour or more before the whole unit was together. So the colonel then decided, no, he wouldn't take the battalion off until the whole battalion was complete.

So by the time they'd got there, as I said, it was rather late so that the colonel and a few of the officers and a few men got onto the barge to go out to the ship. And next minute the order came, there was no more was going off. So the colonel then said, 'Well, take me back ashore. I'm not leaving my men behind.' So the barge returned and he stopped with us.

Then, only just got the news of the capitulation orders, which had been enforced a week before - we were not aware of it. This General Freyburg from New Zealand, he was in charge of the Crete defence. Well, he'd left by a flying Sunder [sic] boat over a week ago and we were not aware of this. And the capitulation orders had been sent then. Now, we feel - and even the Germans said, we thought that we would have to give the island away, we thought we couldn't take it. But through the capitulation behind us, this allowed the Germans to come in behind us to take over the island.

> Well, I think in the last few days you spent on Crete, yourself, before being taken prisoner, you were living in the hills, and I think hoping for an evacuation by submarine.

Yes. The word went out - this was after we had to, every man for himself type of thing - that there would be submarines coming around about a certain time. They said they would probably send up a flare. And some of the boys had some way of contacting them. I think flares, or something like that. They were going to fire them up to say that we would be down there at the beach. So we'd waited three or four nights and this didn't eventuate.

So we went down, we thought, we'll try and get off ourselves. So we loaded up a boat - or we found a boat rather, I'm sorry. And the engine wasn't going too good so we got onto one of the Greek fishermen, of which he got parts off other boats and he fixed this one up. So we loaded up with live goats and fowls and water and everything you could think of. We thought, now, we'll have enough. So we had it already to take off that night.

> And where were you planning to go in the boat?

We were going to try and get back to Alexandria. We were going to try and make through because quite a few others had escaped. They went out on barges and everything - made rafts. Quite a few got away.

> But it's a long way from Crete to Alexandria.

Well, anywhere was better than Crete. Anyhow, we just had it all ready and everything - we'll wait till dark. And over came the planes. They came round and they bombed right around the harbour and everything and hit one direct, right in the middle of our .... So that ruined our escape committee.

> So the boat was destroyed. How large was it, incidentally?

Oh, it was only about a sixteen footer.

> Well, I think it was shortly after that you were actually taken prisoner and your active war was really over. How did that occur? What were the events leading up to your capture?

Well, what had happened, there was a group of about six of us there, talkin' about these flares. And we happened to look down at the beach and we seen quite a few troops down there. And we thought, hello, the submarine must be down there. So two of us went down to reconnoitre to see what was going on.

So this Frank Dyson happened to be with me again, and so he decided he was going to fight them - you know - bare fists. I said, 'You won't do any good that way'. So another chappy - another German rather, I'm sorry - had the machine-gun trained on, and had his legs apart. And I thought, well, I'm not going to get shot so I dived in underneath him. I upset him and as I did he pulled the trigger and he shot a few of his own troops. So this didn't go down too well.

They captured me and one thing and another. Threw me against the churchyard wall and formed up a firing squad. Like the officer rather, he was going to shoot me, and they had troops either side. And I broke through of that and they grabbed me again, belted me and threw me against the wall again.

Was it quite clear you were going to be shot?

Oh well, yes, because I was the cause of some of their troops getting shot by this other soldier of theirs.

Could you remember what was going through your mind in those moments, or not?

Tryin' to get away. Anyhow, when they lined me up the second time, it was getting a bit darker then, so I said, 'Well, here goes, I might as well get shot running as stand there and get shot'. So when I run, I weaved in amongst their own troops and they were too frightened to shoot, 'cause they would have shot one of their own.

So I got into the line up, they were lining all our boys into the church. So some of the boys then grabbed me, put a tin hat on me, wiped me, cleaned me up and hid me away from the Germans. They went up and down the line tryin' to find me, and I got away with it anyhow. They came in at the next morning in the church. And the boys all sat on top of me and done everything to hide me away from it because I was all marked. Anyhow they never caught up with me.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, prisoners of war, Don Watt, tape two, side one.

Well, Don, let's begin the story of your actual prisoner years. After you'd been taken prisoner in Crete, just in the next short period, what were your feelings? What did it do to you as a person to be taken prisoner?

It's a very demoralising. You're lost, you've got no clothes, you've got no food, you've got nothing, your morale was down to a very low ebb. But it's like everything, you can't let that beat you. But at that moment when you stop to think, where do you go? You've got nowhere to go. You've just got to accept the position that you were in.

> And were there any thoughts about the handling of the last days on Crete? Was there any purpose in your being ordered to fight it out to the bitter end do you think, or not?

Well, we had no alternate [sic] there, but it wasn't very good because first off we were told, we'd have to fight out to the end. And then the next message came through that we had to fight to get everybody off the island. But the first instance we weren't told so.

> The place that you were taken for this first period - short period on Crete - was that a properly set up camp, or hastily rigged up, open camp?

You never had camps, you lived as you were, just under an olive tree, or whatever. We never had camps anywhere along there. But the one we were taken prisoner was just a bit of barbed wire put around and German troops all around.

> And you were obviously all disarmed and there was no possibility of getting away.

No way, no. There was no way off the island, not at that time.

> I think there was an interesting story that connects a donkey to do with this period.

Yes, what happened, there was a Greek - he was sent in to clean up the camp. He had the donkey and the cart and they used to take him out and search him and interrogate him to make sure if he was a different man.

So this day we decided, right, went down, we took the donkey out of the cart, we brought it up and told all the boys. So we took it right up to where we were, in behind a few trees. And everybody gathered around. So the donkey was hit on the head, never fell over. Everybody just carved a piece off. It was carved off that quick. We cooked it in little dixies of olive oil and stuff like that we got out and scrounged. And we had it eaten, skin and everything buried. There wasn't a sign of a trace of the bone or anything.

Well, the guards went right around that camp. And the commandant went out and abused the guards outside, 'Did it get out?'. To this day they never knew what ever happened to that donkey.

> That's a remarkable story of initiative - if not for the donkey's sake. You went by ship to Salonika and Greece and I think you stayed in huts there, some 2,000 men, for a short period. How good, or bad, were the conditions there?

Very bad. We took over - well, they put us into a camp where Italians had been. And the Italians had not been very clean on this camp and it was lousy with bugs and lice. And of course, they had embedded into our clothes. And bugs, they get into your head, then you'd have to cut 'em out because if you break 'em off they go in further. So we had to cut them out. I had one instance of that and other boys the same.

> Were there any thoughts of escape in these early days, or not?

We had a few try to get out. In the centre there was a drain to go right outside, so what - they had a grille over it. The boys lifted the grille up and out through the drain. And a few got away. We used to play two-up - imagine we were playin' two-up. As we were lookin' up in the air the boys would duck through the drain.

But then we had all different nationalities. They seen what went on and of course then the upheaval came, they tried to get in the act, and of course drew the attention to the Germans. So they came down and they fired into both ends and killed a few and then had to send others in to drag the others out. So that spoilt that.

> While I think it was from there that you went by train, taking about a week, to Belgrade. What do you remember of that journey and what were the conditions like?

They were very bad. We were put into a cattle truck, fairly well cramped up, and a little of food they gave us, not very much. So we got up through into Yugoslavia and stopped at Belgrade. They had the Red Cross there, gave us a great big biscuit, or about six inches diameter and about an inch and a half thick made out of maize meal. You couldn't bite it, it was that hard, but still it was good.

(5.00) Had you been getting fed regularly during that train journey, or not?

No, that was the first meal that we had. We had a bit of hot soup, or hot water or something, and this biscuit. That was the only meal we got until we got to our destination, because we were taken then to Hammelburg in Bavaria, which they called 'Thirteen C' - Stalag Thirteen C.

> I think you were about three weeks at Stalag Thirteen C before you then went out to work gangs, although you were saying, I think, you were still based on Stalag Thirteen C. I think you first went to a road gang at a place called Weisbach. Tell us about that - the work on that road gang.

At [inaudible] Weisbach. It starts with a 'w', the Germans always put the 'w's as a 'v'. We went out on the road gang there. We had to build this road over the top of a very high hill. What we had to do was break up stones. And they put three of us onto a dump truck - a steel dump truck on rails which tipped to the side. So we pushed up there for quite a few trips.

And one of the boys had diarrhoea so bad that he had to have his trousers off and he just couldn't take the effort of it - he was getting weaker and weaker. So me, not knowing the German, I asked for a replacement. So he took him off and made the two of us do it. So we did that for a little while but it got too heavy, and I asked him again. With that he took the other man off and made me do it.

I did one trip, or probably one and a half trips. I only got up so far and I collapsed and the truck came over the top of me and injured my back and also ruptured in the groin. So they took me back to the barrack like, or hut, where they put us in. And it was about three months before they got a civilian doctor to me.

> I think you were saying that in that period, Don, there was quite terrible pain. Were you able to get out of bed, or were you totally laid up?

I could [inaudible] the head down onto the knees because I was doubled up with the hernia and the spine was in a bad way. There was no treatment, nothing to kill the pain. So I could get to the toilet, and one thing and another. But mainly just, I was lyin' down. I had no way of getting away from pain. So when they decided to shift me I had to walk to a station, about six kilometres or more away, through the snow. And I had the head down on the knees and it was hard work trying to get to that station.

> Yes, it sounds an appalling journey. Were there any officers in your camp, or not?

No, officers, no. They'd all gone to another camp. There were no officers there whatsoever.

> So was there anybody, while you were laid up in bed, anybody able to fight your case for you, or not?

No, we had no rights at all. At that time we hadn't any word from International - the [inaudible] Red Cross. So we had no rights. Didn't know what we could say, or what we could do. We just had to take it.

> Well, you were saying that the journey to the train station was quite - well, it must have been unbearable. I think you were taken to a prisoner of war hospital at Eberbach in the same region. What happened there?

Yes, well, what we had was an English medical doctor there, so he couldn't perform the operation. But they had a Russian - a White Russian - there, and he was quite a capable sort of a doctor. So he said he would do the operation. But then they tried to get anaesthetic, or something - local anaesthetics or anything to help me before they performed the operation, they couldn't get any. So what they done, they put me onto a table, tied me down - arms, legs and what have you - and performed the operation without any local or anything. And when it came to the finish of it, they had nothing to stitch even the wound up. So what they did, they pyramided little sandbags to hold the wound together for about a week.

> You, of course, I think had given permission to the doctors to carry out this operation, and I think they'd requested a number of times whether you were willing to face the pain. What was it that made you go ahead with what was obviously going to be an excruciating operation?

I got to the stage where I'd had enough pain, so I thought I couldn't have any worse than what I was going through, so that's why I said right, go ahead. It was - in the old language - round about thirty-odd below but it felt like about 110 in Fahrenheit degrees to me.

(10.00) It must have been a terrible event. After that, I know your leg and back were in plaster and in fact lice invaded under the plaster and I think your leg became a real mess.

Yes, it did. The lice ate all the skin off my legs and everything. And nobody could get even close to me, the smell was so bad, until it got to the stage where I made them take it off. At the back - I had no skin left on the back, they'd eaten all that away, so they couldn't put me into plaster any more.

When you were taken back to Hammelburg - and this was now an NCO's camp - were you able to perform any work, or were you confined to bed?

No, I was able to walk around but I was twisted to one side of it from the back. But we were NCOs and we'd just got word through from the International Red Cross that we could be put into camp and not subjected to work. But the whole story is, I mean, if you don't work you don't get fed. I mean, the boys on the farm, they lived well. But if you don't work, the old story is, it's hard luck.

But I think you were saying that the Red Cross's recognition of your presence there was something of a ray of hope and that the men's conditions improved somewhat after that.

It improved quite a bit because we got Red Cross parcels after that. And believe me, they were a godsend, because that helped to pick us up a little bit, and our morale came up a bit with it.

And the parcels did come through? They weren't tampered with or prevented from reaching you?

No, we didn't have any problems there, not for the first few years. I mean, eventually the Germans were short, plus they didn't have time to bring parcels to us because they were too busy on their own problems.

Well just on a lighter note, amidst all this difficulty, I think a concert group was formed that you were involved in, and you even managed to get photographs of your concert party.

Yes, well, we did a little bit of blackmail here. We said, oh well, with the Germans, they thought this will be a good .... They were going to use this for propaganda relations so we fed them along. We didn't mind, as long as we got the photos. And we got a bit of gear off 'em even, for our concert, which was a good morale booster for all troops there.

And this was a general revue of amusing musical items, was it?

Yes, sure. We got a through instruments through the International Red Cross, this helped to start it. And we got enough for a band which formed the orchestra, and we had our own music then. So we had the first concert, was quite funny, you know. We were all a bit raw. But the second one was quite a good one - a very good concert. We got some good photos of that. [Inaudible] we shifted from there ....

Well, it was from Stalag Thirteen C that you made three escape attempts. I was going to ask you about those, Don, but could I just ask you first to describe the physical set-up of the camp. What were its main defences against escape?

They had the - had your wire fence, then coils of wire in between, then another high fence, and plus you had all your guard outlets up top, overlooking the whole camp. So the escape was very limited. You couldn't get out through the two lots of wires plus the coil in the

centre. The only way that we could .... And what we did, I tried on my first attempt, we went out on the work party to get wood, just for our cooking and for the heating part. That's when I tried to get through. And with another - I took another guy with me this time but he panicked after four days and, of course, drew the attention of the Germans. So they took us back again.

I was going to ask you about that first attempt. How far did you, in fact, get, and what preparations had you made for the escape?

We had no preparation. It was very, very amateur. You just had to get out. We was out for four days [inaudible]. We got, I suppose, what, seventy-odd kilometres away. And anyhow they picked us up and brought us back. So I thought, oh well. After about a month or six weeks or so, I had a go on my own.

Just before you get to that second attempt, Don. What was the retaliation? What was the punishment for that first attempt?

You had a week or so in the lock-up, just to calm you down a bit. But that didn't worry us. It was no worse than bein' in the other compound.

So it was a really severe punishment as German punishments could go.

No, they couldn't limit the food less, so it didn't worry us.

(15.00) Well, tell us the background to your second attempt, and perhaps also why you were determined to make another attempt.

Well, I thought I'd try one on my own. We got so far with the two of us, and I thought I'll see how I go. I go out for about five days, I suppose, and just made a stupid mistake. I was tryin' to steal food and got caught.

Did you have any papers with you this time - maps or civilian clothes?

No, I was still in our prisoner of war garb because I couldn't even get into a house to rob anything, because, as I said before, it was still very amateur.

And what happened in the end, did you just run up against a guard of soldiers, or what?

Yes, I ran into a few in the village at the time. And one of the civilians reported me - happened to see me go into this house. They came in and just grabbed me.

What were the main lessons then that you'd learnt from those two attempts, and how did they feed into your third escape attempt?

I thought, now, I'll be much more careful the next time - still no plans. So I got out and I got on to a train. I thought, I'll see if I can get down .... I'd got some clothes from a house - sorry - civilian clothes, and threw them over my uniform and one thing and another. So I'm travelling by train, and the German said to me, 'Where do you come from?' and I told him. I could speak a little bit of German by this time. At the next stop I seen him signallin' out the

window of the train. In came the Gestapos and picked me up. He happened to come from the next village where I said I come from and he knew I hadn't come from there.

> Right. So that sort of local knowledge was so important. In those different escape attempts, on each occasion, had you escaped from outside work parties, or had you actually crossed the camp perimeter?

No, from the work parties these all happened.

> Well, by this third attempt I would assume you were getting something of a name in the camp. What was the punishment this time?

They gave me a bit longer in the 'cooler', as they say (laughs). No, they kept me there for about three weeks and give me a little bit of a beltin', not to do it again.

> So there was, I mean, you were physically knocked around a bit?

Yes, I was that time, yes.

> Well, moving on, Don, it was in the last three months, I think, at Hammelburg - and you were saying this was in retaliation for some Canadian troops, in fact, tying up Germans during a feint raid into France - that, I think you were saying, was it all the men in the camp were handcuffed, or just some?

Yes. No, they picked out so many that they had handcuffs for and they put a reprisal on a portion of the camp. What had happened, the Canadians had come in. And they didn't know, they thought it was going to be a right-out offensive, but it wasn't, they was only just testing. But when they caught these prisoners they had to tie them up - the German prisoner. So they had nobody to take them back [sic]. Eventually they got caught so the German put the reprisal on us. So they put the handcuffs onto them. It was a bit awkward for a start until some of the boys, who were very knowledgeable, they worked out a way to pick locks (laughs).

> And I think you were saying that the lock picking, in fact, continued even when you were being transferred up to a camp in Poland. And this was another journey by cattle truck. Tell us about that journey.

Yes, we were taken from Hammelburg up to Thorn, in Poland. There - we were handcuffed all the way, as I said, and they had German soldiers in each truck - we were in a cattle truck. And of course one of the boys had made a key out of a nail - flattened it enough to pick the locks. And of course the boys would wake up, who'd picked the lock, and stretch their arms. And there's one arm dangling. And they said this is no good. So the Germans took them off and give us all new ones. So the procedure kept goin' and goin' until they give it away. They knew it was hopeless tryin' to keep the handcuffs on us.

> Just as an example of the conditions in these cattle trucks, of course it was very cold, I think you're coming into winter here, tell us how you had to go to the toilet.

All we had was a little tin we had to do our business, everything, in that. And then if the train stopped and the guards went outside we used to try and throw it out over them. And they used to go crook and we used to say, well, we didn't know you was there.

> And that sort of element of constantly rubbing your captors up, if you like, what was productive do you think, or not? Or was it to boost your own morale?

(20.00) No, it was to our way that you had to. You couldn't give them an easy ride, you had to keep them upset - or you weren't going to do anything for them. That was just part of our morale, of keeping up and trying to demoralise them.

> Well, the camp, I think, you went to was at Thorn, Stalag 357, in Poland. And here I think you found American, British, Canadian troops as well. The conditions in this camp, from which you made your final escape - if we take these things in order: clothes, food, washing, toileting and so on. What clothes were you provided with?

We got English uniform through from the International Red Cross, which helped us to get rid of all the other clothes. They were full of lice and one thing and another. So we got ourselves cleaned up and got rid of the lice. We had a few problems with Americans there for a while. They came in and we had to get onto them to help make them clean themselves up a bit. Not all of them, it's only - you always get the odd few that won't wash and what have you. So we soon fixed that one up.

> And what about food, I think there are some stories about procuring food - birds and grass and so on. Tell us about that. And how necessary was it to supplement your basic rations?

Well, we had to because at this time the Red Cross parcels were starting to get a bit scarce - this is later on. So what we did, a few of us went out and we used to pick the leaves off milk thistles which were quite edible. And eventually we got on to all types of grass and we used to boil it and we'd have the juice. And we'd have the other greens with whatever little ration we had.

We used to get a loaf of bread. It used to be, oh, it was about eight inches long and about three inches square. But it had been baked for four or five, sometimes up six years and just wrapped in sawdust. Well, that had all gone mouldy. So you had to cut that into six or eight shares. So you didn't get much ration.

So with the grass - and then we used to catch these sparrows. We had such ingenious traps. It's surprising what comes out when you get into such positions. So these helped to give us a little bit of a balanced diet. It had the meat and you had something to flavour it with.

> And were the prison authorities happy to let you gather grass, catch sparrows and so on? Or did that have to happen behind their backs?

This happened behind their back. We kept the grounds rather clean - there wasn't a blade of grass anywhere.

> And you were saying there were some interesting inventions, and the prisoner of war camps, of course, were well known for ingenuity. Tell us about - there was the radio and the basketball and the grandfather clock.

Yes. We had some very smart men. And of course through the Americans and the Canadians, with their cigarettes which they could get sent from home and they used to get them by the thousands. Of course we never got anything like that. But we used that for bartering. So we got around some of the Germans, the weaker ones. And they got different parts and they made a radio and one thing and another like this.

So then we used to get the news, so we had to hide it from everybody of course, and kept it in a selective area. One was hidden in a basketball. Other one, they put it up into an electric light globe and just hid it up in there. So when they did the searches they never found them.

So we used to get the news, and there'd be a certain number would take it around to different huts. We had to keep alternating so it didn't become too obvious to the Germans, what was going on. So between the English news and the German news I think we had a better vision of what was the truth than what anybody else did.

> And the newsreaders, I think, these were men detailed off to regularly inform each hut, were they?

Yes, this was right. You see, you had the Americans, Canadians and Australians and so we had - it was wrote for all sections of the camp. So then everything had to be destroyed immediately after so that nothing could be found. But this is what happened. Everybody in the camp knew what was going on.

> And I think, there were some other morale boosting activities. There were the talks about jobs. I think you yourself initiated a group helping men who had mental problems or collapsing morale.

Yes. What happened - first of all you had to have something to fill in time. So we detailed, or asked, a person to come along, and they used to give a little lecture and everything on, say, the positions they worked in, or all sorts of trades, whatever it was. Anything at all that would create an interest. And then you'd have a session, then the question time. And it used to fulfil an hour and a half, two hours, sometimes three hours. It all depends how good the talker. And this helped everybody get their minds thinkin', gee, that was nice.

(25.00) But on the other side, the poor chappies .... We had a couple in our hut - that they were going down in health and nobody worried about 'em. All they thought of was themselves, some of them. So we decided we'd have to pick them up. So that became something, that. Well, that helped us to keep in sane [sic]. So then the whole thing was passed around to the Canadians and Americans, they hopped in and done the same. So we had about six of us amongst the Aussies goin' around doing all this. This was quite good because it lifted the morale of everybody.

> No doubt. Don, if you had to look at the kinds of men who in a prisoner of war situations, as you experienced them at least, failed, where their morale collapsed; the men who somehow managed to survive in spite of it, perhaps even to triumph in a sense. What were the differences in personality?

There was quite a bit with some of them. Some went down too low. You could only pull out a certain amount - as much as he wanted to. Sometimes some persons haven't the strength to sort of recuperate from that. So they had to be guarded and looked after because you had thieves who would take their ration, or something like this, so they had to be protected. But they came good when we got back to England - not a hundred per cent but I think they improved enough.

> But perhaps just going a little bit below that, or deeper. Looking back on it, what were the characteristics that enabled some men to survive and keep their morale intact and what was it that led some men to go down?

I think you find that even in civilian life, you'll have the same. You'll have, you can say ten men, or ten persons, say, you'll always find two-thirds of them are quite good and the others are not quite fit with it. And I think you'll find that when the circumstances come into something tough, well, it deteriorates down along the line. I don't think you could define it in one way. It's part of nature and life.

> Well, of course it was the people at the camp you were in .... The men who formed the escape commitee, must have been amongst the most positive in the camp. I think this began for you at the previous camp you'd been at, at Hammelburg, where you found some maps and papers. Tell us about that.

Yes, we had an English person that was into camp and he'd heard of me escape and he made himself very popular with me. And I thought, well, he doesn't seem a bad sort of a guy. So we became very friendly. And about four or five weeks after, he disappeared. And I thought, oh, he must have been taken out on a workin' party. So I never seen him again.

Oh, it'd be two or three months later I went to hop into the bunk and I found a rustle of papers there - what's this? And they were plans, or maps really to get away. And I thought, now, the Germans have planted this on me. So I thought I won't produce it to anybody. And I never did - not until we got to Poland, like to Thorn, where we formed this escape committee, and then I produced them.

> And the assumption, I gather, through this is that the papers were somehow connected with this man who'd escaped. Is that it, or not?

Yes, we talked over this, and they said, 'Well look, he must have been a secret service. He got in and put those papers back for you because he knew that you was more positive. You said, 'What's the good of doin' it half-hearted if you haven't got maps.' And I think this is how this came about.

> Well, you were saying, too, just for the record, that on the journey up to Poland you'd kept a record of stations you passed through and rough distances and so on, so you could work out your position. The formation of this escape committee, how did they come together? How was it in this atmosphere of tension. And the danger of informing, if not actually collaborating - men being pressured into giving away names and so on - how did you know who could be trusted, who could not be trusted?

This was a very good question this, because you had to - each person's different - like I did, of another Australian, tryin' to find out how people were with their answers were escaping. Then I had to do it on my own because I would have divulged what I was in. So eventually I went around - you know a lot of the guys. I knew them through the army, through bein' with them in combat, what they were like. So we sorted them until we got down to one or two. But we never took 'em all in together. But you'd find their feeling, then you'd introduce them to the American one who would sound him out until we got a positive. Then we would introduce him to the group - the escape committee.

> Was there much contacting of men to be asked, or at least considered to join the committee, was initial contact or assessment of people through such things as body language, eye contact, looking - seeing how people moved around the camp and so on?

You sorted out friends amongst all the nations, like there. And it got to the stage, where they would find out for you, and say, 'Look, he would be the best person' ...

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

> Identification: this is Ed Stokes, prisoners of war, Don Watt, tape two, side two.
>
> Don, you were saying about this selection of people.

Yes. You got to the different countries, like Americans, Canadians, whoever, English, and you would ask the persons who was the best you could talk to, who could you approach. Say, we wanted to form an escape committee, who would you think would be the best. So they eventually knew the best. And that's how we arrived at it all.

> Well, I think once your committee had formed up, after some time you began working on two tunnels at opposite ends of the camp. Of course tunnels must have been very difficult to construct. Tell us how you went about it.

They derived little ways of diggin', little implements, and the sand to be passed back. And boys would take it out in their pockets and distribute it all around the area. And we used bed boards to form the basis of it from collapsing. The Germans found one so then they decided, well - they took all the boards off us and only left us three. And they were three across - one for your head, one for your behind, and one for your feet. It was a bit hard to manage for a long time but we got accustomed to it.

> There must have been a very long term perspective in this, that you must have kept hold of. I mean digging a tunnel and taking it out by pocketful was a long operation. How did you manage that?

Well, you could only work so long. And we had quite a few men that could do that. You'd pass it out different ways: different one's passing by; or pass out a pair of trousers to somebody else, 'You can empty it'.

> Well, you were saying that prior to your own escape two people had got away, and I think four others had failed. It was April '44 when you made your own escape attempt. How well were you kitted up, both in escape routines and all the practicalities of clothes, money, papers, and so on?

This was done in a very high class manner at this time, because we had the brains of all our nations there - like that was in this camp. And they were very, very smart men, because we had chappies in their civilian life were adapted to these different parts. One, we'll say, of setting up for identification, another one for tailors and makin' suits out of blankets and we had every department sewn right up. We had trial runs to see what they looked like, and we got it down to a very fine art. It was very, very well developed.

> So when you finally went, and I'd assume it was at night-time, could you tell us what you were wearing, what you had with you? What was going to keep you going?

I wore a suit the same as the Germans did. I had the hat the same, and I had the passport, I had everything - not passport, identification - there and money and everything. So I'd walked until I got about 100 kilometres, or miles, whatever it is, away from the camp before I decided to catch a train. Well, the first few days, I tell you, I was very nervous, and they'd come round and checkin' out on you, because I thought I'll get found out for sure, but after three days the confidence was sky high. I said, 'Hello, I'm through'.

> I think you developed a ploy to avoid any conversation, because you thought your German didn't quite measure up.

Yes, I had to do something because I got caught before on this - unfortunate one chappy come from the next village. So this time I decided I'd put on I had throat problem. And I used to give them a smile and point to my throat to say I couldn't talk.

> It seems, in a way, such an obvious thing, and in a sense so suspicious, and yet nobody woke up to your ploy.

Well, quite a few tried to employ me in a conversation. I thought they might be tryin' to trap me, but I was very well trained before I left not to let this happen.

> I guess it was a matter, if you could keep going long enough with your dumb routine, they'd lose interest.

This was quite so, because I wasn't on the train that long before I got onto another line - the same procedure was going on. There's only short intervals until I got down onto the line where I wanted to go.

> Well, I think you were saying you were about eighty kilometres from the Swiss border when I think you began walking. Is that correct?

That's true, yes. I started to walk at night then. I didn't push it too hard, I took it easy enough, you know. I wasn't going to get caught or wasn't going to take a risk. So eventually I got to the Swiss border and I just looked up and I seen these alps, and I thought, gosh, I've got to walk these.

(5.00) So I picked in between two mounts there, and I climbed up into there. I was tryin' to push it a bit hard for a while, so I thought 'Stop'. So I stopped and had a sleep, huddled up in the bushes and everything. So I walked again and I found a little brook there - fresh water running down - and it was good. So I had a wash and a clean up, bath and shower - till I dried - and then I took off again. I'd had a little bit of meat and stuff with me, what I'd scrounged. So I eventually got over the mountain, down the other side. Eventually I got .... About three and a half to four days, and I seen this road and I could see people ahead and I thought, hello, I've made it. Because once I'd got to the Swiss border - I had no plans of Switzerland at all. We had it all from the German side.

So, you didn't of course know precisely where the border was?

I knew on this side, I knew it was, but not the other side. I knew I was into the alps, I knew that, but I didn't know what consisted over the alps. I didn't know how far it stretched across. And I believe it was only a very narrow neck across there. So I walked on, and I could see these uniforms and thought, ah, that will be the Swiss border. That excited me a bit. And I hurried up a bit, and as I got closer I realised that they weren't - but this time I'd .... I was too over- enthusiastic, that the Germans spotted me. So here I am, caught again after all this.

Do you think it was also that perhaps through the general exhaustion and the constant stress of being on the run that your judgment had lost a bit of its finer qualities?

It could have been a bit towards that. I think it was over excitement. I wasn't thinkin' of Germans. I just thought logically it was the Swiss border guard. And I never thought of Germans, because I didn't know whether that was - I thought there was the road down the centre, and I thought that was it. And I thought we'd had to go over mountains to get to another lot. I wasn't sure 'cause I had no plans, and I just logically thought they were Swiss.

So basically, once you walked up to these people was there any chance of escape?

No, none whatsoever. They had the machine-guns on me so it wasn't worth running, not at that stage.

Well, I think you were taken to Heidelberg where you were interrogated for three days. What was your physical condition before you reached Heidelburg after the general, well, all the episodes you'd been through on your escape?

I wasn't bad physically. When I got to Heidelberg there they tried to interrogate me and I wouldn't even talk to them. I still used the no-voice act. And they bashed me around tryin' to make me talk and I wouldn't say anything. They finished up, they gave up on me and they then transferred me to Nuremburg where they did nearly all the interrogations, even the pilots, and everybody.

Once we got there we had the top Gestapo, they really worked on me, and one particular man, he was going to get it out of me one way or another. So after about the third day I said, 'Look, I'm an Australian', I gave them my rank and serial number. So from then on he wanted to

know then how I got the clothes, how I got this, and how got my identifications, and I wouldn't talk.

> Did you say anything at all, or not?

Not after that. I just told him what was my name and rank and serial number and didn't tell him anything.

> It's obviously not a pleasant thing to recall, but you were subjected to quite severe torture, I suppose you would say. Are you willing to describe what happened?

Well, they bashed me around quite a bit, pistol-whipped me, done everything. But that didn't work, so what they did, they took me to another room where they have a machine, sort of like a thumb-screw type of thing, a press. And they clamp your hand and bring the press down onto your fingers. They squashed two of my fingers very bad. One, the thumb was bad and then they got onto the right hand and one index finger there. And then they came back onto the other hand again. And they worked at me, belted me, and I still didn't talk. So this was up to about the eighth or ninth day.

> Is it possible, if I can just break in for a minute, to describe the kind of pain you experienced, or not?

Pain, I tell you, if you get your finger squashed, and somebody touches it the next day, it's sore. But I had to go back through this press treatment again, day after day, on the sore fingers till eventually the pain was excruciatin'. But the Gestapo, he got so mad that he had a knife and he just chopped the end off one of my fingers and that was just too much. I called him all the German so-and-sos, which was a stupid thing, I should not have done. So ...

> What gave you the strength through all this to maintain silence, to say nothing about the camp you'd come from and the escape committee who were back there?

(10.00)Well, if I had've cracked and told them, it meant that a lot of other boys might not have got away too - if they were planning. You couldn't lower the prestige of the camp, or the escape committee back there. I mean, that was part of the training in the first place, you don't disclose how or where or what goes on. I just told them I did it myself.

> The end result of all this, I think, is that you were to be sent to Auschwitz but just before we move there is there anything else that you would like to say about this period - this interrogation in Nuremburg?

Well, while I was there they had pilots, and they were interrogatin' them there, and they gave them a hard time but a lot of them were cracking - you could hear them cracking. And I thought, well, that's not going to happen to me. But the way they go about it, they wouldn't care whether they killed you, they just want to get it out of you. Because I defied this one man, that was why he gave me the punishment. He said, 'Right, I'll make you talk, or you'll die'. He said, 'You're going to Auschwitz'. I never knew what was Auschwitz, I'd heard about it, but didn't know much about it at that time.

> Just looking back on it, the effort in terms of men, German troops, Gestapo tied up, and the rest of it, was there any rational value for the German war effort in getting information from men such as you? Or do you think it was more a matter of pride, prestige, and sheer vindictiveness?

Well, first of all I suppose they thought I might have been a spy. And when they found out I wasn't, then they were .... They took out the vindictiveness on me because I wouldn't talk. And I think this was what upset them more and he was going to make sure he got a result. He didn't want to be a defeated person.

> So it was very much a totally irrational battle of wills.

Exactly right, exactly.

> Well, let's move on to the next period. You went I think by train that was subjected to various Allied attacks, and through that you were sidetracked to Belsen where you spent a week or so. The conditions in Belsen, what do you remember of that?

They were very bad there. You see, you hadn't - well, virtually no food at all. You might get a bit of hot water or something with a swede been through it. That was your soup and a little bit of bread. That's all you got for the day. But in there I was taken in for the first night, and the next day I was put out onto the line-up. What I mean 'a line-up', they had Jews lined up, and they go along the line and they stopped within one of me. And I thought, ah. So they were taken into a room across from where we were and then taken into another one and that was put into the gas chambers, because they had Russians out along the side. I could see them diggin' [inaudible] but they were gassin' them and just buryin' bodies into this hole.

> The Germans, of course, I think were saying that the people selected from these line-ups were in fact going to a better camp. You didn't believe that?

I knew different after bein' there a couple of days, 'cause every time that they put this line up .... They'd have more troops or more Jews coming into the camp all the time, and 'course they didn't have time to know what was going on. So every second day there'd be a line-up which would allow them to bring more Jews in. So I thought I'd have to be smart. And I went up different parts of the line where I could get away from - and they stopped within one or two of me again and they did this for three days. I was starting to panic, I thought my luck'll run out, but the guard happened to take me out on the next day, which I was grateful to get out of there.

> That must be a terrible situation to be placed in, to be in a line with other human beings, knowing that in a sense it's you or them. What was going through your mind at those times?

Look, your mind was nearly a blank. All you was thinkin' of was, how am I going to survive this, this is all you was thinkin' of. See, the whole trouble was, these Jews hadn't been told the right thing. They thought they were going to work camps, goodness knows what, so they virtually didn't mind bein' picked out. And they never knew anything till they got to the gas chamber and that was too late.

I think you were saying also, Don, that there were bodies left rotting around the camp as a deterrent. Can you tell us about that?

Yes, quite a few tried to break out. And they had a wire inside. If you went over there you were shot. A lot of them just deliberately done it, I think, to get out of the situation they were in. And of course the bodies were left there as a reminder for you not to do it. The smell and everything around the camp was atrocious.

(15.00) It must have been appalling. At the end of the period - this week or so in Belsen - what was your physical state? You'd been through this process in Nuremburg, you'd been a week in this camp, how were you at the end of it?

I wasn't too good. I was startin' to deteriorate, and I could feel myself going down. But I thought, this is no good, that's not going to win anything. But then was I going to go in the chamber the next day? You thought, what's going to happen? As I said, once he took me out of there, I was so glad to get away. But I picked up a little bit then knowin' I'd got out of there - until I arrived at Auschwitz.

Well, that was very shortly afterwards. To cover the period in Auschwitz, we've decided that given the story's so difficult to relate and so personal, too, that Don's going to read out from his book that he's in the course of writing, and at the end of that we'll just ask more - have some general questions about the whole period. So over to you.

When I was put into Auschwitz I was put down in underground cells where there was other different nationalities in there with me. We all had individual cells. They'd be about four foot wide and six foot long, so you had no light, it was dark. The only time you seen any light was in the morning when they brought a bit of bread and water. So you had to be quick because if you didn't the rats and that would grab it, steal it, and run off into the dark. Now, to get sleep, the person either side of you had to sing out and keep the rats away. So we had a procedure going right around till everybody got some sleep. It was nerve-rackin' to hear some of the men break down and sometimes a man would have a complete mental collapse and die because he had not enough strength to fight it. When this happened the rats would move in. It only took them two days to clean up the remains. This time we all had our rest because the rats never worried us. So this revived us a little bit until they were back on the scene again.

The guys in there with me, mainly were Polish, but by gee, they were good fellows. We couldn't see each other but we used to converse in German. I'd been in about four weeks and had plenty of time to think. I started to laugh my head off and one of the Poles said, 'Oh, the Aussie's going mad'. 'No, I'm not, I'm okay.'

So I told him the story of what happened at Belsen, how I thought I was smart in positioning myself in the line-up. The Germans knew I was an Australian as I was dressed different to the Jews. I had a French uniform and they took my civilian clothes from me. The Germans used me for a marker. This created a few laughs for a few days. I was kept down there for between seven or eight weeks, 'cause I'd lost count.

When I was taken out of the cell into the daylight I could not see because of the glare. I covered my eyes with a hand, trying to get accustomed to the sunlight, but a guard gave me a clout with a rifle and made me take my hand away. I was put into a hut for one day and then

was made to work with two others to stoke up the fires on the furnace which was used to burn bodies.

The Germans had large gangs diggin' up millions of bodies. Some of the bodies were heaped up, fuel poured over them - diesel - and then set alight. There were four piles of bodies kept continually alight. There was other bodies brought down to us and there were three furnaces with three gangs. We had three men stokin' wood, three men firin' the furnace. The men were showing signs of strain because of the heads kept .... The Germans were showing signs of strain because the heads kept goin' through and giving them different orders, and that made us do twelve-hour shifts. About a month later, nearly Christmas, they made us work harder, plus more men were diggin' up bodies. We realised they were tryin' to destroy the evidence.

If any person became ill and could not work, he would be thrown into the furnace alive. To see this happen and hear the plea for help, plus the screams, sent a lot of men out of their mind. This did not worry the Germans as they did not keep sick men. I lost quite a few men till I got two strong-willed Polish men. If one of us was off-colour the other two would gain enough strength to cover for each other. They were two terrific men. This helped us three to keep our morale up. No person dare answer a guard back because they would have been thrown into the fire alive. The smell was so offensive that it was impregnated into our clothes and body. Even when you tried to eat you could not get away from the smell.

(20.00) In January 1945 the Germans were getting short of food so we got just enough to keep alive. I never thought that a human being could be so cruel and callous to another person as I've experienced through my prisoner of war years. There was all types of atrocities carried out that I could not mention.

Through the International Tracing Service, the Red Cross, and Arolsen West Germany, on record holds approximately thirteen point five million persons who were persecuted by the Germans and through the incarceration in concentration camps.

> Well, thank you for reading that all out. And I think that we should put down for the record, too, that I know that this has been very, very personal, and that you've only recently written this down, I think. Don, I know all this all still affects you very deeply indeed, but perhaps if I can just ask a few general questions about this period in Auschwitz to round off this story. The two Poles you were very close to, when you left the camp was there ever any contact with them again, or not?

No, I never had their name. We no pencils to write names or addresses down so, I only wished on earth I could have traced them.

> Looking back on it at the time, and I know it's gone on affecting you for years since, what impact did this period in Auschwitz, and what you saw there, have on you at the time, and how did it affect you in later life?

It took me years to control myself on thinking of it - of positive thinking of - of very positive thinkin' all round. But it took years before I did control it, because I used to have terrible nightmares, everything. The health wasn't quite so good because of all these problems, because I'd never told anybody what had happened, because who would believe me? So I had to take control of my own system, which I learnt, very positive.

> Yes, I know you were saying before how you've done that in later years. Looking back to the time in Auschwitz itself, how did you and your mates, and the immediate people around you, how did you keep your sanity amidst this barbarity?

Well, it doesn't matter what nationality you are, there's still a certain amount of humour. And I think each one helped each other with a little bit of humour to keep you from going insane. And this is all I could say because the strongest are the ones who survive and it happened to be us.

> There was obviously no way you could have opted out of the tasks you were given, of stoking the furnace and so on. As you said, it would have been your own destruction, but how did you make the jump to somehow distance yourself from what you were doing, knowing that you were actually being forced into abetting, if you like, the destruction of other human beings?

You had no alternate [sic], you just had to do it. I mean, it meant your survival. If you didn't do it, you were thrown in a line, you were burnt, so you had no other way but do it.

> And that was the defence.

That was the defence, that's all you could do. You had no alternate [sic]. But if you dared raise your voice or say one thing, they got rid of ya.

> The physical and the emotional strength that you had that sustained you. Had that developed in the other previous years in the camps, or did it go back further than that?

No, I think I've always been a strong character. But I think we got hardened, more hardened, because the prisoner of war life, I think it hardens you. And as you're going through the different traumas, you became that - you had to put up with it, had to do it, you had no alternate [sic]. And I think that your constitution built up accordingly and you became stronger in yourself.

> And on the purely physical side, at the end of this period in Auschwitz, what was your physical condition? How debilitated were you?

I was down, very low key when they took me out of there. I couldn't eat, because every time you tried to eat you'd bring it up because of the smell that was pregnated [sic] through your system. When they took me out, they took me out in the end of February 1945, and two guards came and got me and took me out of there. I never thought I'd ever get out alive, and they took me back into Germany - one of the guards. And I thought, hello, where's he taking me because I knew our camp where I'd came from was over in Poland. So they took me over to a place just outside of Hanover. And they locked me up there for two or three days and then they let me out and put me into a camp. I went into one of the huts and who should be there but all my mates.

(25.00) These were the people from the camp, the Stalag at Thorn?

Yeah, because the Russians were advancing, the Germans shifted the camp and brought it back into Germany more.

> Right. I think you were given a uniform and in your writing here you said that you felt almost human again. Were you able to eat, or not?

I was hungry but couldn't keep it down. The smell and everything through my system, it just - repugnant. I just couldn't handle it. You got to that stage and that's why I was losing so much weight. You'd eat a little bit here, but every now and again you'd lose it again, the smell would get too offensive.

> Were you able to unburden yourself at all, to share some of the horrors you'd been through with the men who were now around you, or not?

No, I couldn't divulge what had happened to me because none of them had been there, didn't know much about it. All they wanted to know what had happened to me and I said I'd been in hospital, and that's ...

> Was it not possible to say anything to them at all?

How could I? They wouldn't understand, so how can you talk to persons where they didn't understand what went on?

> Do you think people today can understand? I mean, obviously there's been writing about Auschwitz, but can people make the mental jump to understand what went on really, what really went on, or not?

I don't think it's .... It couldn't unless the persons knew exactly what went on. To the average person, no, they wouldn't understand. It's something totally out of character which you would think would happen.

> Well, I think it was in April '45 that you made yet another escape. The Germans, I think, planned to march you into Germany. I think you decided to hide out. Tell us about that.

Yes, they were marchin' all troops away from camps all around Germany, and of course they came to our camp and they started to march them out. Well, I got in underneath the building and dug my way in, and I hid out there for two or three nights until I came out. Then I walked, and the next minute I was seein' Germans flying everywhere and I wondered what was goin' on.

> What was the real purpose of this last escape? What was going to come out of it?

I was trying to get to - get back to which .... I knew the English were coming through, by what we'd heard. And I thought, well, I'll try and make my way through to there. I didn't want to have to walk in. I'd had my days of walking. And eventually I caught up with the English tank division. They took me a ham and gave me a feed and one thing and another. And I went in as interpreter for them for a few days and then they said, 'Oh, I think you better get back', so they sent me back behind the lines.

Were you able to tell any of your story to them, or not?

No, they didn't know what happened. They just knew that I was a prisoner of war, an Aussie, that's all they knew.

I think after this - there must have been great confusion no doubt in Europe generally with men emerging from all over the place and Allies and escaped prisoners and so on. You managed, I think, to commandeer a car and get yourself back to Paris.

I picked up with another Australian, and him and I, we heard that you could get a lot of money for cars back in Paris. So him and I got the cars off a block and pumped the tyres up and one thing and another. And of course there was plenty of fuel on the sides of the road, and we carried one of the containers down, and filled it up. Cleaned the car up, and we got it going. But we weren't allowed to take it, every roadblock stopped us from takin' it through. So we had to give it away.

So you got to Paris independently.

No, what had happened. I'd met up with .... The English took us back further and we met up with a lot of other Australians that they were takin' down to catch a flight to go to London. So in the meantime we landed in Paris. And when they stopped there for a few hours, and I thought, oh well, I might as well have a look around here while I can. So another chappy and I, we shot through and we stopped in Paris. I lost him. And I was in there for about a week, had a look around, met up with people who took me around and showed me as much as they could.

Yes, I think you were rather feted by a family.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A

Identification: this is Ed Stokes, prisoners of war, Don Watt, tape three, side one.

Don, after this episode in Paris, I think you teamed up with an Australian pilot and he got you back to Britain.

Yes. What actually happened, he picked me up. He had to go to Brussels, he had some orders, or message, or something he had to deliver there. So I had another few days there because he wasn't going straight back. So he came and picked me up then, when he was ready to go, and we went back to England. But on his way through he radioed ahead at his base south of London - I forget the name of the area again - I was that excited, I think, I've forgotten what the name was. Anyhow, when they arrived, they deloused me and one thing and another and took me into the hangar. And they had all this food and everything, there it is, I couldn't even eat it I was that excited, plus I couldn't have eaten it anyhow, the way I was. So I felt I had to apologise for not being able to eat and one thing and another. I couldn't tell them why.

No doubt they understood at least, well, I'd imagine it was quite common with prisoners of war. You went down, I think, to Eastbourne where the Australian forces had a headquarters. The debriefing that occurred there, how detailed was it? How much did they probe into exactly what had happened to you?

Not so much with me because when they tried to debrief me: 'Look, you wouldn't understand if I told you', and I said, 'I'm just not in the mood to tell you'. I said, 'You wouldn't understand one thing if I told you, so give it a miss'. But when I went down further to the camp there, all the boys there were goin' to have all our blokes doin' parade ground duties. I said, 'Look, you're going to have a riot, just give 'em leave and get it out of their system. We don't want any parade ground. We've had that.' So everybody that kept arrivin' in, all they'd do, they'd put 'em through a bit of a medical, and see if they were okay and then send them off.

To get a bit of relaxation and get away from it. The medical that you had, do you remember how detailed that was? What did they look into?

Yes, they went over me very thorough. And when I told the doctor, I said, 'Look, I can't eat. I just can't keep anythin' down', so he advised me to go down and get onto the Guinness' Stout. So I went down I used to have - oh, I drank that for a couple of weeks or more.

Could you keep it down?

I kept the stout down but couldn't keep a meal down. So we wandered into the English hotels and they had rooms in there where you had your entertainment - little rooms for singalongs and that - and that was when I first smelt perfume. And it was the first penetration I'd had in my nose break through the human flesh smell. I went over to her and I asked her, I said, 'Excuse me, have you got the perfume?.' And she looked at me, and I said, 'I'll tell you tomorrow. Will you be there?' She said, 'Yes'. So the next day I told her a little bit about why I didn't tell her much, just enough to allow her to lend me the perfume. That broke the barrier. Eventually then I was startin' to smell everything else. It was startin', I suppose, wearin' out of the system, too. Whether the perfume started, I suppose - give me the scent. So from then on I started to eat.

And could you then keep your food down?

I was keeping a little bit down and each day was getting stronger until eventually I kept it down.

The period in England that you spent, I think, was about three months before you came back. By the time you left England had the worst horrors of Auschwitz and all the rest of it faded away a little, or not?

No, it hadn't quite faded away but that was still very strong in the mind. You just couldn't get away from it. It took years when I got here, when I got back to Australia, before I took control of it.

We'll perhaps come to that in a moment. We might skate over the voyage home. But arriving back in Australia - just going back to the beginning, your mother had been very sorry to see you go - how much contact had she had

during this whole period? Had she known you'd been taken prisoner and was safe, or not?

Yes, she was notified by the Australian Army and so forth that I was taken prisoner. Then I had a few letters early in the piece but the latter stages I was deprived of writing, plus through my other adventures, that I never had any more mail and no more Red Cross parcels either. So she hadn't heard of me for over two years - three years nearly.

What had been the impact on her of this mystery as to your whereabouts?

(5.00) Well, she kept faith, she knew that I'd be alive. She had great faith. The only time that .... When she found out, is when I arrived in England I sent a cable straight home to her to say, hey, I'm okay.

That must have been a wonderful thing for her to receive. And the reunion with your mother, where did you meet her, and how did all that go?

When I arrived home Mother was bedridden by this time through bad health and worry, I suppose. A couple of days home, I had her out of bed - she was so excited. So was I.

That's a lovely memory. And did she overcome all that? Did she pick up, or not?

No, she finished up with bronchial asthma, and heart problems and what have you. And we finished up - she lasted a few years, not very long after.

That's sad. Don, I know your life since hasn't always been easy. You were telling me about some of the different jobs you've had and so on. But it seems now you've got a very positive out look on all this, and these events that happened so long ago. What's helped you to achieve that point?

Well, I think since I've unloaded it from my system. What happened, through the Reparations Committee, they put out an article in the paper in 1988. And this is when I conferred to my wife. I said, 'Hey, I've been in one of those', and she pestered me until I wrote a letter. Now it was in 1990 by the time Rear-Admiral Ralph, came up here to 46 Boyd Street, at my house here, and he interviewed me. And he told me he was head of the Reparations Committee. And he said he only had two others to convince about my eligibility and that. And he said, 'If they don't answer you, I'll have to sack them'. [Inaudible]. So that through unloading with him, everything lifted from me.

I had a mental breakdown, I cried for a week, and it would be a month or more after, before my nerves settled down again. But in the meantime, when I wrote that letter, I developed diarrhoea, and I had that for over eighteen months. And I've been up to Greenslopes, to the hospital up there, the Repat. They had professors everybody, couldn't find out what was wrong. What had happened, apparently it got into my subconscious mind and upset the whole nerve system inside and I wasn't aware of it.

Once I unloaded everything - conveyed everything .... And then I started to write - and I wrote it all out of my system. It was a jumble, the first couple of books, now I'm rewriting it. Now, I can talk about it. I couldn't talk about it once.

> Yes, well, there's really something there in those books you've been working on. That's interesting about those connections between mind and body. Looking back on it now from the position now, do you attach any blame, do you hold any hate?

What's the good of hating. It's happened, hating's not going to help it. You can't blame the young persons. It's nothing to do with them. It was the old persons who developed this persecution against you. I mean, the troops, German prisoners of war and so forth, out here in Australia, they never got treated like that. They were treated like human beings. This, I couldn't understand. I mean they must have got letters back somewhere along the line. You thought that the message would have gone across, that they would have treated us better. But no, I haven't got any hate. I mean, what's the good of it.

> Right. And regrets, are there any regrets in terms of the actions you took during the war? For example, is there any regret about your escape attempts, that I suppose did lead to your period in Auschwitz?

No, it's just natural instinct that you would escape. It's part of your duty to escape, to upset the Germans. That was part of the agreement, you're trained and taught that. So it was just a natural instinct, you did it.

> Some people could do it, some people couldn't do it.

Well, I suppose that a lot of people too frightened to try, I suppose. But then I might have been stupid trying, too, but it was an experience.

> The compensation that's been offered, I think, it's $10,000 to people such as yourself, from the German government, is that adequate, or is it necessary? How do you see it?

(10.00) Well, I think at the time, money wasn't the problem to me, not that - I don't mean I'm financially .... What I'm tryin' to say is, I think it was getting it out of my system, talkin' about it, I think that was worth more than the money. Because I've unloaded, and I feel better in health, and that was one of the best things that ever happened, money couldn't buy that.

> Yes, I'm sure that's true. You do have some good plans for using that money, just tell us about that, and how it affects your emotional situation now, perhaps?

Well, this book I'm writing, I have wrote .... There's fifty years of it now what's happened over in Greece and Crete. There's a fifty year celebration going on over there with the Greek government - have built monuments over there and they wish some of us to come over to help celebrate and whatever. So quite a few Australians are going over. Now, with this war, I don't know whether it's going to upset us, or what's going on, because if there's none, or if it's only a short war, or whatever, I don't know. We're supposed to be going over in May. But I was hoping to get there because then I can finish off my book by fifty years later of talking about the country as it is now and what it was then, because Crete was only, what, a bush track right through an island. Now, I believe it's a terrific holiday place.

How does it make you feel Don, to think that at this very moment, in the Middle East, in the Persian Gulf region, there are people whose human motives behaviour may not be that different to some of the events that occurred, or the motives of people in Germany during the second world war? What does it make you think about human beings?

Well, it seems like power seems to be a destructive thing. And they get power over people, and this is happening now with Saddam. I mean, what's he done? He tried the nerve gas on his own people. So how do you answer that question. I think it answers itself. Power overrides everything.

I don't know the answers myself. Just finally, a question I put to everybody. Is there anything you feel you'd like to add to this taped record of your period in the war, and in particular your POW experiences, that you feel has not been said?

No, well, what's happening. You see, I'm writing the book and I think I've answered it all in that. To answer a question such as - has got to be described, and I think I've gone through it, describing as much as possible on this tape. I'd like to describe the lot but I think my book will explain the rest of it, which will answer those questions is for.

Right. Well, there's certainly a lot there already written down. Don, for a particularly long session, and especially given the emotional nature of it all, thank you very much on behalf of the War Memorial for making this tape.

Thank you very much, too. I appreciate the way you conducted your message across.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW