



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is an item recorded with George Roberts about the 2/4th Australian General Hospital, recorded on 18th October, 1990.

George Roberts, where and when were you born?

Spring Mount. About three miles out of Creswick, and that's about fifteen miles from Ballarat. Born on a country home.

When, what was the date?

The 12th of the 18th [sic], 1900, I suppose it would be.

What about your parents, tell us a bit about what sort of people they were?

Oh, my father was a - worked on farms, he was a very clever man. He was an authority on all steam engines, and threshing machines, and any sort of machinery. He could make any - build stables, lofts, sheds, anything at all. Very good blacksmith, very clever engineer. Spent most of his time working, managing farms for Ross's and Leischman's, and that, up around the Newlyn district, out from Ballarat.

As a father, was he a stern man?

Oh yes, very strict. Yes, I was one of eight children, four boys, and four girls.

Where did you come?

I was the second son, and the fifth child.

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

Oh, very lovely. Fine, Christian woman. Lovely person.

Was churchgoing then a part of your childhood?

Yes. Oh yes, very much so. Yes, we were very - we had a wonderful mother. Like - hard life in those days, my father would be away on the threshing machine sometimes, and we only had tankwater those days, and no electricity, though we had hurricane lamps, candles. Later on we got a - what we called a Tilly lamp, which had a mantle, that was a big step up.

But we often used to have to cart water from out the front gully. It was fed by a spring, and that was for slop water. And then we'd have to cart water from a spring about three-quarters of a mile, for drinking water. That often happened.

Would you try and supplement the food on the table by catching rabbits and that sort of thing?

Oh no, we always had plenty of food, like my father worked, and my mother was a wonderful cook, really terrific cook. We had in our little home, it was only a poor colonial type of house, and it had open fireplace, and it had a baker's oven built on the side. And each Friday she used to - oh, we'd go down to Creswick, and get yeast from - Bowley's, the baker in Creswick, and she'd bake all day. We'd get special wattle wood, and special wood, to heat this oven up white hot, and then she'd bake all the different things, cakes, and buns, and all sorts of food. She was a marvellous cook, my mother.

Were you on a farm as such?

Oh well, Roberts' had a farm. But those days the eldest son inherited the farm, and my father had his own home. And I left school at, well, I think I was about thirteen and seven months. Once you got your merit certificate those days.

We started off, in the first world war, we had an old teacher called John White, he was a man that should have been retired, he was seventy-five. But he had to teach at Spring Mount School from the first grade up to the eighth all the classes. And he was far past it, but there was no teachers available during the first world war. And every afternoon he religiously went to sleep, (laughs). About two o'clock, half past two, put his head down and away we used to go then. And he'd wake up, and we'd be all gone.

(5.00) You'd sneak out?

Oh we'd all just go. And the big elder boys, my brother Ralph, and Cliff Slade, they were all characters. And poor old Johnnie used to wear those lovely tussore silk coats, his wife'd do them up. And they'd dip their pen in his ink, there's red ink one end of the desk in the little hole, and black the other, and they'd flick it all over his coat. And he'd come back raging mad the next day (laughs), and everybody'd get the strap, whether you're big or little, and, oh, it'd welt around your hand, you know, and make a terrific bruise, and ....

Were they hard times as such, or generally did you enjoy your childhood?

Oh we enjoyed life to the full. Like, we did - we learnt so many things. We learnt how to shoot out of guns, you know, my father had a single shotgun. All the young chaps around had rifles, single shot, or repeaters. And we knew how to use firearms, and we learnt how to ride horses when you're young. And ride goats. And we used to have buck jumping shows. We'd go over, and put a plank rope on an old white horse. Oh no, we had a whale of a time.

And we knew all about fishing, we'd go out - in that particular part the Chinamen built lots of dams, in the early days of goldmining. Like all through Creswick, Ballarat, was very rich in alluvial gold. And there was big dams, Eden's Dam, and Brogue's Dam. And they were lousy with fish. You know. Perch, English perch, and quite a few trout.

How would you catch them?

Oh, lines. On our way out we'd pick a sapling and just - we only had an ordinary cord line, with a bit of catgut on the end, and a floater. We always used to have to have the floater, and hooks, and - oh we'd catch - if they came on the bite just before a thunderstorm you could catch them one after another. Perch, and occasionally we'd catch a trout, but that was by accident, you know. (Laughs.) It was just - no skill attached to it. But we'd catch lots of fish, and all those dams were teasing - teeming with fish. English perch, and ....

Was it a family that had members go off to the first world war?

No. My father and none of his brothers went to the first world war.

Was that because of a particular view about the nature of war, or ...?

Oh no, I don't think so. There was quite a lot, I can remember quite a lot of the chaps around there went to the war. I can remember as plain as yesterday all the women out, my mother, and Smith's next door, and Manans, and Flynns, and all these - Jim, and Jack Murphy going off to the first world war in 1915. And we were looking through the picket fences, you know.

And I think what brought it to our minds, or it stood in our minds so real, that all the women were crying. Like everybody's very close in the country, and everybody knows one another, and they're very - like, if you wanted to borrow something, you just went and borrowed it, if you were short of anything, you just - there was never any troubles that way.

Did your father ever discuss the war? Was his not going a matter of, with eight children it just would have been impossible for your mother to manage?

Oh, well he was always so busy, like on farms, looking after - managed Leishman, as I said, farm, and Ross's farm. And he used to look after the threshing machines, and oh, he was well, you know, occupied, I don't think he was very interested in going to the war. First world war.

(10.00) Up to the time of your merit certificate, had you any particular ideas about what you were going to do with your life?

Not really. Well we had no option. Like I went to work on Roberts' farm actually. Uncle Joe inherited, like the eldest son, the farm came to him, and he had the farm, and it was quite a good property, like he had - I think there was eight or nine draught horses. And big - we used to cart a lot of wood out of the bush for all different people.

In those days people'd go and get a block. You'd go down to Creswick, and there was a forestry commission chap, and he'd come out, it was something like a miner's licence, he'd put a peg there, and a peg there, and then he'd have it - marks this way, and it was a square. And in that square he'd come out with a little sort of a hammer-type of thing, and it had - take a scallop out, out the tree. And that was the only tree that you could chop down. You couldn't just go and chop everything. And they'd clean the forest out that way.

And it was all cut in five foot lengths. And Uncle Joe, we used to do - cart a lot of that out. In the days. We had a big wood wagon, it was extra big. And we had to put a long perch pole on it, between the front and back wheels, and you put five - three five foot lengths, that made it about fifteen to sixteen foot long. And then you had an extension, oh, it would be much higher, about five or six feet higher than this roof. And we'd have an extension break, and then you'd put chains across the front and the back, to stop it slipping. Because where we was carting - I don't know if you've been through Ballarat, and the Great Dividing Range, have you been through there? It's very steep, and you'd be going down like that, and your horses'd be - two sitting back in the breeching, you'd have the brake on, and then ...

Were there any accidents, people were injured?

Oh no, they were wonderful, my Uncle Joe and my father were wonderful horsemen, like I can - it was a real art, there was no track, you just weaved your way through to the bottom, and out, with a big load of wood.

Incidentally, with it being an area of alluvial gold, did you ever fossick, were the family into looking for gold?

Oh yes, we did a lot of - in the Depression days we went back. Like I came down - oh, there was bad days in 1927, very bad, Uncle Joe had a couple of hundred acres, and he went in with Butler brothers, broke up new country, through at the foot of Forest Hill, and, I don't know if

you know that country, right from Springbank, Bungaree, Newlyns and Dean, it's wonderful chocolate soil. And they broke up three paddocks. And we had one ton - one big pit that had over two hundred ton in it. And we paid to get them dug, we put them in the pit, and when we came to sell them down at Newlyn's Station we could only get thirty shillings for a ton. Sixteen big bags, that's what it was going to get for us.

Naturally they just rotted. Instead of making money, he was going to lose money, by picking them over, putting them in new bags, paying freight, weighbridge down at Newlyn Station, instead of making money he was going to be out of pocket. So not only hundreds of tons, but thousands of tons right through there, it just rotted.

So was it that difficulty that led you to try fossicking?

Yes, that - yes, and that was in - no, in 1927, and my brother knew that I was working there. I used to do all the work, I'd be up, milk about six to eight, ten cows in the morning, and we'd separate and feed the pigs, and clean out stables. And that was the seven day-a-week job. You had to still do all the jobs, and you had to go back Sunday, and if you played football, I played with Newlyn and local, against Clunes, and Creswick, and all those, you still had to go back and milk the cows (laughs), at night, and Sunday.

Ralph, my eldest brother, came down when he was quite young, fortunately I had an uncle in a big way, Garretts, construction builders, and he served his time as the apprenticeship, carpentry.

He said to me, 'Would you ever think about coming down and learning a trade?', and I said, 'I'll be down tomorrow, if I ...'. And he said, 'Well, I can get you a job as an apprentice plumber. You might have to wait six months', he said, 'but I can get you a job straight away as an apprentice solid plasterer.' I said, 'I'll be down next week'.

So I just packed up, and came down. And that was in 1927, when that bad year where everything, you know, you couldn't sell hay, there was not hundreds of tons, there was thousands and thousands of tons of hay right through, oh, Bungaree, Newlyn, Dean, Smeaton, there was a big hay growing country right through, those days, because there was all horses in those - long before the time of the tractors et cetera.

So I came down and started to learn a trade. And I just served about - 1927, I got about a year and a half, not two years, and the Depression started to come. You know, in 1929 it didn't matter how good a tradesman, or, (laughs), what you were, you was - everybody with the building trade was out of work. So back to the bush again.

Fortunately there was a purpose in it all, I'd learnt all how to dig potatoes, and drive teams of horses, and load hay on wagons, and carting, and do everything, so that was no trouble.

Was it during those Depression years you tried the fossicking?

Oh yes, we used to do a bit of prospecting down the gullies, and that, and ...

Any luck?

Beg your pardon?

(15.00) Did you have any luck with it?

Oh yes, we - there was one strange thing happened, we nearly finished up in jail over it. There was my younger brother, Rupert, and a boy called Vince Flynn, and myself. Everybody used to talk about a little bit of solid, I don't know if - that means that it hasn't been worked, in the gutter, where the alluvial gold goes down into a gutter. And of course there's two sorts of gold, there's alluvial, and then there's quartz.

So we thought, 'Oh well, why not?'. And it was on - I don't know if you know the road out through Creswick through to Daylesford particularly do you? It's the Midlands Highway now, but those days there was - most of the roads were - you'd come down Spring Mountain, and there was a big S-bend, and there was a bridge, and it was under this bridge where this solid was. So we thought, 'Oh well, why not'.

So we got down there, and we couldn't use what we called a windlass, you know, it has a handle each end, on a big sort of a log that winds up, there wasn't room for that. So we got to work, and we could work, you know, we was used to work. So I was about nineteen, and the others were a bit younger.

And we dug this shaft, and we got down, it was solid. And we thought, 'Oh, beauty', you know, 'we'll get some gold here'. And you wouldn't believe, it rained that night, it poured rain (laughs), and we had the dirt - we were very limited each side of the bridge, we could only put a certain amount of dirt, and we had it piled up. And it banked up right up the creek, and when we came the next morning, the blooming half was - I was up to my waist here, I was the eldest one, trying to clean out the bottom, we got quite a few penny weight. But we would have got ounces of gold there, it was solid. Beautiful gold. I don't know if you know, alluvial gold, it rolls, you know, and it's round, and heavy.

My father used to do a lot down the back, and he had a big dam up further in the back creek, as we used to call it, and he had a big funnel that went right through the bank, and he had a sort of a big piece of steel fixed on a thing, and he used to pull it, he'd tug it up, and then he'd pull it out, and he'd dig all the sides of the bank in, and let the pressure of the water, as it swooshed down this big dam, it'd wash it, and then the gold would go down into the bottom,

and sorted it out. It did the work. Which was a good idea. He used to have, oh, little Vaseline jars full of beautiful gold like that. Alluvial gold.

So, with the end of the depression, when did you get back to other work?

Well, what happened then, when I went up there, all the locals used to go up fruit picking to Mildura, so I went up with them, in 1931, and 1932, I went up there. And then in 1933, you always picked at the same blocks out at South [Labeen?], and Merbein, and the people that these chaps picked for was people that - named Bromleigh, and old Lionel Barton. He was a pretty wealthy Englishman, they came out in the early days, and settled there at fruit blocks, and ....

And in 1933 the old chap, I got to know him fairly well, old Tom Bromleigh, and he owned two blocks, and Lionel had three, and they had ten acres of citrus. That was navel oranges, and valencias, and a few lemon trees. And he asked me, did I have anything to go back to? And I said, 'Not really', I said, it was only casual work back there those days, like harvesting, and working on threshing machines.

So he said, 'Would you like to stop on, and look after the house, you can live in the house?'. And I said, 'Oh yes, I wouldn't mind'. And the place, of course Mildura was booming then, the dried fruit industry, they all had new cars, and they were riding on a wave, you know, in luxury. And they all used to go down to Victor Harbour in South Australia and all different places for their holidays.

So I looked after the place, but, oh, when I went there it was just like a typical place, nobody did anything, and it was shocking conditions. So I made myself something to do, I only used to have to milk the cows, and shake off a few racks that were left, most of the fruit was in the packing shed, and then we put it in sweat boxes, and it would go off to Merbein packing shed.

And so the rest of the day, so I cleaned up, there was weeds all around the house, so I cleaned up around the house, and put the old horse in the single-furrow plough, and ploughed up - their house was back up about a hundred yards off the road, and ploughed that up, and harrowed it, and cleaned it up. And cleaned all the back up.

(20.00) And the front garden was a mess, so I cleaned it up. And there was - in a shed up the back there was blood and bone, and super, and all sorts, so I threw it all over the front lawn. And there was enough water in the irrigation channel to plough a furrow down around the orange trees next door, and flooded the front lawn, and when they came back they hardly knew the place. It was all cleaned back in the back.

So he asked me - then he said, 'Have you anything to go back to?', and I said, 'No, not really'. And, 'Well', he said, 'we'll teach you the whole', you know, how to - you spur prune for

currants, and gourdoes, and Waltham Cross, and all the others, the cane pruned. I don't know if you know anything about Mildura, but they bring the canes out, and you have about seven to each vine, and you twist them along. Like about - along - if you become quite good you just hold it up the wire. When you first start you're a bit, you know, and then you get bold, and you hold them, and you can do it, and you become quite an expert at it. So I stopped on there for three years.

And I heard about this famous South Merbein football team, they were a team of Germans. So I thought, 'Oh well', I played footie when I was fourteen, in combined teams in Ballarat, with big - the Nicholls brothers, Charlie, and Roy, and Percy, they - Charlie was the father of John Nicholls that played for Carlton. So I thought, 'Oh, I might go over and have a game of footie with South'. And they received me with open arms, because they were all big Germans, all giants, you know. I've never seen such big men in all my life.

So you were to be a rover, were you?

Oh yes, I was a rover, and played on the wing, and sometimes I'd play in the back pocket, pick up the rovers, and I could play anywhere. And so I played - stopped on there for, oh, three years then, I think it was about '33, '34, and '35. And then the building trade started to pick up.

Well we had a good time, we played tennis, all very keen on tennis, and cricket, and football, and I used to play in the combined teams, in the cricket team in Mildura. There was only one oval. Mildura had a lovely oval, and all the rest - our oval out at South [Labeen?], and Merbein, and them, were all just dirt. Rubble, and ....

I remember once they let Merrinee, out - that's west of South Merbein, right out in the new mallee, they came in one year, and of course I was a city slicker, and I went out there in a nice grey suit, and all dressed up, (laughs). And we went - I thought they said they was going out in the bus, and we went out in the back of Thomson's truck. Out to this new mallee, it was about twenty mile out, and it was dust.

And I thought I - they hadn't - like you played, and then you was covered in dust, and I said, 'Where's the showers?', and they laughed. There was no showers, no water to have a shower. So, oh, talk about, you should have seen that suit, it was wrecked. (Laughter.) But, oh, oh no, we had some good times up there.

What were you doing then, just before the war?

Well then I came back, and my brother, like because I had - I told you that I had an uncle in a fairly big way, building. They built, oh, half Maribyrnong, and the Ford shop. And then they

built all the - my uncle built the new flying officers' mess at Point Cook. And that's where I first started.

Ralph said, 'Oh the building trade's starting to pick up, would you like to come down?.' He said, 'You can't start as an apprentice', see I'd started this apprenticeship, but that fizzled during the Depression. So he said, 'If you like you can come back, I can get you a job with a chap called Fred Eshelford, as a solid plasterer'.

And fortunately he had a terrific tradesman, Bob Bishop, and Norm. And I went down to work with him. And once you've learnt to use tools, you soon get into the way of it again even though you've been from it for years.

So we worked there, at the officers' mess. And then our next job when - with Bob Bishop - he was a master tradesman, oh, he could do all these old skirting, and architraves, and arches, and, what do you call it? Keystone, underneath. And so I was fortunate to get with him.

(25.00) We went and restored 'Ripponlea', the ballroom there, we was there for six months restoring that. Like that was the time when it was in all its glory. Ben Nathan lived there, and he had a wonderful collection of orchids. That's all he did, he spent his lifetime all around the world, in America, and up the Philippines, and like Borneo, and all where there's - Borneo. And he had about - I think he had about a dozen hothouses with nothing else but orchids. And then he had the big, oh, grounds were glorious those days, like the ...

And that was a commercial proposition for him was it, the orchids?

Yes. Oh no, he was very wealthy. The Nathans of 'Ripponlea', oh, it was a beautiful place, there was - if you'd look out the front, and there would be peacocks running around, and kangaroos, and squirrels. Oh, it went those days from 'Ripponlea' - have you been to 'Ripponlea' at all? It went right down to Elsternwick, before the ABC took off the corner, and, oh, they had twenty-odd gardeners in those days, and it was beautiful.

What was the background of the family money, do you know, offhand?

Oh, they were in - Jewish people, of course they had their money tied up in all sorts of places, the same like Buckley and Nunns, and all those, they'd be behind all these different Jewish people. Like Myers were Jewish people, and the Nathans. They were marvellous people to work for though. Nothing uppish, and nothing stylish about them.

And there was two girls, and the - the Nathan girls married Joneses. And one lived in the 'Ripponlea' home those days, and the other one lived over the other side of Hotham Street, in a lodge, a beautiful big old - a beautiful new home it was.

When did you first start to get an impression that there was going to be a war, and that Australia would be caught up?

Oh well - no, well there was - I suppose there was - that was in '45, when I worked there. Well everything pointed to war, even, I suppose, that officers' mess at Point Cook, that was - and then all the jobs at the ordnance factory, it was completed, and then right down the cordite factory. Garretts built all these sawtooth roofs, like for all the - well it everything indicated that there was going to be something, a war, everything was for the defence in those days. Nothing other - no other work was done.

Did it impress you that this meant that there was war coming?

Oh well, you could sense that it was. Like you'd read in the papers and I always read the papers, and buy the - we always got the *Age* up the country, you know, it was thrown out, and we all learnt to read properly, (laughs), through getting the paper, I think. All of us read about the football teams, you know. Collingwood, you knew it was Collingwood, all the season when you was two or three, you know. So, oh I think everybody knew that there was something going to happen in the ...

What was the general feeling, did that create a sense of anxiety, or did people feel that, 'Oh, Australia should get there, and Australia will show them', was there that sort of feeling?

Well Australians have got a different outlook on things. They're not a worrying people, like the English people, they're more a happy-go-lucky sort of people. You just - whatever the conditions are, you just take it in your stride, and you just don't do, you don't worry much about it.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B.

Identification: This is side two of tape one, of the interview with George Roberts, recorded on 18th October, 1990, about the 2/4th AGH.

So how did you come to join up?

Well what made me join up, I was working back in the building trade, and my brother - I used to live with the uncle in Whitby House, Whitby Street, West Brunswick, Melbourne. And his wife became - had to go to have an operation, and we left, Jack and I, my young brother, and went to a boarding house.

Rupert and Jack worked at Melford Motors, when it was first built, when V8s first come out, - when Melford Motors was first built. And they were working there. When they started to - well war was imminent then, I think it was really started. And Jack and another chap went down from Melford Motors to join up, and he was the only one that was accepted, like they were pretty fussy. You had to be about five foot nine, I'd say, those days.

What are you?

I'm only five foot six. But I thought, 'Well' - I drove him down to - off on his final leave, down to Spencer Street, and he was going back to Pucka, and they caught the first boat, the first lot that went overseas on the *Empress of Britain*. It came in, and I remember watching it somewhere, I was walking down Point Nepean Road somewhere, and I could see the boat out, and he sailed with that. And I thought, 'Well there's - he's gone off to the war', and the only thing I was thankful for, that my mother had passed away. She'd died, she was walking down the road to catch a train to Ballarat, and died on the side of the road, just dropped dead.

And I thought, 'Well', - you know, mothers worry about their children, boys and that, going off to war, - and I thought, 'Well that's a good thing that Mum's not here, to ...'. Because men don't worry so - my father wouldn't be worried so much. He wouldn't - oh, he'd say, you know.

Had you actually tried to enlist at that time, and been knocked back, because you were too short.

Yes, so then I went down, and we were working, oh it was all defence work, I was doing a hospital, I had a car, I'd bought a nice little Vauxhall Roadster 614, a beautiful little bus, for 160 pound. That was at Melford Motors. Some lady from Toorak changed - traded it in, and my brother said, 'Ooh, it's good, you can get it for 160 pound'.

And I had a bit of money. We'd worked at 'Ripponlea', and then we'd worked up at Syme's place, that's right, that was the last job. Syme's old home, right up in the river flats. And there was a chap Feelan, a very rich grazier from - he had two cattle stations in Queensland, one in New South. And he wanted to bring all his bullocks down to top them up on the river flats. It was beautiful, hundreds and hundreds of acres, on the river, top of the Yarra there. It belonged to Syme. So he bought the property, and the old home was bluestone, and they wanted it restored.

So then I was with this Bob Bishop, and Norm, and us, and we restored all that - we were there for about six months, it was a good job, we didn't - we had a cook. There were stonemasons, and plasterers, and bricklayers, and painters, and labourers galore, and there was about fifty-odd men there. And they had a big cookhouse, and everything. They had a cook, and we restored all that property.

And that's just when I thought, 'Oh well, I - we came down then, and was doing a hospital at Laverton Garretts had built. And I was taking another tradesman, Alf Woodcraft, and another labourer down there. I had enlisted in May, 1940, but I didn't go in for quite a while, I told them that I had to finish this hospital, so I enlisted at the town hall at ...

(5.00) Was your height a consideration then?

Beg your pardon?

Was your height a consideration at the time you enlisted then?

Was I what?

Was your height, you'd - that you'd?

Oh yes, I was only five foot six, so I ...

Yes, what did they say about that, did that matter?

Oh nothing, well see I said - oh well, I hadn't - I had no great desire to kill anybody in war, I was a Christian, and I thought, 'Well I'll join a medical unit', you know, and I'd heard about the 2/4th AGH being formed, out of all the Collins Street specialists, all the doctors, like little John Devine, and Eric Cooper, and Speirs, and oh, Sinclair, they were all a brilliant lot, Dr Johnston, all the leading specialists. The best lot of doctors that ever went away there. And I thought, 'Oh, that'd be a good unit', and sure enough I was the first one drafted into it.

So I went up to Pucka, and ...

Did you know anything about first aid?

Oh. Well I was always interested. When you played a lot of sport, you were interested in first aid. And I had a younger sister who was a nurse. Oh, I was always interested in first aid, and ....

So what did you start to do at Puckapunyal?

Oh we just went up there, we was over the lines for a while. There was only Butch Barton, and George Forty, and myself there. And then we - we shifted over, Pucka was very primitive

those days. That was in 1940 - the 6th Division had just moved out, and we'd moved in. And there was - we shifted out from the lines, and we lived in tents over near the hospital. The 2/4th AGH hospital was there those - it was pretty primitive those times. But since, I suppose you know, they've built a new one over the other side of the road. Which I didn't - I was supposed to go up there, but I was too crook to go. I was over at - I had to go to Heidelberg to have this spinal operation that I've just had.

So, oh no, I was always interested in medical things. And we just went as orderlies, and we learnt, oh, quite a lot. You know, you - if you've got any savvy, and you're pretty bright, you soon pick up things, and ...

Were you doing army drill, and that sort of side of it as well?

Oh yes, we did a lot of marching all around, and we'd have bivouacs, and - we had a bivouac out to Mount Sugarloaf. We all marched out, you know, just before we went away. And then another one, we had a leapfrog march out to the Eildon Weir, it wasn't like it is now, it was the old Eildon Weir, and there was a football ground out there, and they had a sports. The whole 7th Division went out there, and the 2/4th AGH went out, and all our officers and that, and we'd march, say, ten mile, and then ride ten mile, and then march ten.

We had this big sports out there, we were competing for a cup. I don't know, have you heard of Ivan Vaughan Smith? Well he was out there, and it was his cup that he'd donated.

And I remember our doctors saying, 'Oh well, we've got nobody', you know, 'the 2/4th'. We'd only competed two days, and we were well in the front, we'd won a lot of the sprints, and high jumps. I think I'd jumped five foot nine, three inches higher than myself, and ...

Did that astound people?

Beg your pardon?

Did that amaze people, that you could jump more than your height?

Oh yes. Oh well we had a sports arena at home when we were kids. We had - all the kids in the district would come around, and we'd have Olympic Games, hopsteps, and jump, and long jump, and broad jump, and sprints, and high jump, and everything, you know.

So did the 2/4th finish up winning the cup?

No, well we didn't. We were out in front, but we got - it was just prior to we embarked to go away, and we had to come back straight away, and catch a train back the next day down to Station Pier. And caught the - we were in the big convoy, the *Mauretania* we went away on, the 2/4th.

Did you get Pucka Throat during your time at Puckapunyal?

No, no, I didn't have it. A lot of them had it.

(10.00) Well what about urinary tract infection, I gather that - upper respiratory infection rather, I gather that was ...?

No, no, I never had anything like that. I was always very healthy. Extremely healthy, and fit. I was always a fitness fanatic. Like when we were kids we used to have to run, from our place into Creswick was three mile, to get the messages, and back again. And we'd go down Saturday morning for Mum.

And then one day I remember she said, 'Oh', she said, 'I've forgotten something', and 'would you go back again?'. And away you went again. My mother was that sort, you'd do anything for her. And we got this flour, or sugar, or whatever it was. And then went back again in the afternoon to play football, and then back again at night. So that was four times, three miles each way, and we never thought anything of it.

Well, if you were particularly fit, it's not unusual to find some short men who are also very aggressive, it seems to be a response to their size, were you an aggressive character as well?

Oh yes, very strong physically, you know, and particularly strong, because we were brought up to do hard work. And being a tradesman, you're using tools, you're gripping things tight, you know. And I know when I was over at the hospital the nurses used to say, when I had this back, 'Grip me', (laughs), and I used to catch their hands, go like that, I've got a terrific grip as - you can feel it here. I can ...

Yes.

... I can, that's only half - I could squeeze your fingers. So using tools, and being very physically fit, all my life, you'd work - we were born to work, I think, we ....

Did you get into any strife at Puckapunyal, have bigger fellows who'd try and push you around because you were a bit smaller, anything like that?

I remember there was one chap - oh no, it was up Mildura we had a big bully of a chap, fruit picking, he was a big fellow, and he was boasting what he could do, he was a lout. And I picked him up in a crutch hold, like lightning, and dumped him down on his back, and knocked the wind right out of him. (Laughs.) We was always wrestling, and fighting, home, my father used to - we used to have boxing gloves. You know, all around, the locals would have boxing gloves.

What about Puckapunyal, was there any trouble, were there ever fights, or that sort of thing, amongst the men there?

Oh no. Well with the medical unit you get a very good type of - mostly a fairly good type of chaps. Rather than the - we had quite a few chemists, there was three, and there was only room for two. There was Frank Johnston, he was there, and had a place in Bell Street, near Gilbert Road. And then there was Joe Doyle, and there was somebody else.

Oh no, we had all walks of life, we had old Mac, he was a professor at the Ormond College. Like he was a great help in Tobruk, in the sense that he could speak about fourteen different languages fluently, and he was good to talk to the Germans and Italians and all that sort of thing. So you get a big cross-section. We had quite a few schoolteachers.

You've mentioned that in some respects you were getting the elite of the medical world. Was there a sense of elitism about the doctors, were they a bit aloof in terms of their relations with the orderlies?

No, very down-to-earth. You wouldn't have met nicer chaps than Charlie Littlejohn, he was a most brilliant man. Like he, and Major Tyrer, and Speirs, and Renou, they all served in the first world war. They were, no, entirely different, they'd show anything to you.

If you wanted to learn, they'd go to no end of trouble to show you why they did it. Of course later on you'll find that we had all the nurses attached to us, and when we went away we - it was in that convoy, and there was the *Queen Mary*, and the *Aquitania*, and *Dominion Monarch*, and *Awatea*. And we were on the *Mauretania*, and they sailed right down on the east side of Tassie, and we went down on the west side, and picked them right up. We didn't go through the Bass Strait, because there was all the submarines and that sort of thing out, and they didn't know what was what. So we circled, went right around down there, and come into Fremantle there.

What sort of relations did you have with the doctors in terms of the way you'd address each other, would the doctors be addressed as 'sir', or ...

Well if there was any ceremonial parades, and sort of parades, you'd treat them as doctors, and majors, and colonels - nearly all of our doctors, there was no one under the rank of

captain. They were nearly all majors. Major Schwartz, and Major Chambers, and Major Littlejohn, and - or Colonel Littlejohn he was, he was the head. Colonel Littlejohn was head of the surgical side, and Eric Cooper, a very brilliant man, he passed through the Melbourne University the highest that any doctor had been through those days, he was on the medical. And Alec Sinclair, and Tommy Steel. No, they were really wonderful men.

Around the wards how would you address them?

Oh, well they'd talk to you and they'd say when - I don't know ....

Was it first names, or ...?

Yes.

(15.00) Would you use their first names?

Oh yes. If you were talking to Charlie, you'd call him, 'Charlie', you'd say, 'Call me George', and - oh no, they were wonderful chaps. Particularly Charlie Littlejohn. I don't know what - how we'd have got on in Tobruk, only for him. Like he stood head and shoulders over the others. He was a Rhodes Scholar, and a brilliant athlete, and represented Australia in the Olympic Games as an oarsman. No, they were great.

What about the nursing staff, was there a more formal relationship with the matrons, and the nurses?

Oh well, we didn't see much of our nurses, because, I suppose you know, when we left to go up to Tobruk, we were supposed - we left Alexandria, and we were supposed to - we went on the - what we called the *Knight of Malta*, it was a small boat. We had all our equipment, and all the men, and the sergeants. By accident, the nurses, well it was a misunderstanding, they should have been on the boat too. And it was only when we left Alex, which was supposed to be an eight-hour trip, from Alexandria, the naval base, up to Tobruk.

And we got into this most violent storm, I suppose you've heard all about it. (Laughs.) And oh, dear me, look we're just out from the boom gates, and the storm came up, and it blasted - oh, we were down in the forward hold, all of the men, and it was - the sergeants and officers were up top. And we were down there all Friday night, and all day Saturday, and Saturday night, all day Sunday.

And about Saturday afternoon, late, I think John Horan, one of our doctors came down. And, oh - and we got up top, and went up there, there was slushing about in the water, there was

about three foot of water in the hold, and things were moving and floating around. And everybody's thinks, just hear screaming, (laughs), 'She's sinking', and oh, it was ...

Were people actually frightened that it was going to sink?

Oh, well no, I was the sort - I never thought much about it.

Were you pretty sick as well, seasick?

Oh, violently sick. Like everybody was sick, yes. Sick all night. Oh, terrible. We'd retch, and retch. And we got cramps, from retching, and bile, and bringing up, and ....

When John Horan came down, we went out, Saturday afternoon, we climbed up into the top, into the dining-room. And the storm - I've seen waves high, but I've never seen it - like they were up over twenty foot high. And the boat would stand like that, and then it would go like that, and we'd slide all along in the - up in the deck there in the dining-room. And all the chairs, and the front was all smashed in of the *Knight of Malta*.

This went on all Saturday night, Sunday - and then Monday morning, about twenty to four, we heard a bump, and everybody said, 'Thank God', - we'd run aground in a - talk about a miracle - in a lovely sandy little bay. Great high cliffs on either side, like a - nobody would have been saved if we hadn't of ....

And then we had to get off pretty quick, and we lowered a lifeboat down. And everybody left the lifeboat, and we tied a rope before we let it down on one end, on this end. And those who were on the boat was holding it back this way. And others - there was about a dozen of us went off early. We had some good swimmers, and chaps that waded off, and then they towed it backwards and forwards.

We brought in - everybody got off. Of course we couldn't hang about too long there. We stopped, and we had - those who were fit enough, we walked - had to march overland then about - all day practically. Till about three o'clock in the afternoon to pick up the main road between Bardia and Tobruk. And we ....

Was there any concern that you might be caught, and ...?

Well the Germans occupied all the sky, they had - that's why we moved out pretty quick. They left - we had to leave quite a few behind, because they weren't fit enough to travel, some of them were pretty sick. And then we went into Bardia, to a main dressing station, an English main dressing station. And had a good feed, and a clean up, and a shave, an Italian - there's a lot of Italians there, you know, the 6th Division had captured 40,000, there was

Italians everywhere there, and they were pretty harmless. It's alright to say you capture 40,000, but then you've got to feed them, and look after them, and that.

(20.00) And so then we had to - when we came good, and picked up a bit, we had to go back, and salvage all the stuff off the boat. Like we had a lot of equipment, we had - well it was only a 250 bed hospital, but we had, oh, [inaudible] and sterilising plant, and quite a lot of other equipment that was given to us. We had an equipment something like a metal detector that could find pieces of shrapnel in bodies. And then we had - oh, there was a big mobile laundry there, and all the fridges, and beds, and lockers, and everything to set up. And a terrific amount of Red Cross stuff we had with us, that had been given to us.

And we had to salvage, and we had - the British engineers came in, and they had all sorts of equipment, cabling equipment. We had to build a road in on the top of the cliff from there, with mattresses, for them to get in for a start, because the sand was so thick. And when they got in they could cable all the stuff up over the top, and salvaged it all out of there, but ...

Hard work?

Oh yes, hard yakka. (Laughs). Loaded it on trucks there, and away we went to go - we were supposed to be going up behind the 6th Division, but the 6th Division was coming back. Like at that particular time, General Blamey wanted to go on to Tripoli, and capture it all. And Auchinleck and O'Connor, and them, they said that this - they sent the Australians, as you'd remember, to Greece.

Yes, so we had salvaged all the stuff, and put it on, and took it right up to a place called Barce. Up near - the other side of Derna. And we were only there about - oh, about a fortnight. I don't think we were there for a fortnight, a bit over a week. And we'd just got the place established, and started to function as a hospital, and ...

What was your particular role during the set up period, what sort of things were you doing?

Oh, well we did all orderly work. I used to give injections, and bowel washes, and anything at all, if you was - our doctors showed us how to do everything. We learnt that back later when we got to Tobruk, but in those days we were pretty green, we didn't have much knowledge in all that type of thing, how to give injections, and pass catheters, and - but when we went up at Barce, we was only there, and we just got established, and then the Germans landed, and they said, 'Well you've got to get out'.

And fortunately we packed up overnight, and we got out that night, and we went as far as between Barce and Derna. We slept out in the open, in the rocks. And woke up half buried in the sand in the morning, the dust storm been blowing, and ...

Was there a feeling you might have been overrun, the Germans might have caught up with you?

Oh well, we would have been. And that was when General Auchinleck and General O'Connor and them were captured there. They got captured, but had we waited till the next morning, our hospital, we would have all been captured. We just got back in time.

We were at - we came back to - oh, we came down off the Derna, and there was - the Derna pass was a road, there was about seven roads, tiers, coming down, and around like that. There was a big bridge across it, and the Italians they'd - on the way up they'd blown that up, when they retreated back. And the British and Australians built a Bailey bridge right across, with tubular sort of scaffold right across where it was blown out.

We came back on big Mack trucks, and I know we had a lot of trouble getting around some of the bends, we had to come up, and back back. And we had all our equipment, and we just got back to Tobruk, and we had to set up there.

Fortunately we moved into a big barracks, an Italian barracks, which was ideal, it had an administrative block up one end, and the bakery, and - oh, all the cooking facilities down the other end. It was for one of Mussolini's crack regiments that he had there.

(25.00) It was a big square, like, say, this room, right down one side there was - we called them wards, but they were barracks, they used to - it was an ideal, you could put sixty to sixty-eight beds, I think, in one - each room. And we used them as wards, both sides. It was ideal, it was in very good condition when we first went into it, it was nothing - very little damage done to it.

And we set that up as a hospital, with all our doctors. And the nurses came up from - oh, they were down on the Canal at - with the 2nd AGH, I think, on - somewhere close - Kantara there, on the Suez Canal there.

And they came up, and we set the place up, and just got it functioning well, and everything was going. I was working with a Sister Pitt, and a Sister Storrer, and a Sister Logan, she was a theatre sister from the Alfred Hospital. And why I was there, I could use the blade razor, and I could do all the shaves, and preps, and things they wanted to know. And I'd learnt to shave in the country, with a blade razor, my father's, and got into tons of trouble for not using the razor bit, for cutting the strop, you know. (Laughs.) There's an art in stropping a razor, you know, you go like this.

So that was how I started off. And we just got the place functioning well, all the nurses, and I went to work this particular night, I must have slept - some days we'd sleep, and some days we wouldn't, you know, if you was on night duty, and there was so much activity. And I went

to work this night, and this Charlie Littlejohn, as we used to call him, Charlie, he was a colonel, and a mighty chap, he come, he said, 'Don't you know?', I said, 'Know what?'. He said, 'All the nurses have gone', he said. He says, 'But don't worry', he said. 'Don't worry, George', he said. That's what he said, he said, 'Don't worry'. He said 'I'll fix them all', he said. 'Irrespective of what they are', he said, 'if they've got abdominal wounds, or sucking wounds' - that's a chest right through, and through - 'and arms and legs, I'll give them all an eighth or so of morph.'

He said, 'Get all the trays', and I followed him down, and filled the needles, and he knocked them all out. He said, 'I'll knock them all out for youse'. He said, 'That'll make it easier'. There was about - I think there was about half a dozen on blood transfusions, which you had to change bottles, and he just - he was good, he'd show you how to do it. You see, if you let it run right out, it clots, and you can't start it again, and you've got to pull the catheter out, and all this. And oh, he was mighty, Charlie.

> Were there some men who were so badly wounded, the pain was so great, they were difficult to deal with?

Oh yes, oh well we had - in that particular ward that was the - oh, we had, what we called surgical wards, and medical like we had - at that particular time we had a beach hospital down on the peninsula, between the sea, the Mediterranean and the Tobruk harbour, there was a peninsula that run down like that. And they try and kept all the - oh there was quite a few English chaps that had malaria, and we had one particular thing, there was a relapsing fever, that had the doctors where you - they were very brilliant doctors, we had a very brilliant doctor, he was - oh, I just can't think of his name for a minute, I'll think of it afterwards.

This relapsing fever had them very puzzled. It was something similar to malaria, but it wasn't. Their temperatures used to go up and down, and drop right back, and go up to well over the hundred. And he - Major Rudd, that was his name - and he said, 'It's something caused', he said, 'It's not a malaria, but', he said, 'it's something similar', and he said, 'We've got to find out, what it was'.

And they found out that some of these chaps, they had a little tick, it was a camel tick, and it used to burrow into their arms, or legs, or back, or wherever it wants to be. And that was what caused the relapsing fever. And it was very difficult to get out. You couldn't pull it out.

So they found out that the only way was to get a cigarette butt, light a cigarette, and get it smoking, and then put the hot butt near the bottom, and it would back out. But if you tried to pull it out, it'd break, and you'd leave the head in, and it caused a shocking infection. And being in a dirty place, where the hygiene is not too good, and everything is so dirty, that you get a lot of what you call dirty surgery, and clean surgery. So that caused very ugly things, until they found out what it was. But this Major Rudd, he was a very brilliant man, and he'd given his life to medicine, I think he had about six degrees and that.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.

Side one, of tape two, of the interview with George Roberts, recorded on the 18th October, 1990, about the 2/4th AGH.

Incidentally, how had you found conditions aboard the *Mauretania*, I gather it was a pretty comfortable ship?

Oh, the *Mauretania* was very nice, it was a lovely boat to go over on. We were sitting out, riding out in the Indian Ocean, up on the front of the turret. I had a friend, Col Uren, a very close friend, and he'd travelled the world, and he knew all about ships, and boats, and he was an artist in Paris, like before he came home. And he was a good mate, and we were - we did all things together, and he said, 'Oh, we'll get right up on the front of the bow', and oh, it was a beautiful trip over on the *Mauretania*, and the ...

Was it exciting for you?

Oh yes, very exciting. I enjoyed it to the full. We called in at Fremantle, and then called in at Ceylon. And we trans-shipped at Ceylon.

What sort of - you had a bit of shore leave at Ceylon, didn't you?

Oh yes, we had shore leave for about a day or so. But about the day before we reached Ceylon the *Queen Mary* left us, and she set off for the naval base at Trincomalee. But she couldn't come in, she was too shallow, the harbour. And the *Aquitania*, the *Mauretania*, the *Dominion Monarch* and the *Awatea*, the *Dominion Monarch*, and the *Awatea* had Maoris on it. The *Dominion Monarch* was all Maoris, and the other - *Awatea* had New Zealand troops.

How did you get on with the New Zealanders?

Oh well, we didn't see much of them at all, really. Very little.

What about in Colombo, what sort of things did you do during the bit of leave you had?

Oh we just went for a trip. I had an uncle and auntie - my Uncle Stan married one of my mother's sisters, Auntie Bertha, and they lived there. They were missionaries in China, and -

no, not in China, in Ceylon. And they got to know quite a lot of people. And there were some people, Mr and Mrs Thomas, that lived there. He was in charge of the medical supplies in Ceylon. And I went off. The cooks, and, oh, quite a few of them said, 'We're going down over the side of the boat'. And I said, 'Oh'. They said, 'Would you like to come?'. 'Oh', I said, 'I know somebody in Ceylon, I'll - oh yes, I'll come down'.

So we slipped down over the side of the *Mauretania*, and crashed through the top of the old boat that young - the chaps had, the Singhalese had, to take us ashore, and they wouldn't do anything about it until we paid for the damages. (Laughs.) And then we got to Ceylon, and oh my ...

What, you made a hole in the boat?

Oh, it was only made of old pineboard. What do they call it, pine? Lining boards, you know. And it just crumpled up under big Butch, he smashed it. And we paid them, and they took us ashore. And I was never so pleased to get off that place in all my life. When we got there I never - you've never seen so many people in all your life. They were sleeping all around the streets and up the gutters. And old rickshaw men were sleeping with their head up the shaft of the rickshaw. And that was an eye opener to us, to see so many people, the place was ....

And I found my way out to this place, and they weren't home, they were on leave somewhere up in the mountains. So I got back. And then we had to get back on the boat again. Like, we were AWL, no leave passes. So fortunately we was trans-shipping the next day, we were going from the *Mauretania* onto the ....

The *Knight of Malta* was it?

No.

No, oh, the *Nestor*.

(5.00) The *Knight of Malta* was - this was from Ceylon. No, we went on the - oh, I just can't think of the boat at the time. Anyhow it was a terrible change. I'll think of the boat afterwards, the name. And when we got on it everything - it was supposed - it had been salvaged, and brought up from the seabed, you know, and it was - everything was full of weevils, and full of - oh, it was - the food was shocking. The foodstuff and everything, we were dining in luxury on the *Mauretania*, and when we got onto this new boat, oh dear, it was terrific, you know. And you couldn't - everything you bought at the canteen, for a - you know, to try and buy something special, it was all full of weevils, and ....

So that took us to Tewfik, and then we got off there, and we went by rail to Cairo. And we spent a few hours in Cairo, and we had all our - we had a good meal there, we had eggs, and a bit of Tommy Cooks, and then we had a - went from Cairo to - across to Alexandria. And all our doctors, and I'll never forget it, they were all saying, 'We're going to Alexandria', you know, and, 'How wonderful, it's a lovely place'. And it is a beautiful place, Alex.

And we didn't go to Alex, we went twenty miles out from Alex, doctors and all, right out in a place called - oh. Out in the western desert, it was twenty miles out from Alex. It was the place where the 6th Div pushed off. It was just an army camp. And they were all in tents, and the dust blew and that.

This chaps says to us, 'Now whatever you do get as many sandbags, and sandbag all around your tent, because when it blows here it's nothing but dust'. And all these officers from - all these Collins Street specialists, and they thought they were going to be billeted in Alex, (laughs), and here they were out, twenty miles out, in the desert, in the western desert it was. And it was a bit of a shock to them, I think.

But we weren't there long. We was only there about, oh, a few weeks.

> Had you been briefed about how you were to relate to the local people, or what local customs were, the dangers of venereal disease, those sort of things?

Oh yes. You were well briefed on that. It never worried me, I never worried about that sort of thing. I'd learnt enough in life to keep well away from all those sort of things. But, oh, there was a lot of them went in there to, like Cairo was a terrible place, for all that type of thing. Alexandria was the better city, and ....

We was only there for a very short time, and then we - all our stuff was brought up from the Canal, brought off - shifted from the *Mauretania*, and brought up, and put on the *Knight of Malta*, and loaded up there. That is when we left Alexandria to go up on the trip up to Tobruk, when we run into the storm, terrific.

> When you were in Tobruk, when did you have your first experience of air raids?

Oh, we had our first experience of air raids out in the - when we were out from Alexandria. We was watching them bombing Alex, the Germans and that. When we went to Alexandria, there was a chap, Jack Stent, served in the first world war, and Col Uren, and myself, and we went down to the naval base. And I don't know if you ever remember there was the *Illustrious*, the big aircraft carrier came down the Mediterranean in 1940, when Malta was almost starved out, and right to the end of their tether, foodwise, and waterwise, and

everywise. They were just - because they relied - they don't have any - the water's brought there by boats to Malta, the same as a lot of those Eastern countries.

And they were - and the *Illustrious* got through. We went and had a look at the boat, we hired a boat, this Jack Stenton, and Colin, and I, and rowed out, and had a look at it. And all the back was blown out of it, and then - and I don't know how many aircraft it had, it had multiple pom-poms, and it had - it was fitted out with the latest radar, and all, and that's why they were trying to sink it.

And it had to go - it was sent off to - I think it went to Singapore or something for a refit after that. It had to get out, and oh, it was battered about. They had it all plugged up, all the bows of it was plugged up with concrete. But it weathered the storm, and got through, and broke the blockade.

As the bombing developed in Tobruk, did it affect your capacity to sleep, and affect your nerves at all?

(10.00) When we finally retreated back, and got into Tobruk, and we were set up as a hospital, and that, and then, as I said, the nurses were there for oh, they were only there for less than a week, and then they were gone, and we had to carry on and do everything. So, if you was willing - they made about eight of us corporals, I was made a corporal - and if you was willing to take a bit of responsibility, and had a bit of savvy, and used to doing things, if you were a tradesman you learnt to do things, you know, even to passing catheters, and giving bowel washes, and all sorts of things. And setting up blood transfusions.

You learn quickly, and the doctors were good, like that Charlie - Colonel Littlejohn they were - he was a mighty man, and I hate to think what it would have been like if he hadn't have been there. He was a marvellous administrator, and never went to an air raid shelter, and he was a real inspiration.

Was it hard at first, when the air raids started, not to just do the obvious thing, and seek shelter?

Oh yes, well you get that way that you - we looked at it - I had a chap, Harry Silk, he was a mighty chap, Harry, never went to an air raid shelter, and Maurie Condon - Maurie Anderson, like he worked - we slept the whole of our time in behind the MI room, the Medical Inspection where they used to bring them all in.

But the doctors were pretty cluey, when we first went there they - we only had a little operating theatre that the Italians had. And then they turned the big main room, the MI room, like where there were medical inspections into - and they got the workshop people to make a

sort of a trestle, like it had a base, and then came up like that, and it had a piece across, and an end, and you could put a stretcher on it. And we had one each end.

They'd come in from all the battles, sometimes you'd look down at the harbour, from where we were down onto the harbour, and the ambulances'd be coming up around, and there might be twenty or thirty ambulances full of wounded. And if you was wounded you had to have at least one leg off, or half your inside blown off. If there was a walking wounded, they'd be full.

They'd bring them out there, and just put them straight up on these trestles, and the doctors would go through. And all the doctors, like the surgeons, would sort them out as they went. And 'immediate operation', and 'blood transfusions', and, oh, they had all - one - Colonel Littlejohn, Charlie, he organised everything like that.

And after we'd been there operating for a few months, he said, 'I don't know', he said, 'we're doing all these operations', he said, 'sending them back', and he said, 'we don't know'. He said, 'They're rolling underneath beds, with half legs blown off, and heads', and you know, it was only natural if they sort of seek a bit of protection. You'd get out of your bed, and get in your tin hat, as we used to say. You only had a pair of boots, and a pair of shoes, and the tin hat all the time there. There was little or no water to wash anything. So we soon learnt fast, about what to do, and ....

> You were doing minor surgical procedures as well, I gather, in the absence of nurses?

Oh yes, it was - we had all our chaps, those that - Trevor Macfarlane, you know Trevor? He worked in the theatre, him and McConnell - and we used to go in and scrub up, and we knew about - we learnt what was dirty surgical and clean surgical. You know, sometimes with someone coming from the ward you'd clean them all up, and - clean them up, and use the spirits, and aquaflavin, and put sterile things. But come to the stage when we didn't, couldn't cope, with all sterile things, and sheets and that. We did have a mobile laundry, but it could only operate when it could get water. You know, water was always a big problem there.

> When things were very intense there, between March and September, with more than 13,000 cases came through, did it ever seem to be too much, that you just couldn't go on?

Oh yes, well you learnt to cope, you know, like you get ....

> Were there some who didn't, who just broke down?

Well I was always very physically fit, and I could keep going around the clock, I'd go round the clock for days without any sleep. And sometimes I'd lay down and go sound asleep. I know one particular night there this Harry Silk, and this Maurie Anderson were there, and they said, 'There's no doubt about you, Roberts, you can sleep', they said. He said, 'They blasted the workshop outside, flattened it', he said. He said, 'And you looked that peaceful', he said, 'you were sound asleep'. (Laughs.) I says, 'Well ....', I used to go for days.

(15.00) See our biggest problem with the wounded there, it was getting rid of the wounded stretch - taking them down by ambulance at night, and in the early hours of the morning. And we'd have ambulance-loads, dozens, and you know, they'd take them down. And we'd have all the walking wounded, well they could clamber on themselves, and then you'd have all the stretcher cases, the chaps that had had amputations, and, you know, shocking chest and abdominal wounds. And we kept pushing them back all the time.

Well that was one of the - that was the worst job, because that was the hottest place on the whole of the perimeter was the waterfront. Because everything was brought in by water, all the supplies, and water, and guns, and ammunition, and food. And we'd be down there sometimes, and we'd have chaps - fortunately the Italians had caves dug in the side of the cliffs there, near the waterfront.

The whole trouble, the waterfront wasn't as though you - the boats - like the first lot of hospital ships came in, there was two came in at once. Well that broke the - there was supposed to be no two hospital ships in the port at once. And the Germans come over and bombed one, and sprung all the plates, and damaged one badly, and we got all the wounded back off that. That was their own fault, they shouldn't have had two in there at once, but it was - we had so many wounded, we wanted to get cleaned out, see, because it'd bank up, and you'd have - though there was sixty beds in these wards, we'd have stretchers in between sometimes, you know, you might have 130 or so.

What, was there some supposed convention about two ships being in at once?

Yes.

Or was it just a security thing?

Oh no, it was a Geneva conference. Geneva ...

Convention

... Convention that no two hospital ships could be in the one port at the time. But we had so many that they came in, and that was what happened there.

Were there casualties during the raid?

Oh yes, a lot of casualties. We got a lot of them back. Might have - all back. We had - in one ward, in Ward 11, we had one hundred and - it was sixty-eight, there was 130, I think, patients in there. We'd have them on stretchers, and we'd just bring them, and put them back, as we brought them up, and put them down there, no room.

Were there many accidents with moving so many wounded down to the waterfront? People ....

Oh no, it was pretty good. We had to do it under the cover of darkness, but you had your own stretcher-bearer chap that you used, the same mate, like I had a chap called Whimpress, he was very - about my build. And he was a PT instructor in Weber and Rice, he was their top man, and strong as an ox.

And we used to carry - oh, we had some whopping big fellows. Once, I remember once we had a big chap we were carrying, he was six foot eight, from the 2/28th Battalion in Western Australia (laughs), and his feet was poking over one end of the stretcher, and his feet the other. Oh, you'd be struggling with them, some of them were about sixteen stone, you know, at night. And it wasn't though the - all the wounded was taken out with warships, on the *Napier* and everything that came in, we loaded them on and ....

How did you actually load them, did you walk them up a ramp, or how did that ...?

Oh, over a ramp? (Laughs.) No, over - we'd be struggling over sunk boats, and planks, and oh no, it was a blooming obstacle race to get them into the boats, see.

How did you see? Because I presume you'd have to be careful about lights and so on?

Oh well there were - we had lights back in underneath the cave that give a little bit of light. And the boats would be under cover of darkness. But the moonlight nights, it was as bright as day. Like, you could go down there with a list of wounded, walking wounded, and stretcher cases, and you could read quite well. Bright, moonlight nights.

Did you have anything to do with the x-rays?

Oh, not much. Only taking them in. They had special chaps for x-ray. Len Carroll, and Tommy Tyrer, they were from the repatriation hospital, they were the x-ray men, like they did all the x-rays.

Evidently the level of x-ray use, in terms of the safety of the people using the procedures was very high. Was there any concern expressed about that, or worry about that?

Oh no. No, all the chaps were trained mostly to use all that sort of equipment, you know, like Len Carroll was a man from a repatriation hospital, that was his job full-time, and he'd come ...

(20.00) But the exposure rate was much higher than would now be regarded as acceptable?

Oh well, like in wartime you don't take any notice much of those sort of things.

Were there periods of low morale where things just got overall too much, and got people down?

Well there were - it's the same of every walk of life, you get workers and shirkers. And some are not worth a bumper, as we used to say, (laughs), then there's - we had some very good workers. And excellent. And chaps that used to go down - it wasn't only confined to the nursing staff, the cooks were marvellous, like there was Ross Bronson, and Butch Mills, and Mick Smith, and everybody'd go down to stretcher-bearers. The cooks, and the Goggins, Bill Goggin, and Dixie Goggin, and another chap we called 'Joe the Goose'. And oh, the Goggins were good, they were - you meet a lot of very brave people, that's their job, and they do it.

How would you deal with shirkers then?

Oh well you're better without them, you know. If they're not - if they don't want to go, well you're better not to have them there?

Were there people moved out of the 2/4th, because they didn't measure up?

Oh they sent a lot back early. We brought in quite a few from - we picked up a chap called Butch - Pud Evans, and a chap called Cave, 'Magic' Cave we used to call him. They come from one of the battalions, and they came in and joined. They were terrific blokes, they were brave, and do anything, and good stretcher-bearers.

During that very busy period, where you'd often not be able to get much sleep, how would you get on for food and that, what sort of things would you be eating and drinking?

Oh the food - the cooks were good. We had excellent cooks. Like the cooks that cooked for the officers was - oh, Jock Scott cooked for the men, he was a proper chef on blue ribbon boats, like the *Mauretania*, *Aquitania* and them that went across the Atlantic, and that, they were proper cooks. And then there was Jack Healey, cooked for the men, the officers, he was a cook at Menzies, like they were top-class cooks. And Mick Smith. And we had some excellent cooks, you know, and they were good workers, and they could make - the meals were pretty good, it would be ....

Would you take a break, or were there times when you'd find you'd be just grabbing snacks?

Oh well there was times when we'd - it all depends how the situation was.

Well during those peak periods, when you were busy for days on end?

Oh yes, well you'd just - we had a big mess with - we used to go over - they used to set it out. Well sometimes you'd be that busy, I very seldom went over, because I generally used to get a bit that was from what they sent over in the dixies, and all the foodstuff they - but our cooks did a marvellous job considering. A terrific job. You know, it was only tinned stuff.

What were you eating?

Beg your pardon?

What would be a fairly typical meal, what would you have?

Oh, we'd have baked beans, and then you'd have meat and vegetables, and then they used to make - if they could get flour they'd bake a bit of bread. But we mostly had those biscuits, dog biscuits, like army stuff biscuits.

But the cooks they did a really good job. Like they'd send over the food in dixies, and we'd have to dish it out to the - and the wounded'd help you, there were some terrific blokes, they all hopped in and helped. It was, a very good relationship between the workers, they could see that we were understaffed, when you've got about one hundred or so in a ward, it takes a lot of food and that.

The cooks used to make patties out of, all sorts of meatstuffs, tinned meat, and most of the stuff was meat, and baked beans, and meat, and 'M & V', and all that type of stuff. We only had very few rations, once or twice rations of - the officers might have had it, but the men and the wounded - of ordinary meat, fresh meat.

Did you at all have a feeling while you were there that this was a period of the war that would be of some consequence, this would be something that later you'd look back at? Was there at all that sense, that this was an important part of what was going on?

Oh well, it was a turning point, like a ...

Did you think of it as that at the time, did it seem apparent to you?

(25.00) Yes, well it was. Well particularly for the infantry chaps, what they went through was hell out there. Like we lived in luxury, compared with what they did. We had a bed to go and lay down on, but they lived in holes and dugouts, and there for what was it? Seven and a half months, I think, something like that. And, oh, we went out, we used to see the - well we could see all the action at night, like we were up high where the hospital - and we used to sit at the window, this Harry Silk, and myself, and Laurie Condon, and watch all the action, could see all the tracer bullets, and ...

Was this the spot known as the 'Grey Smith Stand', did you go across there?

Beg pardon?

There was an area that was referred to as the 'Grey Smith Stand', I think it was the x-ray area, where you could watch the bombardments?

Oh yes, well we used to watch it out from just near the x-ray, like that - that Maurie Anderson worked in x-ray with Tommy Tyrer, it was close. But this ward, this MI room, we was watching there one night, this Harry Silk, and I, and they landed a big one down the road, about a - the biggest one that's ever landed, about a 1,000-pounder. And the blast knocked us right across the room, over to the other side of the room. (Laughs.) It never hurt us, but it - just the blast that does the damage. I was in Ward 11 with Major Chambers, he got his head blown right off. And they were killed all round me, and I got knocked unconscious, but I ....

Did that set you back, was it a shock to find people you knew being killed?

Oh yes, well we lost a few that day. We lost - Norm Forster was killed, and Major Chambers, and Major Schwartz, our eye specialist. And Mick Hanemann. And, oh it, when you lose your own, like it is your own unit, that's pretty close together.

Did it undermine your confidence? Most young people tend to think, well it's not going to happen to them, did you sometimes then begin to think, 'Well, gee, it might'?

Well I was a bit fortunate, I wasn't young, see, I was twenty-eight when I went away, and I was pretty matured, and pretty fit, and used to life. And I stood up to it pretty well, as far as that, workwise and that.

And I was always - could work, like brought up on farming, and all that sort of thing, and a different life. I knew what it was to sleep out at night on the threshing machines, see, you slept alongside the haystack, or strawstack, and all this wasn't new to me, this army life, and the sort of - it was a lot rougher and tougher, but it was - a lot of chaps come from very sheltered lives that never had anything like that. Slept in beds, and sheets, and all sorts of things.

Whereas, we used to - like the fleas was one of the biggest - we used to reckon it was Mussolini's secret weapon, or the Jerries, it was the fleas (laughs). Like you'd have to roll your - when you're down in the beach hospitals, not so much up in the town, but you used to have to - we had a kerosene sort of a pyrethrum powder, and we'd mix up the fluid, and with an old flyspray we'd lay our blankets out, and spray them all over with that. And roll them up tight. Otherwise they'd be just full of fleas, they'd carry you away. You could swipe them off like that, you'd be black with them. Oh they - fleas, shocking. Fleas, and scorpions, and all sorts of things there.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B.

Identification: This is side two of tape two, of the interview with George Roberts, recorded on 18th October, 1990, about the 2/4th AGH.

During some of the quieter periods, were there moments that were good moments as such that you recall?

Oh yes, there was good moments. We were able to sneak down to the beach from the beach hospital, and have a swim. But there wasn't many. Like if you worked - I worked continually in the town hospital. We had two hospitals, we had one down on the peninsula, and then they - we got shelled, and bombed out of that.

Like they had a big gun, the Italians had a gun called 'Bardia Bill', that was on tracks. And it used to go back into a cave. They'd come out and fire, and the recoil would send it back into the cave. Well it used to fire right over us, but a lot of them were duds, because they were firing about twelve mile back, at extreme range. From the flash, we could be out on this MI room, where we used to look out all over the perimeter, and we'd see the gun flash, and you could count fifty-five before it hit. But there was a lot of duds in it, because it wasn't - the

nosecap wasn't hitting down, it was hitting the side. There was very few good ones, it didn't worry us much.

Did you have anything to do with the dental health side of things at all?

Oh, only caring for the patients, that's all, you know. Feeding them, and dressing all their wounds. And carrying them out, down to the waterfront, and loading them on, that part.

But you weren't dealing with the dentists' activities, or that sort of repair?

Oh no. We had Devon Hall, and Major Amies, they were the specialists. Major Amies was the one that - he's the one that's got the proper dental hospital there, near the Royal Melbourne, in Royal Parade there now. He's - oh no, he was the top man.

What was the feeling when it came to leave Tobruk?

Well we went out in intervals, like some of the doctors went out fairly early, that had worked very hard, and some of them were cracking up, and some got out early. They were the same as anybody else.

But well there's that Charlie Littlejohn, he went up and down the Mediterranean to have a look at them, and when he came back he said, 'You know', he said, 'we've been doing the wrong thing with these chaps', he said. He said, 'I got back there', he said, 'they been - never seen a better looking lot in my life', he said. 'And we've got to get them up', he said, 'and do it, George', he said. 'This letting them lay in bed', he said, 'I don't know', he said, 'that's something that we learnt', he said, 'as soon as they're operated on', he said. They do now, they get you up if you have an operation, pretty soon, and move you round, and keep you mobile, and having to do things.

He was brilliant in that way, he'd catch on things. And he said, 'You know, the pilots', he said, 'that were crashing into the sea', he said, 'when they were floating round in the salt water', he said, 'it done their wounds marvellous'. He said, 'That's something else', he said, 'I've learnt' he said. He was quick to catch on things. And he said, 'We'll make a saline bath', he said, 'instead of pulling all their clothes off', see you used to get a lot of shocking wounds coming in from tanks, where they'd - the armour-piercing shell had gone through one side, and ricocheted around, and set fire to the tank, and they had a shocking wound - burn cases are the worst, I think.

Well we rigged up a bath, we had a saline bath, and we used to - they'd have Vaseline gauze dressing on them, instead of pulling them off, and damaging all the skin, we'd just put them in the big bath, and let them float off. And then ....

Wouldn't they need quite a bit of morphine, wouldn't the salt water be painful otherwise?

Well it'd sting a bit, but they responded to the salt water, like it's very effective.

Probably sting less than having the bandage pulled off anyway I suppose.

(5.00) Yes, well that was the thing, it was better. See you'd damage all the new formed skin underneath if you do. Otherwise before that we used to strip off - it all off, and paint them with, oh, something, I forget what it was now. But some black sort of stuff.

I guess for those who were very badly wounded, where you'd have to be changing the dressings, that'd be a pretty terrible experience, having the bandages pulled off. Would it be difficult to deal with some fellows?

Oh yes. There was some of them, shocking head wounds. We got a major in there once that had both legs amputated, cut right off here, the tank come down and the steel plate sheared down, and sheared his legs off. And there were a lot of brave men. He said, 'I wonder what the wife'll say'. (Laughs.) That was his remark. You know, his - oh, there are some ....

When you got back from Tobruk, and went to Palestine, I gather at one stage there you had quite a lot of different nationalities that you were looking after. Were you involved in that?

Oh yes, before we got out of Tobruk we had - see all the Australians got out, and then they brought in the Czechs, and the Poles, and all the freedom fighters that came up, all the army that replaced the Australians as they were sending out the battalions. And we were the last ones to come out, other than the 13th Battalion who were coming out the next night after us.

And the boat that they were to come out on, it had - hit with an aerial bomb, went down one of the funnels, and blew it up, and poor beggars, they had to - the 13th Battalion had to go back, and they were there right through till Christmas time. Most of them were taken prisoners, because it fell at Christmas time, it was captured.

Was the business of dealing with people of different nationalities made complicated by language, and cultural attitude?

Oh, language, and very - well the Polish people shouldn't have been there. They were terrible, frightened, scared. Well they'd been overrun with the Germans, and then overrun with the Russians, and, oh, the Poles, they'd had a terrible time. But they were petrified. I remember one funny thing one night, a chap shot around the corner, and I said, 'What's wrong?'. 'Oh', he

said - 'Oh', I said, 'that's nothing to worry about', I said something, and he said, 'Oh, something carry bom-boms', he said. You know, it was just a noise, and, oh, they shouldn't have been up there. After what they went through, the Czechs, and the Poles, and they were overrun, and they were just those that escaped and got out of it, and they were the freedom fighters. Yes, we had difficulties with the language problem with them.

I gather, while on the one hand it was good to be reunited with the Australian nurses when you left Tobruk.

Oh yes.

For people like yourself it meant that you were having to step back from doing a lot of sort of work that you'd found very challenging, and enjoyed. Was it disappointing in a way, to have to go back, and resume more of the nursing support sort of role?

Oh no, we got on very well with the nurses. They were lovely girls, most of them, down to earth. And we had physiotherapists. They were down on the Canal there with the 2nd AGH. And we caught up with them, and we came down, and then we went up through to Palestine, and we were at the place called Beit Jirja, in Palestine it was, those days.

We got a lot of leave, we had a lot of leave coming to us. So we went, this friend of mine, Col Uren, and I, we went up to Jerusalem. And he knew his way about, he'd travelled the world a lot, and the British and the Australians had a big hotel up in Jerusalem, the Hotel Fast. And we went up there for fourteen days. We hired a taxi, and we went down the old Jericho road, and down to Jericho, and had a swim in the Dead Sea. And then we crossed over the Allenby Bridge, and went right up to - nearly up to Amman, where all the trouble is now in the Jordan, of course there was no trouble there then.

We hired that taxi all day, he took us, and I'll never forget us going down the Jordan - the old Jordan road there. We were pretty strung up, after being up Tobruk your nerves are not the best. It was a very narrow little road, it's only about from here to the door, just for one car. Pretty rugged country, Israel, or Palestine then, that part. And you'd look right down into these great ravines, and gullies, as we'd call them. And it was a bit scary, after being in something like that. You are strung up when you come out of those sort of places. Takes a ...

(10.00) Was your driver amused that you were a bit unnerved by that?

Oh well he didn't care much. He was only an Arab, and it was like driving in one of those old time yellow cabs, sort of thing. It had a rubber thing, and he was honk honk around the corners.

And do you recall how much you paid for the ...?

Yes, we went all - we had it all day for twenty-five shillings. One pound five.

I gather also there was a white Christmas in Jerusalem, were you there for that?

Oh well we were in Jerusalem, then we shifted up and we occupied the - we were in the Street of the Prophets. We occupied the Italian hospital, down near the Damascus Gate, and right up near the top end of the Street of the Prophets was a German hospital, we occupied that for about - oh, a few months we were there. For five months I think we were there altogether. We run the hospital.

You were there when it snowed?

Yes, it snowed. It really snowed. I've got a lot of good photos of the snow. It snowed about - it snowed all night. I was going to go out to Bethlehem, to - but I was on duty, and I remember it snowed, and we looked out in the morning, and there was about two foot of snow all down the Street of Prophets, right up, and all the trees, the fir trees, the Mount of Olives.

And we were up in a barracks, up in the third floor, and we used to look out right over the Mount of Olives, and over the old city, we could look out, right out to the other side of it. And it was white, all the fir trees, everything was covered. It was a beautiful sight.

There were times when Italians were used as hospital orderlies and that as well, I gather. Did you have much to do with POWs, Italians?

Yes, we had Mario, Bruno, Guiseppe. Oh, about five of them, they used to - stretcher-bearers.

How did you get on with them?

Alright. Yes, they were pretty good. Romolo reckoned he was a boxer, and we used to have a few bits of dust-ups. He wasn't - I used to do a bit of boxing, and I was pretty fit, and he was ...

You actually came to blows, or you agreed to have a sparring?

Oh, he'd hit me hard, and I'd give him a good whack under there, (laughs), and it was - you know. Oh, just for fun.

You just messing around?

Yes, just fiddling around. Oh, they were good. Oh, they were pleased to be there, because they were well-fed, and cared for. I think there was Guiseppe, Bruno, Romolo, Mario. One was a very good - a fair chap from Northern Italy, he could play the piano, and guitar very well, he was very musical. Very gifted.

When it came time to leave, what was the feeling about leaving the Middle East then?

Oh well I enjoyed the Middle East. I enjoyed all the trips around Palestine and Israel, it was wonderful to see all those lands, and go in and out. We went through everything, I think. We went to the old kings of Israel, through the tunnels, and we went - the only thing that we didn't go through was Hezekiah's Tunnel, that they dug from one each side, and they met in the middle. Right down underneath, but that was full of water. Like it was a very severe winter that winter in 1940/41.

Did you ever get into trouble in these meanderings around, get into places you shouldn't have been, or get lost?

Oh well, we'd go down the old city in the daytime, it was alright, but it was out of bounds at night. Like the Arabs are funny people, they could be friendly during the day-time, but it was out of bounds for all the Australians at night-time. We wouldn't go down there, it would be taking your life in your own hands if you ....

Do you know of anybody who was attacked, or did have trouble?

(15.00) Oh well a lot of the cooks and that. We had some characters as cooks. We had the Goggins, and who was it, George? There was the Goggins, and the cooks, when we came down out of Tobruk we were down there in Palestine, and they said to them, 'Now whatever you do don't go AWL or anything', going off. And no, nobody would bother, they had - our officers said, 'We've got to set you up in clothes, and do everything properly', and - medical officers are different to other officers, they talk to you quite sensibly, and they said, 'There'll be plenty of leave'.

No, the first thing the cooks, they all went off to Tel Aviv, this [Cockshott?], he wore the padre's uniform, this is gospel truth. (Laughs.) And they all went off, and of course they got down in the brothels.

AWL?

Yes. Down in the brothels in Tel Aviv, and got picked up, and they got, oh, I don't know what. Six weeks up in Jerusalem digging holes, and filling them in. (Laughs.) And, oh, they had a tough time. And do you know what, the redcaps hated the Australians. They were the military police. They dug these holes, and filled them in, and they were sleeping on one duckboard with one blanket underneath, and one over the top. Oh, they had a hard time. But they paid for their little bit of folly.

How did you find the British, did you have anything to do with them, or did you have any encounters with the military police?

Oh no, I never had any trouble. I don't drink or smoke, and that sort of thing. I didn't have any problems. Oh no, we didn't.

Well when you were then on the way to Colombo, and then later when the - it was learned that the Japanese had bombed Darwin, and Singapore had fallen, what were your feelings at that time?

Well that brought the war home to us. Like we were going to Singapore, and then it fell. And then we were going to Sumatra and Java, and it fell. Because that was when Weary Dunlop got caught up in there. And we finished up - we wondered why we finished up at Ceylon. And we were only there, early on Sunday morning it was, about eight o'clock. And we could hear all these aeroplanes coming. And some of our blokes could hear aeroplanes miles away. (Laughs.) And these blokes, Bill - what's his name. Oh I can't remember his name, he could hear them miles away. And they started getting itchy feet as we used to call them.

And if you believe in miracles, it was at that day, when all these Japs come in to bomb the harbour at Ceylon, a big sort of a fog come down, and blacked it out. Like covered it all over this sort of, in the tropics, how you get a sort of a misty fog. And they had to go round again.

And just when we came to Ceylon all the crack pilots were on an aircraft carrier. And they came - they were British, and French, and Australian, New Zealanders, and they were in behind us. We were out at St Peter's College, and they were in behind there. And when the Japs came in to knock out all the shipping and everything at Colombo, and they frightened - they bombed, but a lot of them fell down around the marketing places, and the whole of the civilian population went through to the bush. In the big shops, like McCargills, and Millers, big English shops that you could buy anything dirt cheap. But had it not been there they would have done some damage.

But the time they went around and come in again, all these crack pilots come in over the top of them. And, oh, it was good to see it, the dogfights, like they knocked them out of the sky.

One chap came down and knocked three out with one burst as he come down through them. And they withdrew. They pulled away.

There was a lot of us, it was a special team, we went right up into the centre of - to a Lipton's tea plantation, and occupied the superintendent's bungalow, and the bungalow was - we set the superintendent's bungalow up for a theatre and that, but nothing happened. We was only up there for about six months. And, oh we had a good time, tripping, and we only treated - there was one brigade of 6th Division up there, and the only cases we treated were dengue fever, and a bit of malaria, and a few tropical things, nothing much.

Did you have any trouble with any tropical illnesses?

No, I was very fortunate, I never got a thing from there.

When you came back to Australia then, where did you go, you had some leave when you first got back?

Oh yes, we eventually came back. Of course when I came back then I - when I was up in Canungra I got the - went to the 2/4th, and then we went, as I said, we went up to Borneo then.

But before that I gather you had a brief period where you were involved training?

Oh yes. Oh yes, we had leave when we came home, we had quite a few weeks' leave. I think we had about a month, I think somewhere about a month leave.

Did Australia seem different then?

Well it was different. You know, when you come back after '40 - like it was - it was overrun with Americans and all sorts of things. Like we went from there - we had leave, and then we shifted up to Redbank. They took over the hospital there, at Redbank.

Did you have any encounters with American servicemen?

No. Oh no, I don't - well it's like the Australians, there's good and bad, and all sorts of very good types of Americans, and very generous. It's just like the Australians, there's nothing worse than the Aussies. (Laughs.) They can get into a lot of trouble in - you know.

I gather you had one brief period at Puckapunyal again, how did that come about. Was it Puckapunyal, where you were training or something?

We had one what?

I thought you said before we began the recording there was one period before you went to Borneo where you went to a military camp where there were a lot of accidents. What was that?

Oh we went up - that was up at Canungra, the jungle school, yes.

What were you doing up there?

I was sent up there as an instructor. Like I didn't - when I went to the 43rd Battalion, they were to go to New Guinea. What happens, we were up at Cape Pallarenda, in the 2/14th Hospital then, at - opposite Magnetic Island. And this Colonel Frith came over, and wanted someone that had had a lot of experiences. The 43rd Battalion that was up in Darwin, they were going to New Guinea, and he wanted somebody in the medical unit that had had experience, that knew about giving injections, and doing all sorts of things. He only had his field ambulance, and then they had a chap attached to them.

So this Frith came over, he knew our officers, Colonel Dicky Leigh, at Cape Pallarenda opposite Magnetic Island. And he said to me, 'Would you go', and I said, well I thought we were bogged down there, we didn't seem to be wanting to shift.

Because when we came up we were going to New Guinea. But what happened, the 2/2nd AGH out at Newington, south-west of Townsville was blown away with a flood, blown away with a cyclone, and then the terrific rain come down the valley, and washed all the beds, and all the lockers, and everything away. When we got to Townsville we had to set up there straight away. Christmas day, we worked all Christmas Day, and during the Christmas too.

They were flying all the wounded back from the Owen Stanley ranges then. At Garbut, there was a big airport at Garbut. Like the Yanks, there was 100,000 Americans there, and they were bringing them back in their Mitchells, and Liberators, and all sorts. Back to the hospital there. So we had to take those there.

Were you surprised at the condition in which some of the men from the Kokoda Trail were coming back?

Oh well, that was before the Kokoda Trail. We struck onto those later on when I got the unit, when I said I was up at Canungra, I got the unit to - I heard that they were going to Borneo,

the 2/4th AGH, so I thought, 'Oh well, that's a chance', and that's where I sneaked out, and got out, and got them to claim me, and I was back in the unit.

But I gather there were quite a few accidents at Canungra, what were the sort of things that were happening?

Oh well, everything was done with live ammunition. Hand grenades was live, and everything was live. And someone'd be pushing their head up. And then they used to have to cross over the Coomera River, where there's a steel cable about that thick, inch, one over the top, and there, and they had to cross over, walk on it. And a lot of them weren't used to heights, and panic, and fall down, and some got drowned, and blown up.

Were there weapon accidents, as well?

Oh yes, there was quite a few weapon accidents. When you do things with live ammunition, throwing hand grenades, and all that sort of thing. And that wash creek stunt, that I was telling you about, that was - everything was done with live ammunition.

Did it get to you to see people being killed and wounded in training?

Oh well, I didn't actually see it. I knew it was happening, like they were sending them down to the Canungra Hospital, and I was down there, and the only - well there was quite a few in the hospital then. But they had a couple of instructors there, they had Bonnie Muir, and Geoff Weber. They were the unarmed combatmen. They'd put a few in the hospital there too. Like they were teaching them unarmed combat up there.

(25.00) I gather that your unhappiness with that situation led you actually to going AWL?

Oh well, it was not for me. I thought, 'I didn't join the army to be mixed up in all that sort of thing'. I was in a medical unit, and that's where I went AWL, and walked out, and got the 2/4th to claim me to go to Borneo with them.

You went to Labuan?

Yes, we went to Labuan, up above Borneo, the 2/4th.

How did you find conditions there, I gather there were a lot of problems with dermatitis, and other sorts of tropical problems?

Yes, well they had a lot of skin complaints, and that.

You were saying there were quite a lot of skin problems and so on?

Yes. Dermatitis and all sorts of things. And of course when we went - it was one purpose, that they went up there to try and rescue - there were prisoners of war. But that was just prior to the Sandakan march, you know, when they brought them over from Changi, and there was this - Sandakan was right up the top of Borneo, and that's when they marched them down, and made them dig their own graves, and shot them, and pushed them in, and there was very few survivors out of that. My wife's brother was lost there, he went right through it, and he died at Sandakan, in that march.

Did you then deal with some of the survivors, the POWs?

That was the idea of the 2/4th, we went up there, we dealt with all the civilians, and nuns, and all the different people from around the islands, they brought them up from Kuching, and all around the - from the mainland.

Were you touched by the condition that you found some of the people in?

Oh yes, shocking. Like some of the chaps that survived, some of these soldiers, they had thighs about that thick. And they were less than thirty pound, twenty-eight pound men. Six foot, and just walking skeletons. You'd never forget it - you can see them in your - for the rest of your life, those sort of things. A lot of little children, and nuns, as I said, and, oh all sorts of people.

When you came back to Australia at war's end, do you recall the day you were demobilised, and how you felt about finally leaving the army?

Yes. Well we came back on the hospital ship to Sydney. Yes, oh, it was a happy relief, you know, and it was a good thing.

Did it seem a bit strange to get up the next day, and you were no longer in the army?

Well it took a lot of adjusting. I'd got engaged to get married before I went away. And I didn't get married till I came back. See I was fortunate, I was a tradesman, and I could go straight back into the building trade without any troubles.

Were you able to take advantage of any special ex-servicemen's facilities, like special loans, or training, or education, or that sort of thing?

Well I could have. I started - I took a - well I'd go down - I was living with my sister out at Surrey Hills then - we were for a few months. And I thought I'd go down to the - well it used to be the Glenferrie/Hawthorn Tech, I think, wasn't it. It's Hawthorn Technical College, I thought I'd learn, do something.

Having been a, like a good tradesman, worked all the things, and I used to get down there, and I spent more time, the chaps used to sharpen the chisels, and instead of having a proper tapered thing, it'd be blunt, and you'd spend more time sharpening chisels, and trying to get your tools, (laughs).

Oh, I thought I was going to do joinery, just as something different. But I found that my own trade was - I could go back and make bigger money. And then I worked for myself later on, after. I worked for myself for quite a long while right up till I was retired, out of it. And I had a very good business. I used to do - restore old mansions. I was in with Whelan the Wreckers, and Miles Whelan.

Over the years has association with former members of the 2/4th AGH been important to you?

Oh yes, very important. We were all a very good team. All the nurses, and matron and that. We have socials, and outings, and dinners, and reunions, we have a good time together. What's left. Of course there's such a lot of your unit passed on now. But those that are left. They had quite a big do up in the Pucka, the opening of the new hospital, I missed that, because I had to go and have this back of mine fixed up. But, oh no, we have a wonderful time together. Matron Hanna's still alive, the original matron. Like our first matron, Thomas, from Ballarat, she was killed in an air raid early. Matron Hanna, she was matron at the Alfred. No, we're all very good friends, we get on well with the nurses, and the ...

END TAPE 2, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW