



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

Accession number	S01050
Title	(VX6355) Kearney, Walter Leslie 'Les' (Sergeant)
Interviewer	Martin, Harry
Place made	Not stated
Date made	29 May 1991
Description	Walter Leslie (Les) Kearney as a sergeant, the 2/8th Battalion, interviewed by Harry Martin for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-1945.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape one of an interview about the 2/8th Battalion, recorded on 28 May 1991 with Les Kearney.

Les Kearney, where and when were you born?

We were living at Sunbury at the time. I was born in a hospital in Melbourne on the tenth of the eighth 1920.

Tell us something about your parents - what your mother and father did for a living, what sort of people they were?

My father had been a soldier in the first world war. He was a romantic Irishman and he always told us romantic stories about war and I think this influenced us in later life - it did me. I went into our war in a blaze of glory. My mother was an English lady of quite good breeding, and actually they should never have married. Nevertheless, they produced five of us, we children, but eventually they split up. So Mum ...

How many children? Five?

Five.

And you fitted where in that?

I was the second oldest. My sister was born on the ship coming out from England actually, after the war - first war. Mum took we kids down to Melbourne and we lived in Moonee Ponds. Dad stayed in Sunbury and we two boys generally used to go and visit him quite often. We lived in Moonee Ponds up until the war and I was a baker's apprentice. My younger brother who had been in the Militia put his age up and joined the army, and I came home one day and Mum said, 'You better go and look after him'. I said, 'Righto', because to be honest being a baker's apprentice was a boring job - night work - I didn't like it at all.

Just going back a bit. Your father, what did he do for a living?

He was a hairdresser and tobacconist. I got into an awful strife once pinchin' cigarettes, but that's beside the point - I think it's irrelevant but it taught me not to smoke.

What about your earlier years as far as schooling and so on was concerned?

We went to Sunbury State School, and Mr Rogers, normally known as 'the boss', and a little two-roomed state school at Sunbury, and he was the boss. I've seen him fight some of the bigger kids onto the floor and wrestle 'em around but he was the boss and he ruled that school beautifully. I don't think there's one of us boys went through without getting the cuts, and it didn't do us any harm in the long run, I don't think.

Were they difficult years, with your mother and father having broken up? Were they hard times?

The Depression came along during this time but while we were living with Dad, being the hairdresser of the place and tobacconist he was alright, but he was a gambler - the Irish in him. And this reacted on me, by the way, because I've reacted right against this. But the rest of the family, including the girls, always have their bet, and the brother has - to this day he's part owner of some trotting horses and that sort of thing. I can remember being in Sunbury as a kid was a pretty happy-go-lucky sort of experience but Dad and Mum would have some right royal blues. And as I say, well, eventually they split up, although Dad used to come down and see us at Moonee Ponds.

(5.00) What about after State School, where did you go from there?

When I came down to town I went to Moonee Ponds Central for a year and then to Ascot Vale State for a year. This put me to the age of fourteen and that finished my schooling. And then I worked for a year in a tanning place down at Richmond. And then I - well, obviously the time limit is wrong here - I worked for H. Mckay's Harvesters in Sunshine. I worked over there for a while and then I started this apprenticeship.

> Had you any particular ideas before that at the time when you were getting close to leaving school as to what you wanted to do with your life?

No, Mum and I talked a bit about it and she would have liked to have sent me to a technical school to learn some trade but we weren't well off and that never happened. I know too, I worked in a glass company for a while. I was the paint mixer where they used to spray all the globes and the light fittings and that sort of thing. I can remember, we used to seem to go all in bare feet. I can always remember myself in bare feet - with very tough feet - and we'd run over the roads and across the paddocks. And my father had greyhounds and we'd go out in the paddocks and course hares and rabbits - whatever.

One of his greyhounds was this Queen McCree and she was one of the forerunners of the Mcawber breed - this is all coming back now. But Queen McCree and I were great mates, even to the extent when I was lost at one stage - seemingly lost at one stage. And they eventually found me in behind - a bush was growing in the corner of the chimney at the house - and the dog would not let anyone near me. Apparently it took them quite a while to wake me up on this nice summer's day, and I'd snuck in there and gone to sleep and Queen McCree was guarding me and she wouldn't let the old man get in even. So it was like - I can remember this dog relationship was always there.

> You said your father told you romantic stories about the war. What were the sorts of things?

He wouldn't tell us anything about it - let's put it this way - he wouldn't tell us anything about the hardship side of it. He was an infantryman.

> In the British Army, I presume.

In the Australian Army. It would always be he and his mate 'Tinker' and 'Squadger' - if you can believe that. Of course, it sounded great to us. They were always getting into boxing tournaments and this sort of thing. I can't remember the exact stories that we used to hear but they sounded romantic. War sounded a romantic sort of a thing.

Did you grow up with the ANZAC legend: salute the flag at school, and all that sort of thing?

Yes, and I can remember every ANZAC Day there'd be one of the local identities who'd been to the war would come down and we'd all crowd into one of the schoolrooms and he'd tell us generally about the landing at ANZAC. And this, I think, impressed - well, it impressed me anyway. Life was just one day after the other. Perhaps I can give you an idea of the way my father was. He was a gambler. He'd go to the races and if he came home in a good mood and full of joy and he'd want to hug us and laugh with us and talk to us and he'd done his dough - he'd always done his dough. If he won, haw haw, he wasn't going to give that up. He'd come home and he'd be sober as a judge - and this Irish sort of thing that was in him.

What were you doing just before the war?

I was a baker's apprentice.

That's right.

Yes. One of the things we used to do was come down the bay and fish. There was a group of young people I was in with and my wife was one of them but she never used to come on these fishing expeditions.

(10.00) In fact, I rather didn't like her. I thought she was a stuck up little so-and-so. But nevertheless, she was one of the people I wrote to during the war. And I think it was - she kept writing to me when the others stopped writing because at times you got into situations where you weren't able to write letters and this might extend over a few months - and she kept writing. And I thought, well, we seem to get on well ... but anyway, I don't know whether that's relevant at all.

Yeah, by all means.

So eventually, over the years we - I think all our romance was by mail. She sent me photos and I'd write her letters and send her photos and that's how we got together.

You said before that you'd had a brother joined up and your mother said you better go and look after him. What was the actual process? How did you go about it?

I went up to the Essendon - well, wherever it was they - the drill hall at Essendon where Jack had been a Militia man. And of course, he was well on his way and he went to the 2/7th Battalion and I finished up at the 2/8th. While we were at the showground, before going to Puckapunyal, this was the first time I met my future brother-in-law, George Davies, who was known as 'Kelly'. It was later on during the war that he happened to see a photo of my sister and he was interested enough to write to her and they eventually got married, too. He lived in Geelong. He died about eighteen months ago.

But we had some great yarns. It's quite intriguing - I started off in an infantry platoon as a rifleman and a Bren gunner and then later on, after Greece, I became a mortar man. I did course and went to the mortars. Now, he was in transport. Well, he started off with me in A Company of the 2/8th and he went to transport later on. And then he became the battalion

blacksmith. And there's a story about that, too. Towards the end of the war we got some reinforcements who were mainly country blokes and they'd come from a Militia battalion. They were terrific blokes. They made us look puny, they were that young and vital and fit. And before we went up to New Guinea the word came around that anybody that had experience on farms were to be transferred out of the army back to their farms so that production could be built up. Now, my brother-in-law was a farmer. He'd worked all his life in the country, so he applied. And they said, 'No, you're too valuable. You're the battalion blacksmith and we can't do without you.' 'Oy', he said, 'I didn't realise I was so valuable'. But it was a bit .... That part of the situation, I think it led to a little bit of bitterness - I know I was - because here's all these young fellows, sent back home and we were sent up to New Guinea and at that time I valuated [sic] that as being a no-no. It was unnecessary and yet we lost a lot of people killed and wounded - a lot of our blokes.

Strangely enough, the other aspect of that, and you probably remember that MacArthur didn't want the Australian Army in with his boys. And we used say, well, he wanted all the glory for the Americans, and I think his excuse was that all the procedures and everything would need to be altered. We would have to learn all this, and there was no time for all this. We were really - strangely enough, we were crooked on it that we weren't allowed to go up to help with that push up through the islands. And when you think of it, it's quite stupid that we wanted to be in that situation where we probably would have got wounded or killed because the actions - the fighting - would have been rather horrific, I think.

(15.00) Going back to the showgrounds, how did you find it? How did you find the whole business of suddenly being with a large number of young men in such odd circumstances?

I don't think there was any particular impression there, because you quickly found out - well, not there so much - but you quickly found that you could get on with this one and not that one. I know there was a call one day for MPs and the rally was: 'Look, come and join the MPs and you'll go to England and you'll be just standing around the streets of London'. Well, Mum's people were all English. And I thought, oh well, this sounds alright, I'll be able to go over and see all me relatives. And I stepped out and I looked around and I thought, oh, that's not for me, and I walked back again.

You were on your own, were you?

No, there were a group, there were a few, I just forget how many, but a few went over and they wanted to join the MPs and I went back. So I finished up at Puckapunyal in the 2/8th Battalion. The first bloke we met there was Tommy Elliott who lived in Clifton Springs, and we had been going with him up to reunions and that, and he was a terrific bloke - Tom. And I say was because about twelve months ago he went for a trip to Ayers Rock with his second wife and he said, 'This is for me'. And Tommy was the sort of bloke you'd say he'd be the longest lived of us all. But he climbed Ayers Rock and died at the top - had a massive heart attack. But he was the first NCO when we were getting .... The ones of us who were left on that - with my brother-in-law because he was in that same convoy - and when we got out we always remember Tom, and he'd say, he was a corporal, 'Youse blokes get over here', and we often used to sling off at him later on. He became an officer later on. He got his commission. But he was one of nature's real gentlemen and it was a great pity that he had to go because ....

What about Puckapunyal? How did you find life there?

Well, everything - it was a new way of life and you had to learn all these new things. And you learnt to laugh at the things that happened. Tommy Barnes, a big, solid built bloke from up near the Murray somewhere, and he finished up in Z Force. He was that sort of soldier. He was selected to go into that Z Force, you know that went up through the island thing and was killed up there. But the first time he got his first stripe - he was a lance corporal - and so, of course, he was given the platoon to work on, to drill. And (laughs) he marched along this road near the cookhouse and gave us the wrong turn and we all marched straight into the cookhouse and (laughs). The cookhouse was open and we all ... well, did he abuse us! Captain Nella St John Larkins was the 2IC, at that time, of the company and terrific. About six foot four tall and non-regimental although .... We used to say 'she' not because of any homosexual connotations but because 'Nella'. So you'd say, 'Here she comes'. And I can remember Captain Larkins' attitude was very free and easy. Like, the sergeant'd fall us in and he'd say, 'Alright, now come and gather around me if I want to talk to you'. In other words, a leader of men. I don't know what happened to Captain Larkins. Do you know that? He wasn't .... I can't remember him up the desert and to this day .... In fact his name's just come back to me now. I must ring up Charlie Crouch and find out. But he was the sort of bloke you didn't - you'd work for, you'd follow. Others weren't, but I won't go into that.

> What did you generally think of the army food, the discipline, the training and those sort of things?

The discipline wasn't bad. Although I remember being on guard duty and the orderly officer didn't turn up for half an hour and Puckapunyal being what it was, by the time he got there, of course, our boots were covered in dust and so were we. I finished up with seven days' CB out of that. I just forget what I said to him but he rebuked me for having dusty boots.

(20.00)I hadn't learned that discretion is the better part of valour and I said something back to him and I got seven days' CB and it could have led to me being a different sort of soldier, because I found while you're doing CB you're not doing drills and all this. I was put to work in the cookhouse and I got the best of food and then I could go back to the hut and lay down and read a book and all the rest of them were out there drilling (laughs). I often think back to that and I thought, well, I should have stuck to that sort of thing and told an officer off every now and then and got this sort of treatment. The orderly officers, they'd come round, doing their inspection of the huts and I'd hear 'em coming and I'd sneak out the door that end and walk around the hut and by the time they'd gone through I'd come in the other end and lay down and read a bit more until it was time to go down to the cookhouse again and peel a few spuds. But you joined the army to be a soldier not to be a bludger. So we went on. I can remember the - this Tommy Barnes was in the group and we were all this sort of mate, and Roy Broughton and - yes, names coming back now you start to talk. My future brother-in-law he was always there but we were never close in those days. He was in a different platoon, too.

It was the big adventure and with my father's romantic ideas about the army behind me, and I think this was always in my mind. Stan Jacobs was a sergeant and he got his commission at Puckapunyal - and the food was never much chop - and the first day he was an officer he was orderly officer and he came round and we really had a complaint because the stew was actually green - the meat in it was green - and you just couldn't eat it. So he came in and he said, 'Any complaints?' and, of course, we thought we were going to get him to back us up, he having been a sergeant, one of us. But, we said, 'Yeah, have a look at the meat' we all yelled

at him. And he reached in and he pulled out a piece of this greasy, green meat and put it in his mount and chewed it and swallowed it and said, 'Delicious' and walked out (laughs). But he was a good bloke and he was our platoon leader up through the desert. And before we went to Greece he was seconded to go down to a training battalion to give some lectures on Italian weapons. And Italian grenades, we considered them harmless - they were made of bakelite and the explosive in them didn't seem to be much good. But he was demonstrating these and one of these things fell off the table and blew his leg off, so they weren't harmless. I haven't heard of Stan Jacobs from that day to this.

> It seems there were quite a lot of young fellows who put their age up to join, but there were also quite a few older men who put their age down. Did you know any or have any who did that?

Yes. Harry Williamson, Stan Reid, because these people, they eventually went to this special battalion called the 'Olds and Bolds' and this happened in the middle ...

> What was it called?

The 'Olds and Bolds'.

> What did that mean?

Well, that's what they were. They were bold enough to get into the army at their age and they were the old ones, and it's just a rhyming thing. I don't know what the actual battalion was - it was obviously not called that but that's what we knew them as, the Olds and Bolds. And they finished up doing guard duties here and there and all over the place. One bloke in C Company, I never ever remembered his name, but he obviously should have been one of those but he stuck right through. And these people were a great steadying influence. I think from the physical aspect, I suppose, it would have been very hard on them. And I know the Greek campaign was certainly the hardest on me physically - it was a shocking place.

(25.00) And I often, when I used to read about the Germans in Russia, later on, in the snow I had full sympathy with them, believe you me. Because my thoughts about people in the army, really you've got no control over anything you're doing, and I think most soldiers, or many soldiers - and I can't really say this - but I feel that many soldiers would have got cynical as the war went on. I think this happened to Australian people generally during the first world war. As the war went on, by things I've read and heard that Australian people generally did become cynical about the loss of life of the Australian soldiers in the first world war.

> But earlier on, at the point when you left Puckapunyal and you marched through the streets of Melbourne with your romance of war it must have been very exciting.

Oh yes. Yes, it was - all the crowds cheering and you felt as though you were on a mission. You were going to do something, you really were saving the world for democracy, so to speak. And yes, all of that Puckapunyal training and then the training when we got over the other side. And, of course, you're in a new country in Palestine and things were just different, and you met up with these people and you found that people are the same all over the world,

really. I mean, they might be different colours and different physiques and have different manners but it's just the way they've been.

How did you find the *Dunera*? How was the voyage?

The mess decks were big heavy wooden slab tables with very heavy wooden slab seats and these were to be let down onto the floor every night and the hammocks slung. Anyway, I managed to drop one of these seats onto my toe and I spent the whole voyage, again, having a very easy time. And once again I used to manipulate myself around the ship as the orderly officers [inaudible], as they were doing their ship's rounds each day, and I really had a bludge of a voyage. I didn't do any drills or anything because I had this crushed toe.

Was it badly crushed?

It took about twenty years, but after that they - in fact they put me out to it instead of a local to take all the pieces. All the nail was in all little pieces and they took it out. Yeah, it was quite painful but it settled down and didn't worry me at all.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape one of the interview with Les Kearney, recorded on 29 May 1991 about the 2/8th Battalion.

When you went off to the Middle East you were following the First AIF. Was there a sense of consciousness of the reputation of the AIF? Were you ...?

Yes, again I feel this was because of the way my father used to talk and, of course, you knew that the AIF, the First AIF, had served in these same areas. I think - just while it's in my mind - the other thing you used to feel proud of, too, was your physical ability to march long distances carrying quite big weights such as your rifle and your pack and all your gear, and you became proud of your physical fitness. But it goes on from there, and the army had this terrible habit, especially in action, saying to you, 'Now, we've got to move three miles to get to our starting point, where we're going to take off for a particular action'. These three miles generally turned out to be about twenty-three miles (laughs), and this happened in the desert a few times.

And it happened in Greece where we were transported from this camp called the 'Daphne'. It wasn't the correct name but we used to call it Daphne - it was near enough. And that was outside Athens. And we were transported - am I alright here to do this - in these cattle trucks which had two-inch gaps between the boards along the sides, and we were frozen because we were travelling up into the mountains. We were mostly prepared and we'd stocked up our kitbags with these Coca Cola sized bottles of Daphne wine which was a thick, sweet wine. Now, I might say that I was a non-drinker but we all realised that we were going up into the cold and we'd need something to keep us warm and we all stocked up with quite a bit of this wine which we drank on the way up in these cattle trucks. And we were on this train for a couple of days, and when we got to Larissa which was supposed to be an open city but which the Germans were bombing anyway, but by the time we got there after our physical fitness had deteriorated to a marked extent ...

(5.00) How did it affect you as a non-drinker?

Well, I think that alcohol in those situations, it did help to keep you warm, but that two days in the train was enough to take the edge off - or more than the edge off - our physical fitness. So when we got out at Larissa, and again this [story?] said, well, we've got to march a few miles up the road. We did march a few miles and it was uphill all the way but it was twenty-five miles. We were supposed to meet up with this New Zealander transport crowd who was going ...

How heavy would the packs you were carrying then be, do you think?

No idea of the weight.

Heavy?

Very. I think it was the only time during the war that I saw any of our fellows drop out of a march. And we went and went and went and went but after a while you get to the stage where your body and your mind become absolutely numb and one foot just keeps going after the other - and that's what I call exhaustion - and we were exhausted. We just kept going and going and eventually it became night and we stopped and we had these little two-man tents. I can't remember whether we carried them or whether our own battalion transport brought them along - they must have because we had blankets, too - and we had some blankets and these two-man tents. Jimmy Neil was section corporal and we could hear this water. And we got our towels out and went looking for it and found it about twenty yards away, and it was a wide stream. And we found out it was only about a foot deep but it was fifty yards wide. It was a mountain stream and it was icy cold and we just let ourselves drop in it, and it was absolutely wonderful because you came out of that braced. And we went back, and I think it was the only time that we were ever anywhere near an active service situation where there were no pickets put on us, and I know I had a wonderful, wonderful sleep on that night. It stuck in my mind.

What about your toe? Had your toe been bothering you during the march or was it okay by then?

Your toe goes numb like the rest of your body. No, I was always aware of it but it never really bothered me.

The training period when you arrived, I gather, was also pretty intense and pretty hard. In the Middle East - when you arrived in the Middle East.

Yes, but once again it was good, and again we were prepared for this exhaustion bit because they used to - one turn-out we did and we covered a hundred miles in a direct line. The whole battalion went out on this exercise, and we went through Arab villages and Jewish villages but when there we never stopped there, we'd just go straight through. And we'd spread out in battalion formation. So besides this hundred miles in five days, we were also doing night patrols and we just weren't going ahead in a straight line. A platoon would be sent out there and another one out there and you're sort of zigzagging across and I reckon we did about - I just don't know how many miles. But I do know, coming back, and Colonel Mitchell, and he was a great leader of men, too, he'd been the 1st/8th Battalion CO. He was the youngest

battalion CO in the AIF but he was the oldest battalion CO in the Second AIF at that stage. We had a wonderful band in those days and we got about ten mile from camp coming home but he'd sent the bandsmen in to get their instruments and they came out and marched us in. A band's a wonderful thing. If war was all bands and music it'd be great (laughs).

And so it picked you up, did it?

Yes, it really put - that sort of music really puts life into you - it's quite amazing. As I say ... but that is not war, and thereby comes the problem.

(10.00) And, of course - we'll carry on about this Greek business. Well, the next day this transport caught up with us and we were taken here, there and everywhere, to about four different places where we put up our two-man tents and camped the night. My memory's a bit hazy about that. All I can remember it was miserable and we didn't seem to get enough food. And I think any country sending their troops to war should concentrate absolutely on making sure they're well fed. Well you know even in ordinary civvy life, if you don't get a meal, or a proper meal, you can get very low. But eventually we got up to Vevi. Vevi? Yes, that's the name of it. We got on a forward slope and, of course, the story was that the tanks wouldn't be able to get up into these mountains and we weren't quite sure why not because if our trucks could get up on our side, well, why couldn't the tanks get up on their side - but you hoped they wouldn't anyway. So we dug in. I think we were there three days and four nights, something like that.

But it snowed and it thawed, and it snowed and it thawed. It would have been better with continual snow I understand, but I know I don't go near the snow now if I can help it. I think - the fact is we're on this forward slope so we couldn't move in the daytime and we could see the Germans patrolling across, and, of course, the battalion was spread over a three-mile front and this meant that one section could not see the next section. And I think you said you've already interviewed Alan Fleming and Alan might have indicated some of the same things - that, I think, one of our .... Well, I don't think, I know, one of our sections was taken by the Germans and they came along the whole front and did this. But I think Alan may also have told you that he's investigated the records of the 'Hermann Goering' Division and they were the ones who we opposed at that stage. And Alan said their records show that they came through there and they had a pretty easy time of it until they ran into the 2/8th Battalion and they had quite a lot of injured and killed.

When did you hear your first shots fired in anger, as it were? And when ...?

That was at Bardia in the desert. I can always remember - to me it was strange that once you're start into action you lose all your fear but, boy, before that your stomach's churning over and you're wondering also, the old thing, how you're gonna stand up in front of your mates. Are you gonna be alright? You're gonna be a gig? And strangely enough some of the .... We went into Bardia and then we went into Tobruk - we took Tobruk - and then we went up towards Barce and Derna, and we didn't go much further than that. But Barce was a sort of an oasis. There was this - quite a town. But as we were going up the coast there we were pulled up and we had to stop two or three times and get out of the trucks because we were being ambushed.

Now, to me these ambush situations were the worst possible things because you couldn't see your enemy. And yet there were bullets and shells coming from these places. To me they

were the scariest - the ones where I used to be most frightened - and you couldn't get at them. Whereas in the actions that we'd been in at Bardia and Tobruk, once you got moving and you were in contact - no worries. It was just like doing a job and you completely lost any feeling of fear - it just went. It used to amaze me. I was always amazed, too, by the fact that I went through the war without a scratch and yet our section .... We were going along once and some three Italian light tanks, and they were light because we eventually got to work on them with the boys' rifles. And in fact one of the Italian prisoners of war showed us how to operate one of their Bredas - anti-tank guns.

(15.00) And these light tanks, they were just tin. They were lighter than our Bren carriers and we just shot 'em to bits. But they came over this ridge and 'brrp' and Jimmy Neil and I were left in the centre and the two blokes on the end, and out of ten men the other six were shot down. And that happened again in Tobruk - a similar thing, not so many - but this machine-gun firing at our section and, again, Jimmy Neil and I were left.

> Did it get to you, at all, or somehow was it a matter of that you just took it that this is what happened and you didn't have ...?

While it's happening there, as I say, while you're in action nothing - oh, right - you seem to get in a groove, you were just doing these things. Like, we got to the edge of this big wadi in Tobruk and Stan Jacobs - I mentioned him before - Stan was a non-drinker but we had very little water issued to us in the desert and we came across these half-barrels of chianti sitting out in the hot sun with tin mugs alongside them. And, of course, liquid was at a premium and so you'd drink this stuff. Of course, it sweated out of you - most of it - but left you feeling terrible.

And I remember we were held up by an Italian machine-gun right across the other side of this broad, deep wadi. And we found out later that the Italians had tunnelled into the side of this wadi and they had all their kitchens and storerooms and ammunition dumps and everything. And in fact we got some beautiful food out of there. But we're sitting on one edge of this - or laying - on one edge of this wadi with this machine-gun got us sort of pinned down. And one of the four-by-fours, which is a square sort of a truck - you probably know what I'm talking about - came along from the Northumberland Fusiliers. And, of course, they had a reputation that they'd been sent out many years before the war and they were due to be replaced when the war started. And they were still out there when the war went on, and they were quite immune to anything that could happen to them, I think.

Anyway, this young officer came up and said to Stan Jacobs, he said, 'What's the matter, old boy?', to which Stan said, 'Well, that machine-gun over there'. And this young officer turned around and, 'Oh, sergeant, do something about that, will you?'. This has always stuck in my mind this conversation. And the sergeant barked out an order and the next thing this machine-gun was down on the ground and 'brrp, brrp, brrp' - that was the end of the Italian machine-gunner. But by this time we'd been laying there a while and there were bottles of wine and spirits laying all over the place, and Stan who was a non-drinker, Stan Jacobs, he got all regimental. He was doing things by numbers, and: 'Righto, turn, lay down. Right, now prepare to move.' And he pulled the one near up and then the other knee and gets up and away we go, down this wadi, and we kept going. But, as I say, I remember him as a non-drinker and this was the way this stuff affected him. I don't remember being affected by it myself but possibly I was doing stupid things, too. But it didn't last long because of the heat - it soon sweated it out of you - and away we went.

Towards the end of that same day, just towards dusk, and we'd gone down across a road and there was a stone wall about two-foot high down at the bottom of this hollow, and then about another hundred, hundred and fifty yards away was, as we found out, a machine-gun nest. There were four machine-guns on it. I was the Bren gunner, and I got down behind this stone wall, we all did, because these machine-guns started to open up on us and we could see the tracers and we'd see the flashes coming from them - it was just on dusk. Anyway, I opened up on them, merely because I happened to be the Bren gunner. I would have sooner been layin' down loadin' up the magazines.

(20.00) But I've never forgotten, way out on the right I could see these flashes, quite a bit away, and I found out afterwards it was one of these Breda anti-tank, anti-aircraft guns, and these tracer bullets were just skipping over the top of us and I wasn't taking any notice of it. You - I don't know how to describe it - but you feel fear before and after it's over you think, boy, I was lucky. But while these things are happening .... But anyway, these four machine-guns, apparently they were on fixed lines on to the road behind us and we were down in the hollow. And whether they couldn't pick up the flashes from my Bren gun, and another one of our sections was down a bit further, also firing at them, but when we got up there we found - they eventually stopped firing and we got up there and we found they'd all been killed. In fact one of - apparently it was one of the bullets from my Bren - had gone clean up the spout of one of their machine-guns and blew the bolt out and it blew the bloke's head off. I'm not that good a shot but it's just one of those things that happen.

What was the attitude of the men towards the Italian prisoners of war when you began to take prisoners?

I don't think it affected us because we just passed through them. Jimmy Hawken, he was my number two on the Bren, and that morning - there were beautiful sunrises in the desert - as the sun came up over the Mediterranean it was accentuated by the dust - not sand, dust. The Libyan desert is pure, gritty dust - its yuk! Anyway, as we're moving in .... Now, Jimmy was only a kid at this stage. I was twenty-one and he was nineteen. He just couldn't - I don't say he was uncontrollable, but he was rushing down with his rifle and he was whacking all these prisoners going past and he was calling out what a wonderful morning it was, what a wonderful morning, and all of a sudden 'bang'. A bullet hit him right in the chest and blew half his back out - it must have been a dum-dum. Of course, that didn't please us too much at all, either - the fact that they were using dum-dums - and it probably helped our resolve. I mean, dum-dums were supposed to be outlawed in the war. No, I don't ...

What was done in response to that?

Nothing there, but whenever we run into anybody to oppose anybody who was going to use any sort of weapon against us then we felt we had to do something about it. I think it's like the football match where the bloke gets socked and the rest of the team lifts themselves up, and I think this is what happened to us. But as I say, as we were moving into the .... The engineers had used their Bangalore torpedoes on the wire and blown it up so we could get through. But it was quite a narrow passage and we were all converging on this to get through and the Italians were ranged on to us, and their artillery was pretty good from that point of view. But the good thing about it, it was first world war ammunition they were using and mostly - well, it didn't do us any damage. But a couple of times I thought, boy, our other two sections - there are three sections in a platoon, as you probably know - and I thought, boy,

there'll be no one coming out of that, because these things would burst up in the air and there'd be a great cloud of black smoke. But what was happening, the explosive had deteriorated to such an extent it was just making smoke and it was just cracking the shells open and they'd just fall down.

But I saw sections of ours disappear in this smoke at times and it was really fortunate that they were using that ammunition. As I say, we could have been in real strife there. I remember Hurricanes coming down and shooting up machine-gun posts that were harassing us, and I remember seeing three blokes, and I estimated they were a thousand yards away, and I always reckoned I was a pretty good shot, and anyway I set me sights and let go a burst and they fell down but I don't know really whether I'd hit them, because I think if you hear bullets coming near you fall down anyway, 'cause they were out on an angle.

(25.00) The Italian food, of course, we had to try that out. And their tinned food was nowhere near as sustaining as our bully beef. I mean, you can live on bully beef and biscuits forever and it would stick by you; you felt good with it. But their cooked food in this particular wadi I was talking about before, well, we got stuck into that, too. Everything was just - they must have been just getting ready for a meal and they had all these huge cauldrons filled with Italian food - spaghetti and all this sort of thing.

> Was there any concern that it might have been poisoned or might have been ...?

Not a thought, no. I think the only thought about poison later on, you wondered what was in some of these bottles that some of us had been drinking - some of this alcohol. I know I picked up a bottle and it was labelled '*triple sec*'. I think it was gin but tripled distilled and I smelt it and I gave it to 'Mudgey' - Bob Mudge, yeah. He had a reputation as a bit of a drinker and he went like that and he spat it out again. It spoke for itself.

> At Benghazi fellows were billeted with local Italian people. Did you get billeted?

We never got as far as Benghazi. We were billeted with the Italians outside of Barce because they had farms there. As I say, it was a bit of an oasis. We were there for the express purpose of keeping the Arabs away from the Italian settlers.

> What was feared would happen?

It was fear that the Arabs would raid them and kill them, or at least raid them and take their stock - they had goats and that. It was where I got a taste for young goat meat, actually. They'd make up a stew of young goat - meat and vegetables and I'd give 'em bully beef. And they liked the bully beef and I liked their goat stew, probably because it was a change. We never really saw any Arabs.

> But what about your billeting, how was that?

I mean, when you take into consideration that we'd been sleeping on the ground anything else was paradise. I can't remember what we actually - I still think we slept on the floor of these places where we were, but when you're young you can cop anything, you can sleep anywhere.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape two of the interview with Les Kearney about the 2/8th Battalion, recorded on 29 May 1991.

How did you get on with the Italians who were putting you up during those couple of weeks?

Quite good, yep. We tolerated each other very well, I thought. To me, this was the start of thinking about why are we fighting these people? There's really no dislike about them or anything. And I always think about this with wars: the people doing the fighting really don't dislike the other one because they can't see 'em and they don't know 'em and they don't know their natures or anything, so how can they dislike them. By this time, I might tell you it didn't take long for the romantic side of war to rub off - it didn't last long.

Given the propaganda there'd been though at the start of the war was it a surprise to you to find that these Italian people were really just, as you said before ...

Just ordinary people.

Were you a bit surprised?

No.

Had you expected to find something different?

No, not surprised. It's like if you go to another town and you meet some people and, oh well, they're just people. The other aspect of it I don't think really came until quite a while later when you start to think, well now, what the heck was I doing shooting people for and I didn't know 'em, they'd done nothing to me. And this sort of attitude came along later on, I think. But when you get into an army situation and in the name of discipline you do as you're told, otherwise you can finish up in strife. Well, I don't think I remember anyone really getting into strife in our mob because when you're banded together like that and when - well, if anyone's shooting at you, well, you're gonna shoot back. It's a situation. It's a funny thing.

I was talking to Wally Gudgeon the other day and he said, 'You know, for all these years it's only in the last short period of time that I want to talk to anyone about what happened during the war'. And it's only in the last few years that I've been talking to my brother-in-law, to Kelly Davies, and to my brother, Jack, about what happened during the war. Prior to that you wanted to forget it. And Wally - well, you're going to see him and he'll probably tell you some interesting things. My brother, he insists that he met me in Greece and I can never remember that. But then he names the place where it was and I was there, so I mean, he's not going to say that. This is merely a point of interest. As I said, Greece was the sort of .... In the desert we'd gone up and we'd had victory after victory. In Greece, of course, the boot was on the other foot and we sort of got .... It was quite strange how the Germans did that. Once they got us moving they didn't seem to want to bring us into action. They just herded us along, and we'd be on this ridge or something and you could see them setting up their army down on the plains. And then they'd send out patrols but never to get really into contact, just to let you know, look, we've got this great mob of people here and they're a pretty good army

and they're gonna come after you shortly, so you better move back. And apparently our people had the same idea because we'd move back another twenty miles and settle in again.

(5.00) You realised then just how much you were outnumbered then, I take it?

Absolutely. We'd realised it right up in Vevi. I mean, being outnumbered it's a matter of proportion. I mean, we were outnumbered in the desert, too, but the quality of leadership with the Italians wasn't there, and also their lack of equipment insofar as, as I say, their artillery. If they'd had have decent shells to fire we could have been in a lot of strife. It's another little aspect about that, too - about the desert. The Italians had marvellous transport - their huge diesel trucks and they'd go alright because we just go up to 'em and swing the - they had a handle - and 'boom' away they'd go. We were being crowded into these transport trucks to be transported from one area to another and we were sitting and laying on top of one another, most uncomfortable. And when you think back it was stupid because they'd cart us along and then say, well, you've got to do this and got to do that, and we're exhausted before we started because we hadn't had a - they generally transported us at night and we didn't get any sleep. And here's these, oh, hundreds of huge Italian trucks that we could have used. But 'No', said our people, 'You can't do that. It's not according to the articles of war. You can't use them; they belong to the enemy.' But, of course, when Mr Rommel came along he had no compunction at all. In fact, we read that he used a British command transport to do all his work in. I suppose our attitudes changed, too, but we weren't in a position to see it.

The water situation, it was quite strange. We used to get a third of a water bottle issued by the water trucks each night. There were two ways of dealing with this. Some of the blokes just drank it straight down and then went without for twenty-four hours, and others of us, and this was my caper, I'd take a sip now and then. But the strange part about this was, when we got up to this Barce area there was, at the bottom of this wadi there was quite a stream and we had to climb down one side and go up the other. Now, strangely enough we'd become so used to being without water, well, in my case anyway, and I didn't see anyone else want to have a drink out of that stream, and just waded through it and went on. And so apparently the body can learn to exist without a great deal of water.

When you first arrived in Greece, it seems there was a bit of time to visit the Acropolis and enjoy a little bit of leave. Do you recall that?

I had a couple of days' leave, yes. I was intrigued with the brothels. I went into one ...

Describe it. What did it look like? What was the manner of how were you approached and so on?

I just forget how we got there, me and me mate, but we did. And we went into this brothel and I saw this young girl and she appealed to me and I thought, oh, I'll have a go at this and I was very, very shy about the whole business ...

What nationality was she, do you suppose?

She'd be Greek. Anyway, so eventually I was beckoned through their passage and opened the door and here's this - she was about fifty, this lady laying on the bed there starkers, and I fled (laughs). But they, not only there but in Palestine and anywhere we went in the Middle East, it was quite a common thing for the fiancé of the girl to be .... She'd be working there to help

to raise her dowry for the marriage. Well, this is what we were told and we had no reason to disbelieve it.

(10.00) One place in Beirut, I went in there and you didn't have to have sex you could just sit down and talk and have a drink. And they had one French girl - me mate did most of the talkin' 'cause he could talk French. What was his name? Griffiths, Rod? Griffiths. He wrote a book, anyway. He'd been in the French Foreign Legion. But he was talking to this girl - whether she was French or not, I don't know. I was just sitting there. I was a very naive sort of a kid, I can tell you. As I say, this Griffiths, he'd been in the French Foreign Legion and even - he wasn't much older than me but apparently he was experienced. And, as I say, he finished up in the I Section and he wrote a book that was readily available, in our battalion anyway. You know, you see films and TV shows and all these girls are readily available and all this romance take place but I'm sure it doesn't really happen in ordinary war situations. Because after all, I mean, you get a day's leave, really, you're thinking of your people back home really, and you're thinking what can I get them. And you're looking for souvenirs more or less if you've got a day's leave. And a day's leave is not that long because by the time you get from your camp in there it's getting on towards lunchtime and then you've got about three or four hours to wander round. As far as I can see, and I never used to hear the fellows talking about going to brothels or anything, so ....

> Did you know anybody who got VD? I mean, it was, of course, of great concern to the army about venereal disease and so on.

If I can put it this way. I never knew any other ranks that got VD and other than that I'm not commenting on (laughs).

> What about relations with the British and so? How did you find the British?

Well, these Northumberland Fusiliers in the desert, they were the ones who - they were our machine-gun support. I can always remember them doing pack drill because some of their blokes got friendly with our cooks and our cooks had control of our rum ration - what there was of it. Before we went into action we used to get a spoonful of rum in a bit of water in a dixie and that really kicked us on. It was completely useless, in other words. No, I can't really comment on that excepting to say, you see these blokes doing pack drill in the middle of the desert, in the middle of a war, and we were told that they'd been drunk through drinking our rum (laughs) - I don't know. Really, we had little to do with them. I think I had more to do with .... We seemed to come into contact with the Americans quite a lot - when we came home, when we were up in New Guinea - but even then it was sort of sketchy. You'd just meet a bloke and say 'how are you going', and he'd say, 'oh, alright'. I can remember one American bloke, he was crooked on his wife, he'd had a 'Dear John' apparently but I can't remember much about that anyway.

> With the Germans approaching, apart from superiority on the ground in terms of numbers, they also had superiority in the air. Was that dismaying, that you never knew when aircraft might come and strafe you and so on?

On the way up we were dive-bombed by Stukas and that was a really scary experience, and I think it's .... We'll go back to what I said before, that when you're in action and you can do something, if the other bloke's shooting at you, you can shoot back at him - okay, and this seems to take away all your fear. At least you can do something. But when you've got Stukas

and there's these screaming things and droppin' bombs all over the place, and you can't really fire - it's no good firing a rifle back at them. I might make an exception there because, now, we got to one spot on the way back down in Greece and this Messerschmitt 109 came over us very low, never strafed us, and he flew over and then came back again. When it came back, by the time it came back, every bloke in the battalion either had his rifle or Bren or whatever - pistols - and they all went up and let go at him, and they hit him, and he started to wobble, and, as I say, he wasn't very high and he flew away and we heard him crash and saw this great heap of smoke come up.

(15.00) The other aspect of that was, too, when we got on the ship out of Greece. We were put on it during the night and from the destroyers onto the ship and we took off. We were all told to stay down below decks. No one wanted to stay below decks. So we were all up on the top deck.

Was there a feeling you might be torpedoed and you didn't want to be trapped? Or bombed?

Yeah, the bombing - didn't want to be bombed and caught down below. There was no thought of torpedoes, I don't think. Anyway, Stukas - no ordinary bomber and Stukas - were having a go at us and we shot down a Stuka and an ordinary bomber with smallarms fire, because whether they didn't expect it or what, I don't know, but they just came over very lazily and very lowly and we just - something had to hit 'em. I don't know how many blokes were on the ship but we were letting go with everything we possibly had, plus the ship's own Lewis guns and things.

I guess a loud cheer to see that you'd been effective when you saw that happen.

No. You see that in films, I think. You see blokes cheer when things happen but it just becomes matter of fact. I think you're so relieved that you're still okay and, of course, when the other planes, and there weren't many, saw that this had happened over our ship they left us alone.

During that retreat did you know that Australians were being captured?

When the time to retreat came, as a Bren gunner, the Bren gunners were asked to stay behind and cover the retreat, and I just forget how long we had to stay. But eventually I took off and came down the hill and on to this dirt road, and it was quite intriguing there. I ran into another Bren gunner, didn't know him, he was from our battalion but, of course - I knew him by sight and that's about all - and so we marched down this road together and we're both exhausted after sitting up in these hills, and, as far I'm concerned, underfed, and we're both exhausted and we got to a spot and we could see these tracer bullets crossing the road. And up in the hill over there was a German tank just firing across the road and we were walking straight towards these tracer bullets. And both of us had hardly said a word to each other because we were both, couldn't be bothered talking, we just wanted to move. And we got about ten yards away from this line of tracer bullets and they stopped. There was quite a deep ditch at the side of this road which we could have got in and crawled along where these tracers were going to be but we never. We just kept walking and we got about ten or twenty yards past and he opened up again. I think he said, 'Look at those pair of stupid buggers. We'll let 'em go.' Anyway, either that or he had trouble replacing his belt.

But as we got down the road and we'd been told if possible we were to go to this particular crossroads where the rendezvous would be for the whole group. And I could see this group of our blokes, they were going on a road, and to me it looked as though they were heading for Yugoslavia. And I thought to myself, well, my sense of direction hasn't ever been that good and I thought perhaps I was looking the wrong way. As it turned out they were heading towards Yugoslavia and they were captured.

Why did they head that way? Do you know? They were just lost or ...?

I've got no idea, because someone must have had directed 'em because they were in a group and marching along in a correct military column. And when I saw 'em, they'd have been about three-quarters of a mile away.

Apparently there were cases of deliberate misleading information by Germans who were disguised as Greeks and so on, and misdirected them.

Well, I think I mentioned before that there was a section taken out of our battalion and they took a section out of each nationality and each unit, right along the whole front by coming up and being dressed as European soldiers of some sort or Allied soldiers and they did do this.

(20.00) And also, we were getting information, or some sort of word came to us and it was treated as a joke, that if we had to retreat, and you found yourself on your own, and you weren't aware of where you had to go to, then throw your weapon away but take the bolt out and bend the barrel of the gun - anything like that. Not that the Germans would want our weapons, I don't think. And there was all sorts of talk about 'fifth column'. But where this particular rumour or order came from, I wouldn't have a clue but I've spoken to quite a few blokes through the battalion and apparently a lot have said yes, they heard this, and a lot have said no, they didn't hear anything about it. But the fifth column was the thing in those days and it apparently - well, there was some talk of it. I know I heard it.

Did you know anybody who was captured? Did you find that you had personal friends who you believed to have been taken prisoner?

Well, 'Soupie' Williamson, Harry Williamson, was our sergeant and he was taken. And I met him after the war and he was .... I always wonder why he wasn't in the Olds and Bolds but he wasn't. Yes, he was captured but he said their life as a prisoner of war in Germany wasn't bad. And in fact I've heard - I can't remember any names - but it appears that two or three of our blokes married German girls after they came home from the war and then went back and married German girls they'd met during the war.

To that point had you had any or many close friends who had been killed or very badly wounded?

Lenny Hore from Albury - we were pretty good mates - but he got shot in the arm, but then it was bad enough he was sent home from that. You were all mates. Claude Varner - Claude was getting more money than General Blamey. I mean, he had eleven kids. You might remember in those days you got paid so much for each child as well as your wife. And Claude .... I had two incidents with people being shot through the balls, and he was shot by the Italians. And he was laying there and he was really - he was in agony - but we were moving and I didn't have time to take that much notice of him except to notice that the

stretcher-bearer was coming up to him. But he died through being shot through the balls. I had a incident where I was going along the edge of a wadi and this, again it was one of these wadis with food and caves in the side and there was a machine-gun, a light machine-gun, sitting in the middle of it. And suddenly this fellow run out of one of these caves and started to run across towards this light machine-gun. And it just didn't make sense and I yelled out at him. He didn't take any notice. I was about 200 yards away from him. And he's getting closer and closer to this thing, and I thought, he's going to be a hero, he's going to grab that thing and start firing and I might get shot, and I propped down on the side of this wadi. And, of course, the Bren was tilted over to one side and I had no time to really adjust or anything and I just let a long burst go and I shot him right through the groin, and he screamed. But then, apparently, the pain got to him and he passed out, but I don't think he would have lived. Two Italian stretcher-bearers rushed out of the cave and come over and got him but, of course .... But that incident sticks in my mind because I used to think, now, I wonder, I'd hate that to have been me. It would have been ooohhh. That would have been something really painful - well, it's putting it mildly.

(25.00) Actually, Vietnam veterans have told me that if they got hit or thought they were hit, the first thing they'd do was feel if their balls were still there. Was there that sense of ...?

No, I don't think so. I've heard this about the Vietnam blokes. But there, I think their problem was they run into a lot more mines and that sort of thing, where it could affect them that way. Yes, I've spoken to quite a few Vietnam blokes. I think there's a large number of them - I don't think our people were evaluated in respect of being nerve cases, but I think it was something like forty-odd per cent of the Vietnam veterans needed counselling after their ...

More have suicided than died in the war. You said you were being very badly fed. What were you eating? What was a fairly typical kind of range of what you might have in a day?

To be honest, I can't remember really, but it would have had to have been M and V - meat and vegetables - out of the tins or heated up or the bully beef - bully beef stew.

At the end of that part of the campaign - most young people, I suppose, feel they're immortal. If people die or get killed it's other people. But had that begun to go or did you still feel that somehow it wouldn't happen to you?

Let's put it this way. By the end of things - by the end of the war - I was hoping that I'd get shot but not badly, but enough to always ... because .... I think I told you of a couple of incidents where people in the section had been shot both sides of me. And this also happened in New Guinea and it leaves you with a feeling, when's it going to happen to me? - and you really start to worry about it. You start to think about am I going to be hit, and I hope it's not something serious. But as it turned out ... And I think this can affect you mentally in the long run. I know that I was certainly glad when the war finished.

Did you go on the *Costa Rica*? Did you leave Greece on the *Costa Rica*?

No, my brother was on the *Costa Rica*. I can't remember the name of the ship - the *City of London*.

So did you go to Crete then?

No, I went straight over to Egypt. And that was about the only thing that happened to me during the war: I jumped off a truck and me knee went on me and did a cartilage, and I spent a few days in hospital, and another few days in a convalescent camp, and that's where I met my brother. He was there. He was on the *Costa Rica* and, of course, the destroyer, when - you probably heard the history it. That it was near-missed and it was sinking and the destroyer come up alongside it to take people off. And, of course, they're bouncing away from each other, and as he jumped the gap opened and he went down and he had his leg crushed. And he was rather, as he said many times since, he was a bloody fool. But after about six months of convalescence and despite the fact that his leg was crushed .... I don't understand why the army didn't send him home but he finished up in the 24th Battalion and he went up to El Alamein and he fought in the desert there. And then he came home and he went again with the 24th up to New Guinea. And he said always the battalion MO had said to him, 'Listen, Kearney, if you want to get out, you just come and see me'. And this particular day up in - am I digressing here?

No, go on.

This particular day he and two other sigs., he was a signaller, they were laying out a line and they'd left something behind and Jack said, 'I'll go back to the battalion and get it'. And he went back and when he came back his two mates had been ambushed and killed. So Jack looked at them, and he turned around and he went back to the battalion. And he went to the MO. He said, 'Right, I'm ready', and the MO had him on plane back to Australia the next day. But his leg - he never should have gone on [inaudible] - bloody mess.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview with Les Kearney, recorded on 29 May 1991 about the 2/8th Battalion.

So after your period of convalescence what became of you? Where did you go?

Back to the battalion and it was then I was sent to the mortar school.

What rank were by this stage, because you became a sergeant, didn't you?

I varied quite a bit. I think I was a lance corporal at that stage, and I did the mortar school, and when I came back to the battalion I went to the mortar battalion and before very long I was a sergeant there. I know I got a very good report. I wished I'd have kept it because it had written on this: 'This man will improve because he's intelligent' but I don't know whether that necessarily applied, because if I'd have been intelligent I think I'd have tried to get out of an infantry battalion somehow - but that's alright. There's this feeling that you need to stay in a place like that and yet there's always a chance that something might happen to you. It's rather stupid, really, but it's very human, too, I think.

When you became a sergeant, did it change your life in the sense of your relationship with other men and what you had to do?

No, because, I don't know, we seemed to get on well. I can remember Harry Edwards - 'Whiff'. He was called Whiff because he joined the battalion in Palestine. He was amongst our first lot of rookies and Whiff was a *'Smith's Weekly'* soldier - a cigarette hangin' out the corner of his mouth and everything about him he looked sloppy but he was a proper soldier in action. And later on we got new, young reinforcements and he'd say, 'Hey, Les,' - and he was the worst one. He was the worst setter of an example. He'd abuse me all the time and swear at me and 'do this' and 'do that' and 'you bloody sergeant bastard' and 'I'm not going to do this' but he'd always do it. But, of course, some of the young fellows coming to us as 'reos', and they reckoned, 'oh, if he can do it I can', which they didn't. They didn't get away with it anyway in the long run. But Harry - as soon as one of them would start, Harry would come and see me, 'Don't let that bastard get away with that'. I said, 'They haven't yet, Harry'.

What would you do? How would you maintain discipline? I mean, on what was the basis that you dealt with that?

(5.00) You've heard the old expression: 'The army is ninety per cent boredom and ten per cent fear'. You've probably heard that many times. I think the basis of any relationship - you can't alter your own nature. I mean, some people have got the power of leadership, some have got the power of command, some have got the power of sitting back and say you do this and you do that. My own particular relationship was that I'd just try and talk to people. And the older soldiers, even though I was a sergeant but I'd grown up with them, and you'd go down to the tent and talk to them or we were out on a route march and - well, you weren't talkin' then anyway - you're just movin' along and lookin' at the countryside. But the situation used to be, for instance, we were up on the Atherton Tablelands in Queensland for quite a while. It was beautiful country. We weren't that far from the rainforest. And Monty Penn-Tonkin - that's a hyphenated - was our officer at the time and (laughs) the first day he ever saw Whiff Edwards he didn't know what to make of him. We had to take Whiff in at lunchtime and clean him up and polish him up and clean his rifle and everything. I explained to Monty Penn-Tonkin later on, just what he was and who he was, and he ignored him from then on.

He would come to us in the morning and say, 'Well, S-S-Sergeant, take your s-s' - he'd talk with a bit of a slow stutter. Nice fellow - he became a solicitor. He was a s-s-solicitor after the war. He'd say, 'Take your section for a march and have a few drills in tactics and this sort of thing'. And up on the tablelands we did enough training to keep in trim. I mean, walking there was a pleasure. We were walking along one day and Peter Pedwell, the Queensland bloke, and he was at the tail end of the section, and all of a sudden there's a commotion and he come up out of this bush with a python. He had it wrapped around his neck and holding it - it wasn't a terrific big one. And then we go and get up into the rainforests and, of course, it's beautiful up there. And we'd more or less sit around and have a chat about things, about everything in general, then after a while we'd go back and have some lunch and the same thing in the afternoon. But we kept ourselves fit by doing that and also there were football matches and things like this.

When you did the mortar training, were there particular dangers with that? Were there any accidents where fellows got injured or killed?

The only time I saw anyone close to getting hurt by our own bombs and, of course, you know the effective beat and zone of a mortar is quite horrific. We were giving a demonstration up in New Guinea and this rather wide river, and I'd sat down on the edge of it to range the smoke bombs onto it. And the people - I just forget where they were from - there were some civvies there and some brigade people and battalion people and we ranged the smoke on early and we left - we had two mortars ranged onto this spot. And 'Ding' Quirk, now, he was Headquarter Company CSM, and I'd sat in this spot to range this smoke on but there was no way I was gonna stay there when we were firing HE. And Ding decided to get down to this spot where I - so I said, 'You better not sit there, Ding'. He says, 'Oh, no worries' (laughs). The first one landed about twenty yards away from him and he moved. For some reason, I don't know why, but that's about the closest I ever seen any of our own blokes although I've seen, up in New Guinea which, of course, was difficlt terrain for artillery. And one battalion exercise we were doing against some Japanese there, and a couple of the shells landed in the trees and blew up and hit - wounded - a couple of our blokes under there. But the worst from being hurt from our own side, I think the worst people were the American bombers. They didn't care who they had a go at. They had a couple of gos at us but they didn't hurt anyone.

(10.00) Did that lead to hostilities when you met American servicemen on the ground?

No, because we weren't meeting - certainly we weren't meeting with their air force people. If we were gonna mix, we'd mix with their army people and ...

It might have been different if you'd met air force personnel?

I don't think so, because you weren't to know if they were the ones up in that plane.

Where were you when you learned about the debacle that had taken place in Crete, and that so many had been captured?

Back in Egypt.

How did that affect men? What did you feel about it?

Self-preservation is the thing, and there weren't that many of our people who went to Crete. See, we'd lost most of our fellows in Greece, and our ship, the *City of London* - I'm sure it was the *City of London*, yep, that doesn't matter - well, we went straight to Egypt. We never went to Crete. Why, I'll never know but anyway we never.

So what about heading back, when you were leaving the Middle East again? Did you think you were coming straight back to Australia? What was your expectation?

We did come back to Australia.

What was the feeling then, with that?

You felt, well ...

You knew that by then, of course, the Japanese were in the war and you were anxious about it.

Oh yes. The thing about it really was the attitude of the Australian people. I think this was the way I thought about it. Perhaps not so much then but later on, when I looked back and realised what ... because we went up to Darwin. We were billeted in Strathalbyn in South Australia. We were there for a couple of months. And we came home on a week's leave and went up to near Darwin, to Adelaide River, and we did a lot of .... I think that's the fittest I've ever been in my life. We did some very hard work up there and, oh, all over the place, because apparently that's where they were expecting the Japs might have invaded. The panic situation in Australia, I won't say it was hard to take then, because we never really knew about it. We heard the propaganda from our own people was keeping Darwin at a very low level, but it was later on when you heard about it. I often wonder is there any way of educating people about how their behaviour should be.

What about your week's leave? You would have come home, met your mother and father?

No, my father - I don't know where he was at this stage - but my mother, yes, definitely. And it was on that leave that we got engaged, and that was our first argument (laughs). Just around the corner from my wife's people in Ascot Vale there was a little jeweller's shop. In fact there was all sorts of little shops - a beautiful little place there - and Burt Hazeldine, he was one we used to go fishing on the *Hygeia*. Anyway, we used to go fishing down the bay with him and he gave us a recommendation to these jewellers because rings were supposed to be hard to get during the war. And we went into this place in the city and my wife decided on the ring and we bought it and I put it in me pocket. And we went to the pictures, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', and my wife seemed to be getting agitated and (laughs) I couldn't work out why. So after the show we were walking along and I said, 'What's wrong?'. 'When are you going to give me that ring?' I bought the ring and I was hanging onto it. I should have given it to her straight away (laughs). And, oh well, we've averaged about one blue a week since then and we're still goin' strong.

Was it an emotional experience getting back home, seeing your mother and your relatives and that, or did you just take it in your stride?

It's quite strange. It just seemed that you were coming back and taking up your life exactly where it was before you left.

Was your brother there?

No. The incident I told you about Jack leaving the army, I never knew that happened till about two years ago. He's got a block of land up between Heathcote and Nathalia and I go up every now and then and spend a few days with him, and it's only in these last few years we've started to talk about the army and what happened in the army. And, as I say, I'm finding this out with other soldiers, old soldiers, that they didn't want to talk about it until just lately.

(15.00) With the kind of feelings you'd begun to develop about the nature of war and how it would be better to be out of it. To be back in Australia and then find you were going to New Guinea - was that a blow?

Yes, because I think - well, I certainly did - I appreciated the fact that it was an unnecessary thing to do and yet this strange ironic thing within me that why couldn't I have been up with

the Americans and getting killed possibly up there. I've often tried to assess this aspect of human nature.

> Was there generally a feeling with men that, well, they'd been to the war, they'd come back, that it was really tempting fate to now leave Australia again?

Not consciously, I don't think, but it would have been there because, especially relative to this because the attitude to New Guinea at that stage was .... See, all the serious fighting had been done and our attitude was: one, the Japs there that are left there will starve to death or the natives will kill 'em off. And when we got there we found that this was in fact the case, that the Japs were in a very, very poor way and all we were doing ....

There was a thing on the telly quite a few years ago and it pointed this out that it appeared that after MacArthur said he didn't want us, our people decided they'd show 'im how to fight a war, because the way the story on the telly set it out was: MacArthur fought a defensive war by reason of the fact that they'd go to an island and blow hell out of it and land their troops and sit there and let the Japs throw 'emselves against 'em and they'd shoot 'em down. And so our people, it appears, reckoned, well, we'll show 'em how to go and attack the Japs. It didn't make sense, really. As I said, by the time we got up to New Guinea there was no need for it. And I'm sure this created a bit of a feeling of bitterness in a lot of people, especially when their mates were being killed. Bill Dickson, a bushman, caught - he had some Aborigine in him but he was a real soldier - chopping down a tree, hit a field of fire and the damn lianas on it, hung onto it and swung it around dropped it on him and killed him, and these sort of things. And you felt all the time that this shouldn't have happened, there was no need for it.

> Did you find yourself in action then, against the Japanese?

Yes, absolutely. Although I was in the mortars it was very difficult to transport - you could transport the weapon itself in its three pieces but to transport a large number of bombs was another matter entirely. And I think we only had two battalion exercises against the Japs when they used the 'boong' trains to cart - we had quite a few bombs to use up. And, of course, we used them because we didn't want to have to cart 'em back again. But whether we did any damage with 'em, I wouldn't have a clue because we knew where the Japs were and we just hurled 'em over and got rid of 'em. But I think I spent ....

At this stage I was developing some sort of breathing problems and I think it was to do with the humidity because over the years I've had it down here and I used to find that if I could get up into the mountains this would disappear and I could breathe again. And I always used to - they say you should never volunteer for anything but this was a survival thing - and I'd always go on the boong trains or anything going, and [inaudible] two or three actions against snipers and that sort of thing. I think we only ever found two snipers in these ... of course, two snipers can cause a lot of problems in the right place.

> Can you describe, say, one or both of those incidents? What happened and how you recognised where the sniper was and dealt with it?t

Don't forget I'm with a group and, of course, we're just moving - they were coconut plantations and these two blokes had got themselves up into palm trees - and we just moved through. And we were told that they were up in these trees and we just looked through, and I

don't think I actually fired. I wasn't in the right position to fire at one of these blokes but in both cases they were shot before they could do any damage to our people.

(20.00) What was the impression you had as to the way the Japanese were seen as soldiers compared with - having fought the Germans and Italians - in terms of the tactics and the way they fought? How did they seem?

As a foot soldier and tactics and that sort of thing really wasn't my province, that was up to the battalion, but .... I'll tell you another strange aspect of human nature. When we were up in Northern Territory there were people who'd been in action in New Guinea and they were sent down to tell us what sort of tactics and what sort of actions they'd used and it was quite strange. Human nature is really a funny thing. I can remember this particular sergeant came to talk to our NCOs. He was from a battalion that had been in New Guinea and he was treated with - his advice .... Our fellows just said to him, 'Look, you wouldn't do that. You're doin' the wrong thing.' They more or less scorned him. It might sound funny but that's the way human nature is: you don't like to think that some other person is telling you what to do. And in fact this turns out to be the case quite often, that you can go into a similar situation but you'll handle it in quite a different way but just as effectively.

You've mentioned that you were having trouble with breathing. What about malaria and some of the other aspects of adapting to that sort of climate after the Middle East?

Yeah, well, I caught malaria when I came home and I spent a few days in Heidelberg.

What was the feeling about the Japanese, given that you'd heard of the atrocities and the sorts of things that were being done?

I think soldiers themselves are more concerned with survival for themselves than worrying about what the other bloke is or was or what he's gonna - you can't do anything about that. It used to horrify me personally to hear of the things they used to do, such as sitting blokes on fast growing spikes of bamboo and this sort of thing - and a whole lot of things. And certainly the way they treated their prisoners of war which, of course, didn't come out till later on. But then you've got to ask yourself, this is their way and some of the things that our people have done in the heat of battle - we weren't exactly angelic. I mentioned before about those tanks that came over the first time we got - this young Jimmy Hawken got shot. There were other people shot too, of course, but he was in our section. Once we opened up with the boys' guns and the Italian Breda guns on this thing, they just stopped and they held handkerchiefs through the turret and we shot their hands off. And then they tried to leap out, still waving with the other hand, their handkerchiefs and we just shot 'em. But you do these things, they're not a .... I mean, alright, they shot us so we'll shoot them. I think - that's in the heat of battle but some of the things I've heard about our prisoners of war - and they'd just be going along and a German would shoot 'em. I've heard of that, and I haven't heard of Japanese doing this but, of course, we didn't have any prisoners taken by the Japanese. But I think you'll find some aspects of this from Wally.

Did you take any Japanese prisoners?

Not that I know of.

Or could there have been Japanese prisoners and weren't taken for the reasons you've described?

No. I think that if there was a battle they either cleared out or were shot during the battle, but they didn't leave themselves in a position to be taken, to my knowledge.

(25.00) What about relations with the local people? You said you volunteered for expeditions where the carriers were and that. How were they handled? What was the relationship like?

All I know is - all I can remember about the New Guinea natives was their magnificent physique and their ability to handle loads without any strain. We never had actually much to do - well, I never had anything much to do with them. Some of our people were associated with them all the time, but certainly I was just an escort and so I didn't have a chance. I do know that they were issued with Australian slouch hats and if you saw anyone in the jungle without a slouch hat you shot 'em. And the tracks used to wind around quite a bit and I heard on two occasions that one of these New Guinea natives had taken their hat off and got himself killed because of that. But that's pure accident and it just happened because he didn't obey the rules.

It seems there were Indian soldiers the Japanese had captured and were using as labourers who were rescued. Do you know anything about ...?

No, I never heard a thing about that.

So how did you come to leave New Guinea? Did you leave with the rest of the men or ...?

The war ended and there was a point system in operation and in due course I just left.

Where were you when the news came through the war was over?

Aitape.

Can you recall the moment, how you felt about it and how men responded?

I think it was just - because we'd been expecting it and it was just a matter of fact thing - we're going home, I wonder what's going to happen now. Because six years in the army and more or less this is your formative years, and suddenly you've got to go home and you wonder what the heck's going to happen. Well, you didn't really, you just, oh, we're going home, we'll see what's going to happen. I was given an aptitude test - and put the square blocks in round holes and that sort of thing, and the bloke said to me, he said, 'You show an aptitude for clerical work, for figures and that sort of thing'. I don't know how we worked that out by just puttin' blocks in holes but I said, 'No, I'm not. I'm going to be a carpenter.'

And did you?

Yes.

> With all that, the war and the exceptional nature of it drawing men together seems to have given a lot of men a very special sense of bonding and comradeship. Is there an emotional feeling about your involvement with the 2/8th when you look back?

Yep, although for many years I wanted nothing to do with the army. I wanted nothing to do with the 2/8th or anything. I just wanted to get away from that because I think that the feeling of - I felt it was wrong that I, that we, had gone to New Guinea. I felt there was no purpose in that and I felt that the army had treated us wrong and got a lot of people wounded and killed for no real purpose. And I think in anything in this world you need to be doing it for a purpose.

> But now today, as towards your fellow soldiers, the fellows you served with, is there a very special feeling for them?

Yes, well, I've mentioned Tommy Elliott, who's - you know - and Kelly Davies, but they're all going now. And the other day when I went down and saw Wally - I took him up to a couple of reunions but that was a few years ago when he could travel - and I didn't really know him, he was in a different platoon in the army. But the other day I was going to just call in and ask him to come - whether you could come and see him - that we sat down and started to talk. And I've got to go back and talk to him again now.

END OF INTERVIEW