



## TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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<b>Description</b>	William (Bill) Smith, as a corporal, the 2/8th Battalion, interviewed by Harry Martin for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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## BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape one of an interview with Bill Smith about the 2/8th Battalion, recorded on 5 June 1991.

Bill Smith, where and when were you born?

I was born in Collingwood or Abbotsford, William Street - which is my name - on 15 September 1918.

Tell us something about your family - your mother and father - what they did for a living and what they were like as people.

My Mum, she was married and had four children. Her husband died, she married my father and had five more children. And at my memories, early memories, about three, they never lived together. He lived up in the Mallee. I think it wasn't because they were separated, actually it was more for his working that he lived there. But they might as well have been separated because he didn't treat her very well according to the rest of the family. He never sent much money, and of course there was no social services then, and there was eight children. In my early memories there was only two working, and they'd only be fourteen and sixteen.

Where did you come in that group?

I came seventh.

Did you see much of your father at all then, when you were young?

No, he came down occasionally. And I was a bit frightened of him. He had a rough off-hand manner. He had a weeping eye which looked repelling to me, and he never gave much affection. He seemed to give a smile and to me it was more of ridicule than of anything else.

What about your mother then? What was she like? How did she cope with all that?

She was a very strict woman. She belted us a lot but in those days that was pretty common - it is today too, I think. She belted us a lot and we never knew when you was doing the right thing or not. You were always in fear. Apparently also, of course, you'd be terribly worried about the fact of trying to get us to live - our nourishment. She'd send brothers to the Victoria Market and they would take a wooden truck and pick up apples or discarded fruit or vegetables thrown on the footpath - maybe leaves of cabbages and lettuce - and bring 'em home and she'd wash them. And she'd send other brothers, or one of the brothers, under a false name and address to a butcher to get cheap meat on the slate. You know, you're going to pay next week. Then after that she'd send another brother the next week and this is the way, as far as I know, how we lived. As well as the fact that two of the children would be getting enough money perhaps to pay their way.

Would you also be expected to pitch in and if you could try and find some means of adding something to the family's income? Either materially or financially?

At the time I would be only - my early memories were about three. And when I left was about five - five and a half - so of course I couldn't do much pitching in.

You've got a series of illustrations in the hallway to do with your childhood and you mentioned being in some institutions, or at least one institution. What happened?

Yes. My father took us to the Mallee and he didn't have us there very long and he gave my second youngest brother - no the youngest brother - he gave him to a family and we never saw him again for fifty-four years. He told us that you shouldn't get in touch because it'll spoil his life. So the elder sister never tried. And then, of course, we lost touch and didn't know where he was until so long after. And then having given him to this family he then sent me to an institution at Flemington Road, North Melbourne, which was called Kildonan. It later moved from there, but in the time I was there it was at 149 Flemington Road, North Melbourne.

(5.00) And we were there treated fairly harshly but looking back they were harsh times and at least we got better food than we got at home. After I reached ten years of age they sent me up to a farm home up at Sale, a place called Kilmany Park. And the boys would be sent there and the girls would be sent out as drudges round different places and they'd be still under the institution care. But the boys would go to Kilmany up at Sale and we would work, usually till you're thirteen or fourteen and you'd be drafted out to work on farms for seventy/eighty hours a week at no pay or two and six a week - ten shillings, or maybe a pound when there was a very generous or good farmer.

I suppose it isn't a good thing as such, but in a way the regimentation and discipline may have made the army life seem almost easy after all that.

Yes, it was much easier for me than many of 'em because when we went into camp at Caulfield they were all moaning about the first meal. All they cared about was getting plenty of it. And I was used to boarding houses, the home, then in rough boarding houses, then into the army, and I could take the rough food easy as long as there was plenty - that's all I worried about, which by no means was it always plenty but at least there was enough to keep going. I know it's just the army's own commonsense is to keep you going.

You mentioned that you were separated from your sister and you mentioned fifty-four years, so it does suggest that you did meet up again later on.

Yeah - that was the brother.

The brother, I beg your pardon.

We met up fifty-four years later. Now, let's see, I think it'd be about 1976, I think, when I met him.

Was it very affecting, because in a way I suppose it would take you back to all those maybe strong feelings and emotions you may have felt as a small child with that turmoil and so on?

I always thought of this brother and the first thing when I got out of the home, at eighteen, I said, 'Where's Roy?'. And they looked and they said - they thought I'd forgotten him - and then they said, 'Oh, he's up somewhere and we don't know where he is but he's well looked after', 'cause my sister, of course - my eldest sister, Emma, that was my step-sister, a very good person - she'd been told if they'd kept in touch it wouldn't be good for him so she just thought it was best and she lost touch, and then of course we lost touch because she was the one that used to keep us informed and advise us and help us.

When you did meet up again, were you able to bridge the gap or had you just grown too much apart?

No, I was very glad to meet him and I rang up. And then he didn't want to know us - any of us. So at last he said okay. I went out to see him and he took us down the pub and - I can't drink much - and we had a few drinks, and his wife and son came. He told me, he said, 'I'll introduce them to you as a mate in the army'. And of course I didn't have much time to discuss this and I said okay. So we were talking and his son's a bit interested about him - what he was in the army and that which I couldn't tell him much, and I could have contradicted everything he'd told his son if I made up a yarn. So I didn't know what - and anyway at last I burst out, I said, 'I'm your uncle. I'm his brother.' And then he didn't like that so I didn't see him for a while and then he got over that and I see him now and again and we have lunch together occasionally. And I think we're the two closest of the family, 'cause one of the brothers, another brother, between he and I - I told you I was the second last, I was the third last - the other brother, he lives in Sydney. He never sees him. My sister lives up in Magnetic Island but she did live down here for a while and he never saw her as much as me.

During the earlier years, particularly in the home and so on, what did you see yourself doing in life? Did you begin to fantasise about travel or have some notions what you were going to do and become?

No, I could never make up my mind what I was going to be. I used to say, 'cause I was a weed - when I was sixteen I was only five stone twelve, and when I was twenty, twenty-one, I was seven stone nine - and I used to say I'd be a jockey because I heard my father say 'you'll be a jockey'. But I had never ridden a horse or anything. But in the home they all reckoned I was a good boxer and we had boxing contests at Sale.

(10.00) I won easily and so I thought I was a good boxer and I tried to take up boxing. And a trainer saw me fight and I was getting belted. But the fellow was a lot bigger and he was a lot better than me, and he's belting me, and I probably would have squibbed it but all me mates were looking and I hopped in. And this trainer, who was one of the leading trainers in Victoria, thought 'Oh, he's game', and he took me up and let me come up the gym for nothing. And I boxed and sometimes I'd be real good and the next time I'd think meself out of it - I was always frightened of getting beaten. And the trainer couldn't make head nor tail of me because I'd be good one week and no good the next when he thought I was going to win. And I beat a couple of the boys who went on and became Australian champions but that didn't mean I would be because, after all, I didn't have it when I couldn't front up each time.

So that was my ambition then, to be a boxer. And I didn't give myself much .... They did tell me in the home I should be a newspaper reporter or a writer - the schoolteacher and them - but I always thought oh, that was too good for me, 'cause you put yourself down a lot when you're in homes, more than usual I think. I can tell you about other boys. But anyway, so I

just went from job - I didn't go from job to job because it was hard to get jobs. I hung onto them but I'd get the sack because I'd get a bit older, see, and then they'd put you off and put on a new boy.

What sort of work were you doing?

The first job I had, my sister got for me - I got out of the home first though to get a job as an instrument maker in the gasworks down here at South Melbourne 'cause that's where Emma's husband worked. But they didn't want me and then they said they'd get a good job for me in at the Gas Company in Flinders Street - a salesman or something, I don't know what it was. And when she took me in there they said, 'Oh, you said he was eighteen'. She said, 'He is'. They said, 'Oh ....'. I'm that small. They said, 'We wanted a big boy who could also shift things around and that' so I lost that opportunity. So she got me a job down at a textile mill in Coppin Street, Richmond, and although it was a forty-four hour week in most places, it was forty-eight in the textiles. And I only got eighteen shillings a week for eighteen years of age. And my board was twenty shillings a week. And Emma, my sister, gave me two shillings to make that up. And Ernie, my other brother, who was very good to me - he was just a bit younger than Emma - he give me another two shillings to entertain myself, buy my clothes and save up for a rainy day on.

I suppose in those days you could have got into the pictures for about sixpence and so ...

No, the pictures was one and a penny.

One and a penny?

Yeah. I was a mad Collingwood barracker from way back. Don't ask me to tell you anything about that, I'll go forever on way back. But anyway, you could get into the Collingwood football ground - if a member had somebody under fourteen they could get you in for nothing. And, of course, me being a weed with a fairly young face, I could get in front of them for a while. And then after a while I had to buy a ticket. But it was only eight and fourpence for a whole year. So I went to the footy. Or Emma might have bought my ticket, I forget. But I'd go to the footy and I'd walk from Richmond to Collingwood or most of the grounds. And then I'd go to the pictures once a week. And I'd put elevenpence in a money box to save up to buy clothes or that. But mind you, Emma and Ernie bought me a few clothes like underclothes and that, earlier. I'd walk everywhere, wherever I worked or into the gym and then back. And on top of that I used to get up in the early morning and go over from Richmond over the Botanical Gardens and run round the tan, and then walk to work. In the finish I was walking to Clifton Hill and back to work.

Of course, the tan in those days was the thing for the well-to-do to ride horses around it. Did that seem a distant world, in a way - to see people on horses who obviously had wealth of a sort that perhaps you could never aspire to?

Well, it did. I didn't see too many of them 'cause I'd get over there in the early morning. It did in a way but I just took it for granted that I'll never get that far and I might get a house or something, but oh, a house - crikey, to have a house! You'd think that'd never be but you might rent a house, a nice house, and you'd have enough money to do that. Didn't think about

growing old, of course. So this also fitted me for the army better than a lot of others. When I get in there they'd say, 'Oh, you shrimp,' and all that.

(15.00) And I'd say, 'Ooh', I'd get real uptight. And we'd go out on route marches and I'd be loving it because you'd see 'em limping and everything (laughs). I'd have a go back at 'em. I was feeling inferior and then I'd come back at 'em like a child for having a go at me earlier.

Incidentally, just going back a bit. One of the other sketches in the hall is of school days and of standing before the flag with ghost-like figures of the ANZACs. Did it mean much to you? Or, like most kids, did you salute the flag and have a bit of a sense about it but it ...

No, it meant a lot. I used to learn all those poems: 'The bugles of England are flurrying [sic] o'er the sea ...' and it goes on. I could recite it but it's not .... And all these patriotic poems: 'To the Fallen' and all those. I read *The Road Back* by Remarque, and *All Quiet on the Western Front* and they impressed me a lot. But they impressed also not to fight, not to go to the war.

Did it leave you also ...? I can remember as a child reading, I think, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and I used to fantasise about being on a front and bringing the men from either side together. There's this vague notion that you wanted peace and that somehow or other you would be an instrument of that.

No, I wish I had've been intelligent enough to think that way but I didn't. But I felt, and also we had a schoolteacher, who I call in that little book I wrote, Mr Prott, he was in the first war with the English Army [sic]. And he used to, on ANZAC Day, fill in the detail of the terrible wounded and the going over the top and all that - he was a stretcher-bearer. And he really impressed me into not to go to war and that war was nothing. It's a bit of a contradiction to the patriotic idea of fighting for your country. And I also heard so many tales about how the Diggers were treated in the Depression with their pension cuts and everything, and the difficulty of getting a pension even. So I used say no, I won't go.

Anyway, when the war broke out - I was boxing. I was up at the Stadium. It was a Friday night and they knocked on the door and they said, 'You'll blokes'll have enough fightin' to go to now. Hitler's going into Poland.' Of course we hadn't declared war then, we declared it two days later, but we'd been told it would be on. So some of them cheered and I felt terrible about it.

Did you win your fight that night, do you remember?

Yeah, I won the fight that night. It didn't interfere in that way. I might have already fought, I forget. But I remember I won it because I know where - this was the Fitzroy Stadium, the Lyric Theatre, not the other Fitzroy Stadium. Anyway, they're talkin' about it and one fellow, Frankie Young, he said, 'Oh, I'll be there. I'll fuck every sheila in Paris.' And I thought, 'what a bloody thing to say', and I thought 'I won't be there'. Anyway on the Sunday night when war was declared I was 'round at my step-brother's place - he was married, Ernie - in Malvern. And we hear it come over the radio that we're in the war. And I said, 'I don't think I can ever go to a war'. And he said, 'Oh, you don't have to go'. I said, 'No, I don't think I'll go'. Anyway I went back and struggled for a few months, different ones joined up. And I thought, oh, I should go because they're running all over Europe and there's things coming back about

the way they were treating people - the Jews and that. And I thought, oh, I should go because .... And different blokes'd say 'Don't go, look how they treated in the Depression and the soldiers'.

Was that a pretty commonly held view? I mean, was there in fact quite a lot of residual feeling, well, it really did exploit the working man - the nature of war?

There was quite a bit of it and there was quite also, I think, a lot of 'em using it as an excuse not to go as well, but there was quite a lot of that. I was torn between these two things of the way they treated 'em and also these people suffering in Europe. And I thought, well, it don't matter how they treated 'em, if they get here we'll be treated worse. And if they ran all over Europe they're not going to stop at that. They might stop for a while. So I thought, 'Oh, I've got to join', so I joined up. But I really, I'm not kidding you or meself either (laughs), but I really thought I wouldn't come back, but I thought I've got to go. At this time I'm boarding with a terrific family of people. They took me in. I could tell you a detail about that but I don't know whether it takes up too much time.

Well, give us some of an example.

(20.00)I went there - I wanted to get into a private home, I'd been in boarding houses. And they were all alright the ladies that ran the boarding houses, they were poor struggling women that had to earn a deener, and, by gee, they earned it too with all the things they had to do. But I wanted to get into a private place, and here's one advertised in Hyde Street, Richmond. So I got my case, my old crumpled case out at Kilmany Park Home, and I had my few things rattling around in it - it was a big case - and I knocked on the door and out came this lady, Mrs King. And she said, 'Yes, what do you want, son?'. I said, 'I've come for that boarding opportunity you've offered'. Oh, her face fell. She said, 'I wanted a man, son. Somebody that could pay the board.' They wanted to earn a few bob themselves. And she said, 'Well, how much can you pay, son?'. I said, 'A pound a week'. And she said, 'Oh'. I could see she was very sorry for me and, of course, I was a cunning Kilmany boy by this. And she said, 'Can't you get somewhere? Where's your father and mother?' I said, 'They're dead'. Well, my mother died at thirty-eight when I was in the home. My father might as well have been dead. So I said they're dead. She said, 'Oh, well look, son, you go away and see if you can get somewhere else and if you can't come back'. (Laughs) And, of course, I put on a bit of an act and I said, 'I understand, lady, yes, okay'.

I went around the corner and waited for about an hour and then I came back again (laughs) and, of course, I'm in. Well, that family, they treated me as if I was one of their own and none of them resented me. There was a married daughter - didn't live there - and another married daughter lived there with her daughter and her husband and another single daughter and two boys - one about my age and the other one a bit older. And they never resented me. They liked me. They treated me well. I think I ate more in the house than anybody else - I had a hell of an appetite and showed nothing for it. They treated me that well. Well, after I joined the army they were very sad about it. And anyway, I went into the army and, of course, you've got to make your will. On my first leave home I said, 'Oh, Mum' - I called her Mum - 'I've made me will to you'. I just said it very ordinary as if I'm talkin' about the weather. And I said, 'I made my will to you, Mum. I haven't got anything but if I live a few years there'll be a hundred quid there - deferred pay.' And she burst out crying. I'm nearly crying now, not because of me but because of her - she was such a wonderful person. Anyway - I don't know how I got on to that.



We were talking about you joining up, so was it to do with having to tell them that you were going away?

That's right. And that's how I came to join up. And they were sorry that I'd joined but I said, 'Well, I've got to join'.

Did you start off at the showgrounds when you joined?

No, I wasn't a early goer. I went in just - I enlisted before anybody sailed away but I went into the army four days after they went. I woke up, got my kitbag with a few clothes, a few things in it that I might need, and went out to the Hawthorn Drill Hall. And they're all there with their bags and going on, carrying on, wise-cracking and yelling out, and this was all a bit bewildering. Saw a few blokes there that I knew that didn't know me like tent fighters and one bloke that used to - his father was a champion with North Melbourne - named Sid Barker. It was his son who played for Norths - Sid Barker. I later become friends with him. And I stood mostly on the sidelines and there was a lot of blokes that were bagmen - some of them became very good friends of mine afterwards.

What do you mean by bagmen?

They were on track looking for jobs. In those days, a lot of young fellows, they'd get kicked from town to town - they'd carry their swags. And a lot of them that also become habitual bagmen - they liked the idea - young fellows. And I think some of these were that type. One was called 'Diver'. One was called 'Lucky'. There was 'Philadelphia' - that was a Yank name, somebody must have grabbed. And 'Timetable Scotty' - he was the bloke that knew all the times of trains going from different places when they jumped the trains. Anyway, they'd be arguing with other fellows they called 'cow cockies'. Some of 'em were farmers, others were blokes that worked on farms, and, of course, they got treated badly by farmers. Not because the farmers were necessarily bad but their own families were treated roughly because of the circumstances. But anyway, they had these two camps, and they later all became friends and that but at the time there was this picking at one another.

(25.00)Once you joined did you have any misgivings? Did you think, oh gee, maybe ...?

No, I didn't have any misgivings but I can tell you a bit of a few misgivings later, if you like. But at that juncture and right up until I went in there I didn't have any misgivings. And I really never had any. I had a couple of little doubts at times I'll tell you about but, really, when I think it over now, I wouldn't be out of it. Even if I could have got out when sometimes I felt that rotten about - I can tell you later - that I would have instantly got out but I would have wanted to get back the next day 'cause ...

Just so we don't lose them, what were they - the occasions of misgivings?

I've got to be quite honest. When I went into action in the desert I never had any want of getting out of it, although I was frightened. And I had - Richmond Council give you a steel mirror - I had that over me heart in me tunic pocket (laughs) in case of a bayonet fight. And I had me pouches of ammunition slung around and my respirator hanging here in case of a bayonet fight it might help me to protect meself. And me one up the spout and me finger on

the trigger. I was really frightened but I didn't have any want of getting out of it, just the same.

But when we went into Greece and we were facin' 'em and you could see the enemy pulling up in their trucks and their tanks and aircraft and everything. And they'd had all these invincible victories in Europe, I did feel a little bit frightened and wonder whether I should be there (laughs). There was a fellow, by the way - an older fellow - and he says, 'Who wrote that song about hanging their washing on the Siegfried Line?'. 'The Siegfried Line.' We all laughed, and Tommy Quincy said, 'He's blamin' the bloke that wrote the song for us bein' here'. And he said, 'It's alright for these bastards to write songs about hanging washing out but it's a different thing when it comes to hanging it out. I'd like to see them up here hanging it out.' (Laughs) And we said, 'Well, we all volunteered to come here'. But anyway, I had this little misgiving then, but I was quite prepared to keep going and fight. And it finished up when they finally broke through us.

See, they came through Bulgaria, around the back of us. We were up near the Yugoslav border. We were the first troops - Australian troops to meet them - the 2/8th and part of the 4th. There was other troops there though: British and Greek and New Zealanders, I think. But anyway, they came round through Bulgaria and they come through Albania. And this Hitler crack regiments that had been in Europe came through the front of us. And they had tanks and they had planes. And we had to get out. So it finished up we got out and I was - you don't get so scared then, you've sort of got controlled fear - I was quite ready to go back, as we were trained to, and to fight them. You cover the next lot getting back and then they cover you getting back and an orderly retreat.

Let's come back to that. But in the meantime, going back to when you've just joined up. You'd indicated that you didn't find it so difficult to adjust to army life. How did you find Puckapunyal overall?

We weren't in Puckapunyal at the start ...

Oh, you didn't go to Puckapunyal?

... but I can't .... I was at Pucka for a little while but we were in Caulfield - the racecourse - the first troops there. And we slept on hard boards with palliasses against the toilet walls under the Guinas Stand. And it was freezing cold and that. But it was easy. I could adjust to it easy. I liked the life in a way. It was real good - rough and that, but you didn't mind that. And you found the bagmen - that's when you start sorting out who was who. I could tell you one little story about 'Diver'. He always had yarns and that to tell you. They had us out in the middle of the Caulfield racecourse asking us about our private life.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape one of the interview with Bill Smith, recorded on 5 June 1991 about the 2/8th.

You were telling us the story about the Diver.

Yeah. And there was a corporal named Devlin training us. He wasn't in the AIF. He did join later but he wasn't then. He was from the Militia and he's training us. And we used to call him 'Jitterbug Teeth' 'cause his false teeth used to keep popping up and down. He was asking us about what we were in civvy life. And, of course, a lot of us had jobs and there was quite a few didn't have jobs. But all of us that had jobs, most of us weren't very well paid. And everybody'd be saying 'Oh, I was getting five pound a week', doing this and that, and, of course, five pound a week was a big wage. They come to Diver and Diver was sucking a straw, not worrying, and they said, 'What was you in civvy life, Diver?'. Diver says, 'I was a professional train jockey'. 'What's a professional train jockey?' Diver said, 'What I said'. 'What do you mean?' He said, 'I rode the rods'. There's two rods under the train - they used to lay on 'em. And the bloke said, 'But I can't put that down'. Diver said, 'Well, put down whatever you like but that's what I was'. The bloke said, 'But haven't you any ambition?'. Diver said, 'Of course I've got an ambition'. The bloke said, 'But what are you going to do after the war?'. Diver said, 'Go back on the track'. The bloke said, 'Haven't you any ambition?'. Diver said, 'Of course I've got an ambition'. The bloke said, 'What is it?'. Diver said, 'To have the best set of swag straps on the track'. And, of course, this was hopeless but that's how he was. But Diver, although he said these things, he was different. He used to work hard and he'd say, 'You never work. You're only a mug if you work.' But during our army life it'd come out different things - he could do anything. He could mend boots and he'd do all sorts of jobs, and he was a hard worker in the army.

In terms of mating up with fellows, did you find that it was an intuitive process that fellows that you became friendly with endured or did you find that some you got to know and they fell away and then later fellows that perhaps you didn't take a shine to early on you became friendly with?

Yes, there was a fair bit of that. I usually took to anybody. There was a few I didn't take to, and I often shied away from 'em, and often my judgment'd be right, and a lot of times it was wrong of course. You don't like 'em 'cause they do their hair in the middle or something, but some stupid thing. But usually, nearly everybody you liked, some better than others, like some you liked and you had nothing against 'em but they weren't your mate. I liked all the larrikin types - funny blokes, some of 'em. This Diver, he become a good friend. I despised him for a good while and he become a good friend, and he was better to me actually than I was to him. He looked on me as a junior. For instance, we were travelling on the trains and you always had your boots in one another's face tryin' to sleep, and you couldn't move - they'd pack you in like sheep. And we got on this train journey once and they're all going to doss down and Diver opens his pouch, pulls out two hammocks. He'd pinched the officers' net that they played deck tennis with and made two hammocks; one for me and one for him. And he'd do all these sort of things. He was a good bloke in spite of his making out he was different.

(5.00) Did you get some fellows who were just natural bullies? Given that you were smaller, did you ever have fellows try and push you around and take advantage of your size?

I think a couple might have once or twice but they soon found out that I - I used to love those big blokes because I've got a hell of a long reach and I knew how to use the left hand. And I loved to get a real big six-footer and punch him right in the nose and he never tried again, especially in front of other blokes. But the army itself used to put 'em down to size - they wouldn't stand bullies. And if the bully got on to some weaker bloke they'd usually stand up for the weaker.

When you say `they', this is the men or the system?

The men, without discussing it among ourselves, you got into a mould where you knew. And if there was a bloke couldn't take a joke or that, they wouldn't pick him much. They might pick the other blokes that could take it. But if a bloke was a nasty coot, they'd give him everything - the lot of them. And you hardly found any thieves or blokes like that because they were all brought down to size in the army. They couldn't get away, see. Not like in civvy life, you can steal something and go and live over in Brunswick or somewhere.

With the larrikin sort were there any who basically weren't bad blokes but just couldn't abide taking orders and just got into more and more difficulty for that?

No, most of them were good blokes. We had 'Cookie' Blackman. When I talk about them being larrikins, a lot of 'em were good soldiers too, when the chips were down.

Were there some who just couldn't buckle down and take authority?

Yeah, there was those people too. But Cookie Blackman, he was a good mate, he'd always have a joke. Like we'd be .... Down in New Guinea once there was a big flood come up - huge flood - river changed course. Some blokes got drowned. Some climbed trees on an island. The river just took the island away and the trees - some of them out to sea.

Where was this, by the way?

It was up in the Danmap River in New Guinea. But getting back to Cookie Blackman. He was in A Company and I had been in A Company, I went to C. And we meet up and we're talking about the flood and our own experiences. And Cookie said he was sitting there and he saw three Japs riding a log down in a flood, singing 'Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer'. And he'd make up a joke like that. It doesn't sound much funny in this context but at the time you'd roar laughing at such jokes because there's stress on you and he'd always have a joke, Cookie.

By the time it was getting close to your departure had there been any things of particular note that had happened to you during the training period?

Not actually to me, I'm not quite sure if I'm on the right vein of what you're getting at. But when I went on leave the bloke whose number was next to mine and became a very close friend named Wally Sneesby, he broke his arm and he couldn't go away with us. And it finished up trying to get away with us he ran into another mob, the 2/21st, and he finished up on Ambon and he got massacred on Ambon. But that's not actually what you're asking, is it?

I've already with most of the 2/8th fellows gone into a fair bit of detail about Puckapunyal and I don't want to get bogged down in that area, so it was a matter of before we looked at your departing overseas. I didn't at the same time want to leave anything out that might have been important.

Oh, before we went overseas. Of course, we'd had our final leave many weeks, six weeks before. We thought we were going to go straight away but we didn't.

Were you inclined to play up in company with some of these larrikin mates, as it were?

No, I joined the army and I expected discipline and that, and I ...

What about on leave though?

Yeah. I'd been a very shy and on my own a lot and I shed all my old mates that didn't join. I didn't go back to see them much, in fact at all, unless I ran into 'em when I was on leave. But I went with friends and I never drank grog, see. But I mainly visited Mrs King or relatives. I hardly played up. Well, I didn't get on the grog. I chased women but I wasn't much good at that (laughs). But no, I can't say that I did. I don't think I was characteristic. I think a lot of 'em did all that but being in a home and that I was too shy.

(10.00)How was the march through Melbourne then?

I wasn't in that.

You weren't in that?

I was with the blokes that went first.

So you missed that?

I missed that. Oh no, we marched but not that first march but we marched as well. And I remember, I'm tryin', I'm marching along, face steady looking ahead like they told us to do. I did everything the army told me to do rigidly. Looking ahead and eyes on the back of the head of the man in front, and here they're yelling out, 'Go on, smile and look around'. And here we are a lot of us doing the same. Others are joking, which they should have been doing too, which I should have been doing, but no, I was too fair dinkum about the army for that.

Was there a sense of pride in that moment?

Yeah, I was proud of it, 'cause they get you into that mood - the army. Irrespective of what people join up for, they usually get into the frame of mind, well, we're here to do a job. And a lot of the larrikins were good fighters. There was one bloke, we used to call him 'Snakes', and he was a little skinny bloke. He finished up, he was a garbage man at Richmond. He died - suddenly got a heart attack and dropped dead. I visited him a lot after the war. But this Snakes, when I was out at Heidelberg hospital to visit a friend, Kevin Fisk, who'd been shot in the stomach, and he told me, he said, "Cranky Jack's' in the next ward'. There was a bloke, finished up a major. He was Captain Coombes. He was a policeman. And he was a real rough nut, in fact he did a lot of crook things, but he's alright with his troops like, but he did some rotten things I could tell you about if you want to.

What sort of things?

He shot bloody unarmed Italians and he was pretty rough with some of the troops that weren't in his company.

Rough in what way?

He might bash 'em or - I don't know whether I'm saying the right thing here, so it's going on record but it might be wrong. But when I was in Greece - we'll have to come back to what we've started on - when we were on Greece and just before we moved up, there was two blokes going to be sent home as 'snarlers' - that's Services No Longer Required. And I was guard over 'em, and they wanted to go for a walk. So I just put the rifle over me shoulder and taking 'em for a walk, and they're looking under bushes and pulling out bottles of plonk and drinking the plonk (laughs) - I'm supposed to be their guard - and they knew I was a mate.

Anyway, we were walking along and along come two officers and one of them was twenty-one - he finished up getting killed in New Guinea - a bloke named Tommy Oldfield, come from up Albury. His father was owner of the place near where the 'Pyjama Girl' that was murdered was put. Anyway, Tommy Oldfield, 'These's blokes are drinkin' plonk. They're prisoners.' I could have been up for lettin' 'em do it. He just had a drink with 'em. And they said - Harry Lygons was the prisoner - he said, 'I didn't do that'. They were supposed to have a pistol or something that he shouldn't have had and they were talkin' about sending him home - Services No Longer .... He said, 'I didn't do that. I was framed.' And I'm thinkin' to meself, bullshit, you hear all this from the troops. And to my surprise Tommy Oldfield said, 'I know and I know who did it but I'm an officer'. And I thought well you bloody well ought to be talkin' out. Anyway, this is as true as I'm sittin' here that this happened. And I've told a few of the troops later and they haven't made any comment about it - officers and all I've told. But it happened, I can swear to that.

And was the fellow sent out of the army as a result?

No. And then we went up to fight straight away. And, of course, they wiped a lot of those things after them being in action 'cause you did a good job. But Tommy Oldfield got killed, unnecessarily too. A bloody German patrol come along and they could have got him with a machine-gun. He said 'These are mine', and jumped on the top of a trench with a bloody pistol - may as well have had a pop-gun - of course they got him. He had a lot of rum in him.

You also started to tell us about a fellow who was garbage collecting.

(15.00) Yeah. And so this Coombes, I'm in this hospital seeing Kevin Fisk, this mate of mine who, incidentally, was in the 39th Battalion on the Kokoda - a good bloke he was. Anyway he got this wound in the guts. He had a lot of trouble after the war. So I went to see him in the hospital and he said, 'Oh, Cranky's in there'. So I went in to see Cranky too, and Cranky didn't like me because I was a communist, see, and he tried to get me put out of the battalion but the blokes wouldn't have it. Anyway (laughs), bought a postcard and I wrote on it 'To Major Coombes' and I named a lot of names on it - oh no, I had a photo, that's right - a photo with B Company blokes that he was over. So I wrote it on the back, to Coombesie, see. And I took it in and I said, 'I can't' - I didn't go to see him but I made out I went to see him - 'I've come to see you but these blokes from B Company told me to give you this'. And he had this photo and he said, 'Bill, what's that little dark bloke's name?'. And I said, 'Oh, that's Jackie Ross - Snakes'.

'Gee, you know,' he said, 'I recommended him for a medal in Crete. The Germans were approaching and they had a lot of 'Pommies' in front of 'em - they had them in front and they're approaching from behind. I didn't know what to bloody do and this little bloke grabbed a Bren, a Bren gun, run around on the side and he enfiladed them and broke 'em up. I

recommended him for a medal but there's that many blokes to recommend so he never got it. He should have got it.' He's a little insignificant dust bloke and everybody laughed at him in the Richmond. I'd meet him in the pubs and have a drink with him and they'd all look at him and queer and that. I think they thought I was a poof or something. They thought I was a - I perhaps shouldn't use that word - homosexual 'cause they'd whisper in his ear and he'd say, 'Alright, you just try him out' (laughs) 'cause he knew I could punch even though I was a little skinny bloke. But that's just telling you something about one of these larrikins.

And 'Snowy' Fraser, he was always in the peat. He was always clocking somebody. He was a boxer. He won the Sixth Division featherweight championship and he's a bit cranky but he'd be socking people and gettin' in ... and he couldn't stand authority and he'd be in the gaol a hell of a lot. But he was always alright in action. And Frank Horan, he wasn't a bad bloke at all. He was a nice fellow but he'd get into strife, like him and Cookie and them would pinch the grog off the officers and get a barrel of beer or something and get it in the scrub and drink it and get caught and get put in the gaol.

Incidentally, during the training period, did you get caught up in boxing?

Yeah, we boxed in there, in the battalion.

Well, was there a sort of rivalry between different units and so on? Could you get yourself special privileges or just get a little bit better treatment?

Yes, well, there was a lot of that but in our mob there was not a lot of help for us in that way - like football teams, too. They'd feed 'em on steaks and let 'em off training stunts, but ours didn't. And the 7th Militia Battalion, I think they had the best football team of the lot. They certainly, of all the ones we met. And they used to get fed steaks and didn't have to train. We'd still have to do our bloody training and that - not that I was a footballer - but also in boxing. But Snowy Fraser and some of them, their officers got them better food and that, but ours didn't get me any. And Snowy was a featherweight but I really reckon he was a lightweight, but they didn't weigh 'em, you see. He was short but he was stocky. And I knew I couldn't fight Snowy so I fought lightweight and I was a featherweight (laughs). But he was a lightweight more than feather I reckon. Anyway, with the battalion, lightweight champion but I got beat on other fights up there.

Incidentally, had you, at this stage, already a political perspective?

No, I gradually got it after Greece. I got disillusioned a lot. And, of course, Russia - we'd heard such a lot about Russia wouldn't last six weeks and a lot of things about them that when they did fight so well it seemed a lot of lies all these other things about 'em. And I was so disillusioned with a lot of our own unfair things like blokes - ten of us - in a bloody tent. And infantry battalions you get worse than the others. The further back you got the better life they had. Like less in a tent which was something in itself without any other privileges. Water, and the Comforts Funds would come up and by the time they got to the infantry there wouldn't be so many as they'd be getting back further.

(20.00) And beer, not that - I did drink later - but at the early stages I didn't drink. But we'd be unloading shiploads of whisky for officers or air force people and that and there's supposed to be a shortage of shipping, especially when the Japs were in the war, up at Darwin where we went after we come home from the Middle East.

How did you generally feel then about the sort of privileges that officers were able to get?

I got real crook on all this because there was blokes prisoner of war and blokes killed. There was reinforcements needed overseas and we couldn't get 'em. And when we got home there's blokes being conscripted into the army and they know they've got to be in the army so they join the AIF. They come in and their officers over us and all. So I got real crook on this, whether it's right or wrong, that's the way I looked at it. I just used to speak straight out too. I'd say, 'Oh, if you're so patriotic why wasn't you there?' (laughs). Some of the poor bastards probably had a legitimate excuse but a lot didn't have it. And I say, 'Why wasn't you there? You were so bloody good' and I'd give 'em cheek.

What did you make then of the British with their much more rigid class system?

I didn't have much to do with 'em, but at least they were all in it and you didn't know who was volunteers and who weren't. So I didn't have much against them at all. I didn't know much. I did travel on an ambulance once for a good while when I was put in hospital for a few days up in Derna. And apparently it was no tucker and such hardship marching and that, that all me mouth and hands swelled up and they said it was nerves and they sent me back to Tobruk hospital. Well, I was only there a few days. I never even seen anybody, I just had a good rest and a bit of tucker. And I thought bugger this and I jumped on an ambulance and I went back to the front. And then that time I travelled with an English ambulance driver. So I didn't meet 'em much. In Greece I handed over a couple of German prisoners of war to 'em and they told us to shoot 'em - the British did. They give 'Heil Hitler' signs and all, they were real young Nazis. And I went crook at the British. And they said, 'It's alright for you Aussies, they're bombing our cities'. I don't know what happened to 'em in the finish but I just handed 'em over and went.

Did you get the impression then that there was a lot of shooting of prisoners by the British?

No, I can't say I did but I'd reckon ...

Was there a sense of passion and anger about it or it had reached such a stage of bitterness that it was all - it could be done almost without a lot of feeling?

I think at that stage they would have shot 'em because they were bombing their cities and we weren't bombing theirs at the time. Finished up bombing 'em worse but at the time there was none of that, or very little. And anyway, so I reckon these British would have shot them. But don't worry, some of ours shot 'em without that. Some of ours shot Italians without any of their bombing our cities, so what would they do?

Did you see that happen?

Yes. We were at Tobruk and before we were given orders - after Bardia, they give in so easy, we were given orders not to take prisoners, they were a lot of cowards ...

How did that order come through? What was the ...?



The company commander told us that we were not to take any prisoners. He said they're treacherous bastards and they shot different ones in the 5th and 6th - the other battalions - and they said they were treacherous and that we weren't to take prisoners.

Was there any feeling against that? I mean, did fellows reason, well, conversely then ...?

I get on to that. And the officer said, 'Here's a grenade - a good thing to put among 'em, among a bunch of 'em'. So we went back to our platoon and the platoon commander, Mick Dwyer, he said, 'None of us will be shootin' any prisoners. It's against the Geneva Convention. None of us will shoot prisoners.' And we were glad of that. We didn't want to shoot 'em.

Would you have done, do you think, if the occasion had arisen where your platoon commander had said okay, we're going to shoot these fellows?

I'll come to an occasion. So we went back and the next day we were fighting 'em and some tanks come along and we didn't have - we had a gun they called an anti-tank rifle - you couldn't shoot a kangaroo. It would shoot a kangaroo but that'd be all. And so we couldn't knock 'em out with that so we fired at their visors so they had to close their visors. And the rocky ground and the terrain, they turned over and they waved their white flags and they said, 'Halt', 'Cease fire'. So we all ceased fire and they got out of the tank and they said, 'Fire!', and bang, bang, bang, bang. I don't know whether I pulled the bloody trigger or not. I know I aimed - I think I did. My conscience has probably helped me to cover it up. But Bill Broes, who was a very nice fellow, he was a lance corporal, he's tellin' everybody to quit firing and all. And anyway, Mick Dwyer didn't tell 'em to fire but the company commander did. Anyway, they shot 'em - three or four of 'em - running around.

(25.00) Anyway, after that there was this officer, I told you, he had a captain, an Italian captain, bailed up and they said, 'So and so's been shot, sir', and he said, 'Sorry, old chap', bang, shot him. They reckons that he pulled a concrete lid off a cylinder and dropped a grenade in among a lot of prisoners who were hiding in this cylinder and put the lid back on. I don't know whether it's true or not but there's a very strong rumour of that by fellows from B Company. And that order, I found out later, come from the top. It didn't come from our company commander.

How do you know that?

I'm a bit frightened to say this (laughs).

Well, it's fifty years ago and these things are important to record.

Alright, I'll say it - yeah, it is. 'Cause Mick Dwyer, who's still alive and he's my platoon commander and company commander and he was the bloke that told us not to shoot, said it come from Divvy. It must have come from Tom Blamey. So he told me. That's one of the things I wrote down here not to look at for a fair while. Anyway, I'll ask Mick about it. Then - what was I going to say then?

Well, one of the things I'd asked you - whether it bothered the men? Whether you also wondered, well, is this going to happen to us?

No, it didn't bother me in that way. I didn't think of it that way. But there was another fellow, who I didn't see this happen but they told me and I think it'd be true knowing the fellow, bayoneted an unarmed Jap. Bayoneted him! - that'd be pretty gruesome. Not a Jap, an unarmed Italian. Anyway, we then moved up and went on to Derna and we were under fire there and we took turn of moved up. And I left them at Derna and went back to the hospital. I was there for some days, I don't know - three days, something, a week - and I pissed off, got on an ambulance and went back. By the time I'd got up they'd been to Benghazi and come back a little place, to a place called Baracca. And we're in with Italian with settlers - they had little farms - and we're in with them. We're living in their houses. They're paid one and six a day each and we live there and they supplied us with - the army supplied food but we got a bit extra from them and paid 'em. And they were great friends with these settlers.

Was this before or after some of the incidents involving prisoners?

After all those incidents. The war had finished as far as the Italians were concerned at that stage.

Did that affect how you felt about the whole thing? I mean, did it seem sort of strange?

No, I just felt peculiar. See, moving up to - after I saw a few of 'em dead and that, and wondered what it was like to be dead (laughs) and what they had been thinking. And then I saw - we got captured materials and gramophone records and hear their playing *Sorrento* and all these Italian ... and I'm marvelling that they had the same music as us (laughs) - it had come from there. And then seeing their photos of their church parades and all that. And I thought, gee, the same sort of thing as here, 'cause I don't believe in God and I believed in him then. And I thought, gee, the same as us. They go to church parades and all that. And I'm trying to get into - 'cause they had all this racial attitude that they were different, like monkeys - and I was tryin' to get inside their brain and I'm looking at their stuff and it's all so similar and that. And I didn't realise they had a far better culture than us, like history and culture.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

## BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape two of the interview with Bill Smith about the 2/8th Battalion, recorded on 5 June 1991.

Going back to when you left Australia, how did you find the voyage to the Middle East?

I was always very nostalgic, thinking I'd never come back, and I used to look at everything and before it ...

Why did you feel that? What was it that gave you that ...?

Because I thought I'd never come back because I'd read - I was telling you earlier - I'd read these books and heard about how they went over the top and got slaughtered running into machine-gun fire. And that's the way it was in the first war. We were luckier in the second war, except for the blokes who were prisoner of the Japs or that. The infantry had it a lot easier in this war than they had in the first war. And I expected it to be like that and so I was more relieved than anything. Other blokes thought they were going to have a good time - they were worse off than me (laughs). So I had this that I'll never come back so I listened. I remember 'Poddy' Hawkins singing 'Goodbye, Melbourne Town' on my birthday, 15th September, when we left to sail abroad - that was the day we sailed. And I've wondered, I wonder if he'll come back, I wonder if I'll come back. Course Poddy got shot that very time when I'm telling you about shooting these ... he got shot just before that - he got killed - a kid of eighteen. And so on the boat I'm thinking of every ... and I remember Joe somebody saying to me, 'Bill, do you know that every turn of this propeller we can hear we're getting further and further away from home' (laughs) and I remember him sayin' that. And I thought, yeah, I wonder if we'll hear it coming back. So I had this attitude. What was the question?

How you found the journey?

Oh yeah. So I had note of everything and we played .... When we first got on the ship there was a note from the wharfies: 'Soldiers' - down where we were .... See, we were put right down below, no cabins, only sergeants and officers had them, and we were put right down below, and it had a note: 'Soldiers, there is beer down in the third hatch for officers'. And Sid Barker, who was a bit of a rough character, he pulled it away. He said, 'Don't let anybody see this. We'll be into this later.' And they went down and they got their beer. But I wasn't interested in that. And they played ...

Were there any repercussions? Was there an attempt to find out who ...?

No, not at that time, not that I know of - I don't think there was. They got so much and they'd throw the .... See, there's so many crates and they'd perhaps take a whole crate and throw the stuff overboard - the wood - at night or something which they shouldn't have done because of submarines. I don't know whether they did that but they probably would do that.

What were you sailing in, by the way?

A Dutch boat called the *Christiaan Huygens* or *Hygienes* [sic] or something - H-U-Y-G-E-N-S or something is its name. There was nurses on board, too. Of course, they were in with the

officers. And they had concerts. This Sid Barker, he was a good singer - he went to South Africa with Gladys Moncrieff - but he was a bloke with a split personality. He could sing beautifully. He had a fairly good education, and he got promoted eleven times. He'd get his stripes and then he'd get into strife and get 'em ripped off and then he'd get 'em again. After the war I went in the pub, I seen him in the pub. I said, 'Hey, Sid, how many times did you have stripes? I've told me kids about you.' Sid's drinking a pot. He held up his hand, 'Eleven' he said, 'Had 'em on press studs' so he could put 'em on and take 'em back (laughs). So they had these concerts and they had the boxing contests which I won. No, I won a couple of 'em and I got beaten by a fellow in the final. I could have beat him - everybody says they could have beat him (laughs) but they got rough - I know I could have beat him.

(5.00) I had one of these stupid attitudes that when everybody wanted me to win I'd lose, 'cause nobody knew me before. And I'd just smile and look as sissy as I could and go out and shake the gloves, go back in. And I'd come out and I had this long left hand and all that. But anyway I got beaten.

Would men bet on the ...?

Yeah, and they never bet anything on me at first 'cause I was skinny-lookin' and a lot smaller - I was in the lightweights. And I was just as tall but a lot skinnier. And nobody bet on me and when I belted the tripe out of him they all had their money on him, and then I'd get beaten when they had their money on me.

Was anybody ever badly hurt in those fights or were they pretty well supervised?

I broke the nose of this poor bugger that I first fought because I'd lead out my left and he'd run into it. See, you know how to do it, you slide your foot forward and your shoulder and you only have to move it six inches and your whole body behind it - you're only eight stone something and he's nine stone something - so that's fifteen stone coming in a foot, see, that's how they work it. And you just go bang, and you move back like that and he comes in again, he was real determined - bang! And so he got his nose broken by doing that.

What about after, did you become friends with fellows you fought?

Yeah, in boxing - boxing's a funny sport. You belt the tripe out of one another and you talk like we're talking now. It's nothing. That's how you expect it. But anyway, there was this boxing and then there was concerts and there was PT we'd have. But there wasn't much other than that on the boats, I don't think. Oh, a bit of rifle drill, which the boat rocking and that - although it was very calm over the Indian Ocean.

You stopped in Colombo?

Yeah, we stopped there and there's where my first time I ever met anybody from another country - foreigners. And we'd been lectured by the officer not to buy at the price they ask. They said always beat 'em down to a quarter of the price and you'll get it at the right bargain. Course we accepted all this, but looking back I would presume that it was the imperialist way of keeping 'em in their low ebb - the people.

So anyway we get abroad, oh, was it hot! And we had this hot khaki field dressing on, and the bloody bloke that wouldn't let us wear shorts or that he comes in his shorts and that - he comes ashore, the bloke in charge. Anyway, we're in all this crowds of people begging and, of course, I was a very ignorant person. And I thought why are they begging, why don't they do a bit of work (laughs). And a lot of 'em had children - little girls with children and all holding out their hands. They apparently trained their kids to hold out their hands. And flies in their eyes. And there's other blokes sellin' you waddies to beat 'em off with and, of course, I didn't come at that. And a few of us - there was English women there in the canteen, they'd be driving us around, showing us the sights. And this woman took us around, about three or four of us, showed a few places and then we had to go back to the boat.

Did that sudden sense of, or the potential sense, of superiority get to any fellows? That here they were, they could suddenly lord it over people whereas previously they'd never had any particular stature.

I think it did but I didn't see it at that occasion. I did later which I'll talk about. But on that occasion, there was a couple of 'em went the opposite way round. There's rickshaw pullers and they thought they were being funny and they put their hat on 'im and put 'im in the rickshaw and they pulled 'im around (laughs). And they got pack drill for doing that - for insulting the King's uniform. And, of course, throwin' money to 'em to dive for money too, in the harbour - there's all that sort of thing. Later on when we got over to the Middle East a lot of this, what you are talking about, came out in people.

In what way?

In a small way in me. We were driving around in a gharry - Billy Kirkpatrick, who got killed on Crete, and Tommy Quincy another mate who died, the three of us were going around - they were older than me, and I had a few drinks then, the first time in me life, or just about the first - and we're going around in this gharry and I'm tryin' .... And there's a native policeman, Egyptian, on point duty. I lean over to hit him on the head with a paper (laughs). It didn't hurt him but it whacked him. On our way and we just - we're going, I've got me back this way, the horse is going that way and I'm sitting that way and the others are sitting frontways. And we only went a little way and bang! something hit me on the arm and it was another Egyptian. I'm going wo-wo-wo-wo, having a go at me and he's going, pointing quits for the policeman, and I'm indignant at him doing it (laughs).

(10.00) And there was others too and they'd try and take 'em down, although they took us down more than us - more than we took them down - tryin' to make a bob. Like they'd sell what was supposed to be whisky and they'd piss in a bottle. They'd have the top intact and somehow they'd get it into the bottle. I don't know how they did it. It was supposed to be whisky and sell this bottle of whisky for a fiver or something, or a couple of quid or something, I don't know what they sold that - never sold any to me but they did sell it.

Did you ever see some poor innocent unknowingly take a swig?

No, I heard of it but I didn't see it, and I believe it. It was too backed up - the tale had too many backers for it not to be true.

Before arriving in the Middle East or during the early part of the arrival were you all warned about VD and where not to go and so on?

Yeah, we were warned about VD and not to go anywhere except in the brothels and use blue light outfits or French letters. And they said how all terrible things happen to soldiers in the first war with VD. And they told how the Arabs were so protective of their women that they'd shoot you. That they'd cut your throat, cut your balls out and sew 'em in your mouth. And this was their reprisal. And they told various other stories. And they said about the Arabs being homosexual because of the purity of their women, and they all believed that the next - what's their god?

Allah - Mohammed?

Would come from - be born of man, and that's why they wore these baggy pants. Anyway, one of them was going to give birth to the god - that's what they used to tell us. And they also told about how the Arabs liked their women to be virgins, like the purity of their women, how they protect them, and then they contradicted it by telling us how hardly any of 'em were virgins - the only virgins were the two-year-olds, and then they'd roll on their dummy. Terrible thing to tell you but that's what they'd tell you or what one bloke told us. And then there was these brothels and you'd have to report to the doctor when you come home and he'd have to inspect you. And I think a lot of these brothels were - Tom Blamey and them might have hand in 'em, like getting money out of 'em, because he's supposed to have had a hand in 'em in Melbourne here - had a bad reputation. And I can't feel that a man with his previous record wouldn't have been getting money out of 'em.

Well, I suppose there was a great profit opportunity if there were preferred places that were supposed to be more hygienic. Was it suggested that some places were well run and hygienic?

Yeah, certain places told that you had to go if you wanted to go there. If you wanted to go anywhere you had to go there. And if you were anywhere else you were out of bounds - you were on a charge. And provosts would go around. And there was a canteen there, I must tell you this one, it was the canteen, a big building, and it had all sorts of recreation in it - this is in Beirut in Syria [sic]. And it had all sorts of recreations, good cheap food and nice meals - Australian sort of meals that we liked and other meals.

And one of the blokes running it, one of the chiefs, was a footballer from South Melbourne name Peter Reveille. And Peter was a real rogue - very likeable, everybody liked him - and a champion footballer he was. Anyway, he used to, anybody AWL and that he'd give 'em a free feed and he'd look after blokes as well the fact that he was touching the till, and we didn't give a damn (laughs). Anyway he had this reputation and after the war my brother and a mate took me out to the dogs at White City, I didn't care about 'em but they were going and I went. And they're betting and they go up to hear the race run - to see the race run - and I'm walking around the deserted bookies' stands, just killing time, and I could hear it going over what was winning and I didn't care, I didn't bet. And a bloke walking towards me tearing up his betting tickets. He said, 'Have you ever seen a bigger racket than this?'. I said, 'No, Peter, only that canteen in Beirut'. And he laughed like anything - it was Peter Reveille. He laughed because there was a real racket with him.

What about with provosts? Did you get into any strife there?

(15.00)I didn't get into much strife because I usually did everything right except I went AWL a day or two here and there 'cause I thought it was justified when I saw officers with more leave. But blokes did get in - real good blokes got into strife with 'em and they reckon they were bastards, they'd pick you for anything. The few times they approached me they were very officious but I usually had everything alright. They never came at me the couple of times when I was AWL. They hated 'em. And this little Snowy Fraser, he absolutely hated 'em because in the gaols they put 'em in - oh, they were sadists. I know this because I know too many good blokes that got put in just for being AWL and that. Of course they were not all in the provosts corps but a lot of 'em had been in and they reckon a lot of the provosts were similar to 'em.

But Snowy Fraser, this little mate of mine who was the featherweight champion of the division, he hated 'em that much that - he had a leave pass and they come after him for his leave pass and they asked him very belligerently. So he could have showed 'em his pass and nothing would have happened but he'd had trouble with 'em before. So he put his hand in his pocket for his leave pass, pulled it out, jumped up in the air - he's only shorter than me but stockier - jumped up in the air and smashed the bloke's nose (laughs). And off he flies, black blood - blood everywhere 'cause they caught him and belted 'im and kicked 'im and everything. But that's how he hated 'em.

And the 'screws' in the 'boobs', oh, they hated 'em - good blokes hated them, that were just put in there. They reckon - well, the English were terrible in Jerusalem, they were English screws. And in Brocks Creek and that up at Darwin and up in north Queensland - I just for the moment forget the place - oh, they hated 'em up there too. One bloke, a mate of mine in the 2/2nd Field Regiment - a bit of a rough head - he was in the gaol and they threw in his .... When he got in there 'cause you've got keep junk on double as soon as you get in there. Of course if you just go in for the first time you don't know that. And he's in there the first time and he got whacked in the ear for not doubling straightaway, so he doubles. And then he's in the gaol and apart from all the punishments like pack drill and everything they used to give 'em, you'd be in your cell - you had a certain time, naturally, in your cell - and they threw in a big, we used to get big tins of jam, divide it up so many days among your company or something, and they threw in this big empty jam tin with all the old jam hard in it, in the crevices where they'd cut around the lid and that, and rusted. And they threw in a little bit of cloth that you cleaned your rifle with - four by two. And they said, 'Have that clean by tomorrow morning in your spare time' because by that time he has to go out and do his pack drill and whatever else they do in the gaol - I've never been in meself.

And then he gets back at night, hardly any light, and he's got to try and clean this bloody tin and, of course, it's cuttin' his hands on the edges and all and it's all impossible. So the next morning he gets an extra couple of rounds of pack drill for not having it cleaned and also for cleaning it in his spare time (laughs), which is all the time he had to clean it - this is what they reckoned to him. And I believe it because I heard that many stories from other blokes. He could tell a lot of yarns that bloke but I believe it because I heard so many similar stories from others.

I suppose the rationale would be that if the prisons were made so bad that men, under any circumstances, would never want to go back, in a way that was a good system. What would you make of that as an argument?

I reckon it had the opposite effect on 'em because they come out hating 'em. They hated the army worse than they did before and a lot of them were good blokes, they'd do everything if you were in action or that. With the army was monotonous, gee, the training when I think of it, I could have been learning swimming and I couldn't swim. I could have been doing more - I only fired ten shots - never fired a rifle of any sort before in me life. Ten shots I fired before I ever went into action. And you could have been doing a lot of these sort of things. Instead of that you're still doing all these stupid marching and sloping arms and that when you could have been doing a lot of the other things. Well, of course, this monotony made a lot of 'em worse, and they'd try and get out of it. They'd try and get schemes around it. They'd get caught out and then they'd get into more strife and it didn't have much effect in my opinion, it just brought a hatred.

(20.00) What about your first action, was that a moment that stood out for you - the expectation of what may or may not happen, at all?

Yeah. Before we went in we were at a place, Burg el Arab, we knew we were going in, and I was very nervous, and I told you about how I put all these things around me in case of a bayonet fight. And when I went in I'm ready all the time, and the shells came down from our own shelling. We had to go to ground and the shells dropped in front and then further and further and then we followed the shelling in. And they retaliated but they didn't get us, we went to ground. And a few of theirs didn't go off - just in front of us, too.

But yes, but you control your nerves. I think you're more nervous before you go in. And when you go in you might be nervous but you've got it controlled. But as soon as it's over you're all talking and going on like drunken men. And so I was fairly good about that and, of course, I found out too that the fight against the Italians wasn't so fierce as I'd thought it was. Mind you, other companies found it worse than the company I was in. We had it a bit easier but they found it a bit harder, but it was still nothing as bad as in Greece or in New Guinea. So you control it and you go through and you're alright. And then you get out and then after a while you recover from that drunken talk a lot - pent up emotion.

But when I was in New Guinea I'd had more time - see, after Greece we didn't see action for a couple of years. Wouldn't believe it. We were in Syria and we're getting ready for the Germans, and then we were going to go up to Tobruk where the 9th Divvy were, and then the Japs came in. So that was six or seven months and we were to go to Tobruk - we'd had a good rest after Greece and Crete. So instead of that we went up to - we came home. When we came home they weren't sure about Japs tryin' to come down this way, so they sent a brigade up to Darwin with other Militia troops - an AIF brigade and an air force, and few other troops like commando or, as they called them, independent companies. And we went up to Darwin.

Well, we were up there twelve months. Then they decided the Japs wouldn't be coming this way anyway, because they were starting to get back - pushed back - their lines of communication were too long. So they sent us then to leave, we had leave. I can tell you about our leave - I didn't like a lot of those. But anyway, we had our leave and then we went to the Tablelands expecting to go to Lae and Finschhafen, in New Guinea, but the 9th Divvy were there and more of the 6th Divvy were there, and some of the 7th, and they didn't need us again. So they held us back thinking we might be going somewhere else. Again, another year passed. So we came on leave again and then went back and then we went to New Guinea for the last twelve months of the war.



What did you mean there when you said you didn't like some of your leaves?

I was a very disillusioned person because when I came home on the first leave and my sister, whose husband was in the permanent army and all he was doing was at Broadmeadows and coming back home and going home, doing that all the time instead of going away or that. And I said, 'Well the WAAFS or them - the AWAS - can do those jobs and you ought to be helpin' us'. And my sister said, 'Oh, youse did nothing', and you understand I fell out with 'em for a good while. And then on leave you found people sneering at you for being in the army. It was all an excuse I think.

What sort of sneering? I mean what ...

They'd say, 'Oh, you didn't do anything,' and I think it was all for themselves - excusing themselves for not being in it or if not themselves for their sons or husbands or whoever they had, for not being in it - pretty sure that was the idea.

(25.00) Like, they mightn't have even understood themselves but there was some animosity that hurt me and hurt others, too. And then you couldn't get a taxi - the Yanks had 'em all 'cause they had the money - these great patriotic Australians that were behind the war. Go into a café, you might get served after the Yanks or something 'cause they learned tips - great patriotic Australians! Wherever you bloody went. You'd go to the pub, you couldn't get any beer or that. Well, it might have been short but they still kept a bit under the counter for whoever could pay higher, which was generally Yanks or officers or maybe our troops who were willing to pay.

And this great patriotism, I reckon - and to this day I say if the war came here there'd be just as many collaborators as there was in France or anywhere else, and there would have been then, too. So I was very uptight and you can see I'm still a bit about it (laughs), and anyway this made me just wipe a lot of people that I liked before. And my sister and them I fell out. I'm still mates with her now but I still grit me teeth sometimes when I'm talking to her. She talks about how her husband was in the army for twenty-six years - should have got a knighthood. And I feel like saying he was in the boy scouts. But he finished up going away. He joined the AIF and he went away for seven months in New Guinea. Altogether he was away from Melbourne for twelve months in the whole war. He was away for seven months and he wasn't in the infantry - he was in an infantry battalion but he got taken back to the lines of communication - never saw any real action.

These are the things that made me down and - really did. And then I met a girl and I fell for her very deeply and she was for me but her husband - not her husband - her father and mother didn't like me. I'd never met 'em but I know what's happened, I can read between the lines, because she told them I was a communist, because I could tell she liked me a lot. And she told me we had to break it off but she didn't tell me this was the reason. She told me she just didn't like me but she kept coming back, and everything about her - well, everybody knows whether somebody really likes them or not when they're closely together. So she wiped me and that broke me heart a lot and I was a bit of a sook and I was on the grog a bit and that and didn't enjoy me leaves much.

When did you become a communist?

I was starting to think of it in the Middle East and after Greece and Crete I give away religion and then started looking for something else and when Russia started fighting much better than we were told, and together with all these things that I thought were unfair about our own system, about how people were treated in the officer ranks to us and how civilians acted and all the black market and everything, and I had an idealistic attitude of socialism. And I read a book called *The Socialist Sixth of the World* by the Dean of Canterbury of all people, who wrote a great picture of Russia. And it seemed to be true because they fought so well and pressed the enemy back. And then starving around Leningrad and Stalingrad and the population fought so well, as well as the soldiers, that I thought, well, these people of ours wouldn't fight so good. And I had me doubts about a lot of the Militia too, because I got into strife with them about why they should volunteer. So it made me so disillusioned with us that I looked for something else and Russia fighting so well I thought that must have been the answer.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview with Bill Smith about the 2/8th Battalion, recorded 5 June 1991.

Did you actually become a member of the Party as such?

Yes, but I didn't know any communists.

While you were in the army?

Yeah. What happened, it finally came about I was up in Darwin and I put on a bit of a mutiny I suppose you'd call it - I was an acting corporal - and we're going out on these stunts. It might thunderstorm, a tropical storm at night - the middle of the night - you'd go out and you'd have to march up and down hills and if it was the dry season you had to lie - mosquitoes and all, no mosquito nets or that - out in the bush. And officers weren't doing exactly what we were doing. They'd have a light pistol on their hip or something and their other things coming up in a truck and we're doing all this.

And I didn't mind it normally but I'd got upset about these, what I thought were injustices. So I decided I wasn't going to do it. I said I'll fight in New Guinea but I'm not going to do this - send me to New Guinea. But I said you can't give the army away because there's prisoners of war and that and they've got to be released, but other than that - I was that bitter about it - they can halve their civilians and that, and some of their troops too. I said if they put them on an island and the Japs were there, the Japs could win for mine - I was that bitter about 'em because they really killed[?] us for being in the army and all.

So anyway, they go out on this stunt right in the middle of the night and this lieutenant calls out, 'Where's Corporal Smith?'. I said, 'I'm here and I'm staying here'. So he tried to get me out and I wouldn't go. So they went on their way and the next day he said, 'Bill, why didn't you come out?'. I said, 'Because it's for nothing. I'll go to fight in New Guinea - I'm not doing this - all these bludgin's that are going on. Anyway, you yourself, why weren't you in the army earlier?' He said, 'Oh' - and he told me a tale.

I felt sorry talking to him in a way but I felt it was right what I was saying. So he said, 'Well, I have to put you on a charge'. I said, 'I know you will'. So he put me on the charge and they marched me up. They get two of your mates with a bayonet and rifle and they've got to march you up. So they marched me up to the company commander who was a bloke from Horsham known as Jack Smith, Captain Smith, and he was a real nice bloke. And he dismissed the guard. He sat me down with a cup of coffee and a cake he'd had sent by his wife - a big tinned cake. And he said, 'What's up with you? You're a real good soldier, now you're doing this.' I said, 'I joined up to fight and I'm not doing this where all these bludges' and I pointed out a lot of the things I've already mentioned. And he said, 'I know. We can't give up.' I said, 'I'm not giving up. I'll fight but I'm not doing this.' He said, 'But you've got to, the army tells you you've got to'. I said, 'If I tell you and you tell the next bloke up higher than you, they keep going. You know it's true, if you keep standing up for what you believe it's the only way you'll alter it.'

He said, 'Oh, you can't do that. It doesn't work that way. If you don't do it you'll finish up in gaol.' I said, 'I don't care. Gaol won't be harder than these stunts we're doing. I don't smoke. I have very little drink - only when I go on leave. The money won't worry me when I go on leave, you can always get it off your mates and pay 'em back, so I'd sooner go into gaol on principle.' He said, 'Oh, don't do that'. And I said, 'And furthermore, I don't want these stripes. You're only telling people to do things you wouldn't do yourself.' He said, 'You've got to hang onto 'em' but I said, 'No, I don't want 'em'. So he said, 'Well, just think it over'.

(5.00) So he let me go and I just sulked for a few days and the blokes are going out on stunts - 'Why aren't you going out?'. And I said, 'I'm fine doin' this, if you want to be in it with me you do it'. And of course they went out and of course I felt a bit conscience-stricken - them doing it and me not doing it - so I went back doing the same as them. Anyway, it came on the board: 'Wanted - a clerk at battalion headquarters'. They got one and six a day extra, three of 'em in a tent, better conditions than the riflemen. So I went up to him and I said, 'What about me getting that job? Since one of these new blokes get it, why shouldn't I do their turn in the line?' He said, 'Fair enough, you can have it'. They sent me up and I got the job. I was only there two days - I couldn't stand 'em. I wanted to get back with the troops (laughs). And anyway, I went back to him and he said, 'Well, I'm sending you to a clerical school up in Darwin and you can go there and then when you come back we'll send you to Brigade Headquarters as sergeant clerk'. I said, 'No, I don't want to go. I want to be back with the troops.' He said, 'Well, go up there and you'll have a rest'. So I went up and I did this school and when I come back he said you can go there and I said no, I'll go back, and I went back to the rifle section as a private, and I stayed there.

But getting to about joining the Communist Party, did I mention to you that I said to him about Russia and that, and he says they've got something to fight for? People were starting to think this - not only me. So when I came on leave I thought I'm going to join the Communist Party when I get on leave. Anyway, I got on leave and a few boozes with the mates and that, and I wanted to join but I didn't know where to look for 'em and I wasn't going to spend any time lookin' for 'em. So I went home to this bloke that I told you - his parents. This fellow got massacred on Ambon, Wally Sneesby.

So I went to his parent's place to see them, to say hello - I did a lot of that. Pals that were prisoner of war or that - saw their parents. So I went out to see his parents out at St Kilda. And they were Liberals. It wasn't the Liberal Party at the time, it was some other conservative party - UAP. And I said, 'I think the 'Comms' are the only ones that are right'. And the young

boy - he was eighteen fellow, young brother of Wally - he's there sitting at the table saying nothing. Anyway I went back and I'm out with the boys again drinking, and just as a second thought I went back to see them again the next night. And this fellow, young fellow, says, 'Hey, I'm glad you come back. I was talking to a 'Commo' at work and he told me to come in and join the party. I'm joining meself. Come in.'

So we went in and there was the building in King Street and they joined me up. Anyway, I went back off leave, back again into the army. And I didn't have any idea what the communists were. I just thought it was helping one another and all this. And I'm tellin' 'em what's going to happen in years to come - all real idealistic ideas. And I'm arguing it on the basis of real socialism. And anyway, I didn't mind tellin' everybody I was a communist. A lot of 'em laughed and a lot of 'em thought I might be right, too - there was a hell of a lot of feeling that way. Anyway, I didn't know one communist till I joined the Party down here in Melbourne. And when I come back there was some reinforcements in and one or two of 'em were communists and they linked up with me.

But I was in a different company and we went in New Guinea and when we were in New Guinea we were separated fighting in action and we hardly saw each other. But after the action we met and we had Party branch meetings, and the brigade education officer was a communist - a lieutenant. And that was Elliot Johnson, the bloke that just brought down a statement, the Aboriginal Commission Inquiry, just recently. He was the lieutenant in charge of education (laughs). And one of the medical men was Dr McDonald, a very well known and respected doctor out at North Fitzroy. I think he might be dead now.

Were there ever any repercussions for you as a communist?

A lot of the boys laughed, but I joined a few of 'em up, too, but the colonel and them, I think they must have had dossiers on us because I went on leave - I told you that.

(10.00) Yeah, and when I was on leave, another time after that. That was first - 1943. '44 I was on leave and I tried to get into Z Force and I was real mates with some of Z Force because my platoon commander and sergeant were both members of Z Force - they were captains by this stage. And they wanted me and a few others of us in because we'd been with 'em in Greece and that. And we went in and they accepted us but we weren't to tell anybody or say - keep our mouth closed (laughs). Anyway, we went to a party and one of these Z Force blokes brought along a WAAF, a nice looking WAAF, and I'm blowin' me bag (laughs) and I think she might have been sounding out whether I was reliable or not. Anyway, I'm tellin' her about communism - I wasn't tellin' her about Z Force.

So when I went back they wouldn't let us in - like when I went back to the battalion they wouldn't let us in. Anyway, we're going to New Guinea then so I was pretty happy. But the colonel .... Also, another thing I got into, when they knocked me back from Z Force I then wrote out a transfer because I didn't know we were going away. So I wrote a transfer for the paratroops because I still wanted to be in action but I didn't want to be .... And I wrote out on this transfer: 'There is some officers and NCOs in this battalion that I've not got the slightest confidence in, and I don't think they're entitled to their rank'. Well, by this time the company command had changed, although I would have still put the bloke in that we'd changed but I didn't mean him at the time and he never ever got into action - this bloke. And he looked at the transfer, and they usually say, 'Do you want to be tried by me or the colonel?'. And the

colonel says, 'Do you want to be tried by me or the brigadier?'. He didn't say that at all, he said, 'March him straight up to the colonel' so I went up to the colonel.

What were you being tried for?

For conduct prejudice to military discipline, in that I wrote disparagingly without reason of higher command, which I reckon had all the reason. But anyway, the colonel read this out. He said, 'It's contrary to military discipline'. I said, 'No, it's not' - I interrupted him. I said, 'No, it's not. It's to military discipline'. So I said all that 'sir' and I said it politely. And he said, 'What do you mean?'. I said, 'When we were in Greece there was certain officers let us down. We've been a long time out of action. We can sum people up much better by our previous experience and there are a few people I can tell you - name and why - I haven't any confidence in 'em.'

He just ignored that 'cause I think he thought the same (laughs). He wasn't a bad bloke in a way but he was real conservative. And he said, 'You're a Bolshevik, Smith'. And I said, 'Yes'. And he just said, 'Don't come before me again. Five pound fine, a week' - or three weeks - 'CB' - I forget what it was - 'March him out' before I could say anything. And the sergeant major was a real close mate of mine. He's in that little book I gave you before about me and Billy Broes. He's the one that told us not to shoot at Bardia. And he was tryin' to save me from meself. He said, 'Quick turn, quick march' - I'm goin' crook - and he's marchin' me out. And there's an officer standing there. And I've said this to Bill and he forgets this. He said I made it up - it's true. And these officers are standing there and most of them liked me - the officers. They might have been saying all good things about me or not, I don't know what they were saying. But he said, 'Eyes right', and I just got me hat and I threw it at 'em. Anyway, he marched me as quick as he could, and the bloke that used to be my commander, Gately - he was a mongrel. That can go on record without any doubt. He finished up getting cashiered from the army. Anyway, he chased me out. He said, 'What's wrong with you, Bill? - coming on like this. You'll finish up in gaol.' I said, 'I don't care if I go to gaol or not, if I'm going to be treated like this for tellin' the truth'. Anyway, he just berated me and broke us off and we went our way. But that was part of the how they - I reckon they knew I was a communist then.

Did it follow you out of the army? Because in the immediate postwar period the Nazis were regarded as a spent force and with, say, immigration to Australia the concern was more to keep communists out than there was a concern about Nazis. Did it follow you?

Yeah, the RSL put me out. I formed the St Kilda West Branch and got a Liberal bloke to be president and got all blokes along at random that couldn't join the Army/Navy Club because they had too many bookmakers ...

(15.00) But I mean, not in terms of your active involvement. Do you suppose there were files that were passed on and that you were under surveillance?

No, only that I was a communist - that's why I got put out. I did nothing wrong in the League itself. But then, wherever you went - of course I become a communist organiser then. I give up a job I could earn twenty-five quid a week as a shipping clerk, and some weeks I could earn twenty-five quid, which was a lot of money after the war, and I give it up to earn three-

pound ten a week to work for the communists (laughs). Some people call me a mug. I reckon it was a good experience now I look back.

Anyway, they used .... Anybody that was a little bit liberal then they thought they'd call a 'red' or a fellow traveller then. Oh, they were really vicious. Not only the coppers, the whole thing - everything - they'd look at you. Anyway, I got run out of towns - organising in different places - and RSL mobs would get up and call me a traitor. And I'd say I can go to the 2/8th Battalion any time you like, and I can now. They even put me on this (laughs). But this Coombes tried to put me out of the battalion - go into the battalion even - but he couldn't get a seconder. And blokes that were against me politically, they all backed me up and all - Mick Dwyer and different ones. So .... Did I get away from your question?

No, that's alright. But going back to that first experience of battle where you'd prepared yourself for the possibility of encountering a bayonet. Did you actually get involved in any bayonet actions?

No, never in a bayonet, I was lucky that way. I went into Bardia and we didn't get into any action, just fired some shots at people. I don't know whether I hit 'em or not. There was other companies did get into a little bit but they didn't have to use the bayonet. They'd charge with a bayonet but they all .... But in Greece there was a few bayonet charges there, but I can't see why you'd use a bayonet when you had a shot in your locker. But there was a couple of bayonet charges there but not much use for the bayonet in this war.

Was the notion of being on the end of a bayonet something that was particularly chilling? I mean, was there something ...

Oh, it was for me. I wouldn't like a bayonet in me.

No, I can understand that, but I just wondered to what extent it was of concern.

No, I was very chilled with that idea and I often thought, with terrible sadness and horror, about these blokes on Ambon that got let out a few at a time and bayoneted 'cause the Japs didn't have enough ammunition.

You went to Crete as well?

No, I was on the last boat away from - last two boats away from Greece and they bombed us for an hour or two and we were able to keep 'em at bay but the other boat sprung a leak. See, what they were doing, they were dropping the troops on Crete, coming back to Greece like that, and we were the last two boats, so we were heading not for Crete but for Alexandria because they weren't going to defend Crete. They were going to just use it as stepping stone back to Alexandria. So the troops had already been dropped there. So our last two boats were going straight back to Alexandria, but the other boat sprung a leak with the bombing so they put on to Crete, too, and we were the only boat that went straight back. So we missed it.

When you were in Greece were there particularly bad moments? Are there times that remain with you where things really just got you down during the retreat: lack of food, the marching, and so on?

It got you that way you felt - your morale went down a lot but you .... I don't know whether you haven't had time to think of that or not, you're just thinking of getting out and you've got to hold off from them, and whether you'll get shot in this next turn you've got of holding back the enemy while the others get back. And you had a couple more turns at that and then I didn't have any more. But there was a lot of bombing of us. Getting out of trucks and running for cover and bombs coming down - oh, will this be it? - will this be it? Yes, you felt that way. But when that went you still just - I don't know how to feel. Yeah, you felt terribly down - whether you'd ever see home again - that's how I felt.

Did that feeling that you'd left with, that is, that you wouldn't come back, did that remain with you or did you somehow did you lose that feeling or what?

No, it wasn't a definite that I wouldn't come back at that stage, it was just that I probably won't but I hope I'll last this one out. At least I hope this one .... And each leave I'd go on I'd say I wonder if I can last for another leave.

Blamey, of course, was said to be very unhappy about the way the Australians had been put into Greece and the role that they were playing. And given the debacle that took place, what effect did that have on the relationship between officers and men? Was there at all a feeling that you'd been let down by high command and it created a general sense of dissatisfaction?

(20.00) There was a lot of that, but we were soldiers and although we hated, and didn't want to get killed - we were frightened of gettin' killed - and although we hated a lot of aspects of the army, most of us I think were like me, that we thought well, we didn't have the munitions or the air force or tanks that they had but somebody had to go there to delay - it was part of our job. It was like when we were getting out - when we were getting out of Vevi where we got chased down and there was a debacle - a lot of us were ready to get back as we'd been trained and hold 'em off at the risk of our lives while the others formed up behind us to let us get back, and probably give our lives. But it didn't finish up like that. We all practically ran out because that organisation didn't take place. But we were ready to die even though we hated to die and we were frightened to die. And if somebody had have had a plane and said 'You're on the next plane out', we might have taken it, and if we had have we would have been ashamed of ourselves later but we were ready to do it.

In retrospect it's now felt that the campaign had a fairly devastating effect on the German capacity on the Russian front, but at the time was there a sense that whole exercise had been useless, or did you really believe something worthwhile had been achieved?

No, I felt it was useless because at that time, too, we weren't getting papers like civilians back here, and news like them, and we didn't realise that the Russians were going to be in it because they weren't in it at that stage. And our morale was very low when we were back in Egypt after the campaigns in Greece and Crete. But it lifted a lot when we heard that Russia had been attacked. Even though they didn't actually come in, they were forced into it. But we were hoping then that that would help us because, to tell the truth, my morale was very, very low. And I could tell you about some of the prisoners of war with Germany, too, and their morale was pretty low.

In what way?

Well, I'll tell you something that I'll write down that can't be used for a while. My brother was a POW, he was in the ASC, Army Service Corps. He's my younger brother by eighteen months. And he went over with the first lot. He didn't join straightaway, he joined about February or March 1940 and he went away just before I went into the army. And he was with the artillery. And then when he got over in the Middle East he went into the ASC, Army Service Corps. And it was an easy job in Libya because there's no enemy planes strafing 'em, they had a nice van to sleep in at night, they could carry plenty of water and rations, so they had it on toast compared to us. Good luck to 'em, too - we had to have 'em. So he didn't see that much there.

But we went to Greece and in Greece, of course, they come under a lot of bombardments - the trucks. And I'm not clear exactly what happened but apparently in the finish they were formed up somewhere out from Athens - like they had rifles like us. Their trucks had to be destroyed and they were more or less infantry. But they were surrounded and they all give in. I'm not blaming 'em for that 'cause if our officers said give in, we'd give in - and I'm not blaming the officers either. It might have needed to give in, I don't know what the situation was at that time. But anyway he was a POW.

Now, he was there from April '41. He got captured nearly on his birthday, too. He sailed on his birthday like I did. He sailed on 15th April '40 and I sailed 15th September. Anyway, it was near his birthday in '41 when he got captured. He was POW and I didn't see him. We heard little of him right up until he come home just before I did. I was in New Guinea fighting when he come home because the war in Europe ended. When I came home he had a barrel of beer saved up to have a big party for me - he's good to me in that - but I found out he was pro-Nazi. He was in a camp in Austria and apparently there was a few others with him: Australians and other Europeans and English, and they weeded out the ones who were more possibilities and had 'em in this camp in Austria.

(25.00) It was well away from any fighting, working on farms. And it is well known that the Germans were working on troops to try and get 'em to fight on the Russian front, which would have been against us actually, but they didn't - the Germans put it differently. And he didn't get to that stage but I think he was getting near that stage because he was justifying Germany. He was talking in German, giving Hitler salutes and all that. I've never told my sister or anybody about that - never told them. She's naive as anything. She said, 'I met German air force pilots and got friends with 'em, we did. And they were telling us about they were in Greece and that. And we told them our brothers were. And I told 'em about Stan bein' in this prisoner of war camp.' And they said, 'Oh, we only put our well behaved prisoners in there'. She's as proud as hell that Stan was a well behaved prisoner. A well behaved prisoner was bloody getting towards collaboration.

When it came to going then to New Guinea to fight against the Japanese, was there a sense that this was a different war altogether or had you become so used to adapting to different circumstances that it didn't make a lot of difference?

No, well, of course we had a lot of reinforcements by then but to me it was .... No, it wasn't another war. It was a different war in the fact that it was close combat whereas the other had been open terrain. And I knew that the forwards ones would be the ones under danger. And that many troops wouldn't see any action because we were so small - the confinement of it.



And I knew I was in danger 'cause I was always forward scout, having had experience and that they always put you forward. But no, to me it wasn't, and it was just another war. A little bit different but I just took that in me stride without thinking of it being different.

Was there a different feeling towards the Japanese? Did you know something of the sorts of things they'd done?

Yes, I was horrified with them thinking, having a lot of racialism in with me as well, looking on 'em as more sort of animals - knowing of the atrocities and that. Like, even shot 'em and expected 'em to get up and shoot me again. I put about four in where I should put one.

Were there reprisals against Japanese prisoners where ...?

We didn't take 'em. We shot 'em.

Were you told not to take prisoners?

So in some ways we committed atrocities but the ones we usually found - see, they'd fight on. They fought to the death and if they didn't they were that sick that we thought we were doing 'em a good turn anyway by shooting 'em, as well as the fact that we didn't want to carry 'em all the way out. So in some ways we half committed atrocities. I've got nothing on me conscience about shooting the ones we did, even with my further enlightenment.

With the changing views and values that you developed through the war, when you now look back on it, what are your feelings about it? Do you feel that it was an experience that was very important to you and you value, or what's your overall feeling?

Well, it had to be done so it was an experience which I value, and the mateship I made was great. But when I think of all the dead blokes and the fact that we had to have it at their expense I don't think it was worth having.

END OF INTERVIEW