



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description	Walter Charles (Wal) Button as a sergeant, the 2/8th Battalion, interviewed by Harry Martin for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-1945.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape one of an interview with Walter Button on 3rd June 1991, 2/8th Battalion.

Wal Button where and when were you born?

I was born in Hamilton 4th March 1915.

Tell us something about your parents, where they were living and what they were like.

My Dad was in the army when I was born. Gee whizz.

That immediately touches an emotional cord with you.

He was in the army and he came home to see me.

Did you miss him a lot when you were very small, then - during the period he was at war?

Yes. And he always reminded me. He came home AWL and he was fined ten bob and he said I should give it back to him (laughs).

What had he done in civilian life?

He was a labourer and he was one of the first caretakers to go up to the Hamilton High School when it was built. And I was a kid here and went to school here.

Was he a firm man, or how do you remember him?

No he was very, very good. I don't ever remember him belting into me.

How many in the family?

I had three sisters and then I arrived. I was the only boy. I'm the baby.

What about your mother? What was she like?

Very good. Looked after me well.

Were they hard years? When you were small, that is?

Well, when I was small there was no money. Like it was during the Depression you had to take whatever work you could get. Things was very hard as regards money.

What did your father do when he got back from the war?

Oh, well, I can't remember, I was only a little wee bloke. Oh, he was a slaughterman. He worked for - slaughterman I think. The first I remember we was at Goss and Johnston's

slaughterhouse. They were the butchers. They never had abattoirs then of course. They all had their own slaughterhouses.

Did he ever feel as an ex-soldier who had done his bit for the country that in a way the country had let him down, that things were so hard?

No, he never ever growled. Well, I never heard him growl anyway.

What about your schooling? Where did you go to school?

Oh, very little. When I was a boy I was sick and they - I was in hospital for a fair while and I got very little schooling.

What was wrong?

I had a kidney complaint and I was up in Warracknabeal when I enlisted up there. And when I came home they was giving us a send-off in Hamilton. And old Doctor Fitzpatrick, he was an old soldier from the first war, and he was the army doctor. And he said to me, 'I wouldn't have passed you'.

Well what did you do for schooling then, if you were in hospital a lot of the time? Did you have correspondence lessons?

No, I had very little schooling until I got into the army, and then I started to learn.

When you were young - when you were small that is - what did you see yourself doing with your life? Did you have any particular ideas?

I did. I would have liked to have been a farmer but there was no hope of being a farmer. So I worked wherever there was work to be got when I was getting older. That's how ...

Before you joined the army had you started to work?

My word I had. I worked on the Hamilton sewerage here. And when the sewerage finished here there was hardly anything to do - oh and I've worked on the Shire on the stone crusher and there was no work in Hamilton and there was a sewerage going in Warracknabeal so I went to Warracknabeal and worked on the sewerage in Warracknabeal. And I enlisted in Warracknabeal.

Had it been a religious family, churchgoing - part of your childhood?

Yes. We always - Mum and Dad - well me Dad liked the army and me Mum liked the Church of England. We were all brought up Church of England.

Was it a political family? Was your father inclined to talk about the social and political issues of the day?

No I wouldn't say we was a religious family by any means. We always believed in God.

(5.00) At school, there had been traditions of saluting the flag and the ANZAC tradition was very strong. With your father's own involvement in the first world war, was the term ANZAC something that had special meaning to you?

Yes, he never ever missed any ANZAC marches and I can always remember saluting the flag on Monday mornings.

Did he talk to you about the war?

No.

So how did you imagine it? Did you see it as some great romantic heroic thing or what?

No, I wouldn't say that. Like, I was named Walter. Mum's brother was killed in Gallipoli. He was Walter. So when I was born I was called Walter.

Did that have a particular meaning for you? I mean did you think about that as a child?

Yes, definitely and when I was overseas me sister had a boy and she called him Walter.

What led you to join up? Do you remember when you made the decision?

Yes, I made the decision when the war started and there was a lot of talk about it. And I finished work one night and I went straight down and enlisted, so they couldn't say I got drunk to enlist.

What did your parents think about it?

No, they didn't say anything.

They didn't try and talk you out of it, or anything?

No, they didn't try to talk me out of it. They thought, well, if he wants to go, let him go.

So after signing up what happened?

After I signed up, well we went into the showgrounds in Melbourne. They come up to Warracknabeal and picked us up and we took the oath in old [McCoombes?] Hall.

How many of you?

About twelve.

Did you have mates among them?

Yes, there was about, I think there was about six fellas off the sewerage. And I think we only had about three locals.

How did you go down to Melbourne?

Train.

Was it exciting or was there a sense that you were off, you were going to see the world and ...?

No, it was really quite alright. They, after we took the oath in the morning, the townspeople, or the Shire, had gave us dinner down at one of the cafes. And after we had dinner the city band, or the town, or borough band then it would be, played us the band and we went up to the railway station.

So you were local celebrities in a way?

Yes, that's what you could call us. We was well looked after.

And what was the train journey like?

Well, (laughing) I'm afraid when we started off we finished up having a few bottles of beer and got down to the showgrounds and we had our first army stew.

What was it like?

Well, it was good, because we was hungry.

And what was the routine at the showgrounds?

Well they was putting us into our battalions and learning us how to stand at ease and line up and so forth. And we were there and that's when the 2/8th Battalion was formed, up then in Puckapunyal - at the showgrounds I should say. And then they moved us out in few - or a week or so's time, moved us out to Puckapunyal.

You said you had a few drinks on the train going down. Did you play up at all while you were at the showgrounds?

No, we didn't. We wasn't in the habit of playing up then (laughs).

How did you find it all - the nature of suddenly having to adjust a routine of being told what to do and stand to order, and all that sort of thing?

Well, you knew you'd have to do what you was told, because I'd an uncle that was in the ... like me Mum's brother that was in the 1914 war and he stayed in it. After the war he was a warrant officer and he used to come to Hamilton and drill the boys up on the - at the drill hall and in the paddock. And I used to hear him roaring them up and giving them orders and I knew we had to do what we was told.

Did any of your friends have trouble adjusting?

Not the ones I went in with. They nearly all adjusted. There was different ones though I see didn't, and the punishment at the start off with if they didn't behave they just got discharged out.

What were the people in charge of you like, the sergeants and the drill masters and so on?

They were mostly just learning too. And I found them quite alright. They weren't real hard. We soon found out you just had to do what you was told.

The trip to Puckapunyal was by train. How did you find that?

That's when we went out there. We found it quite alright. I don't know - I haven't noticed anything wrong with that.

And Puckapunyal itself?

Puckapunyal was just in the huts. They were just building it then. There was no sewerage. It was only the old pan system.

Did it seem pretty desolate? You'd wonder what on earth you were going to do round there for entertainment?

(10.00) You did (laughs). About one of the funniest things a man first found out when he went there - they used to put tins out in the line for fellas to urinate in and had to take it in turns of being the orderly. And six o'clock reveille and the first time we was on it we left it till after six o'clock and the pooh tins are all pretty full. But after that you soon learnt that you was well up before reveille and had them all removed.

What were you doing? I mean were you put in to a particular unit or group while you were there?

Yes, I was put into the Don Company of the 2/8th Battalion, 16 Platoon.

And what did Don Company do? Did they specialise in any particular way?

No they were an infantry battalion - infantry company.

So there was lots of marching and ...

Yes there was marching. Well, when we first started off we only had the old Lewis gun that they had in the first war - rifle and Lewis gun. And we was told that when we got overseas we wouldn't have the Lewis gun, we'd have a Bren gun.

I believe the Lewis had a tendency to jam.

Well the Lewis had a little round magazine on top. Well he was from the first war so you couldn't expect anything much of him left.

Did you see Bren guns at all while you were at Puckapunyal?

No. Never seen a Bren gun until we got over to Palestine.

What about leave? What did you do for leave?

We got a couple of days' leave, like weekend's leave from Puckapunyal.

What would you do on those days?

I'd go home to Warracknabeal, if I got a weekend leave, because I was going with my wife - or my girlfriend then - I was going with her in Warracknabeal.

Were you getting homesick at all?

No, I don't think I would have got homesick. I'd been homesick when I was a kid, but when I got into the army I wasn't homesick.

How did you find the meals overall?

Well when I first went in there was several times I was going back from the mess house and back to the hut and wish I was going home for my dinner.

What about the conditions otherwise, flies or the heat or the cold?

There was no shortage of flies and it was - the heat when we were there, we wasn't there in the winter. We was only there in the - I don't know what time we went away, about March, April, when we sailed away. We only had the summer in Puckapunyal.

Did you get 'Pucka Throat'?

No. But when we was marching past there was some of our mates was working with up in Warracknabeal, they were helping put the sewerage on in Warracknabeal, at Warrack, and they were down there at Puckapunyal putting the sewerage on. And when we marched past them at the start off they used to have a bit of a talk to us and I walked past them one day and one of the fellows said, 'If we want to speak to you we can join ya'. They kept working.

You had a march through Melbourne I gather?

Yes, we definitely marched through Melbourne.

Can you tell us about it? What it looked like, how you felt at the time and so on?

Well I'd say a fella felt very proud was all marching along and there was quite a lot of people there to give us a wave and we marched through. That was our first march in public really.

Were you good by then? Were you pretty well drilled?

Yes we could keep in step alright.

Give you a sense of pride?

I would say yes. To see the people there to see us and we were all marching along in step and the whole battalion marched through. It wasn't just our company.

Did you get leave just before you were to go away?

Yes.

Had you been told that you musn't tell people where you were going or what you were doing? Were you briefed in that way?

We was briefed in that way. (Laughs) We couldn't tell them because we didn't know. All we knew we was going away.

But there were a lot of rumours floating round, I presume at the time, about what you were doing and where you were going.

Oh yes. There was always plenty of rumours. But we was never ever told anything. All we was learning we had to - how to .... Oh they had us in the huts and getting out. How we had to disembark off the train and to get onto the ship and march off and so forth and as one 'lieut' said, 'If you stop to kiss your Aunt May goodbye', he says, 'I'll see it's not goodbye and you'll never leave Australia'. And I said to one of my mates, I said, 'Gee whizz you'd think he was giving us a privilege lettin' us go away'.

How did the boarding go? Was it pretty orderly, without much confusion?

No confusion, not that I know of. Everyone seemed to go along quite alright.

And conditions aboard ship?

The conditions aboard ship, well, at the start-off she was pretty rough going through the Bight and you was very lucky if you could get a place on the rails (laughing).

You were a bit seasick?

Everybody. It was very rough.

How long before it started to improve?

Oh just three or four days. By the time we got over to - where did they land us? - was it Adelaide, I think, or Perth. We landed somewhere...

Perth I think.

We stopped at Perth and we seemed to have settled down by then.

(15.00) How were the locals towards you, in Perth?

Well when we got to Perth it was - soldiers had landed there before us and they had played up and when we were there all the pubs were shut. But the locals - there was cups of tea and ladies and cups of tea everywhere and sandwiches. They looked after us very well.

Those fellows must have played up pretty badly for the pubs to actually shut and lose their trade.

Yes. They must have been.

Do you know anything about that? What actually happened?

No well we was told they'd - there was some playin' up there and they'd taken precautions that we didn't.

And then you went on to Colombo?

Yes Colombo was the first foreign port we saw. And we was lined up in our full uniforms and stood up on deck, and the sweat didn't drip off me, it started to run off me. And if it hadn't have been something new to see a foreign place, I would have walked down below and taken me uniform off. But I suffered it (laughs).

You went ashore?

Definitely went ashore. Even had a rickshaw ride, for about a couple of chain. I said, that will do. And the fella was quite pleased to collect his money.

Did you do any other sightseeing at all?

Yes, went round there and we had a good look around Colombo. We only had the day and then we had to get back on board that night.

Was there concern during the voyage about torpedoes or the possibility of being bombed?

Yes. There was always talk of it.

By this stage did you have a clearer idea at all as to what you were going to be doing when you finally arrived in the Middle East?

I would say no. We knew we would have to train and get climatised.

Were you being drilled aboard ship?

They took our boots off us. We had to wear sandshoes. And they'd walk us round the deck. There wasn't much room but we'd walk right round the decks and we'd get our exercise. They kept us under discipline all the way. In fact our adjutant had a talk to us there one day and read out all the things they could do to us if we didn't behave.

What were some of the things?

Oh well, what we could be charged with for disobeying orders and what could happen to us and all things.

Were there any did play up on the voyage out?

No, they never got a chance.

So when you arrived I gather you had some leave again.

No when we first arrived, when we finally got into camp in Palestine. We finished up down at Kilo 89 and were there for a while and then we did get a day's leave into Jerusalem.

Did that have any particular meaning to you as a - visiting places you may have learned about when you were small and going to church and so on?

I'd say yes it did because the first thing you done when you got into Palestine, into Jerusalem, you got a guide - there was any amount of guides there. They were all offering themselves as guides and showed us round all the holy places and it was - what did surprise me there, how they're all barefooted and they even wore holes down in the stones where they'd wore over them for many years.

Had you been briefed about the dangers of going to some of the unholy places and about the dangers of VD and so on?

Yes, they never stopped telling you about it. So you had to be very careful and when you seen some of them, well you wouldn't go there (laughing). There was one place they had out of bounds to us and that was the Old Jerusalem and I don't think there'd be any soldier that didn't have a look down there. But it was such a dingy little place and if a camel come along you had to stand to one side into a doorway to let him go past. And you'd only want to go down there once. Even poor fellas making nails by hand and - very poor place it was.

How did you get on with the local people? What was their manner towards you?

I would say the manner of the Arabs was quite good. We were well warned at the start-off that when we see the man riding along with the donkey with an umbrella over himself and his women running behind him we was not to interfere. That was their religion. And we never did. They used to have all their faces covered up and all you could see was nice little eyes. Sometimes you'd see a bright little pair of eyes. One fella did whistle one of the girls one day and the old fellow kicked his donkey into a trot and the woman had to run then to keep up and they only got so far behind and that's where they stayed.

Quite a few fellows had trouble with British MPs. Did you get involved in any fracas of one sort or another?

No there was a few got, you know, a few beltings-up and so forth. But I was lucky enough to dodge them.

Did you see any take place?

Well I seen one one day and I reckoned it was the Aussie's fault. The Aussie attacked the Tommy first and then the Aussie got a hiding for his troubles. So I didn't interfere with him, I thought they'd do him good.

(20.00) What did you generally think of the British and their tendency to be rather more disciplined and authoritarian?

Well, I always got on quite alright with them. We never got a chance to mix with them a lot of course. But any time I did I found them quite good fellows. I wouldn't condemn them one bit.

So when you got down to the business of drilling and marching and adjusting to the very different climate, how did you find that?

Well at the start I found it very hard because they - we went into shorts and the backs of your knees got burnt jolly bad and then they let us wear our long trousers then for a while and when we come good you didn't notice it so bad.

What would you do for the sunburn?

Nothing.

No lotion, no creams or anything?

No.

Did any men get badly burnt, blisters?

No, I never heard of anyone who had to go to the doc with them, or I never seen them anyway. But mine, once they let us wear the long trousers for a little while to keep out of the heat, mine came good. But they were very sore. Your legs were stiff. You was finding it hard to walk.

How was the food there?

Oh, well you just got to get used to army food and that's it. You got two choices, you can either eat it, or you can go without. So you found out you ate it.

And were you getting mail from home and so on?

Yes mail always come through from home.

Entertainment, recreation, sports and that sort of thing?

We used to have a little bit among ourselves, like down on the beach they'd have their lifesavers going and that sort of thing. It was very good.

Did you swim?

I'm not a very good swimmer. I can just save myself but I'm not a strong swimmer by any means.

After a few months of this were you starting to get impatient, wanting to sort of get into action?

No you - what we did do there once they ... oh they took us on a bivouac. The Lighthorse took Beersheba in the first war so we done a bivouac there and we took Beersheba. But they just issued us that we marched all one day and then just issued us with our blankets that night and before we got a chance to dig a hole and lay down .... We always had to dig a hole there just to get yourself out of the wind. And before we got a chance to lay down they took them off us again and marched us. We had a night and we took Beersheba at daylight in the morning and then they gave us a forced march back to our camp. And when we got back to camp the first thing I'd do is to lay down. That was our hardest bivouac we had - hardest training we had.

About how far had you travelled?

Oh look I wouldn't have any idea. We just walked. And it was on the next morning I know 'old' Blamey was there to see us and we was marched down to see him. And he stood up in the boxing stadium to talk to us and he said how pleased he was to see us as standing as steady on parade as we was the last time he saw us. And it just goes to show it doesn't matter how much a man's had the day before he comes up for more next day. And if he asked any man that was there what he wanted to do, he would have told him to lay down. (Laughs) And when he went away well, we done nothing for the rest of the day. They took us back to our tent and let us lay down.

Did you accept that it was necessary or did men tend to grumble about being pushed too hard?

Well you knew you had to be toughened up. And that was the only way you could do it. In fact there was one day there - like where they just learn you discipline - there was three big shell holes there just outside our camp, was from the first war. And this afternoon, and it gets jolly hot there in Palestine, each section was put in one of these holes to stop there for the afternoon. And we stopped there but we built ourselves a little bit of a shelter by - we put our ground sheets and tied them together with our bootlaces and propped up our groundsheet with our rifles and we all put our heads in - we could all get our heads in, one each side. Your legs were sticking out but your head was in the shade. I'd say we had not a bad afternoon there.

Did you have limited water or did you have enough water?

I don't think we had any. Oh we had our water bottle. But the other poor fellas when you seen them that night that didn't have any shelter (laughs) they looked real wrecks. But that was just something - that wasn't a punishment job. We hadn't done anything wrong that was just to teach us that we was told to stop somewhere, well we stopped.

(25.00) Were you being briefed at all about the nature of the enemy that you'd be fighting? Told what sort of men they were, what sort of equipment they had and so on?

No. I wouldn't say - oh our company commander told us one day when it was - when Italy came in against us - and he said it was just as well, he said it takes - oh I think it was two armies to look after them in peacetime and three armies to look after them in wartime and one army to belt them. (Laughing) That was boosting up our courage.

Had you seen Bren guns by this stage? Had you been issued?

Yes when we first got to Palestine we got our Bren guns. Went out to our - fired them on the rifle range at Tel Aviv.

What did you think of them?

Very good. Only with the Bren gun you had to make sure the gas magazine was well cleaned and the dust got in it, it would jam. But keep it clean and they were good.

Did that tend to happen rather easily in those sort of conditions?

It did. Because there was any amount of dust and dirt of course.

Do you know of men being caught out as a result of that in a critical situation and suddenly have it jam?

No because his 2IC always had a rifle and it had to be cleaned and ...

Did you have a Bren gun?

Yes I was a number two Bren gunner. I used to take it in turns with me mate. There was the two of us. You generally had the number one Bren gunner and the number two.

What was the feeling then about being a Bren gun operator? Was there at all a sense, well because you had heavier firepower that you might then be picked out to be shot at rather more frequently?

Oh (laughs) I think they did. But the thing was it was pretty heavy to carry you see. You used to take it in turns to carrying it. You'd swap over with the other fellows. Your mate would carry your rifle and you would carry the Bren.

What else were you carrying?

Oh and then we finished up with a tank attack rifle. And he was pretty heavy. I don't think we got him though till we got into action and it was a pretty heavy one. And as I've always said I think I must have walked along asleep one day, because I was carrying the Bren gun and me mate was carrying me rifle and I noticed him carrying the tank attack rifle and I didn't see him get it.

You were carrying your own water and food and so on?

Well when you got into the desert they didn't give you much water then. We got a pint and a half of water per day and that's what you washed with, if you did. You never drank it. You put it in your neck and in your mouth and you just let it dribble down.

Did you carry food rations with you?

We always had - mostly had a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits - that's a day's rations - three tins of bully beef and three tins of biscuits was three days' rations.

And a shovel?

Yeah we nearly always had a shovel.

Swag?

A what?

Something to sleep with - blankets or ...?

No. No when it got dark, or it got cold, or you got a chance, you lay down and went to sleep.

How warm was the clothing that you were issued with? Was it adequate?

Well when you talk like that - when we first went into Bardia they gave us a bit of a forced march to get us in there and then 'boomp' we stopped and we stopped all night - or the rest of the night or the rest of the morning. I couldn't tell you the time, I've not the faintest idea. And you just lay there and it doesn't matter which way you look the wind was going straight through you. (Laughs) So there was no such thing, it was plenty cold.

Made it a long night I suppose?

Yes it was, definitely. And then when the sun comes up, well it's hot.

Did you get issued with tea? Was there at all the opportunity to get back and have tea brewed up anywhere?

Definitely not. You had to wait for the cook truck to catch up, if he ever did. He was a bit behind sometimes if he .... But when we was in Palestine, like we was well looked after then as to water and you could have a shower every night.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape one of the interview with Wal Button recorded on 3rd June 1991 about the 2/8th Battalion.

When were you first told you were going into action then?

When we left Palestine they took us up into Burg el Arab, I think it was, up into Egypt, just outside of Alexandria and we trained there. We was well trained before we went into action. They give us - you couldn't growl at all the way we was trained up.

What was the feeling when you knew that you would finally be confronting the enemy. Was there at all a sense of anxiety that you might let yourself down, or that you might let your colleagues down?

No I would say every fellow had a different sort of a feeling. I said, 'Well if I'm going to die, I'll die'. That was it.

So where did you first see the enemy?

First enemy we ever met was in Bardia.

Can you describe what happened? How the day went?

I just went with a few things going wrong.

Like what?

Oh, Bardia wasn't bad. We got over Bardia alright. We never - I don't think we lost any of our men in Bardia.

But what went wrong?

Oh well, went through the other fellows you see. When you went through the other lines there was some of the other 'chappies' lost [inaudible] battalions lost their mates. But we only come in more or less at the finish of Bardia, if you like. That was the first time that we ever got under a barrage. The navy sent up a barrage there. Like send the shells over and we had to advance so far every minute. We went so far and then they'd lift. And gee whizz everywhere you could pick up a bit of shrapnel. Oh, the enemy was well and truly chased out of it.

Was it frightening or were you confident that the barrage would drop where it was meant to?

Yes, we had great faith in them. We had good faith in the navy. And my word they sent over the shells, there was no half measure about it.

So where did you first see some Italians?

Oh, we seen the ... they were in Barcia [sic] but Tobruk was our worst time. Well you see, now when we left Barce - what did I tell you the first one (pause) - we gave us our first swim for the year - first wash. We went down to the sea and they issued us with clean underpants, nothing else, just your underpants and they were long johns. And when I put them on you couldn't bend your knees. I got me pocket knife out and had the legs off. And one of the boys said, 'My word you'll be gettin' into trouble for cutting the army clothing'. 'Well', I said, 'I can't walk with it on'. And the next thing I seen our platoon commander with his pocket knife taking the legs off. And they walked us then for the next three nights, all night. When it got dark we started and when it got daylight, well we had to lay down then. And that's when they got us near the border of Tobruk.

It seems that the Italians varied quite a lot in the way they fought. In many respects they often surrendered very easily. But there were some places where they fought very well.

They did in Tobruk, they definitely did. In fact there were a lot of times I wished someone else was in my place. I was there for a while and it was the 2/2nd broke the barbed wire in Tobruk - that went through first and then we went through their lines. And there was one poor devil laying there he was blood from top to bottom and as I was passing he says, 'Good luck'. And I said, 'I think I'll need it'.

(5.00) Did you have good luck?

Well I'm here. So isn't that good luck?

Did you get wounded at all?

No.

Was it dismaying to see young men badly wounded and dying and so on?

Yes. It's a pity to see your mates die. You see a fellow shot beside you and he's doing the same as you are. It's luck it's - nobody's clever. It's just luck. If luck's with you you're right. If it's not, well you're done.

Would you tend to have the feeling if somebody got hit just near you that in a way that made you safer that, well he'd taken the bullet that might otherwise have got you?

No I wouldn't say that - you was just sorry. But our job there we had to go forward, no matter what happened we had to go. So that was all about it. You never had time to look at your mate. Like we were laying down there one day, well cuddling Mother Earth as close as you could get and was under machine-gun fire and by gee they were lifting the dust around us and me mate, oh he might have been six feet away from me, I see him just gradually go over onto his side but there was nothing you could do and as soon as the machine-gun - oh he must have changed his magazine or something - I up and off again. But he had to stop of course.

Sorry who had to stop?

He did.

Your mate?

Yeah.

Had he been wounded?

No he got killed outright so he wasn't suffering.

What happened then with that particular machine-gun incident?

Oh well I don't know. It was over from us one of - some of our other mates must have got him, must have come through because we got through there alright - or what was left of our fellows. When I got forward there I got into a hole that had been dug and the company - the battalion commander was there. Not the battalion, company commander, Jack Smith, and we was coming in - we wasn't in very good order - the rest of the section that was left and our platoon that was left all arrived. And they had to take a hill over there. And anyway we finished up - we got there alright. But the greatest thing that happened to me in there. Oh first of all before that. There was one of our mates, my mate - it was my mate on the Bren gun - he was lousy.

As a shot you mean or ...?

No he was lousy, like with lice on him, with no water. He was in a bad way and he went to the doc, and he thought oh the doctor will give him some powder or some more water to clean up, and he went down to the doctor and he came back to us a very disappointed man. He said, oh the doctor, he went to the doctor and told him he was lousy and all the doctor said was, 'Huh, wonder you wasn't lousy long ago'. That's all he got.

What about you? Did you have trouble with lice?

I had very little trouble. They couldn't have liked my blood and different ones there they liked - they had a hard job with them.

Did different people have different ideas about how best to deal with them and so on?

Well there was nothing you could deal with them if you had no water and you had nothing, no powder and it was later on we got given some powder. But up till then we had absolutely nothing. I think it was about 21st March, 21st January when we got our first wash for the year and I don't know what date this was, and anyway after that I got into a wadi there and we was warned on booby traps and there was a forty-four gallon drum of water there, full to the top. And I thought oh gee whizz I've been warned on booby traps, what can that be? And the next thing one of me other mates come along and I had my tongue out, I suppose, like an old sheepdog, but his was out about like a Labrador and he went head first in it and I pulled him out and I said, 'Oh cripes Tommy', I said, 'you could be poisoned, you'll die'. 'Well', he said, 'I'll die if I don't drink it'. Well, I said, 'And I'm with you'. So we both finished up head-first in this forty-four gallon drum. And we had a good drink then the rest of the fellows was coming along and the forty-four gallon drum got emptied.

Did you carry water canteens?

We only got a pint and a half of water per twenty-four hours.

But you had your own canteen, could you fill it up at the drum?

Never got a chance. This forty-four gallon drum, we all had a [inaudible] the rest all had a drink, it was emptied.

(10.00) Had you been taking Italian prisoners through this period?

Yes. We'd had a few prisoners because one of our fellows, the stretcher-bearer, caught up to us and he said he was - oh Henry - Henry was killed and this one was wounded and someone else killed. And this night was just on dark when one of our mates was taking prisoners back and he seen this poor fellow move that had laid out in the sun all day. He was hit in the head, so I suppose that's why they thought he was dead and a stretcher-bearer's job to just to keep anyone patched up that he can save. So they put him on a blanket and the Italians carried him back and they got a bullet out of his mouth or something, the doctor did. And he finished up home, but he was blind for his life.

What were your feelings about the Italians, about the prisoners?

Well they were prisoners and I suppose if they could have caught us well they would have, and we caught them instead.

It seems there was at least one incident where an Italian prisoner suddenly fired and killed an Australian soldier in another unit and there was then a response to that. Did you hear about that?

No. But I seen one of our fellows there one day there was two devils they had planted in their dugout there and they shot at him. They put a bullet wound through his uniform - his bullet carrier, you know what you have out in front of your equipment. And he shot the two of them. They missed him but he got them two.

Were they prisoners?

No they weren't prisoners. But they deserved to be shot. They shot at him. And they was there. If he hadn't shot them they would have shot him. Well they're damn lucky they didn't shoot him.

Were you involved in any bayonet charges or such?

No. I wouldn't say any bayonet charges. Once you got that close they'd give up.

Were fixed bayonets commonly used?

We always had fixed bayonets, yes.

Did you ever get to use yours?

No, I had a fellow bailed up one day with it.

Had you been trained to the point where you could have easily used it, or did you have at all a sense of it wouldn't be a particularly nice thing to have to do?

You knew it wouldn't be nice but you wouldn't have the least hesitation if you was in danger. To do it callously, I'd say no, you couldn't. If you told me to go and put a bayonet through someone, the answer would be 'Do it yourself'. But if he was going to do it to me and I could catch him first, yes.

Given the way human nature varies so much and you get some men who just enjoy violence and can be quite sadistic. Were there any men that got a reputation for being unnecessarily brutal?

No, I'd say no. There was only one good fellow we had with us, if ever he could find anything to eat or find anything to drink he was like a little retriever dog, he always brought it back to the section to share it with you. But he seemed to be able to scrounge around and find something where no one else could.

During that period where you were fighting the Italians, are there any other particular things that stay with you that you still find yourself thinking about from time to time?

No.

You were then, anyway, eventually withdrawn and finally got some leave.

Once we come back. We went away as far as we could go up Benghazi and they brought us back and we got billeted with some Italians for a few days, where Mussolini had put them on this little - like a soldier settlement block if you like. They only had about ten acres each. There was no fences. They just had stones. This is your place and this is mine. And we got there and we had a nice concrete floor to sleep on in this room and three blankets and I think every man thought he'd arrived in Menzies Hotel. We didn't even know the floor was hard. And that's where we'd had this fly powder and as one of the boys said, 'I fix 'em, I lay one blanket on the floor and I sprinkle the powder on 'im and when I get into bed and pull the others over me the heat of me body dissolves the powder', he says, 'and I gas 'em'. (Laughs)

Did it work, do you think?

Well he got over them. He got out of them and when I'd only used the powder on me. They couldn't have liked my blood and yet we used to have all our blankets rolled up together. There was nothing anybody was any cleaner or better than the other, it was just some they liked.

It seems during that period where you were billeted with the Italians some people got on very well and made friends amongst the Italians. Did you?

(15.00) Yes. There were only two old couples where we were of course. And they only had a boy there and we got on quite alright with them. In fact the old fellow, he cleared out when we was coming away. He wasn't game to say goodbye to us. Where the food come to us we always shared what we had with them. We shared everything with them. And the boy come home one day, he'd been out looking after these few sheep he had and the old ewe had lambed and that night the lady gave us some of the cheese from the new milk.

Did it change your attitude towards the Italians at all?

It did for them. This old fellow he could speak a little English - well they'd all be the same that was there because they fought with England in the 1914 war.

Did you then go on to Greece?

Yeah. But while we was with - the funniest thing of the lot while we was there, when the first settler we hit he had some chooks. And gee whizz his chooks went and there was feathers going everywhere. We cleaned up his chooks for him and our company commander said we got to stay a while with these people now. And he said if you've got any of the lire - that was the Italian money - there was any amount there and we was too stupid to fill up your pockets with it. And the boys emptied out their pockets and gave him the lire for his chooks - it was valueless to us. And the next thing he's out and he showed where one of his chooks had hid. And I thought, cripes I would have been hiding it again without showing anyone. We over-bought his farm with the money we gave him was more than his farm was worth - most money he had ever seen. But to us it was valueless.

It seems that at one point in part of that campaign there was a lot of Italian wine was found. Did you enjoy Italian wine?

No but we did find some. I had a little mate, the one you were talking to [inaudible] we had a flag that we got off an Italian machine-gun post and he thought a lot of his flag and we got - we was with some Tommies there too. We was guarding a big store in Derna. And these Tommies, they had aircraft guns up from us, and they were down talking to us and we got full of this nice Italian wine and this [gandhi?] that had this nice flag. He made a big speech. He said well I'm off to Greece and I'm going to get myself a German flag. And he said we'll all sign our names in the blood of the 'Dagoes' and we had an indelible pencil and dipping in the plonk and wrote our names on this flag and handed it over to the Tommy. That was a gift. He's off over to get himself the German flag (laughing). Next morning when he wakes up he says, 'I must have give me flag away'. I said, 'I think you did'. He said, 'I couldn't very well go and get it back'. I said, 'That's the last thing you can do'. 'Alright', he says, 'I'll get meself the German flag'.

Do you know if he ever did?

No he didn't. But when we first arrived in Greece the German flag was still flying. And he said, 'That's the flag I want'. And our platoon commander heard him and he says, 'You leave that flag alone or you'll cause more trouble than there is now', because Germany wasn't at war with Greece.

Did that seem odd when you arrived, to find that there were Germans there and that you weren't actually at war with them?

It did seem funny. In fact there was a fellow down at the bottom. He was even - when we got off the boat he was counting us. He knew how many was there and what our colour patches were and all about us.

Was he given cheek?

No he never spoke to us.

No, did you give him cheek?

No. No. we had to behave ourselves. We didn't know much about the place of course. And we was only there a day when Germany declares war on Greece.

It seems that Blamey wasn't very happy about the Australian commitment there. That he felt that it was wrong that the Australians were put in and misused in a way. Did you know about that?

Well. I wasn't very happy with Blamey. When we was, as I told you about being billeted with these Italians. We had to line up - Blamey and Menzies come over there and we had to line up onto the road to meet them. And we were there, our battalion and they didn't come. So we went back to our houses again. And next morning we lined up again and - old Mitchell was our battalion commander and he said, 'When the Prime Minister and Blamey comes', he says, 'you just stand there and keep your mouths shut.' He said, 'Don't say anything that we'll have to be punished for afterwards'. So anyway they arrived and first thing when Mitchell introduced him he said, 'And keep quiet'. And the first thing Menzies wanted to know, 'I don't know what that keep quiet was about'. He said, 'I want you to look at us as a messenger from home'. They were going to come the day before but it was wet so they couldn't leave Cairo. But they didn't worry about us standing there and Blamey didn't even speak to us. We were what was left of a battalion and he never spoke to us.

(20.00) You'd taken heavy casualties at that time, had you?

Yes. We'd lost quite a lot. So Blamey, I never ever liked him afterwards.

How did the campaign in Greece start for you? What was your first involvement?

Our first involvement when they declared war, we had to - we went by train and they got us as far as they could go and then they got us out on our feet and we walked way up devil to billyo. I don't know how high but it was a jolly long way up. We had three or four stops on our way up. And there was three of us together, and we'd open a tin of bully beef and have a biscuit and a bit of a spell and get going again, and we done that three or four times and we arrived right up onto the border, and when we got there the German tank was sitting down the bottom.

It was pretty cold I gather?

When we first got there it wasn't - well it was cold but we built ourselves a little cubbyhole there out of the stone and that night it snowed like billyo. And then we knew what was cold because we never had any snow clothes. We only had our coming over from the desert. And there was one thing that was good, we had a gas cape - they reckon like for the liquid gas - and that run the snow off. But your feet and your boots they were just like water.

Were there any men who were badly affected, had to be moved out because of the effect of the cold?

Don't suppose there would have been anywhere to move them but we had three days there and three nights. It was just the night when the Germans broke through and they were in front that we was sent out. We was certainly every man for himself then to get out.

What happened with you? Describe how things went for you?

I had the Bren gun then and I said I would never be caught prisoner. And I had a fair bit of ammunition and I carried as much as I could carry. And I got so far and I knocked up, and the Germans was in front of us then and there was a lift in the snow fairly close to a man but they were missing. And a little bit of a rise, it wasn't very far, oh a few chain round, but my legs wouldn't carry me - I was done. I'd used up every ounce. So I set the Bren gun up on the little bipod and said, 'Alright, the Germans now can get me'. The corporal was with me then too, and he got round on top of this little rise. He wouldn't have been more than a couple of chain away. He could talk to me and he called me and he says 'Come on', he says, 'and I'll give you a spell with the Bren gun'. And I said, 'I'm not going'. For the one reason, I couldn't. And I {inaudible] I only had the open sights and they'd be a good six hundred yards down and I was going to stop there. I was quite prepared to sell out to the devils. (Crying) I shouldn't tell you these damned things. Well anyway I did get back on me feet and when I stood up they'd stopped firing at me anyway. I got up on me feet and I couldn't feel me feet, I couldn't feel the Bren gun, I couldn't feel nothing. I was a robot, I just walked. So that's how I got out then.

How far did you have to walk?

Oh cripes that was only the start. A man walked and got down and the bridges were blown. Oh and there were a poor Greek laying there, he'd been shot in the legs and his eyes were almost asking you to take him but I didn't know where I was going.

(25.00) I didn't know how deep the river was and there was two of us then, so I had to leave him there because there was only the Germans behind me by that time and I suppose the river would be up to your navel and didn't even know it was cold. I just walked. Never felt anything. So I was a robot. And we got back and we got a bit to eat - what we might find. Well we found a Tommy camp and I finished up - I got away anyway.

How long was it before you realised you weren't going to end it there? It seems like you'd resigned yourself to this was the finish. Was there a strange feeling then to realise that this wasn't the end?

No, well we wasn't out, man had no idea and ... We never got - we finished up then - I think we got some trucks then later on. I got back to a poor old, some Tommies first, at ... they had a supply depot there. And cripes did we rob their fruit for them. It was tinned fruit and we ate pretty well.

Did they mind?

He was doing a bit of growling but it wouldn't have made any difference because the Germans had it the next day. (Laughs) So it made no difference. But the funniest thing was there and I [inaudible] when we got back further there was some mules had to be taken up for our artillery and this is one thing I've never ever been able to understand because we had no artillery. I think there was about four of us, if I can remember, we had five mules each. And we took us nearly a day going back with these mules. We rode one and led the other fellows behind. And we got there at night-time and we had to stay with the mules all night. And next day there was officer come along to pick them up with a couple or three men and he was all dressed up, smart looking bloke, and I don't remember the men speaking but he could speak good English and I reckoned we handed those mules over to Germans because when the planes went over us they never ever fired on us.

Did you have friends who were taken prisoner as a result of that sort of confusion during that period?

Well we just come back to me own corporal. While we went back with these mules, when we come back where our battalion was going to be, or what was left of them, they'd all gone to Crete and we were left there. And they reckoned that - they gave us - we got some tins of bully beef and they said this has got to do you for three days. And the next word we got, well we don't know when you're going to get any more. And then it was a couple of nights after there was a little destroyer got in onto the beach and we got on board it.

Had you been without food for a period there?

No we had the bully beef. And that was one place the bully beef was a big difference when it was frozen to what it was in the desert when you opened it and it'd run away. But there it was quite solid. They took us out to a - we got onto a ship then when the destroyer got us out. And I can still remember going up the rope ladder. I thought gee whizz if I had a knife in me mouth now it would be just like a pirate. You know when you used to see the old pirate stories going over the side of the ship. And all I wanted when I got on there was a lifebelt. And I found a lifebelt and found somewhere to lay down and I lay down and I went to sleep.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is side one of tape two of the interview with Wal Button about the 2/8th Battalion recorded on 2nd June 1991.

Was there a sense of relief to get aboard a friendly ship?

My word it was. Only there wasn't much food on board for us because they never had it. They were just taking us off. When we finally got back anyway and got off the ship - I wouldn't know ... it was somewhere up the channel - I don't know where it was now. Anyway we got off and there was food there for us and we got well looked after.

Were you attacked by enemy planes on the way?

Yes that's the first thing a man woke up to when I got on the ship - the first thing I woke up was getting bombed. And that's where I was frightened. It wasn't that I wasn't frightened before. I was more frightened because I was down below decks and I was frightened there.

You thought you might be trapped and go down with the ship?

Yeah I was and then afterwards - and yet there was others would come downstairs to get down below. And afterwards I got up on deck and had the Bren gun up there and I never went down below again.

It seems there were a couple of planes brought down as a result of troops firing into the planes as they went overhead.

Well you had to. You had to fire at everything - we had to keep them up.

Did you see any planes go down? Do you feel that ...?

I don't know if we got any but even seen one fellow with a tank attack rifle. He had it on a gate - tied up on a gate and he used to have a shot at them with that. They're pretty hard to hit, you know, with small arms plain. They've only got that one little bullet.

Would have been quite a racket with all the troops firing away as ...?

Oh yeah, there'd be bullets going everywhere. But it kept them up. They couldn't get down too low.

So where did you go?

We finished up from there - when we first landed we had to sign up to say that we was out or otherwise our next of kin would be getting notified that we was missing, no one knew who was who. We was just a lot of mixture.

And where did you go?

From there we went back - we finished up back in Palestine again.

Did you have some leave?

No. We was in Palestine and then from Palestine, there for a while, then they moved us up to Syria. And the first leave I got - I got two days' leave into Damascus. And we had one fellow with us, he didn't drink and he said, 'Gee whizz', he said, 'The bugs are crook here, aren't they?'. I said, 'I don't know'. And gee whizz, do you know the next night I couldn't sleep, he frightened me telling me about the bugs and they were about as big as your fingernail, walking up the wall. Well Damascus is the oldest city in the world isn't it?

Was there talk of Lawrence of Arabia? Do you remember that at all?

No. No, I don't remember that.

So how long did you spend in Damascus?

Only had two days and then back to camp, and then had another two days another time in Beirut. That was the same there. [inaudible] use our money you see with these little pounds your money went fairly quick because you wasn't getting change. You was giving away these little pound notes all the time and you soon went broke (laughs).

Were you buying souvenirs and things?

Well I didn't buy any souvenirs because there was nothing much you could do with them if you got them. To get them home was the hardest part.

How was your health by this time with the Greek campaign?

My health when we got up into Syria, that's when I found out how many aches and pains I had. I was down at the sick bay walking along on me toes and for a week or so they were trying to get feeling back into me feet, me shoulders, where I was carrying the Bren gun, and couldn't feel anything. And that would be a good while afterwards too - it would be a month or more afterwards when I was starting to get feeling to come back into me.

(5.00) Was it essentially just chronic exhaustion? Was that what it was?

Well I suppose it was. But how I come to get numbed and could walk I don't know. You got me beat there. So it's no wonder a man's got a crook heart now, is it?

Were you to go into action again?

Myself, no we never seen any fighting in Syria and when we came back to Australia from there. We were going back to the islands when we left, but if we had have went to the islands, I would have walked into - we would have just walked into the Japs' arms like a lot of little babies.

Incidentally, where were you when you first heard that Japan had entered the war?

I was at our trainer battalion when the war ended back in Australia.

No, I mean when Japan entered the war? Was it worrying to think that Australia was threatened?

We'd heard about it. But you didn't get a lot of news you know. There's a lot you don't know.

Were you anxious to get back?

Yes. But if they had have landed us in the islands it would have been just the same. Well, as I said, we would have been done if we had have got landed there. A man wouldn't have had a hope of keeping up. None.

So how did you come? Which way did you go - back to Australia that is?

Which way? Now you got me beat. We landed in Perth first. We were billeted there for a few days.

What was the feeling to see Australia again?

When we landed in Australia we was well and truly warned that we wasn't to make any noise and we had to be half - the battalion like was lined up half-way on the ship, like some in the front and some at the back if you like, or portside and aftside or whatever they call them. And we wasn't - they had a band there and played for us when we was landing, when we was coming in, but we wasn't allowed do any yelling.

Why was that?

I don't know, case they got us too excited or what it was but they had us - well as I told you we was well under discipline then because ....

Essentially these were all men being repatriated for ill-health or for wounds or whatever, were they?

No. We was all fit men, or supposed to be fit. That's when we first met Yanks then, when we landed at Perth.

How did you get on with them?

No good. As one fellow said to one of my mates, he said, 'Oh you can take your uniform off now Aussie, we're here to protect you'. 'Well', he said, 'You take your own off and protect yourself right away'. (Laughs) And the Yank got a bloody hiding.

Did you get caught up in any fights yourself?

No, I was never a fighting man. I was a good boy.

Did you see many fights?

Yeah (laughs) a few.

How did you feel about the Americans yourself?

Well myself I, oh well, they came here to help, but they left it late to come in didn't they. If Pearl Harbour hadn't been bombed, do you think we would have had Yanks in?

Would you say that to them?

Wouldn't be a bit afraid to say it to them.

Would they have any particular reply?

No. See both wars they left it till late, didn't they? Take the 1914 war, they didn't come in till late when their own selves might have looked to be in trouble. But they have got equipment. You've got to give that in. They got equipment, they got men, they got money.

When you got back to Perth what did you do?

When we got back to Perth we finished up. They moved us out - we was at Alexandria - no not Alex - out in a little suburb there and they gave us seven days' leave. My seven days' leave, I came back to Hamilton and, Eve like I was going with her up in Warrack before the war, and I promised her that if I could get back we'd get married. And I did get back.

How did you do that? How did you travel?

We come down by train from there.

What was the train journey like? Can you remember it?

Train journey - you didn't think it was ever going to arrive. It was pretty - you didn't think you'd ever get back to Hamilton here. So when I got back to Hamilton here, they were down on the station there to meet me. Even the Mayor of Hamilton was down there to give me a welcome home. And poor old Mrs Buckingham, we only had one taxi here then and she picked us all up, like meself and me Mum and girlfriend and brought us home.

(10.00) Were you moved by that reception?

Yes definitely. So I got engaged and got married and went back to camp in seven days and finished up in the same house as I left and carried all me goods.

The journey to and fro would have taken the better part of at least four days.

No, it was seven days when we got home, less your travelling.

What was the trip on the train like? Was it mostly troops?

Nearly all troops.

Did they play up to pass the time away?

No they were all on good behaviour because we was all going home and wanted to get home in good stead.

What about the return then, when you were going back?

Well, when you was going back every fellow was a bit sorry for himself. That's the only way you could put that.

And when you got back to Perth, what then?

When we got back there we was moved up to Adelaide River, like just out of Darwin. And we was in camp there.

How did you feel about that?

Oh well it was alright. See you can't feel about anything when you're there and whereever you go, well whereever you're sent is where you go. And then we got up there and that's when I broke up up there. Me feet petered out on me altogether and I was moved out to our trainin' battalion and I spent the rest of the time in the training battalion.

Where was that?

First of all at Dubbo, then at Cowra. We were at Cowra when the Japs broke out but we knew they were breakin' out. They knew because we had one old fella with us, his son was killed over in New Guinea, and they sent him over there with horses cleanin' up the yard - like gatherin' up the scraps and he said, 'Everyone I seen, I tried to run over 'im'. So he wasn't (laughing) there long and they sent 'im back. And he said, 'Oh, they're devils', he said, 'They're well fed, they're looked after very well'. He said, 'And if one fellow walked past that

window there six times a day he takes notice what's there'. They were ready to break out and we had a guard from our battalion just sitting up on top of a hill where we could overlook their camp. And this - oh I don't know whether - this night or early morning, boomp up goes the fire to start burning the place up and jumpin' around and they'd broken out.

Were you able to go to the hill to see the camp?

No our fellows went out to gather 'em up. And there's something that's never ever been told. Is it alright to tell you?

Yeah. Do. I mean it's important to.

Right. Well now - our men were not allowed take their rifles. They were issued with a piece of string. They had to go out and tie up these Japs. How are they goin' to tie 'em up with a yard of string? Don't ask me, and bring 'em back.

How did you feel about that? Did it seem mad?

I don't think you could give it a name. Well anyway, we had a - one of the 'lieuts' was there. He was Lieutenant Doncaster. He was one of our 2/8th Battalion fellows. He come home with me and he come into the Q store - he wanted some bullets for his revolver and I said, 'You're not allowed to have any'. Well he said, 'How many Bren guns have you got loaded?' (laughs). Well I said, 'How many bullets do you want?' (laughs). Well I wasn't going to sit there with no protection. It was too silly. And away they went. And I know one kid came back to camp. He said there was a Jap standing just opposite side of the fence to him. And he said, 'And I walked up to him and I was just going to put me hand on him and he let a yell out of him and jumped in the air'. And he said, 'And I've arrived back here'. (Laughs) 'I don't blame him', I says. Well next day when they went out without any - they made this Doncaster leave his rifle, his revolver at home. He wasn't allowed - at the camp he wasn't allowed take it and the Japs jumped him, him and his half a dozen boys - well eighteen year olds. And he told the kids to run and they run and they got this Doncaster and tied his hands behind his back with his belt and bashed his brains in (pause).

Did you get out on the search at all?

I did afterwards when you could take the rifles, definitely. I went out then. But I wasn't gonna walk round with a piece of string for anybody.

So did you round up any Japanese yourself or get involved ...?

No, they nearly all committed suicide, didn't have to. In fact they had their - hung some - some hung themselves in [porky?] trees. At one stage there .... I don't know whether it was a belt .... they had a belt anyway and they must have tossed to see who went first and second and there was about half a dozen laying on the ground and there was one fellow still hanging up in the belt.

(15.00) What did you make of that?

I couldn't make anything out of it. It didn't make sense to me. But if they could have - oh well, when they broke out of course - if they could have got those Vickers guns they would

have played merry billyo. But they missed out on them. They weren't afraid to die. Evidently they always prefer to die to go back to camp - to go back to Japan.

Given that there were a number of Australians killed were feelings very high around the town? Was there a sense at all that the camp ought to be broken up and they all ought to be killed - those that survived - or what?

There wasn't a very good feeling about it but there was just nothing you could do. You're not allowed.

Was there a special service for the men who'd died?

Yeah, for our officer, definitely.

There was also, I think, one or two on a Vickers gun. One who threw the bolt away before they were overrun who was killed, too.

Yeah he was killed - they're the fellows, they're the blokes that done a very good job. If they could - if the Japs could have got those Vickers guns they would've played billyo.

Was there a sense of shock in the town?

No they were really expected. As I told you they were expecting them to break out.

Anyway how long did you stay up there?

In Cowra? In Cowra - from Cowra they moved me to the Tommy marines. So I have had the pleasure of instructing Tommy marines.

In what?

In bushcraft and small arms. You could lead them around three gum trees and lose 'em because they were only used to the sea.

Where were you camped doing that?

That was up at - the other side of Sydney at Nelson's Bay [sic] the other side of Newcastle - go to Newcastle and go across on a little ferry. So I had six months there, my last six months in the army and I more or less civilised. I mixed with the fishermen a bit, like civilians and calmed down a bit.

What were the British like?

The Tommy marines? On parade they were very good fellows. That's the way that I found 'em. Only they're not used to Australian conditions. Everything goes out the porthole - they were sailors and their kitchen, you see was goin' out the window, instead of going out into the sea it was outside the window. And I come in for dinner one day and - oh it was late it would be two o'clock and I had to talk nice to the cook, did he have any meals left? Was I too late? Which I was and ... 'Oh no', he says, 'I still got a couple left here'. And they was sitting up on top of this big fireplace and they weren't covered and it was two o'clock. And when he gave it

to me, I looked at it first and I said, 'Oh cripes, can't eat this, it's blown to billyo'. And he was really surprised. He looked at it and he says 'Oh', he says, 'it's only been there since twelve o'clock'. Different climate where they are over there in England.

Senator David Hamer who was in the navy during the war remarked that he found there was a big difference between British officers and the able seamen, the British seamen - the working class were very small and there was quite a marked difference. Did you find that with the marines?

No, I found them - the big difference I could see in them was their age. Their complexion was more - what would you call it? - sallow than ours or something. You'd think a bloke - oh well he'd be about, oh you might put him down at about twenty and [inaudible] he'd be up near thirty. There was a tradition with them though. Oh there were several of them there, they're the third generation in the navy. It's really a trade with the Tommy marines.

Why were you training them in bushcraft?

With small arms, with their - we had the Tommy gun then and an Owen gun which they didn't have on the boats and as one of the sergeants said to me one day there - I was explaining to 'em the weight of the different weapons, grenade and afterwards he said to me, he said, 'Why do all you infantry fellows want to put so much emphasis on weights?'. 'Well', I said, 'When you're in the army, in the infantry, you gotta carry 'em. You haven't got a ship to carry 'em about in.' And I said, 'If you don't know the weights can you distribute your load among you men, say this fellow has so many grenades and this one so many magazines for his Bren gun or Owen gun. So if you overload one and give one fellow nothing you're done.'

(20.00) Where was it expected they might use these skills? Do you know where they thought they could be going?

I couldn't answer that one. Whether it was just something new for them while they were having a bit of a spell off the ship. See they'd come up there to this camp and they'd be there for a while and then they'd be drafted off again to another ship. As one of these little Tommies, I told him how I got off Greece on a destroyer and he wanted - he was very interested to know what destroyer it was. He said, 'I know every destroyer afloat'. And I had no hope of telling him what it was. I never took any notice what destroyer it was. All I wanted to do was to get on it.

Incidentally with the Cowra outbreak, how was it covered in the news of the day?

Did I read about it? Don't know whether I did or not. I think I was too interested in what I was doing.

So how long were you with the marines then?

About six months. And the war finished.

Where were you? Can you remember the moment when it actually finished?

Yes, I was at Nelson's Bay. And when it finished there was a bit of a turn went on in the town and they had a bit of a turn in the mess that night and celebrated the main brace up there, the Tommies and we had quite a good time. And then the war was over and I had more points than I wanted to get out being more or less from the start to the finish and so I just told 'em I was off. The next day there was a bus going into Newcastle, so I went and I seen the boss there of the marines and told him that I was off. So I went down and got on the parade and got on the bus and finished up in Sydney. Well when I went to the marines I was transforward [sic] to L of C of New South Wales but I was never ever there and I went straight up to these Tommy marines.

And when I was coming home I thought oh gee I suppose it would be just as well to go and tell 'em I'm off, so I went out to their office, this Lines of Communication of New South Wales and they knew nothing about me. They said, 'Where were you when you was here?'. I said, 'I've never been here'. See I went straight from our training battalion to there. There was two Australians went. And he hunted through a few papers there and he said, 'Oh yes, there's one here about you'. They knew nothing about me whatsoever. He said, 'Well if everyone gets messed about getting discharged it will be you'. So I had no papers and I finished up back at - where did we get? - Royal Park. So I went there and whatever papers I didn't have they filled in.

> Had you felt at all disgruntled that you were being kept up in New South Wales when you'd already married? I mean did there seem to be any point to it?

It would have been nice to have got back here but then there was no - the training battalion wasn't here I suppose, so they left me up there.

> What was the mood when you did get back to Melbourne with the war being over and so on?

Well when I got back to Melbourne the war was over all I wanted to do was get home. That's all. So as soon as I got me discharge I went back up to Warracknabeal - that's where Eva was living then. Me Mum and Dad were still living here. They were at [Vinegarten?] Street there. That's surgical place we had a look at.

> Did it seem odd suddenly no longer to be in the army?

I'd say yes, for the simple reason - there you are - you're out of the army. Oh and I got me deferred pay. And I had four days' AWL in Alexandria, just before they sent us to Greece and when I got me deferred pay, that four two shillings a day was deducted out of me deferred pay.

> Did you think that was pretty mean?

I definitely did. But no doubt I'd do it again. And then as our platoon commander - I don't know if ever you met him, Col Diffey. He was our platoon commander, company commander over in Greece. If ever you meet him, he'd be a good man for you. Well anyway, we was lined up in the morning when we come back after this four days, I was a little bit sick and it was ...

From what?

(25.00) Oh, from drinkin' too much salt water (laughs). And we were lined up - church parade. We got back on the Saturday. It was church parade Sunday morning and I got out on church parade and things was going round and round a bit an' when it come to fall out the RCs, they didn't have to go, they got to go and have their own service if they wished. So it was fall out the RCs, so I was an RC that morning - Roman Catholic. So I fell out and went back to the tent and the little corporal he come back to me (laughing) and he said, 'What did you fall out for?'. 'Well', I said, 'If I hadn't have fell out I would have fallen down'. Because gee whizz I was sick. 'Oh', he said, 'Don't leave your tent'. I said, 'Well, if I could leave the tent I wouldn't 'a came here'. (Laughing) So I stayed there. Oh it would be a few hours after we was all lined up again in groups, one day, two days, three days, four days - the ones who had all been AWL. And old Mitchell our battalion commander went a bit crook at us. And I got fined four pound out of my six bob a day, I was fined four pound. So back we go again to our tent and we was lined up again after dinner. That's when they was going to issue us our ribbons for the Military Medal for the decorations. And one of my mates said to me, 'Now when Mitchell pins the medal - the ribbon on you, ask him for your four quid back'. (Laughs). So down there and oh he's praised us up said what great blokes we were then and when he pinned the ribbon on me I wasn't game to ask him for me four quid back. (Laughs). I don't know if I even saluted him. I know I smiled. I thought of me four quid and didn't ask him. Then afterwards, as I said, Diffey, me platoon commander, he come along, 'Well', he said, 'How many other men have ever been abused in the morning and congratulated out after dinner?'. (Laughs).

How was your health by this stage?

Oh me health by that time was pretty good. That's what I couldn't understand. I walked all through the desert there and never had any worries at all there with me feet. No worries.

How did you feel when you heard what had happened to so many of the men who went to Crete, taken prisoner and so on?

Well that was terrible you see. And I was told that my corporal got killed in Crete. And I well I was sorry for him too, because he helped me. He did help me. And there was one day when I got back here at work, I was bringing Eva down the street and I had a couple of plumbers I had to fix up that morning, that afternoon, and there was a man and a woman up at the house. And I thought they were looking at the reservoir there or something and they looked as though they were looking for something and I got out of the truck and went over to 'em and I looked at 'im. And he didn't speak, he just looked at me. And I says, 'Max Fisher'. And that was my corporal that I thought was killed. But he'd had four years in Germany in the prisoner of war camp. When I said to him, 'Max Fisher' he said, 'Well who else do you think it'd be?'. His wife had brought him up and he made a trip up here to Hamilton to see me which I thought was lovely and I could introduce Eva to 'im and I said, 'Well this is the man that got me out of Greece'.

How did he get you out of Greece?

When I wouldn't go, he said he wouldn't go. He sat there. He waited for me. He said, 'If you're not gonna go', he says, 'I'm not going to'.

And then did you get separated?

He just sat there about this two chain away from me. But he was over a little bit of a rise and I couldn't make it. If he hadn't 'a waited there I would not have got movin'.

Would he have been captured?

Well he was captured just the same.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview with Wal Button recorded on 3rd June 1991 about the 2/8th Battalion.

How had he been captured, do you know?

Well he was in Crete and I suppose well there was a lot of others caught there too, whether he couldn't keep going or I don't think he'd ever give in.

Once you got out of the army, there were opportunities of getting special education or doing courses and so on. Did you avail yourself of any of those opportunities?

No. What I did do when I got out of the army, I went to the - I did travel around first lookin' for a job quite a bit and I was going to avail meself of it and I finished up back in Hamilton here and I went to see the Town Clerk here, that's been here for a fair few years and I told him I was lookin' for a job and he took me round and introduced me to the engineer. And the engineer told me to go and work with an old fella who had the name of George Kennett - it was George Kennett and George Groves on the Water Trust. He said, 'You just go and work with George Kennett', he said, 'and don't you worry about anything.' So I went and worked with George Kennett and he's taught me all about the Water Trust and whatever I asked that man he told me. I couldn't have got a better old man than 'im.

As you'd been looking for work was there at all a feeling that some people were a bit reluctant to take on ex-servicemen?

No, I wouldn't say that. I didn't look long, you see, because I started work before the Christmas. I didn't wait long before I started work because [inaudible] I had a bit of a spell with these when I was with the Tommy marines. You meet some fishermen you see, you met some local people. Otherwise it would have been hard just to come straight home out of the army and mix in. I reckon that six months was nearly as good as six months at home.

Did you later take up a low interest loan?

No, not when I first got out of the - well I lived - when I started with the Water Trust you see and then I finished up in their house and I asked all the time about a war service home and I was always told yes, yes. And then when I was about nearly ready to retire I asked about it and it was yes, but I had to get meself a bridgin' loan first, so I spent what money I had and we

got the house built. There was an old house here and I got 'im pulled down and this one put up and then I mucked around and I got this bridging loan and what interest a man was paying and so forth on it was terrible. Well anyway I got it, but by the time I got it I had all my insurances carried on till I was sixty-five. So me insurances come good. And me long-service leave and all me money and I finished up I had the house paid for when I got me war service loan.

(5.00) So I got fifteen thousand which was, I'd still say a gift. It was interest you had to pay and your redemption. But then if I invest it it is going to stop me getting any sort of a pension whatsoever. So I had it for six months and I finished up I sent it back.

Couldn't you have just spent it?

If I'd just spent it I would still had to repay the fifteen thousand. I could have spent it and kept paying. So I suppose you just look at it like this. You've never had anything and you've never owned anything, never owed anything and what you got you own, well I think a man can carry on happy.

What about repatriation in terms of illness in later years, do you feel you've been well looked after?

I would say yes, but there would - I never ever asked for a TPI but then they made me a hundred per cent. But then when they were going to give an advance on - what was it? - about another twenty-five, forty dollars a week or a fortnight and I asked for it and they said I'm not eligible for it.

On what grounds?

Oh not sick enough I suppose.

Did you feel cheated?

Well in a way, yes. I've seen other fellas that have been a lot easier and got it and - but I can't growl, like we're living well, Eva and I, we - only the two of us and what we got we own and as long as they can keep giving me all me medical advantages, well that's not so bad.

What about the RSL? Has that been an important part of your life?

Yes. I've been the president at the RSL.

Have you valued it? How important has it been?

Well, you got a lot of mates there and they're all in the same sort of a boat, so I'm always look forward to it. In fact I marshal the parade here on ANZAC Day for about twenty years and then I told them I wasn't goin' to do it any longer. Because while I was doing it well, there was none of the young ones going to take it on, so I just wouldn't do it.

When you look back on your years of service in the army, does it give you a feeling that you had done something special, that it gave your life a particular sort of meaning and a point?

Well I can honestly say yes to that, as I said that's where I got my education. I might have got it all on a practical side but still a lot of writing and so forth I don't do and can't do but I think I know right from wrong alright.

> And are there men who you associate with who are special to you in a way that perhaps may not have been possible outside the army?

Yes. There is some. Now we'll just take it - now what did surprise me very much was when I come back to the trainer battalion there, we got eighteen year old boys and you'd ask them where did they work and they'd only been to school and they used to try to put it over me a bit at times. And I said, 'Look, I never went to school till I was eighteen'. I said, 'and I'm not supposed to know that but I'll answer any question on this weapon for you'. And I never ever tried to bluff me way out with 'em. If you try to bluff your way through, well you're done.

> Do you ever look back and think, what if you'd not joined up, if you'd found some means of remaining a civilian, that you might have gone on better in life?

Well I got to say to that, no. If I hadn't got away I would have been disappointed to think that most of your mates got away and if someone got killed or something and you wasn't there to help him, well I don't think anything could be worse.

> So does it leave you with a sense of pride that at least the challenge was made and you were able to give something to your country?

Yes, well it's your loved ones you gotta think of, isn't it? It's not your self. It's your loved ones.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B