



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Interviewer	Martin, Harry
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Description	Claude Longley Simpson as a lieutenant colonel, 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 ONE, SIDE A

> Identification: this is side one of tape one of an interview with Claude Simpson about the 2/8th Battalion, recorded on the 18th of April 1991.

> Claude Simpson, where and when were you born?

I was born in Leeds in England on the 21st April 1909.

> Tell us something about your parents, what they did for a living, what they were like as parents.

Well my mother and father were English, and my father was a detective in England, in Leeds police force, and they decided to come to Australia, I understand, for a better life. And prior to being detective, my father and his brother ran a building contract show and they apparently had a bit of a disagreement. It was something to do with my mother, and my father left the thing and eventually, as I said, became a detective in the Leeds police force. He came out here with me. I wasn't twelve months old when we landed in Australia, so I reckon (laughing) I'm Australian, now I'm eighty-two!

Anyhow, his first job - you want this? - his first job was on the dome at the public library. You know the dome? And he got into a row with the boss because, being a contractor in England, he said the mixture of the cement wasn't good enough and the dome wouldn't stand up. It's still there (laughing). Anyway, as a result, I suppose he got the sack or something, and things were pretty tough at that stage. So somebody suggested he join the police force seein' that he was a detective. And he tried, and he found the age of twenty-six was the limit and he was twenty-seven, so he was too old. But things must have been different in those years, because coming out on the boat they met some pretty influential people, and they kept in touch with my mother and father, and when they found out my father couldn't get a job they used their influence and got the [lay?] age shifted from twenty-six to twenty-seven I understand, and with the result he joined the Victorian Police Force.

(5.00) I believe at that stage - I've never actually been able to trace it down - but I believe the *Age* had a helluva write-up about this Pommy coming in. Anyway, he was made a detective; but my mother only had me, and she was a stranger in the land and of course a detective - the CI wasn't like it is now - and I understand he was sent away, you know, inquiries. And I understand the last straw was he was sent away out to Preston, which was in the bush in those days, and Mum was pretty upset. So he decided that, for her sake, he'd ask to go into uniform so that he'd get posted to a station, and he was posted to Williamstown. And while we were at Williamstown, my mother had two other girls and two boys - that made five of us - and things were pretty tough. I don't know what this has to do with the army, but ...

> Well, it's just getting background about where people came from. Tough in what way?

Oh, well I don't mean tough, but I mean it's not army. And things were pretty tough for the police, the conditions and one thing and another. And I understand - I got all this background from - would've been with me father over the years - they used to put fellas on following the chaps around on night shift to make sure that they were `spooks', they called 'em. And my father joined the Police Association and became an executive of the association, and they

were the stirrers, were the executives. And the chief commissioner thought there was gonna be a strike - there was eventually - but he posted all the members of the executive to the furthest part of the state. My father went to Mildura, somebody else went to Portland and they got rid of 'em.

Anyway, it was the best thing that really happened to me father because there was a strike, and he was pretty cross about the way that the executive weren't supported, and he didn't go on strike when they went on strike which was, as I say, for the family was a good thing really. Oh I think it probably was. Anyway, he was up at Mildura and Mum was down at Williamstown with five kids, didn't know anybody, and he was up but couldn't get a house in Mildura. Things were pretty tough. I was the eldest. I used to have to do all the shopping and all those sort of things for Mum. And eventually he got a house at Castlemaine and the family moved up there. And that was a good thing for the family because we got a cow and we had fowls and we had, you know, plenty of food and plenty of everything, which we were scratching when we were at Williamstown. Imagine keeping two homes.

> Was it hard? I mean, as a child, were your earlier memories then when your mother and father were apart, was it an unhappy period?

It was very, very tough. My mother - I can remember my mother - she couldn't go out of the house because she never had any clothes. Oh when I said `no clothes' - suitable. She used to wait for me to come home from school to do the shopping, and when we got the cheque, when my mother got the cheque from me father, she gave it to me. And in those days it wasn't like it is now. You had a [run of], an account with the grocer and the butcher and everybody and I used to have to go round on the Thursday night - or Friday night it was - and pay the accounts. I can always remember the grocer, a little bag of lollies I always got. But things were pretty tough with the family then.

> Did it make your mother bitter?

No. My mother never ever got bitter. Never ever. She was a wonderful woman. (Laughing). She should have. But I had a pretty hard life. I was the father of the family, and you know, all me father was away.

> He put a lot of responsibility on you too early?

Oh terrible. I was only nine. Just imagine me mother handing me the cheque and me goin' and payin' the bills and things. And I always had responsibility. But even when we went to Castlemaine, you know, my father bought a cow and he couldn't .... His hands, well he had tremendous hands and he couldn't milk the cow, and he sent me to a dairy to learn to milk, and he always .... He was a very efficient man, very efficient man, and he consulted the veterinary surgeon. The veterinary surgeon told him that the best way to get results from a cow, it has to be milked regularly, every day and every afternoon. And so it had to be milked at half past seven in the morning and then it had to be milked at five o'clock at night, and I had to be there. It don't matter what I was doing, you know, socially or whatever it was, I had to dash off home and me father'd be waiting at the gate for me, make sure I'd - if he wasn't on duty - make sure I milked the cow on the right time.

(10.00) Was he a hard man ...?

Well ...

... your father? I mean, was it `spare the rod, spoil the child' attitude?

He was, to me. I was very fond of me father, but he was very hard on me. I could never quite understand this because the rest of the family were treated differently. My father was very English, very English. We've had no connection with his family in England because he's never - he's severed connection with them. But as I say, they must have been somebody because he and his brother were building contractors and one thing and another, and he was a very strong fellow with a very strong character. And well, to tell you .... After the war, he sent for me, despite the fact I had two sisters that were married and had no family, and two brothers younger than me, he sent for me. I wasn't discharged. I had seven years in the army - I wasn't discharged till middle of '40, middle of '57. And he sent for me and I don't know what he did about [inaudible]. They never - he'd never been able to raise enough money to put a deposit on a house, and they rented a house, and he retired from the police force as an inspector. He couldn't get any higher because in those days it was promotion by seniority, and having joined at twenty-seven, if you understand, there were so many fellas younger than him. He'd qualified to go to the top but he couldn't get there because, as I say, it was seniority. And he sent for me and he said that Mum and he were strugglin' because he retired during the war, and his pension was very low - not like after the war, it went up and up and up. And he said they were having trouble making things meet. And I said, `Well why come to me Dad?', and he said, `You're the eldest, son', and he said, `and as the eldest you've got a responsibility to Mum and I'. I said, `What about the other kids?'. Anyway, I don't know what he said about that, but that was his attitude, that I .... And all me life he treated me as the eldest, and I was expected to do things.

It sounds like it was quite a burden in a way?

Oh I don't know whether it was burden, I grew up with it.

What about church? Was it a churchgoing family?

Yeah, well, I can't understand about that because I was always a church boy.

Which denomination?

Anglican - or Church of England, it was then. But I was brought up in the church and I just can't realise the rest of the family .... Well my sisters are now, but I don't think they were then, and Mum didn't sort of seem to go much. But I did. I was brought up in the church. I was ...

Did you believe in it or it was something you did because you had to do it?

Well I don't know how I became involved, but I went to church and then I got confirmed.

But did you believe? Were you a believer as such?

Yes, yes. And I was a leader of the youth when I got a bit older. When we were up at Castlemaine I joined the Scouts and ultimately became assistant scoutmaster, and I was in the .... When I was sixteen, round about, it was compulsory military service, 'cause senior cadets

in those days. And I joined the cadets and then I went into the Militia when I was seventeen, which was compulsory, and when it compulsory finished, I continued on. I had a great interest in the army.

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

No, no. Oh, well I don't know. Was only my father, and we don't know anything about what the people overseas in England did.

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

I went to school in Castlemaine. Well, first of all, Williamstown State School. I left there. When we went to Castlemaine I was nine, and I went to the Castlemaine State School, and then the junior technical school. And while I was at the junior technical school the principal of the senior tech. sent for me. And Thompson's Pipe Company was a pretty big firm up there, and he said that they'd asked him for a boy in the tool shop, and they wanted a reliable lad who ultimately would become an apprentice. And he said he'd chosen me. `Well', I said, `I'm not fourteen'. I was only thirteen. `Oh', he said, `I think we can get over that hurdle. What would your father think?' I said, `I dunno'. So he spoke to me father and me father spoke to me, and I said, `Well Dad, it's a good opportunity, because I know four young fellas that have been at Thompsons for years and wanted to be apprentices, who have been there for years and haven't been apprentices'.

(15.00) And Mr Steiner, the principal, said they'd guaranteed him that if I got a reliable lad, when I was old enough, I could become an apprentice. And I said, `That's a thing that a lot of fellas up there would give their right arm to'. So he finished up sayin', (laughing) .... You look at kids now at thirteen! He said to me, `Well son, I'll leave it to you'. (Laughing) So I must have been a pretty responsible sort of kid mustn't I? Anyway, I did go to Thompson's foundry, and prior to that of course I was doin' a paper round and sweeping the shop out. I used to give the money to me mother because a policeman's pay was lousy in those days. And I gave up the paper round and the shop when I had to start at the foundry at half past seven in the morning. And the newspaper fella came about six months after, said he couldn't get a reliable lad, would I take on the newspaper, deliverin' the papers. And I said, `Oh I can't, I got to work at seven'. `Well', he said, `the train comes in at five o'clock'. So I took on the bloomin' paper and went over and got the railway station at five o'clock, got the papers, delivered the papers, had me breakfast and went to work at half past seven. And then they wanted me birth certificate, because you weren't supposed to work until you were fourteen. So I kept putting him off tellin' him I couldn't find it, until (laughing) I was fourteen, and the day I was fourteen I produced me birth certificate. So then, ultimately, I was made an apprentice and, as I say, between your working and goin' to the scouts and goin' to the army and goin' to church and runnin' the youth club and milking the cow at seven, half past seven in the morning and five o'clock. I had to drop everything!

So it's not much point asking you if you had hobbies then, is there? (Laughing).

Well, me only hobbies were the army, and the scouts ...

Well why did you join the cadets? What lead you to that?

Oh well it was compulsory military training at fourteen.

Compulsory?

Fifteen. Senior cadets at fifteen, and sixteen you went to the Militia.

But you had to join?

You had to join.

What if you said `No'.

Well you'd be taken to court. Oh no, this was the rule then and anyway, I rather enjoyed the army. I wasn't long (laughing) before I was corporal.

What sort of training were you doing then as a young boy?

As a young boy, as what, in the army?

Well no, in the cadets, before you went into the army.

In the cadets, oh we used to do PT and we used to do drill around; warrant officers from the Australian Instructional Corps were there, and we didn't do much. I don't know that we swung rifles around when I was senior cadet, but we drilled and we did PT, that's about all. And then, when I was fifteen or sixteen or something, I had to go up into the - it wasn't the Militia, it was the army, and when I was seventeen it was cut out. But I was a sergeant then in the army, and I continued on.

So was this full-time army or sort of part-time army?

Oh no, no. This was just Saturday afternoon soldiers - one night a week and Saturdays and Sundays sometimes, you know.

So by 1939 were you still in that Militia or reserves?

Yes. Oh well, that was the 7th Battalion up at Castlemaine ...

But just before the war started ...

Yeah well, in the meantime my father had got promoted and transferred to Melbourne and I had to board, and when I finished my apprenticeship .... The last year of the apprenticeship they had no work there anyway, and the apprentices were just sweeping the floor. This is when we should have been doin' tradesmen's work and the firms getting some return for the apprenticeship. But they didn't have any work.

Did you feel cheated?

Oh no, I never felt that way. I was not a boy that way. (Laughing) And no, thank God I never had any grudges against anybody. It's only since I got to be an old man that I've thought back and thought what a bloody hard life I had as a boy. But I've never had any grudges.

Why were you so keen on the army?

I dunno. I liked the discipline. I liked the discipline.

Well just before the outbreak of war, did you have a sense that there was war coming?

Well I'll tell you. When I finished me apprenticeship we all got the sack because they .... We knew we would, and I had to come home to live with me people at Northcote.

(20.00) And I transferred from the 7th Battalion to the 57th Battalion at Preston as a sergeant, and I wasn't there long before I was made a warrant officer. And then ultimately I got a commission with the 57th Battalion. Oh, I could tell you the date, it's on the commission there, but it was a couple of years before the war - two or three years before the war.

Did you feel there was war coming? Did you have that sense?

Well we got on to .... The CO we had was - ah, what was his name? - Stevenson who finished up a general. That was his son that was on the *Hobart*, you know, that was sunk. But he .... I was a warrant officer and the CO that was at the time wouldn't entertain anybody for a commission unless they had a public school education. But when ...

Did that annoy you? Did that seem wrong at the time?

No, no.

Just took it for granted?

Just took it for granted, but when Colonel Stevenson was promoted, he was in the Signals, and he came to the infantry to get experience as an infantryman - in infantry before he was promoted to brigadier. And he upset the - he knew there was a war coming. He upset the whole business. All these lads - I got nothing against people having a public school education. Some of 'em were quite good, but the ones who were no-hopers he got rid of. And one day he called me up and he said, `Why haven't you got a commission?', and I said, `I don't know sir'. And he said, `Well I want an application from you on my table tomorrow morning'. And I put in me application, sat for the exam, got a commission.

Was it a difficult exam?

Oh well, I don't know if it was a difficult exam. It might have been a bit difficult for me because I didn't have much of an education. I've had all my education since the war.

Do you know, can you recall what sort of things you did in the exam? Was it maths and essays?

Oh no, no it wasn't. Practical side of it was drill and administration and what not, and then we, I think we went and did an essay or something on military, something about military. I think that's what it was. But it was, I remember it was a pretty tough thing for me to write a proper essay (laughing) at that stage. Anyway, I got me commission.

So when the war started, were you still in that reserve force, as it were?

I was with the 57/60th Battalion.

In a reserve capacity that is, is it?

Saturday afternoon. Well, when I say .... When Colonel Stevenson came here it was pretty hectic because he apparently knew there was a war coming, and he wasn't worried about .... Bein' voluntary, we didn't have a hell of a lot of troops, but he insisted in keeping up the officer standard and keeping up the senior NCO standard, and we used to - when he became CO - about every second weekend we were doin' tactics or something, and we went down for the weekend and boarded somewhere and did tactics and things. And then he ...

Well, what kind of tactics? What sort of things were you doing?

Infantry tactics, infantry tactics in the field.

Like ambushes and all that sort of thing.

Yes, and all that sort of thing, and he even arranged for a mobilisation in the drill hall. We all had jobs, you know, in case there was a call-up. It didn't happen that way, but he was really, he was organised. He was organised for the 57th Battalion to become an AIF battalion. He assumed that we'd all join up I suppose, I think he did, and that we'd only have to recruit soldiers and train 'em. I'm sure that was his idea. Anyway, I used to go to annual camp, and I couldn't always go with the battalion because I couldn't get me leave from the police. I'd joined the police force and I couldn't always get me leave when I wanted it, so I used to arrange to go .... I always went, I always did me annual camp, fourteen days annual camp, with somebody. They arranged for me to go when I could get leave. And when the war broke out, I was with the battalion - 57th Battalion - and one day Colonel Mitchell arrived, stood up in the officers' mess, and Colonel Stevenson introduced him, that he was there to select officers for the 8th Battalion - 2/8th Battalion - and I was one that was selected. And I went down to the - was sent down to the showgrounds and .... I was one of four officers from the battalion sent down to the showgrounds. Some of them were sent straight to Puckapunyal.

(25.00) And at the showgrounds one day they, all the troops, all the people that had come down - enlisted - were sent to the showground. I don't know whether this is what you wanted, is it? We were sent to the showgrounds (laughing) and there were about - oh not thousands, they looked to be thousands - but anyhow they were all .... There was bit of scrimmaging with COs pinching people and Colonel Mitchell insisted that they all be paraded on the showgrounds and sorted out, because various areas were allotted to various battalions, if you know what I mean.

So people were going out trying to get the best for their own units as it were?

Yes. I remember colonel of the 5th Battalion, he got fellas from Richmond and Collingwood and round there, and our people were from Warrnambool and down the Western District and all down there.

What was the difference in terms of the sort of men they were?

Oh well, a lot of the fellas that we got were off the land, you know, that sort of thing, and some were more .... I can remember some of them, their fathers were squatters, and things like that (laughing).

What did that mean in terms of their readiness to become good soldiers? Were the country boys thought to be potentially better, or ...?

Oh no, I think probably the colonel of the battalion sort of thought he was looking for potential people with rank, I think, and he sort of thought they might be .... I don't know. But anyway ...

What, he thought they might be from better families from the country?

Yeah, probably. But anyway, Colonel Mitchell insisted that everybody be put on the parade ground and that they be put into areas where they came from and the battalions they were supposed to go to. And so then they were sorted out into the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th Battalions. And the very next day they were, had a muster parade on the showgrounds, and the chap was the commandant was a captain from Mildura. He'd been a captain in the first world war. And I'll never forget either, they had returned soldiers from the first world war issuing out kit and things. And it went off half-cocked. For instance, the first of the fellas came down and they were sent to the store to get fitted out. Well they could only fit some out with hats and boots and pants, and some with jackets. They were first world war uniforms, you know, and some .... Nobody had a complete uniform. They were fitted out with bits and pieces. Oh, this is when I say they went off half-cocked. They didn't have a proper Q-store, and you probably didn't go and get fitted for a full uniform. Anyway, they were a cosmopolitan lot. Some had boots and hats, some had pants and hats, (laughing) some had jackets and hats. Is this what you want? (Laughing).

Hm.

(Laughing). Oh they looked terrible. Anyway, the next day they were all paraded and, of course, the old diggers felt, they knew the time, they had a pretty rough time of it I think and one thing and another, and they wanted to be kind to these fellas. I could have shot ... what did I say his name was?

Simpson, was it?

The captain that was from Mildura that was a commandant. I forgot his ...

Stevens, was it?

I forgot his name. Anyway, he stood up on the parade ground and he said, `All you fellas are goin' to Puckapunyal tomorrow. Do you know where Puckapunyal is?' And I said, `No'. `Well I'll tell you now it's a bastard of a place, and it's about five miles out of Seymour, no pubs, no women, no nothing.' And I thought to meself, `Well this is a fine thing to tell the fellas where they're going, you know. I think that sometimes it's better to keep a secret'. So he said, `Well now look, I'm gonna dismiss you all now, but there will be a train there at the railway station seven o'clock tomorrow morning. And I expect you all here. But go and have a marvellous time tonight because it'll be the first time for some weeks that you'll be able to

do this sort of thing.' And I was standing there and I thought, `What poor bugger's gotta take these fellas to Puckapunyal tomorrow?'. We had no NCOs. So about an hour later, `Lieutenant Simpson, report to the office!'. I reported to the office and they said, `Oh, you'll be OC Troops tomorrow to go to Seymour. Take those fellas.' I said, `What!'. I said, `Who's coming with me?' [Inaudible]. You know, you've heard of George [inaudible] I suppose. Have you heard of George [inaudible]?

No, tell us about him.

No, well he was a fellow that was very highly decorated, but he was a lieutenant. I forget who the other two were but I had three and myself, lieutenants. No NCOs, no nobody. So having gone to camp to Seymour many years, and knowing that the train stopped at ...

END TAPE ONE, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B.

Identification: [None on tape] this is tape one, side two of the interview with Claude Simpson, 2/8th Battalion, held on 18th April 1991.

... relieve 'emselves, and the guard came running up. He said, `Who's in charge here?'. I said, `I am'. `Well', he said, `if you don't get those fellas off the railway line you'll lose half of 'em because the Sydney Express is due'. So I grabbed the other officer, I said, `Get 'em off the bloody line, quick smart'. And we just got 'em clear when whoooo, the express come through. So this is my introduction to the AIF. Well also there was a bar at Seymour, and I'd taken the precaution, I thought, to have the bar closed. You know, fellas that drink, they'd want another drink. And the chap that met me, liaison between Puckapunyal and me was an AIC fella from the first world war. And all these fellas were sympathetic to the soldiers, you know. They'd probably want a drink when they got there, so he ordered the bar open. Well it's wrong to say that 500 of 'em went into the bar. A lot of fellas were decent and went down, but I said to the three officers that were with me - this is from Seymour there's a ramp down, and I said, `Get down there in the clear and the open, get yourself separated and I'll send these bunnies down, and as they come down try and put 'em into their units'. So they did that. And the decent fellas .... Oh well, I'm not sayin' the fellas that booze weren't decent, but the fellas that weren't inebriated did as they were told. And I kept goin' `What fella, what unit are you?'. `Fifth Battalion.' `Well if you don't hurry you'll get left behind, they've gone.' `Oh, oh.' Oh, I must have tapped over a hundred blokes on the shoulder and said to them, `You ....'. Eventually I cleared the bar, but I was pretty wild by this time as you can imagine.

So then we lined 'em up and got them into as near as we could into 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th Battalions, and we marched them. Well then when we got out of Seymour on the road, this old codger from the AIC arrived with transport, with sandwiches and tea. So they sat alongside the road and ate the sandwiches and tea. And while we were having the sandwiches and tea another old digger from the first world war drove up with a horse and flap thing, with cases of soft drink. Well I don't know when a fellow - I've never been a (inaudible). I've had a drink, but I've never been that way, I don't know when they start to, when the march from the station they had to dry out and they got a bit thirsty, but somebody went and got the lemon soft drink.

And then, anyway, he sold 'em all his soft drink. But some silly bugger took the bottle back, and in those days you got a penny back on the bottle. `Oh no refund' he said. Well, this fellow said, `You know what this bastard [inaudible], "No refund on the bottle"'. And then they proceeded to smash all the bottles alongside the road. What could I do? By this time I was fuming, so I grabbed the other three officers, said, `Right, get 'em on the road, we don't stop till we get to Seymour. I don't care how many we leave behind, but we're gonna ....' I was wild. So we started off to march.

How far was it?

Oh about five miles. From memory, about five miles. But anyhow, we started to march and then .... The army's got a rule that you stop irrespective of when you start, you stop ten minutes to the hour for a spell. And this old warrant officer come running up to me, `It's past the ten minutes to the hour, lieutenant'. I said, `I don't care a bugger if it is, they are not - we're not gonna stop'. `Lieutenant, they got to stretch. It's regulations, you've got to stop ten minutes to the hour.' I said, `We're not stopping till we get to Seymour'. `I'll report you', he said. I said, `Well very good, thanks'. Well then that was an extra thing that worried me. Here was I, a young lieutenant in the AIF gonna be reported (laughing) on the first job I got. Anyway, it was rather comical because it was the best thing we did. We kept marching, they kept dropping out. But there was plenty of traffic on the road and everybody was sympathetic to the fellas who'd volunteered to go to the war and they'd pick 'em up. And when they got us, they'd jump off the transport.

(5.00) And anyhow, when we got to within half a mile of Puckapunyal, the 5th Battalion pipe band were there, so we stopped to get a bit organised. And while we stopped to get 'em into their fours or their sixes or whatever it was, those that were left behind had caught up with people who'd given 'em lifts, you see. So I was able to deliver a full complement when we got there. So I couldn't find my CO, Colonel Mitchell, quick enough to tell him the story, and I said, `I don't think I'll be with you long, sir'. `Why's that?' And I told him about this old warrant officer and he was gonna report me for breakin' the regulations. He said, `Bugger 'im, you don't take any notice of him'. I said, `Well I'm worried sir'. He said, `Well forget your worries. I'm your CO. Forget your worries.' So that was a bit of a relief. Well that was introduction to ...

Puckapunyal.

It was a great one. As I said, all my life, any tough jobs have always seemed to fall to me no matter (laughing) where I've been.

What sort of accommodation did you have as an officer at Puckapunyal?

Oh, we were in tents for a while.

How many to a tent for the officers?

Oh I think that was alright, I think we had two or three to a tent. I don't think there was any complaint about accommodation, only it was in tents.

What about the messing? Did the officers have different food, different meals and so on?

Oh well, it wasn't long before they set up an officers' mess. Ah, I really can't remember.

Hm. How was the training? How did you find Puckapunyal?

Ah, well of course as soon as we got there we started, were broken up into companies and things, and started to train. But I don't know much about that because one day the CO sent for me and he said, `You've been selected to go on the advance party overseas'. He said, `The brigadier wants to see you'. So I went down and - Brigadier Savige - and he said, `Congratulations Simpson. An officer - a lieutenant - and an NCO were chosen to go on the advance party', and he said, `you were .... I thought you'd be selected'. He said, `I thought there was only one person there to be selected and I thought you'd be selected, and congratulations'. I said, `What's this mean, sir?'. He said, `Well you'll be given a week's leave, and then you'll receive word where to report to the showgrounds'. And I said, `Alright'. So that night Colonel Mitchell called me out of the mess and we walked up and down the lines and he said, `I don't know where you're going. I don't know whether you're goin' to England or whether you're goin' to the Middle East, to Palestine.' He said - I can always remember - he said, `See those stars up there?'. I said, `Yes'. He said, `If you go into Palestine', he says, `you'll feel as though you could put your hand up and reach 'em'. (Laughing) I can remember that. So I said, `Oh yes'.

Well anyway, I was goin' to leave and some of the fellas were very shrewd and they went and had, were vaccinated at their own expense. I never thought of it, but when I got on the boat, the New Zealanders .... We got on the *Strathallan* which was a passenger ship then, had passengers, and had the advance party for the AIF and the advance party for the New Zealand ...

How many of you were there? I mean - many? Was it a big unit or ...?

Oh no, I suppose .... Well I dunno. There might probably be fifty or sixty officers and fifty or sixty NCOs. Anyway, I'd been an instructor in the police force after - I didn't tell you this. But after I got, after I'd walked the streets for two years with me bags of tools and got a job here or there or somewhere, I applied for the army, navy and air force, and I got a call for the air force. It was rather ironical that I didn't get in the air force because when I was goin' through me examination, the .... Being in the army, well for instance the police force, they wanted fifty and they had 3,000 applicants. And how I got in, I know how I got in. Tom Blamey was the chief commissioner, and when we did the education and all that part, he used to sit up at the end of the drill hall in a chair and they'd call twenty in at a time down the other end of the drill hall. And when my name was called, when the fellas' names were called for walk - they wanted to see how they walked up and that sort of thing - he had 3,000 to pick fifty from. And they said, `Here, right, yep'.

(10.00) When my name was called - at that time I was a lieutenant in the ... - I sprung to attention and said, (very loudly) `Sir!', you know, and marched up. And they all thought it was a bloody joke, but I didn't. When I got up old Tom said, `Oh you've had (laughing) some army experience?'. At that stage he was in the voluntary army. And I said, `Yes sir'. He said, `What unit?', and he was talkin' about the army. And he said, `Righto, out that door'. Six times I went before him and each time I sprung to attention and called out `Sir' and marched up. (Laughing) After about the second time he said, `You're still in, go on'. That's the only

way, because by jove there were some magnificent men, you know, from the country - six foot two, six foot six, big fellas. Anyway ...

> You're not a little man. You would have been what, about six two would you then?

Oh no, no. In me bare feet I'm five eleven and a half.

> You're a Collingwood six footer are you?

A Collingwood six footer, but these fellas made me look like a kid. But anyhow, this is sort of doubling back. Do you mind that?

> No, no not at all.

Doubling back. So I got called up and I went into the trainee depot and there was a drill instructor there. Now that was a misnomer. In the army he'd be a warrant officer, but the police force, they didn't think drill was anything, you know, that part of the thing. But this is where you learnt your discipline. So we went in and we had to do education - had a teacher from the Education Department, law, and drill and PT and unarmed combat and all that sort of thing. And this drill instructor used to put .... He was the disciplinarian. He was, well, I'd say he'd be like the RSM in a regiment - although he had no rank. And anyway, he was sick during our training, so that they didn't have fellas with military experience.

So the inspector got in touch with the chief commissioner and said, `What are we goin' ...?'. `Well', he said, `you got a fella ready trained down there'. No, I wasn't a lieutenant, I was a warrant officer then, that's right. `You've got a fella already trained.' So I used to sit in the class doin' the education (laughing), doin' the law, and then when it came to PT I had to take 'em, when it came to drill I had to take me own batch. But fortunately - and I say this when I think now - I didn't then - I didn't think anything then, but fortunately I feel now either my father's upbringing or God or somebody was good to me, (laughing) because I always had the knack of handling men. I don't think you want all this.

> No, no. I'm interested in this sort of, the very detail that you're giving us. When you ...

I said to them, [inaudible] blokes, `You know, you better get in and have ...'. Some wags that wouldn't want to do it, I said to them, `Look fellas. This is our, my batch, as well as your batch. I didn't ask to do this, but one day we're gonna march out of here and we're gonna have a passing out parade. If you listen to me we'll be as good as anybody else, but if you don't listen to me, well you've, be a shame for your mother and father to come and see you.' That's the sort of talk I did. `Righto fellas, come on.'

And every day I had 'em for drill. I never had to bawl anybody out because I'd say, `Now remember, we've only got an hour today, and remember although I mightn't take you on the day of the marching out, you've got to be as good as anyone else'. Well of course the drill instructor came back and the day we marched out we were as good as anybody else, (laughing) but he took 'em, not me.

Well then, when I finished me training, I went to Russell Street and I was only up there for a matter of weeks and I was sent back to the depot as assistant to the chap who was the drill instructor. And then old Tom Blamey had an idea that the uniforms weren't too good and all the old policemen were called up for two hours a month for drill - supposed to be - but an officer was supposed to come and inspect their uniforms. What they did, when they had to come to this thing they'd put on their good uniforms, see? But nevertheless, I had to drill 'em for two hours, old fellas, you know, and I did the same thing to them. I just said, `Well come on'. I didn't wear 'em into the ground or anything, but I expected when I said, `Attention', they sprung to it, and these things, and I said, `Come on fellas', you know. And I had no trouble.

(15.00) But while I was there, though, somebody must have known the war was coming up because I was sent to Victoria Barracks to do a course and handle gas training for the protection of civilian population. And when I came back, mixed with the drill and that, I had to teach all these policemen round about anti-gas precautions, dress 'em up in anti-gas uniform and all the rest of it. Anyway, when I was sent back there as assistant, I relieved the drill instructor whenever necessary with the recruits, but I also had to go and do this other job.

Well then, to jump to there to back to Puckapunyal, when I was at the camp and I was selected to go to the showground, I had a month's leave and I had a fortnight there. So I asked to see the chief commissioner, and I saw his secretary. He said, `Why do you want to see the chief commissioner?'. I said, `Well I've enlisted in the army. I just wanted to tell the chief.' And he was ropeable. He wouldn't even see me, and he said - secretary said, old Duncan, Alec Duncan - he said, `You tell Simpson if he's not back here when his leave's up I'll get a warrant for his arrest'. Well that upset me. Well there was another chap in the police force called [Coombs?], and he said, `Bugger them Claude, I've enlisted in the AIF, and they can do what they like'. He never went near 'em.

So the next day I saw Tom Blamey, and of course he knew me because I was an instructor down at the depot. `Hello Simpson', he said, `I thought you'd be here'. I said, `Well I don't think I'll be here much longer sir'. He said, `Why?'. I said, `Mr Duncan has said that he'd get a warrant out for me arrest'. He said, `That Duncan, he's ruined the police force', he said. `Don't you worry. I'll fix it.' So I don't know what he did, but they had Major [Beerworth?] at Victoria Barracks. When the war broke out, they had a lot of fellas in Militia that were in key jobs, like the police force, the railways, the tramways, the Board of Works and whatnot, and they called a lot of Militia units up for security of various places. Well all these people wanted, didn't want their people in the army, and they had to apply to the army to get 'em released. And Beerworth was the liaison officer between the state government and the Commonwealth when they applied for these fellas to release as essential services. They weren't goin' to the war or anything, they were goin' to security in various places.

Well anyway, ultimately, I got a letter to go and see the chief commissioner and I went and saw him and he still wouldn't see me, but I was told I'd been released from the police force without detriment to seniority or superannuation. Well the seniority was all rot because I lost all me super and all me seniority. Anyway, I got up to the part where I was selected and we were on the boat. Because .... I don't know, how news flies, these bush telegraph or something. I certainly didn't tell 'em. We got on the boat and the second day I was called for and I was told that I had to take the officers for PT in the morning and the other ranks for PT in the afternoon, and had to take the other ranks for lectures on gas in the morning and the officers in the afternoon for gas. Who the hell told 'em, I don't know. They had to keep 'em entertained, they had to do something with 'em. They all had a marvellous time. I was sort of

looking up .... For instance, PT, you can't give 'em the same thing all the time. I was lookin' up what sort of a program I was goin' to have, and all the way over on the boat I had that job to do. So wherever I went .... When we got to the Canal, the Suez Canal, the .... This is all about me. You don't want to know ...

> No, no. It's this part that you had as an officer which is a bit different to the others. So ...

Well, when we got to the Suez Canal, and the British people from the British Army came on board and said, `Right'. We were all paraded. The army, the British officers were going to entertain the Australian officers. Some could play tennis, some could play golf, some could go horse riding in the desert, and some could do this and some could do that. And I remember I said, `Oh, Captain Griffiths', I said, `I'd like to go horse riding in the desert. Wouldn't you?' He said, `Me too'. So when the thing came ...

> Could you ride? Had you had experience?

Oh I'd had a bit, I'd ridden some horses down at the police depot and roundabout. So when they said, `Horse riding', Griffiths said, `Me', and I said, `Me'. And they said, `Oh no, not you Simpson. We want to see you.' So when they were all dispersed and taken where they wanted to go by these British officers, I was called up, and certainly there were no other ranks there. They were all in, the NCOs, but they were going on to Alexandria and would have the day in Alexandria and they had to have an officer in charge of 'em. Was me.

(20.00)Well, you'd think that .... I thought, oh well I felt a bit, you know, I would have liked to have gone riding to say I'd been in the desert, but I thought, `Oh well, what about it?'. So when I got to Alexandria, there was somebody from the British Army there to see us, and they said, `Right. Well, your fellas are free for the day to look around, and if they want some of our blokes to go with 'em to show 'em around, okay.' `Well', I said, `what am I gonna do?'. They said, `Oh come to the mess with us'. I said, `Alright'. `Well', I said, `I'd like a bit of a look round too'.

Although they were NCOs and they'd been on the boat and they didn't have any - they thought they didn't have anybody over them, you know, looking over - some of them were starting to get a little bit tiddly, you know, and one play up. And I said to these officers, `Just a minute', and I was goin' over and sayin', you know, correcting them anyway. But my afternoon was really spent wandering around. I didn't go with the British officers, I wandered around. Anybody I saw that was, I didn't think were behaving right, I'd tell 'em about it you see. Well then ultimately, I had to get 'em on, across the river at [Muldara?] I think was the name of the place, and the officers joined us there, and we all got on a train to go up to Palestine.

> Incidentally, on arrival, had people been briefed about the danger of, say, going to brothels and VD and this sort of thing?

Oh I don't think so on this .... The troops were, but I don't think anybody mentioned that on the passenger boat. But anyway, we got on the train, and another thing that happened to me; the war was on and there was liable to be a disruption with the railways, you see, so they had emergency rations, and somebody had to sign the emergency rations. Now Captain Griffiths was the senior officer. He said to me - but he appointed me as his lieutenant because I was

looking after the troops. He said, `You sign of course'. I said, `Righto', so I signed. They weren't to be touched under penalty of death unless there was an emergency.

So we went up on a train and various places we were dropped off, depending what courses we were to do - signallers and various people. I never thought any more about it, but months after a file that thick came to me wanting an explanation why the emergency rations were broached. Well I knew when I signed them that under no circumstances were they to be broached. So I put in a report that we got off at whatever place - I forget the name of the place now - we got off there, and they weren't broached then, but they had to stay with the train. So fortunately I was able to contact Captain Griffiths and tell him what had happened, and he substantiated my story. He was OC Train, and they hadn't been broached then. But even that, they were blamin' me for that!

Well then anyway, we did, I did a course with, at Sarafand with the British Army and weapons and what have you, and then I was sent to .... I was supposed to be attached to the Scotch [sic] Greys. Well now, although the war had broken out, these people had been in Palestine for a long time and they were still in civvy. I mean, they dressed up for mess and, you know, and they had their uniforms with all their stuff on their shoulders and one thing and another. And the first day I went I was paraded to the CO - I'll never forget this - and he said, `Your name's Simpson?'. I said, `Yes', and he said, `You're from the AIF?'. `Yes, yes sir.' `Well I sincerely hope that the Australians are much more disciplined than they were during the first world war. They were just a bloody rabble.' I'm attached to his unit and this is what he said to me.

Anyhow, fortunately, I didn't think, I don't he wanted an Australian because by the end of the week I was sent down to Jericho and attached to the Leicestershire Regiment, the Royal Leicestershire Regiment, and they were .... They were still in peacetime, they had their mess nights with the officers dressed up, and here were us in the uniform with black buttons and what have you. Anyhow, I served a month or so with them, month or five weeks down in the desert, in the Dead Sea at Jericho with them.

(25.00) Was it special to you to be in the area with names that you would have associated with your early years going to church and so on? Did that touch you at all?

Oh well at that stage I was, Palestine was new and I was just shunted about and I didn't .... I realised when we were down the Jericho, the walls of Jericho, I realised that. But anyhow, then I was, then the first of the Australian units arrived, the 16th Brigade, and I was set up and attached to first to the 2/3rd Battalion, then the 2/4th Battalion and then the 2/8th Battalion arrived, and I went back to me battalion, was appointed a company commander. And the rest of the war I spent with the 2/8th Battalion, apart from being seconded a couple of times.

Incidentally, with the name Simpson, would you get references to Simpson and his donkey? Did that dog you through your army career?

Oh no, no it didn't. No, never mentioned. Well then we served in Palestine and did various tactical exercises under Brigadier Robertson - `Red Robbie'. He made us do the .... He was in the first world war when (inaudible) was attacked, Beersheba - the Turks in the trenches. And one of the exercises he did was to take us out as infantry. They were on horses, we had to do it as an exercise on foot. The only thing is they weren't firing at us, but oh, well, they had imitation - the engineers had imitations. But we had to do that battle of Beersheba and I

remember we were all just about [yooted?] when it finished. How we cursed Red Robbie for the thing. But anyway, he was trying to make an efficient brigade out of us I suppose.

So then the next thing is we moved up to Burg El Arab which was in Egypt for further desert training. But the desert was funny. Most people think of the desert as *Lawrence of Arabia*, sand and that. A lot of it is sand, but a lot of it's just gravel. Do you understand what I mean? No sand at all, just gravel, and when the wind blows it blows with such force, all these little bits of gravel cut you to pieces. Oh, it's an awful place.

So then we went from Burg El Arab up to Bardia, and we weren't the first troops in Bardia. We were the reserve. We went in after the first troops. But when you're fighting, you just can't stop to take prisoners. You keep on going, and when we went in we gathered four or five hundred prisoners that, you know, they'd sort of gone through and we collected those. And I think that was about the most we did at Bardia. We never saw a shot fired there. Well they were ahead of us, but the didn't worry .... Well then we moved up to Tobruk ...

END TAPE ONE, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A.

> Identification: this is side one of tape two of the interview with Claude Simpson about the 2/8th Battalion, recorded on 18th April 1991.
>
> So you went on to Tobruk. How did you move?

Oh we went by transport up to within kicking distance ...

> Train you mean?

No tram. Er no, trucks. No tram, no railways there. We went by truck up to within kicking distance and we stopped short of a big tank trap that they had, anti-tank trap, to stop tanks going across. And we stopped about a couple of hundred yards short of that and took up these positions on the ground.

> What were your feelings at that time, given that, as an officer, men would look to you. You'd in a way have to assume a special level of responsibility. Were you anxious? Were you worried whether you mightn't perform well under fire or ...?

I was never ever worried about meself, but I was always worried about me troops, whether we were gonna,(laughing) you know, have casualties. Anyway, we moved up and we were, to about two hundred, two or three hundred yards on the south side or whatever it was of the tank trap, and we were in position and we had to find out about the tank trap. There was Lieutenant Field was sent out with two sergeants to find out what he could about the tank trap. They didn't know about it and they wanted to find out. He went out three nights for [free?] information; went out first night; second night the intelligence section wanted to confirm certain things, and the third night he got killed. The sergeants didn't - they got back. But anyway, the night he got killed the Italians thought that there was gonna be an attack and they opened up with everything. Oh, you talk about fireworks! Artillery, machine-guns and all sorts of things, and we weren't even dug in because the ground was gravel. You couldn't

dig in. We were layin' flat on the ground hiding behind a little shrub - if you could get a shrub to hide behind.

How far away would you have been from the enemy at that point?

Oh well, we were two or three hundred yards from their tank, from their anti-tank ditch, and oh the artillery'd be a fair way back behind that. But that doesn't matter, the artillery always is. But the forward troops that were guarding the tank trap, the machine-gunners and that'd be just a couple of hundred yards away. Anyway, they pitched everything. For about half an hour it was hell.

Did you feel you might be killed or was it that point of your life where, as a young man, you felt `not you'?

Everybody was scared to hell. This was the first time we'd struck this. So anyway, they eventually stopped firing.

Were there men hit around you at all?

I'm gonna tell ya. The British must have had good sabotage in the Italian munitions because all around in among the men were shells, half shells. A shell is supposed, when it bursts, supposed to break up into pieces - shrapnel - and there were half shells. I didn't count 'em, but there were hundreds of half shells all round about, and only one man got hit in the ankle from the att.... Nobody got hit with the bullets, but only one man got hit with the ankle. Well then it was decided, because the tank trap was there, that we wouldn't go that way. So we packed up at dusk and marched, I think it was eighteen mile ...

Incidentally, what became of the man with the injured ankle?

(5.00) Oh well, he was taken to the RAP and eventually back to the ambulance I suppose.

Was it a bad injury? Would he have come back or would he have ... just a temporary thing?

Oh well, I dunno, but you got casualty. They went and some were back shortly, some of 'em were back anyway. Anyhow, we marched around the desert, around the outskirts of their wire, to the side, eighteen mile.

This is daytime?

Night. Oh, wouldn't do it in the daytime, they'd see us.

How'd you find your way? How'd you know where you were and where you were going?

Oh, the intelligence officer was responsible for getting us from A to B. Anyway, we got around there and then at dawn, after marching eighteen mile or twenty mile or whatever it was, we had to attack, and ...

It would have been pretty weary ...?

Well, yeah, I know. Oh, we were pretty fit though. By jove we were fit. Anyway, the engineers blew a - with a [mangonel?] of torpedoes they blew gaps in the wire for us to go through, and the battalion was split up into two pieces - two companies on the right and two companies on the left - and we were on the right. And our job was this big building on the main Tobruk road. Our job was to capture that, and the other people's job was to capture something else. I dunno what they were doing, but they struck - the two companies on the left - struck tanks and they were pretty well cut about. And one, the company commander and a couple of officers and a few men were killed there. But we managed to get, despite ....

And of course, the artillery - our artillery - was firing. We were walking up to the artillery. Do you know what I mean? The artillery was firing in front of us, and you know, you had to be careful you didn't walk too quick because it'd lift. And we were walkin' .... And we got up to our first objective without any casualties ...

Were there any men unnerved by this, couldn't go forward?

Well if they did they didn't show it.

Had you been told what you should do if a man felt that he couldn't go on and wouldn't go on?

No, no. We didn't expect anybody not to go on.

Did you know that in the first world war the British had shot troops who hadn't gone forward?

Oh well I'd heard of it, but we wouldn't shoot ...

What do you think you would have done? If you'd had a man who said he wouldn't go forward, how do you think you would have responded?

Well I don't know. I was too concerned with what I was doing. But we didn't have that, that didn't arise. So we got to our, the blockhouse they called it, and then we were swung to go left, and that was when we struck our trouble. We struck the enemy. As I say, you couldn't dig in, but they built sangers of rocks, you know, up .... And we had to fight, had to fight like hell. We did fight like hell too, with the fire, and we continued on until dusk that night. So that meant that we'd started at dusk the night before, marched eighteen mile, and gone dawn right through until dusk the next night. Now what was going on on our left, you naturally didn't know. You only knew what was going on in your own sight.

Were you overtaking enemy positions and they were pulling back?

Yes, we were overtaking them and ...

Prisoners?

... sending prisoners back, yeah.

These were Italian, were they?

Yeah. Every time we had to do that we had to send somebody with 'em of course, and that was a bit of a worry because we were depleting our force.

> Were you losing men? Had you lost men to that point? I mean who were injured or casualties.

I think we had a few wounded, but you see you didn't worry about that because apart from your own stretcher-bearers, I mean if you're in a set position and fellas went out and were wounded, your own stretcher-bearers went out and brought 'em in. And once they came back to the battalion, then Field Ambulance took 'em back. And I dunno ...

> You just caught up in doing what you had to do?

Put it this way: as soon as things settled down and you had a chance, the first thing you did was to find out how many casualties you had. But while things are going, you haven't got time to be worryin' about that. You've got things in hand.

> Incidentally, what did you carry as a weapon as an officer?

Me pistol, that's all.

> Well did you get within a distance where you had the sense you were actually shooting at an individual?

Oh well I suppose we were at times, yes. Oh sometimes I had a rifle, sometimes if a soldier was killed or something, you might grab his rifle or something like that. Altogether, if you're doing your job you're too busy organising people. For instance, when you're firing and somebody's firing at you, you've got to tell people, some people, to fire and some people to move forward and you know, you're a pretty busy boy. And you haven't got time to (laughing) run around shooting people yourself.

(10.00) Had the training worked well for you in that sense?

Yes. Training was very good. I reckon that .... Well I can only speak for our battalion, and I reckon there was not a better trained battalion than our battalion. It was unfortunate there in Tobruk that C Company happened to strike these patch o' tanks and they went straight into it. But I can't say anything about that because I wasn't there.

> So anyway, there you were at dusk.

Well then at dusk, at dusk we stopped and they did have some artillery that had pulled back that fired at us from away out, but they seemed to fire a few shells they had left and clear out. And in the morning the Italians had had it.

> Were you able to sleep?

Oh no, we couldn't sleep. Sometimes you got that tired you might snatch five minutes, but you couldn't sleep.

What about food and water? Did you have ...?

Oh well, you always got that when you could. You couldn't get .... While ya fighting you can't get it ...

No, but ...

We couldn't get it till the next morning, and of course we had to have ammunition. Ammunition was more important to be brought up to us than the food. Oh, as far as water was concerned, when we went into the desert we were trained for this. We were trained for this before we even went into battle. We were given, we were told our water bottles would be filled up and that's all the water we'd get for the day. And our battalion CO was very strict that the fellas shaved, and he had to use it to shave and to wash yourself. You'd wash yourself with your shaving brush - only your face and that - and you drank. So you didn't get any water until night time when the water cart could come up within distance and you could go and get all the water bottles full.

And of course, I think from memory we had hard rations. We did. We had hard rations we carried with us, you know, a biscuit and a bit of bully, and you opened a bully tin and shared it with three. That's right. That's what we had. Oh we had no proper meals until we were complete ..., not in the fighting. We just had to eat, we all had bully beef issued and biscuits, army biscuits, and I think from memory - I forget now - I think a tin of bully beef had to do three people, and you had these biscuits. I couldn't eat the bully whereas most people .... It was hot in the desert and the bully was floating in oil. I couldn't eat it. I lived on army biscuits.

So the next day anyway, you'd gone through the night. Would you recall the next day?

Well the next day we mopped up, what they call mopping up. Any prisoners that were, any soldiers that were there that weren't captured were, you know, we sent out patrols to find 'em and bring them back.

The Italians seem to have varied in their response to the war. There were areas where many Italians surrendered very easily and others where they'd dug in and they apparently fought very hard.

That's right, yeah.

Well what was your experience then?

Oh well, the same thing. Sometimes .... Well at Bardia, for instance, we didn't go forward troops. The forward troops just went right through and the ones that we captured, we picked up four or five hundred of them, they were very happy to be picked up.

How did you feel towards them? What were your own attitudes towards them?

Oh you didn't bear any animosity.

Were there any men who did act badly, who sort of felt angry they were the enemy and had friends killed and ...?

Oh well, I suppose there was, but I didn't know of anybody that did anything outrageous or anything like that. But we, I think generally speaking, they just treated 'em as enemy. They, `Poor buggers' (laughing) they said. We'd been fightin' them, but that's the Australian. He doesn't (laughing) .... The average Australian doesn't bear any animosity. `Look at the poor buggers', you know. Yeah.

So after the mopping up?

After the mopping up we then moved on to Derna and there's the Derna River, or the Derna Creek - I dunno whether it was a river or a creek - but we were all spaced out alongside the Derna River, which was .... Derna River was right down - there was a big escarpment and then it was right down - and we were there for two or three days till it was decided that we couldn't go across this. Anyway, it was like, like up at Katherine, you know, where the river is there like? Well the bigger size you couldn't go [inaudible]. So then it was decided that we were going to go down along the beach and attack Derna. And Derna proper was a village right down near the sea. The river, or whatever it was, flowed through Derna town and the civilians were there, and the markets were there, you know. They were just carrying on normal. We didn't interfere with them, and we just marched through the town, and when we got to, ah ...

(15.00) Were some of the fellows tempted to sort of knock off the odd bit of fruit or things like that?

No. Oh well, the troops wouldn't let 'em do that, under discipline. They might 'a done that if they were freelance, but we just marched through the town, and they were under control, you see. Anyway, we got to Derna and there's a tableland at Derna. From Derna back towards Benghazi's on a tableland, and there was a road up, just a road which wind up to the top of the tableland.

Well my company was leading - Don Company was leading - and when we got to below the escarpment, below the tableland, we were fired on pretty heavily from above. Well you could imagine somebody two or three hundred feet up on the edge with machine-guns and you're down there - you're open slather. So we just hid behind .... There were a few boulders around there and we hid behind boulders or whatever there was, and I went back to the CO and said, `It looks pretty impossible sir, unless we can get some artillery onto those'. I'll never forget him. He was smokin' his pipe. He said, `Let's wait Simpson, till it gets dark, and we'll go up in the dark'. `Very good sir.' So we waited. Now, when you're attacking, you have your troops in formation. You have forward troops and the captain ...

Effectively, how many men were you directly responsible for?

As a company, oh about a hundred and forty. And Lieutenant Diffey was one of my lieutenants, and he was the forward platoon. So there was this scarp, and they were up there, high, and this road had been cut in the side of the hill and wound round, you know.

Did the comparison with Gallipoli occur to you? I mean, that sort of ...?

No.

No?

No, we never thought of it anyhow. Anyway, I said to Col Diffey, I said, `Look Diff, you don't know, they might not only have machine-guns up there but they might have machine-guns covering this track'. Well it wasn't a straight track, it was like a track that was cut in the side of the hill and it wound around. I said, `The best thing we can do; make sure your men keep well to the side, the steep side', you know, cut side. `Keep off the road.' So he said, `Righto'. So I said to the rest of the company, and we all went up in single file, walking as close as we could to the wall in case a machine-gun opened up. Well a machine-gun didn't open up because the Italians didn't expect us to come up. In the morning we found that if we'd walked up the centre of the track we would have been blown to pieces.

They'd mined it, had they?

They'd put down 300-odd vehicle mines across the track and taken the springs out. Now, a soldier's foot on any one of those mines would have blown 'em up.

And would have alerted them to the fact that you were coming too.

Yeah, but we would have lost a lot of troops. Well, we would have .... We were the first ones to go over. We would have stopped then. But whether God was looking after us or whether it was shrewd tactics to keep in close because of machine-guns or not I don't know, but we went up there and not one of those mines went off. And the engineers said, `You infantry blokes are (laughing) cranky bastards. [Inaudible] would never have gone up there for all the money in the world.' They had to disarm 'em, you see. But anyhow, we didn't have much of a fight.

Diffey, he got an MC there because when we got up there he went first, before his troop, and he didn't want to alarm anybody by firing, so he got - I don't know how many sentries or whether they were sentries or whatever they were, I don't know - he knocked 'em out with the butt of his pistol (laughing). And he, then the company got up, right up on the top of the scarp without firing a shot, and then whether they woke up that there was something happened, we stopped there, and in the morning any that were there were gone. So then we had a pretty safe sail to Benghazi really. The Italians blew up the bridges and the poor old infantry. Have you ever been a soldier?

No.

Poor old infantry. We have engineers that do engineering works, but they blew up the bridges and held up our advance, and to get down with our vehicles and things we had to find .... So they found, the engineers found little, you know, in the country - recesses - and they had to fill 'em up with bricks or anything we could, and of course then the infantry become engineers. You take off your kit and strip to the waist and help the engineers to carry the bricks and things to make a road. You make the road, then you put on your uniform and back again and march (laughing) down the middle.

(20.00) Anyhow, we got to Benghazi. Red Robbie was there before us because we were held up with these roads, and he found a different way. Anyway, I mean, the Italians were fleeing

or withdrawing very quickly then. But he took a risk by going .... But the brigade headquarters arrived in Benghazi and took the surrender of Benghazi, but most of the troops were out of there. Anyhow, we continued after them, for about couple of mile past Benghazi, and then we had orders to stop and dig in because we were gettin', we were movin' too fast. They couldn't keep .... Had to have ammunition, munitions and things, and they couldn't get 'em up to us.

So we stopped there and we dug in, and because we were so close they were frightened that we might get .... We hadn't got any air offensive against us up to this stage, but they thought that we might now. So we were told to dig .... We dug slit trenches and got in there, just big enough for yourself to get in, and I'll never forget. Oh, the transport came up and the troops were given blankets for the first time and the officers were given their sleeping bags, and I got into me sleeping bag and got in this hole. And I'll show you how tired I was - we all were - it rained like hell that night, and in the morning me batman came to wake me up and the slit trench was full of water. (Laughing) I was floating in me sleeping bag fast asleep, see, in this slit trench. Anyway, we got out and we dried ourselves out, and then we were told we were gonna be relieved. And we came back, in easy stages back to Amiriya, which was just outside of Alexandria. Now up to that stage we'd been in shorts and shirts. That night or the next day we were issued with the old type, you know, digger uniform. We didn't know where we were goin'; it was a secret. Eventually, I don't know, it might've been a day or two, we were put on boats and we were landed in Athens.

> Incidentally, when Italian prisoners were being taken, there was one incident where an Italian prisoner fired and killed a private called Charles Freeman of C Company, and as a result of that there was some anger and some shooting back. Did you hear about that at all?

No, never. That's the first I've heard about it, yeah, first I've heard about it.

> Anyway, so what were you ...?

Oh you couldn't, you know, things happen. You couldn't ...

> What were conditions like in the ship?

Oh I think they were alright. It was overcrowded, you know. We were sleeping anywhere, and well I can't remember much about that except it was overcrowded.

> As an officer, as you were going aboard the ships, did you get briefed at all as to what was coming next, or did that only happen later?

No, I don't .... I think we were kept in the dark about Greece. I can't remember being told about it, unless it was on the way over.

> I gather you then had a day in Athens?

Yes. Well we arrived, and we camped at a place called Daphne - if you've got something there you know about Daphne. Daphne was a lovely place. The thing - I must tell you this - the thing that really struck me on the boat was when we first saw Athens and the, what you call it, the Parthenon, you know. White! The city of Athens - all houses are built of white

stuff, white - I dunno, brick or something - and on the boat with the background of the land and everything else, all this white, it just shone out like a mirror, you know.

Anyway, we got to Daphne, and then again the battalion had to be paid, which it always is, in new currency, and who do you think was to be the pay officer? Captain Simpson had to go in with the pay corporal into Athens to a British pay office and get, oh, enough money to pay the battalion, and we paid 'em. I don't know what the hell we paid 'em for; we didn't have time to spend any of it. So they were all paid, and the next day we got on to little, funny little carriages. They weren't carriages, they were really like cattle trucks. They were cattle trucks, and a little, funny little engine and we were taken up inland.

(25.00) Oh, I can never remember some of the names of the places, but I can remember this, that the poor old Greeks thought the Australians were .... And they had been fighting the Italians for years, you know, and they thought we were comin' to rescue them. And all the little stations, as the train puffed up this big mountainside, all the little stations I can remember women there with bunches, arms full of lilac (laughing)[inaudible]. A pitiful thing, you know. They thought we were gonna save 'em. We were lucky to save ourselves. Anyway, I can't remember the places in between, but we got off when the terminus of the train. I have an idea it was Larissa. Would that be right?

Well, just go on. Don't get too hung up on places and so on.

Well I have an idea it was Larissa. Then we got on to trucks. There were trucks there and they took us over to the Hungarian - where? Hungarian border. And we missed the trucks, and then we had to get 'em back again because word was given that we shouldn't be at the Hungarian border, we had to be at the Yugoslav border. Now I think what happened there I don't know, but we believe that the Yugoslavian government had given an assurance to the British Prime Minister that they'd fight. And I think word came so that side was protected because the Yugoslav army were going to hold the Germans up there. That's why we were sent to the Hungarian border. But then word came that the Yugoslavs were gonna toss it in, so trucks came and picked us up, took us back to .... Oh, I'm sure that's right because the bloody enemy were coming before we got to our position.

Well we were dropped on the transport supposedly near our objective where we were gonna be. I can remember there were two or three carriers, and in order for the company commanders to get up and have time to make a reconnoitre of the position to put your troops when they arrived, we were put into the - we were taken up on the carriers to top of the mountains. Well, I think they were mountains; they were big hills anyway. And I can remember standing there and the CO said, `Well this is a bit stupid. You know, gentlemen, a battalion frontage is so many hundred yards, and the company frontage is so much.' He said, `We've got a frontage of about five thousand yards, and we've got to do the best we can'. He said, `There's the Italians on your right and there's down in the Vevi Pass, there's a British unit called ...' - I'll think of it in a minute -`... and the only way I can think we got any hope of doin' this is Indian warfare. Defend the tops of the hills.'

Well, we'd never struck anything like this in our lives. Usually we got to fire an area, you know, firing range, but here we were - and we did a reconnaissance - and the poor old troops had to get out of the transport because the transport couldn't take 'em. We went up in carriers. They had to march up these hills or mountains, or whatever you like to call it, to us. Our second-in-commands brought 'em up, and then we had to put 'em into position. Well there

was a hill there, a hill there, a hill there and a hill there, and there was re-entrants. We had some troops on the top, some troops in the re-entrants. Anyhow, but the very night at dusk, it was getting dusk when the troops landed there, and we could see across the valley from the hills that we were on across the valley. We could see the Germans coming.

ENE TAPE TWO, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE B.

> Identification: this is side two of tape two of the interview with Claude Simpson about the 2/8th Battalion recorded on 18th April 1991.
>
> Incidentally, during those movements, it seems the Germans had some men in Greek uniforms to misdirect people. Did you know of that?

Well, let's get to it first. First of all, we could see the Germans coming, probably two mile across the valley from Yugoslavia. We could see them coming - tanks, oh, there looked to be thousands of 'em, and artillery and everything - and we hadn't even got our men in position. Anyway, when we were in position, I thought, `How the hell we gonna fire? We'll be firing downhill at 'em.' Anyway, the very first night the Germans came up and they put patrols in, and it is assumed that some of 'em were in Australian uniform, because the fellas were tryin' to dig a hole or make some def..., put some bricks up or something or other, and from some of 'em - not my company - but C Company on the left, it is alleged that fellas came up and said, `Pretty bloody tough goin' digger, isn't it?', you know. And they were Germans in Australian uniform. Now whether this was true or not, I can't vouch for this, but this is what was alleged. And they collected, they got into conversation with 'em and they collected 'em prisoners.

> They picked them as aliens, that they weren't really Australians?

No, they didn't. They collected Australians, prisoners.

> Oh I see, yes.

Prisoners! And we'd only been there, well it was only a matter of hours. The fellas even hadn't had time to dig a hole for themselves, and the German patrols - and they had dogs too. They had, their forward scouts or the people went out had dogs. We could hear the dogs barkin'.

> Incidentally, Blamey was said to have real reservations about this situation. Did you know of this?

No we didn't, but it said after the war that Blamey didn't want to go. He said it was a farce and didn't want to go. And it was too. They sent a boy on a man's errand. Anyway, well what were you askin?

> Well, anyway, go on. So you'd ...?

They were, it is reputed that they had people in Australian uniform. But anyway, we couldn't even get our artillery goin', because our artillery eventually came up and we had to supply

some men to assist their signallers to patrol their wires because there was somebody breaking them - two rocks, you know - breaking the cable and stopping the communication between the forward artillery officer and the guns. Fifth column, if you like, or I don't know, but this is what we had to put up with too. So anyway ....

Oh, and another thing. That night we just come out of the desert in shorts and shirt. That night it snowed, and it snowed, and I think we were up there for three days and it snowed every day. They couldn't get food to us. They were flat out to get ammunition to us because they had to come up this great big hill, you know, and they had no transport to get it up there. So anyway, we eventually - oh, I think it was the third day - company commanders were ordered down to battalion headquarters, and we went down there, and the CO laid the plan for a withdrawal, an orderly withdrawal from the positions. But never got to that because while we were down at battalion headquarters the forward companies were over-run by the Germans.

(5.00) Now what happened is this. Vevi Pass, where the ... rangers - was the British Regiment; they were like an independent company; they had automatic weapons galore - they were in the valley and the Germans .... Again, I don't know whether it's true, these fellas fired their guns and never stopped and they shot, it is rumoured, you know, dozens and dozens of Germans but they kept on coming and they broke through the pass. And when they broke through the pass we were up on the hills. The pass was getting behind us. And they over-run the forward companies, and it wasn't a case .... The company commanders didn't have a chance to get back to their companies to tell the second-in-commands to pull out. They'd already pulled out because some of 'em were over-run.

Well she was a bit of a shemozzle then, because instead of .... Under normal circumstances we would have gone back and organised our company to withdraw platoons at a time, and kept 'em under control, but when the Germans were in among, you can just imagine. So we didn't even have time to tell the forward troops our line of withdrawal. So anyway, they got out the best they could really, but I know one of my platoons was taken prisoner.

Was that a shock to you, to know that some of your men had been captured?

It was a shock because I wasn't up there. And I'd given this platoon commander strict instructions that before we pulled out he'd be told, so he could get out. And I wasn't there to tell him to get out, but I was very very worried as to whether he did. But I did hear that .... The second-in-command assured me that he'd sent a runner around three times to tell him to get out, and I was also assured by another fellow who .... They were taking a prisoner and one chap lay `doggo', and he took a risk. He could have been [inaudible] you know, and when the Germans took the platoon away, he got out and he got with the Greeks and eventually he caught up with us. And he assured me that they had got word, they should have got out when they were told to get out.

Why didn't they?

Because the platoon commander said they'd all be killed if they attempted to get out. So anyway, unfortunately, again I think God was looking after me. Excuse me for saying that ...

No, not at all.

... because I was terribly concerned, because I assured this platoon commander that he'd be out before we got out. Anyway, I was worried and I kept sayin' to my second-in-command, `Are you sure?'. `Well', he said, `here's the runner'. He went round three times to tell him, and I still wasn't happy about it. But when this sergeant caught up with us, I said to him `How the hell did you get out?'. So he told me that he'd laid down. And I said 'I want to ask you. My second-in-command has told me that he sent word for you to get out three times. Is that so?' He said, `Yes'. I said, `Why didn't you get out?'. He said, `Because the platoon commander said it was too dangerous. It would be better for us to take prisoner [sic] than to be killed, and we'll be killed if we attempt to get out.' So I said, `Thank you very much', because up till then I was terribly concerned, but as I say, I think God was lookin' after me because my conscience was eased. Anyway, it just shows you the luck of the game. When we were on the withdrawal, the trucks came from somewhere and we could only really move at night ...

> Was there a sense of panic? I mean, was there a sense you were going to be totally over-run and all taken prisoners?

Oh I think there was, I think there was. Well, I mean, I didn't catch up to the company because I was down at the battalion headquarters. Fortunately, the troops, the company second-in-command told troops to get out, and he came down to meet me. Otherwise I was on me way up there. I would have been a certainty to be taken a prisoner. I was on me way up to make sure they got out, and he told me that, `Come on', he said, `I've got 'em out. Things are right', and he walked back with me. I know troops went ahead of us, and eventually we caught up to them. But we got in trucks and this fella, this sergeant .... We were in trucks evacuating and the raid came over, dropped bombs, and everybody in the truck got out this side of the truck and he jumped out that side, and the blessed bomb lobbed and blew him to pieces - the fella that had laid doggo, you know. Now I've thought about that a thousand times - why should he live long enough to tell me? You know. However, that's one of those things.

(10.00) But anyway, we, all talking about fifth column. Whether it was Germans or Greeks or not, when we were tryin' to move in the daytime, you'd find a donkey cart in the middle of the road, you know. There was no mercy held about the donkey cart, when there was about .... We were expecting Germans to raid us, and there were about a dozen tracks, I used to just push this donkey and the cart over the side. But that happened a lot there.

> There had been a suggestion that there was going to be a last stand made. Had that got around?

Yeah.

> Were you expecting you were going to be told that, `This is it, you're gonna stay no matter what'?.

Oh no, no I wasn't, but we did .... On the way back we just didn't clear out. We just didn't clear out, our units were assembled and we had to do, and they were expecting paratroops and any vehicles that they had were all massed together and part of the battalion was made an anti-paratroop force to go and fight 'em. And then we had to, well of course we were unfortunate because the Aliakmon River, they blew the bridge over the Aliakmon River, (laughing) and we were on the enemy side of it. But the engineers put a ferry, made a ferry

across the Aliakmon River and that's how we got out, otherwise we would have been certain to be taken prisoner.

Had they already done that by the time you got down there?

No, no. They realised we were over there and we couldn't get out, so they sent the engineer. We watched 'em. It was right down, oh, from where we were, several hundred feet. You couldn't see whether they were Germans or whether they were Australians that were doin' it, but they were Australian engineers puttin' - put a line across and one of those army sort of things like a ...

Flying fox sort of vine?

[Inaudible], and took a few across at a time.

It must have been anxious moments waiting.

Oh I thought we were, two or three times I thought we were gone. Oh, well I won't say I wasn't anxious. Of course I was anxious. But anyhow, but then we climbed up the thing and then we .... And then after that - I can't remember the various places, mountains and various places - we were in defensive positions so that the troops forward of us could get back through, and they got back through and took up positions and we went through until we got right back to - what was the name of the place? We evacuated from ...?

Where were we? It was, well it was with *Costa Rica*. Suda Bay? Oh no, that's where you went, sorry. Anyway, you went on the *Costa Rica*?

Yes. Well we were lucky to get on that too, because the 17th Brigade were all on the beach, and the navy said that it'd be bringing punts in to take fifty at a time and there had to be an officer and fifty, an officer and fifty. You know the navy's pretty efficient. And Brigadier Savige told Colonel Mitchell, `If there's enough room you fellas can come off, but make sure you're organised into officer and fifty, and officer and fifty'. We were in the scrub then, we weren't on the beach.

And so the army were friggin' around and the navy got a bit disgusted because they wanted to get the ships well out to sea before dawn, well out from bombing. So instead of sending the punts they sent destroyers into the wharf, and there were hundreds of troops on the beach and one thing and another, and Colonel Mitchell said, `Look, I think we're right', so we marched out of the scrub, officer and fifty, officer and fifty, and they were still friggin' around - the others - and the navy saw us and said, `Right'. So instead of getting on if there was room (laughing), we were about first on. Fortunate again, because the 7th Battalion got left behind there.

So how long was the gap then, where the ships were there waiting before they started to ...?

I dunno because we were in the bush. We don't know how long they were waiting, and we didn't see any ships until we came out of the scrub.

How do you assess that, because I suppose on the other hand, if they'd been too peremptory and said, `Right, every man get aboard as quickly as possible', there may have been a near panic?

Oh there would have been. Oh, they wouldn't do that. The navy wouldn't do that.

Hmm.

So anyway, we got on the *Cost Rica* - half got on the *Costa Rica* and half got on the *City of London* - and we didn't get far enough out to sea. There came over a wave of bombers and oh, gee whiz, you talk about morale. The fellas were on that ship, and they said bloody air force weren't gonna sink 'em, and everybody that had a rifle or a machine-gun, and everybody that could get in a position, and those that didn't have rifles were collecting ammunition from the blokes that just had ammunition. And I said to the captain later on, I said .... He said, `I was more scared of the bloody shells (laughing) going off the ship than I was from the aeroplanes'.

(15.00) But anyhow, they dropped a stick of bombs at the rear of the *Costa Rica* and it sprung the plates at the back of the *Costa Rica*. Now I wasn't there, but I don't know, but I've been told the most wonderful thing that ever happened. We saw the destroyers - up went flags, you know the signals - and destroyers, there must have been a dozen of them appeared from everywhere, and they pulled in each side of the *Costa Rica*, fellas got down on the [inaudible], and as they filled up they went away and other destroyers come, and there was only one man injured. And they said on board, `Everybody be calm; everybody will be taken off', but to listen to what they were told. And this fella was a crewman, ship's crewman. One of the ship's crew jumped overboard and got squashed between the destroyer, and out of the hundreds that were on that ship. Marvellous piece of work on part of the navy and a marvellous bit of work on behalf of the ones that listened to the instructions. So we continued on to Alexandria, and the people that were taken off the *Costa Rica* were landed in Crete.

So what became of you at Alexandria then?

Well we went up from Alexandria up to Palestine. From memory we went into a rest camp for a while, and we had to sort of reorganise the battalion. Half of the battalion were in Crete and half were in - those that weren't taken prisoner.

Well, of course, so many of those fellows finished up as prisoners of war in Crete. Did you know men who went off that way?

Oh yes, oh yes, I know some of them, yeah.

How long did it take before you knew what had happened in Crete?

What do you mean?

Well, that Crete was over-run by the Germans and a lot of men were captured.

Oh, when they come back. Oh we heard, but it wasn't very long before they rejoined us. The ones in Crete rejoined us, and as a matter of fact - oh well, I wasn't there but as it turns out,

you know, the Germans were gonna evacuate Crete themselves. Only a matter of hours. If the Australians and New Zealanders and the what British troops were there hadn't have decided to withdraw that day, the Germans were gonna withdraw that day, and the Germans never ever used their airborne divisions again. It was shot to pieces over Crete, did you know that?

Hm.

I wasn't there, but I've heard this story from the fellas that were there.

So how much rest did you have?

Rest, where?

When you got back to Alexandria.

Oh, we went up to - not much. We went up to Syria then and we were .... We went up to Syria. What were we doing up there? We were preparing defences against, in case the Germans came down through Turkey. Up in there, and again in the snow (laughing).

Did you have better clothing by that stage?

Oh we had, oh no, we had the same old uniform, the old digger uniform. But we first had tents and every morning the damn tents .... Oh, if you're up on a defences, you were in tents but if you were down .... They sent companies up there for a week and then you were relieved to come down, and they had huts, army huts, down for the ones that weren't working on the defences. And then of course, soon after that we came home.

Well what were your feelings though, then, as you must have done, talked about the battle in Greece and then as you learned about Crete? What did you feel about it? Did you feel anything had been accomplished?

No. We felt very annoyed. We felt very annoyed that we were taken out of Egypt because if we'd hadn't have gone to Greece the Germans, although with all due respect to Rommel and the Germans - they were a different cup of tea to the Italians - but the 6th Division had been well and truly blooded. You can't tell me they wouldn't have, with the 9th Division that was there, couldn't have held up the Germans. But we were away. Well, the only news we got of Rommel's advance and all that we'd captured had been retaken except Tobruk, and the Rats of Tobruk. We heard all this, and here we were wonderin' what was gonna happen to us actually.

Was the feeling that it was bad luck or bad management?

Oh, I don't think .... I think the feeling was we should never have been there, shouldn't ever have been there.

Did you come back on the *Aronda*?

Yes I think so.

Yes, and you had stops at Port Sudan, Aden and Colombo. Did you go ashore?

Oh, at Port Sudan we, the whole battalion went ashore. For some reason or other, we were - I don't know what it was - we went ashore and I don't think the boat went away, but we were ashore for a week or something like that. I don't know. Some time, anyway, before we got back on the ship.

(20.00) Were you able to have a bit of relaxation yourself, or as an officer were you forever still minding men and looking at what was going on and that sort of thing?

Oh well, you've always got .... Well, if you're a conscientious commissioned officer (laughing), you feel as though you've got the care and safety of the men - constantly. Well I dunno. I might have been lucky. I don't think I was ever let down.

How do you think the men regarded you?

(Laughing). Oh don't ask me, don't ask me.

Did you ever get any insights into how the officers generally were seen? You know, I mean, did you have a feeling about how the men generally regarded the officers?

No, I never worried about anybody else. I was always well respected.

What about the British? What did you make of the British in your contact with them?

Oh they're a funny crowd. See, we're different. When I was attached to this Leicestershire regiment, who do you think I cobbered up to? They had granted permission - an unknown or heard of thing in a British Army - for selected NCOs to get a commission, and then the Leicestershire regiment, the RSM had had a commission, the transport sergeant had a commission and another sergeant had a commission. Now while I was with 'em they were doin' training exercises, and one of the training exercises was building a defensive position.

Now, according to our textbooks there's a way you go about it. They even tell you where the peak, rise, strike, break, rake, how to do it, you know. The people that had their defensive position done, their platoons done before the others had almost started, were the platoons that were commanded by the newly appointed lieutenant, RSM, transport sergeant and other sergeant. They were that far ahead of the other officers, I don't know how. I think they'd been blokes themselves, and that's where we have it. See? We don't have - we didn't durin' the war .... A majority of officers, some of the weren't - some of 'em were appointed because they had the silver tongue or they were Scotch College - but the majority of officers were fellas that, well, they were ordinary blokes in civvy life.

And it was an amazing thing to me, and when we were in the mess and that sort of thing, over drinking together would be me (laughing), the RSM, the transport sergeant and the other sergeant. We had things in common, and when I was attached to them I could see the way they worked their platoons. They sort of, were with the men and part of the men, which isn't so with the average British officer. What amazes me is this: when I was attached to that

regiment, a bloke with one stripe in the British Army would stand up a private soldier and bawl him out, and he'd stand to attention and dare not say anything. Now I'm afraid the Australian'd say, `Oh Bill, don't be bloody silly' (laughing). Oh well, does that explain anything to you?

> Incidentally, what about your relationship with other officers who came from public schools, you know, the grammar schools? Did you encounter any snobbishness?

Oh no, not really. I was, I became second-in-command of the battalion. I was always a lot senior to most of them and they were more or less duty bound, so pay you a bit of respect, you know.

> So you never had the sense conveyed that you were sort of socially a little bit inferior or anything of that sort?

Oh no. Oh, I wouldn't .... In those days I was a different boy to what I am now.

> What do you mean by that? You wouldn't have stood any nonsense?

Oh I had a bit of confidence in meself, and whatnot, and a bit of, you know, I knew what I was doing.

> What was the feeling when you heard about the Japanese entering the war? Were you anxious to get back to Australia?

Oh I think we were. I think we thought we ought to be here to protect Australia. Australia's Australia as far as the Australians are concerned. I think we were all anxious to get back.

(25.00) Then you went to Adelaide I gather?

Well, as soon as the ship arrived in Adelaide, I was seconded to Northern Territory. Well I had been. When we came home from Crete - Greece - the 6th Division of Provost Company did a marvellous job there getting .... At night we had to travel by night because the bombers couldn't travel, wouldn't come at night, and there were roads everywhere. And when you got to, well we wouldn't have known where to go if it hadn't been the 6th Divisional provost fellas standing there with a hurricane lamp and telling us where to go. And with the result most of their show was taken prisoner in Greece.

And when we came back - no, this is before we went to Syria - the CO sent for me and he said, `Brigadier Vasey wants to see you'. And I went to see him and he said, `You're gonna be seconded to .... General Herring wants you on 6 Div Headquarters to reorganise the Provost Company.' So I was pretty cross about it. It was silly. I told the CO if he wanted to get rid of me there was other ways of gettin' rid of me and that, and he said, `I don't want to get rid of you'.

Anyway, I went up attached to the 6th Division to reorganise, recruit and reorganise the Provost Company, and I became Deputy Provost Marshal. And I was supposed to be for six months, and when me six months was up I went to the - paraded to the general and said, `I want to go back to my unit'. He was pretty good. He could have said, `You stay where I say

you should stay', but he said, `What do you want to go back to your unit for?'. I said, `Well I'm an original with the battalion'. He had silly ideas. I mean, bein' on the headquarters, 6th Division Headquarters is a much more comfortable life than bein' with an infantry battalion. So anyway, he said, `Well you've done a very good job here', and he let me go back to me battalion.

The reason I'm tellin' you that is because when the ship pulled in at Adelaide, General Herring had been flown home from the Middle East and was commander up in the Northern Territory. And the CO said, `Well, when we .... We're all goin' to ... What's that place you said there? Ah, [inaudible], and then we're going on leave.' `Oh', I said, `that'd be good', and he said, `Not you Simpson. I've got a signal here from army headquarters, planned priority, "to be despatched immediately to Northern Territory as Provost Marshal of the Northern Territory and be promoted to the rank of major".' Well I was, I had been, ah ....

In the battalion I'd been before the brigadier to be promoted to make a major and I wanted to earn it in the battalion, but with our movement home it hadn't caught up. So I was made a major and I went up to Northern Territory and started .... There was .... Oh, I was wild, I was mad. So General Herring's *aide-de-camp* picked me up at the airport and I was roping mad. I said, `I want to see the General', and I was gonna - even if I got a court martial - for gettin' taken away from the battalion. He's a pretty shrewd bloke, General Herring. I walked into his tent and he said, `Just a minute Simpson. Before you say anything, go and have some breakfast and my ADC will take you around Darwin, and when you've had a good look around you come back and see me.'

So I went and had breakfast, and he took me round, and when I saw the Darwin hotel which had been .... I remember when it bein' built and said it was one of the best in the southern hemisphere. All the chrome work was pulled off the walls, all the lights were broken, all the windows were broken. Everything was smashed. Now the Japs didn't do that. And we went down the town and all the shops were raked, the shops that had material were all thrown on the ground and trampled on 'em, one thing and another. Japs didn't do that. So I said, `Isn't there any provosts about here?'. He said, `Yes sir, I'll take you', and I went to the camp. No officers there, an old warrant officer, and I said, `Who's supposed to be in patrol in the town?', and he said, `Corporal so-and-so and his men'. And he called out Corporal so-and-so. `Who wants me?', this fella said. I was out that tent like a shot and before he knew I was standing alongside of him, a major, and I said, `I do. Stand to attention. Where's all the provosts and what's happened?' So I couldn't get back to the General quick enough to tell him what a disgrace, and now you know why (laughing).
END TAPE TWO, SIDE B.

BEGIN TAPE THREE, SIDE A.

> Identification: this is side one of tape three of the interview with Claude Simpson about the 2/8th, recorded on 18th April 1991.

This is nothing to do with 2/8th Battalion.

> Well (laughing), formerly of the 2/8th. Anyway, you were saying there was trouble at Mount Isa. What happened.

Well General Herring sent for me and he said there was trouble at Mount Isa and he'd like me to go over and have a look about. I said, `What was the trouble?'. He said, `I'm having trouble with the Americans. They were sort of scaring the people and walking down the footpath and, you know, all this sort of thing and I want you to go over and have a look at it.' So I eventually went over and took four fellas with me ...

Just tell us a bit about what your American friend had to say about this.

Well I had become friendly with an American friend, and I told him I had to go, and he said, `What have you got to go for? They're mostly Americans there.' And I said, `Well apparently the Americans are disturbing the people. They're walking down the footpath and the people are walking in the gutter and one thing and another.' And he said, `Oh well', he said, `that unit must be commanded by northern American officers, not southern American officers because anybody from the south wouldn't tolerate that'. So he said, `Well my advice to you is if you could take a couple of good blokes over with you', he said, `and walk down the street and confront 'em'. And he said, `If you have any trouble with em', he said, `shoot the bastards'. I said, `Oh, I couldn't do that'. `Oh well', he said, `that's what I'd do anyway'. So I eventually took five fellas over with me and I ...

In choosing them, what were you looking for?

Oh, fellas that'd back me up.

Big blokes?

Well they were big blokes. Anyway, and so were the negroes - they were seven foot tall. But anyhow ...

You must have felt a bit like a hired gun (laughing)?

Yeah, well I left them in the transit camp and had a walk around meself and saw what happened. And I saw the negroes walking down the street, and they were walking down the middle of the footpath and the people were getting off the footpath when they came past. And the negroes were having hands full of notes and things, but they weren't disturbing anybody or talking to anybody, you know, but they were just walking down the footpath.

Was it partially that white Australians were used to a black population here that was, had been made very subservient and were a bit unnerved to see black people being quite authoritative?

I don't know. They were pretty big fellas. So I didn't form an opinion then, but I thought, `Well we gotta fix this good', and so this fella told me, `Get on top quick smart'. So I divided us up into twos - myself and one of the sergeants - and two .... Oh, I think there were three sergeants - two sergeants and meself, and another sergeant. And I said, `Look fellas, we gotta walk down the footpath and we don't get off the footpath for these fellas'. I said, `We're not gonna do what this Yank said, shoot 'em, but we're gonna see if we can bluff 'em.' 'Course we had armbands on and things, and to my amazement we walked down the footpath and they got out of our road into the gutter, walked round. So I was only there half an hour and we walked round town a couple of times, and every time we walked round, any of the negroes are walkin' down the footpath got out of our road.

So I came to the conclusion it wasn't really the negroes that were makin' them get into the gutter. They were walkin' down the footpath and the white people were getting out of their road, you know what I mean? But anyhow, I was only there for an hour and we walked around and we sort of educated them that we didn't get out of their road, and this sort of seemed to solve the solution. I was in fear and trembling what we were gonna do when we got over there, but it turned out to be, you know, turned out alright. We had no trouble at all. But I did leave me men over there for a while to patrol the streets, you know, to show that the civilians would get confidence to just walk down the street.

(5.00) They were just unnerved and frightened by seeing these black men ...?

I think, you know, some of those negroes were seven foot tall and built in proportion and of course they might have been with notes in their hand, they might have been, sort of, you know, offering an invitation or something. But anyway, that's how it turned out. We didn't have any trouble at all. But they got out of our road and eventually I was able to bring the fellas back from [inaudible]. But the local police were frightened of 'em. Local police wouldn't have anything to do with 'em.

END TAPE THREE, SIDE A.

END OF INTERVIEW.