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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

ACCESSION NUMBER: **S01133**

TITLE:

INTERVIEWEE: Kevin Byrne

INTERVIEWER: Gary McKay

RECORDING DATE: 6 March 1993

RECORDING LOCATION: Cairns, QLD

SUMMARY: Joining the Army; training.

TRANSCRIBER: Gale McKay

TRANSCRIPTION DATE: 17 August 1993

This is the leader for the first tape with Kevin Byrne taped in Cairns, Saturday, 6 March, 1993 for Gary McKay's research project, Delta Four - Australian Infantrymen in Battle.

Righto, Kevin the first one is why did you join the Army?

Well, I'd left Nudgee College and spent quite a number of years, seven years total as a boarder, parents lived in Papua New Guinea and I had intentions of doing Law at university. So, as an interim measure, I wasn't sure whether I really wanted to go back to university and go into a live-in college so I joined the Shell Company and whilst I was there of course the Vietnam War was on and I thought that that might be an opportunity - by joining the Army - of spending some time and finding my feet. Now I didn't particularly just want to join the Army. I wanted to be an officer in the Army because one day, on my way to Pinkenba, where I worked for the Shell Company, I saw a little second lieutenant in a blue MGB and we were stuck at the lights at Woolloongabba, and I just looked at this guy and I noticed he was a young officer in the Army and I thought, now what I need to do is find my feet before I decide what I want to do with life.

At that stage I had intentions of doing Law at university and I thought wouldn't it be nice if I could do that, find my feet and own an MGB! So, that morning on the way to the Shell Oil Company, I crossed the Story Bridge, I pulled up at a public telephone booth, I rang work, a fellow called Rob France who was my boss and told him my car had broken down and that I would be several hours late and I went into the recruiting office in Mary Street. I was met there by a warrant officer who looked up at me and said, 'What can I do for you son?' At this stage I was 18 years of age and I resented that comment, 'son', I thought that was rather presumptuous of him, particularly after seven years at boarding school. I was playing A Grade cricket and reserve grade rugby union and so on and I really thought I'd made it. And I looked at him squarely in the eye and I said I wanted to be an officer in the Army and he looked at me and he said, 'Well don't you think that you should join the Army first?' And I said, 'No, I want to be an officer in the Army, I want to go to Portsea and become an officer'. And that's how I joined, that's really the motivation I guess as to why I joined the Army.

You knew Vietnam was on?

Yes I did.

That didn't faze you, the fact that you might have to go to war?

Not at all, I thought that that would be a natural progression and in fact it was I guess, part of the motivation of me wanting to join.

Did you know much about Vietnam, the politics or ...

Not really, except that I had always had an interest in international affairs, even whilst I was at school, and I guess from the study of history, modern history at school, I had a genuine belief I guess at the time that America was really the freedom fighter of the world. And I admired Americans. I studied a little bit of the history of the last War, the last great war - the Second World War - and I thought that what they were doing was honourable and that it was in the best interests of the world and particularly south east Asia. And, so,

the Vietnam side (of it) didn't faze me. But I guess that's really all I knew, the other was rather fleeting, it was sort of TV images and a few articles in the paper. Mind you we hadn't really had a heavy involvement for a long period at that point. I think our AATTV forces went over in 1966 or thereabouts, or probably a couple of years earlier, but it really wasn't sort of the headline grabbing stuff that it became later on of course with Jim cairns and others running around the country.

So, you went off to Portsea. What is your most memorable image of Portsea?

I guess the most memorable image of Portsea was Day One when we, after a long train trip from Queensland down to Melbourne, and getting in a bus with an old corporal driver called 'Skull' I think his name was, who drove us down the Mornington Peninsula and regaled us with tales of fear. And then being met at the gates at Portsea and driven up to the quadrangle area and the lines and being unloaded with a bunch of warrant officers snapping at our heels. And I looked out across the bay and I thought this beautiful area, and it was summer time in January, and as we sort of slowed down towards the gates of Portsea there was the Portsea Hotel and the Nepean Hotel and literally thousands of Victorians in bikinis and open sports cars - you name it. Obviously they were enjoying themselves and I think this was Saturday or a Sunday, so there were a lot of people around, and then in we went into these gates and I remember looking out over the bay and there were people water skiing and at the same time there were these enormous numbers of warrant officers just running around snapping at our heels and I thought what in the hell have I done?

Okay, the next section I want to talk about is training for war. Did you consider that your platoon was well prepared for Vietnam?

Yes, I think given the lead up and given the experience that we had with our trainers both in my officer training at Portsea; and there wasn't any question about what corps I wanted to go to when I was at Portsea by the way, I always wanted to go to infantry and that certainly was my first choice. The other choices were I think armour and artillery in that order, but yes, the training there was first class I thought at Portsea. Then I went off to Kapooka and I was platoon commander at the Recruit Training Battalion for about eight to nine months I think, and that gave me great experience because at Kapooka were a bunch of NCOs from corporal up who all had Vietnam experience. They talked frequently about their experiences and which I was party to, and I guess in some instances I was a bit envious about what they had experienced. And then I went off to Four Battalion and looking back on it , and looking back on my time in three different battalions - I'd spent time in four battalions in my military experience - those days in Four Battalion I believe we were well trained, because of the experience of the NCO cadre that we had particularly and some of our officers. Mind you, I walked into a company where the Company Commander was (Major) Franz Kudnig, who by any standard was a pretty tough task master, particularly with young officers. He was absolutely bloody relentless.

The 2IC at that stage was (Captain) John McAloney, for a short time, and then I think roughly at the time that you came on board, (Captain) Peter Schuman was the 2IC. He was a tremendous trainer, Schuman, the way he related to us, the way he could take us aside, he was a man even to this day that I have an enormous amount of respect for. A respect not because he was just a great guy, but because of his ability and the way he related to us and the way he took upon himself a personal obligation to make sure that the subbies were

trained as best as possible - and all the soldiers also. And then of course we went to war with that complement I guess. There was yourself, Graham (Second Lieutenant G.D. Spinkston), myself, Peter Schuman, Franz, to a lesser degree (Warrant Officer Class Two) Noel Huish; but I thought we had some good sergeants and good corporals, (Corporal A.C.F.) 'Tas' Wilkinson and (Corporal D.J.) Dick Wheatley and all that crowd. And then of course Franz left us and we had (Major J.H.) Jerry Taylor who came with previous experience, I think in the Middle East or thereabouts, so it was ongoing. So, I can say that I was satisfied with the level of training from a personal point of view and I was also satisfied with the type of training we did. I don't know whether you recall some of those awful exercises we did at High Range and Mount Spec and particularly Canungra and those things. So, I guess when we stepped on the boat, I was reasonably happy that I had the best training that the Australian Army could dish out to me at the time. Am I talking too long?

No this is good. What do you think was the most important part of the preparation? I'm talking at the second lieutenant, platoon commander level.

I think the most important part of the preparation from my point of view was whilst we got the rudiments and the theories right - we had that drummed into us all the time - the most important part was the foresight that some of our commanders had in allowing platoon commanders to go off and train with their platoons. I remember some of the jobs we were given, call it jobs - tasks we were given, you know in Mount Spec and High Range and Canungra and so on, and we were pretty well left to our own devices I guess. There was a great degree of trust and I think, that the ability in our training in the formation days of that battalion and in that company, where people said, 'McKay, away you go, this is what we want you to do. You've got three days, there are your rations, go and train in ambushing techniques, go and do this go and do that'. I think that was excellent and that really moulded, in a sense in a professional way, the platoon, the NCOs, the soldiers, and in particular the NCOs and the officers. And I found that part invaluable.

How much did you get from people like umpires?

Oh, Gary, difficult question. Some umpires I found absolutely useless to be frank with you. They were nit picking and they had, I guess an abrasive attitude. Some umpires were quite good. I remember going on one exercise in particular, in fact it was an assessment exercise at Canungra and I had a tall gangling umpire called (Captain) Lochie McLean, and I thought, where did this guy spring from? But I learnt a hell of a lot from Lochie McLean as an umpire. Obviously he reported on me and assessed me but at the same time he taught me. So, in answer to that question, it's a mixed bag. You know I had some bum umpires, some terrible umpires that were out there that had really no right to be assessing my platoon.

So maybe there was case where the umpires should be more carefully selected?

Oh, absolutely, yes. I found them to be quite obstructionist some times and at other times I found them to be tremendously helpful, tremendously informative.

What do you think was so special about Canungra?

I think the thing that was special about Canungra was that it had a variety of different types of training facilities close handy. It was intense, it was well I guess deliberately intense, and the other special thing about it was Canungra was an independent assessment phase where the battalion and the company and the platoons went through altogether and there was a healthy competitiveness with your other companies, your brother platoons and also you knew that another battalion had been through and they rated what ever. So, there was the healthy competitiveness of trying to be better than everybody else. Also it was a tough environment and I think that was tremendous training, particularly the live firing range, the ambush ranges, that awful confidence course or obstacle course and it was very intense and dear me, at the end of it I remember jumping on the Herc out at Amberley and flying back to Townsville and I felt as if I'd really earnt my bread and butter.

Almost like graduating?

Yes, yes, you know when you got the tick from Canungra and I think that was probably our second last exercise before we went, then we went on another one - High Range I think or Mt Spec - and then we jumped on the boat. But, yes, once I think you go through Canungra and out the other side, and as I said it moulded the group together. And if you didn't make Canungra you wouldn't have made Vietnam and I felt pretty confident that if I weathered that, I'd weather anything.

You mentioned competitiveness before, do you think that the competitiveness between platoons for example, even within a company, is good?

Yes. I'm a great believer in competitiveness even now at every level. I temper that statement by saying that it has to be healthy competition and not being competitive because it's a 'one-up-manship' thing. I've always loved sport, I think I've always played it with the right spirit and certainly my military days I remember saying to my boys, 'We've got to beat Gary McKay's platoon, we've got to beat 11 Platoon.' It's not because we didn't like you guys it's just that we wanted to be a bit better than you and have you people shout the first drink. So, yes, I think it's tremendously important. I used to always say that Delta Company was the best company, and Four Battalion was the best battalion because I worked bloody hard to make sure, or I thought I worked hard, to make sure that my platoon was the best, the company was the best, the battalion was the best. And I think throughout the battalion if everybody had that sort of philosophy that it would only be to the benefit of everybody.

What sticks most in your mind about Canungra? When you think of Canungra, what sort of image comes up?

I think when we did our final company attack and it was an absolute cock up for want of a better term, and I remember I don't know who was supposed to be the lead platoon, we were going in one-up, but I ended up there and I think we came in on the wrong side and we were supposed to marry up and it was just a nightmare. Anyway, we went through and we did the company attack and my platoon came out of it fairly well because we were in the fire fight and I made a quick decision and I looked at the umpire thinking what's he going to write?, and I thought well we were in the fire fight, we might as well keep going and we can be the spearhead of the company attack. Now we spent a lot of time trying to sus that position out and do close reconnaissance and some of it was successful and some of it wasn't. But I remember when it was all over and it was our final test and it's a funny

thought I guess, but it was a complete balls up. There was no describing it any other way than that and I remember incurring the wrath of (Major) Franz Kudnig and others, but we very happily walked out of the attack area to catch our trucks home and I was quite surprised that at the debrief, prior to walking back to the trucks that (Captain) Lochie McLean gave us all a big wrap because I thought we were just going to get canned. In fact it turned out the other way. In fact that, oh, there's another couple of happy thoughts I guess. I remember the officers/senior NCOs tent - our bar. We would have spent a long day, we had probably come in about nine-thirty, ten o'clock at night and we'd get into the old rum and cokes and tell lies and cheat each other and play cards and probably end up in bed at half past twelve, one o'clock in the morning - drinking illegally - and then having to get out of bed and wash my face in the fire bucket; go for a couple of miles of running and I guess vomiting and so on. But they were happy experiences and I guess character building.

> What do you think is one of the most important things you have got to learn when your fighting in the jungle?

That's a difficult question. From my experience it would be to be alert at all times, to be alert at all times. Now that, having said that, I remember you know we would talk in hushed tones, we would whisper, we would, you know sort of when you came off operations you found it very difficult to raise your voice because you lived in an environment where every body whispered. But I guess the single most important thing from my point of view as a platoon commander was one; to be alert 24 hours a day, which is quite taxing mentally after a period of time on operations. But, and the other thing is, was camouflage. I guess these are throw away lines; concealment, but the majority of the things we were taught were all valid but the other thing was because there was the fear of the unknown around you all the time, was to keep close; keep close and keep tight and make sure every bugger, every bugger in that platoon was alert 24 hours a day.

> So security …

Security.

> Okay. When you got to Vietnam was there any thing that sort of surprised you, that you hadn't been prepared for do you think?

The thing that surprised me I guess was you can learn all you like about the terrain of a country, the people, but I remember getting in a helicopter - I think it was the first day or the second day - and we went on a familiarisation flight in a Huey and it was pretty well featureless province. There was some mountain ranges, the Nui Dinhs, the Nui Thi Vais and the Long Hais and so on and then up the Horsehoe and the northern part. But the rest of it was pretty bloody flat and with just rivers and streams and things like that and I think that was the biggest surprise because there was a lot of jungle but there was also a lot of open space too. And I thought then - when we were flying around, dear me, we are going to have to, it's not just all jungle here, we're going to have to be fairly careful how we fight. And I think that was the first impression, the rest of it I was fairly well prepared for, the tent lines, the layout of Nui Dat and so on. There we were just looking at it, I don't know what height we flew at, it was pretty damned high, and looking out over this vast area and knowing we were about to be fighting down there soon.

> I found one of the things was noise. I wasn't prepared for the noise of battle, did you find that? I found it to be a lot noisier than I expected.

Yes, yes I guess that is true. I think the thing that shook me in the first encounter was it was mayhem. For those people that had never been in a fire fight it was just, 'Christ, what is happening here?' And it takes you several seconds and I guess as a platoon commander, the interesting thing was you shook your head after a while and thought, 'What the fuck is going on?' And then you realised well why am I saying that because I'm in charge of this show and you try and steel yourself and steady it and that was the biggest shock to me. The noise, yes, certainly. Particularly if you go back to Canungra when we were doing our fire and movement on the live firing range and so on, we were pretty well spread out if you remember. And we had a couple of sections up and few other things and we were over this open field with the Vickers firing over the top of us. But in close quarter combat in the jungle, you're dead right the noise is right there next to you and you've got leaves and trees and you're like entombed in this bloody monster noise machine. Its terrible.

> Okay. I'd like to now go onto the people and we talk about National Servicemen first up. What was your reaction or what did you think of National Servicemen under your command?

I thought they were first class and the reason I say they were first class is they were that couple of years older, they were obviously a little bit more mature and I thought that they played, they made a tremendous contribution to life in the Army because I think they brought a degree of maturity particularly down at the soldier level. We weren't just dealing with 17 and 18 year olds, we were dealing with 20 year olds and older, those ones that were deferred university and so on. So I found National Service to be a tremendously stabilising influence and also it brought in another dimension. The military can be a very cloistered environment where you know it's just like living in the one family for ever and a day. National Servicemen brought a degree of different sort of social skill to the Army and a different perspective. You know I remember dealing with Scheyville graduates for example, who were in the main blokes who had been out a couple of years at university or what ever and they didn't have the blinkered, narrow mentality that a lot of RMC and Portsea people had for example. So, I think that they were a tremendous asset, a tremendous asset.

> Okay, you answered all those, didn't even have to ask any ...

Sorry.

> No, no its great, you're covering the ground it's terrific. What was the hardest part about being a platoon commander?

Whoa. I don't think there was anything hard in retrospect, it was a great experience. I think - I've got to answer the question - I think the hardest thing was at a young age, and we were both pretty young, was thinking about and meeting the expectation, or trying to work out what the expectation of the soldiers was in me and attempting on a day to day basis to live up to that expectation. I made a mistake earlier on thinking that I had to be the best rifle shot in the platoon. I had to be the best, be the first home in the nine miler and things like that and then I quickly realised I didn't have to be because there were other people that had different talents. And then I realised that not only that, but the soldiers didn't expect

me, all they expected was for me to do my best. So I think the hardest thing was to try and work out what their expectation was and once I did - it was easy.

Okay, so as long as the platoon commander tries and gives his best shot?

Oh, no. No the platoon commander has got to have ability too. You know the world is full of triers, but you can't lead unless there is a degree of confidence in your ability and knowledge and all those other aspects that go with it. But I found that even those people who had all that but if they didn't try - if they weren't triers - soldiers would quickly lose respect for them anyway.

What do you think was the most important part of your job?

The most important part of my job was to deliver the goods. We are talking about a battle platoon commander now?

Yes.

The most important part of my job was to take, to lead my soldiers into battle, to do the best, to bring out the best in those soldiers in battle and bring them all home. That was my job.

How do you get the best out of your diggers?

Lead by example. Lead by example and there's various ways people do that. You know the big tough guy might lead from the front, other people might lead from the middle, others just have a natural flair for leadership and what I found personally was if the soldiers knew you well, if the soldiers had confidence in your ability and knowledge, if the soldiers trusted you to get most decisions right, and they knew that you were giving it your best shot yourself - they would follow you. Mind you, having said all that, we had a long time together as a platoon, so all the shirkers and bludgers weren't in the platoon, they had other jobs and were out and gone. We sorted them out in our training, so by the time we went there we had a pretty nice group of people.

What do you reckon is the minimum amount of time that you should have your platoon together before you go on operations?

Well, Gary it depends on the ...

Given that you have got all the resources.

On the intensity of training, well it depends on the intensity of training and the quality of the soldiers, I'll say that, but in the Army that I enlisted in the minimum amount of time I thought for a platoon commander to really mould a platoon and get them ticking the way he wanted them - six months.

Okay. You've already mentioned you were well trained, you considered yourself well trained for your particular job. Did you like your job?

Loved it, absolutely loved it.

What gave you the most satisfaction?

Being in charge. Being in charge, knowing that my 33 people, I was in charge of them, and I don't mean that egotistically, but I personally thrived with the knowledge that these people expected me to produce and that drove me on to producing. And I must say that I loved my time as a platoon commander, loved it. Obviously, you know when you are climbing up a big hill with 80 pounds on your back and it's four o'clock in the afternoon and you had a company commander who said we're not going to stop until we get to the top and you knew it was eight hours away, and there's another false crest - I didn't like it. But they were only short periods of time. But the harder it was - the more I enjoyed it.

Okay. What sticks most in your memory about 4 RAR?

Ohh. There were so many good memories, good memories. What sticks most in my memory? I guess, I guess coming home. When we came home as Delta Company and there was the battalion pretty well intact and we had a tremendous reception home from the battalion. We missed them when we were over there on our own, missed you; and then we had a great party in the Officers' Mess and I think on a lighter side, you came down to see us and you had a couple of champagne corks through the pin in your shoulder, and you got caught in the door going to the toilet and fell over! I think that really summed up the camaraderie and all those things about Four Battalion.

Did you ever take R & R?

Yes.

Where did you go?

Came back to Australia.

Did you think that you needed R & R?

Oh yes, yes.

Why was that?

I think you needed it just to get away and recharge the battery, recharge the batteries.

Did you find it hard to get going again when you came back (to Vietnam)?

No I didn't.

No cold feet?

No. no I was used to it. I went late in the piece too, I think, so that I knew that I had to go back, but I was on the short end of the time frame do you know what I mean?

Now we had a couple of R & C's ...

Oh, several (laughs)

Do you think they are important?

Yes, yes, because in the type of war we were fighting, which was a unique type of experience, we went into operational areas as a company; we dispersed and went into our own platoon AOs (areas of operations); we would come together I think every ten days from memory and have a company debrief and collect all our goodies. I remember the lovely pasties and pies that old (Sergeant J.C.) Joe Ryan use to send out to us with milk and things and we'd probably get a can of lemonade. And the padre would come around and we saw all those other people. But that was only for a couple of hours and then we were off again and then we would all sort of team up and fly back to Nui Dat. And then we could go away and let our hair down; the soldiers could go back to being soldiers; the NCOs could mix amongst themselves; the senior NCOs and the officers in the company would mix amongst themselves and we would link again that company spirit rather than the individual platoon spirits that existed out in the jungle and the padi fields. So, yes I thought it was terribly important that the officers and their sergeants could get away and go have a few drinks at the Grand Hotel in Vung Tau together without soldiers, and the soldiers obviously without the officers and senior NCOs. So, yes, I think it was terribly important because of the intensity and the type of things we were doing.

Good. You mentioned what your first contact was like; we talked about mayhem. What scared you the most when you were on operations?

Oh, the thing that scared you the most was the fact that you might get killed, I think that's a natural fear. But fear, if you train properly has a positive result and that is that it drives you. The fear of death provides in you a driving force to make you stay alive, and that, if you train properly, is a positive thing. Now, we were trained to react instinctively in a contact and in a fire fight. The initial response was an instinctive one, then you thought about it. You did your appreciation of where the enemy was and what he was firing at you and how you best silence him. So, yes, the biggest thing, from my point of view, was the fact that I've got these people, this platoon out here and if I don't do my job we might all get bloody well killed. And so there is a natural fear when you're on operations about death.

Did you ever think about mines?

All the time, all the time. There were some areas that you knew weren't mined of course, you know they don't necessarily mine padi. You know you could, oh, we were lucky, Delta Company were lucky obviously. Other people had it a little bit more difficult, but we had a fairly instinctive idea of where mines would be and where they weren't. There was always the fear of, I remember a guy, Johnnie Fraser who was with Three battalion. Now, (Lieutenant) Johnnie Fraser was fantastic rugby player, I remember him at The Southport School, and I was at Nudgee, and I saw him play rugby. He was a few years ahead of me, but when Johnnie Fraser got killed in a mine incident it brought it home to me vividly because I knew him. But we were fairly well trained I think with mines and we also had a degree of luck. We weren't in the Long Hais and those places that were heavily mined.

What incidents stand out? We are talking combat now. What incidents stand out most in your memory? It doesn't have to be with the company, it can be anything.

I think there's a very funny incident that stands out. I had a very close relationship with my signaller, I think most platoon commanders did.

> What was his name?

Willy. Private Williams. And Willy and I used to share a hootchie and we used to, he had a marvellous sense of humour, he was a country fellow and he told some lovely jokes and things and he was quietly spoken, dry sense of humour. And he had an SOP (Standard Operating Procedure), and we both smoked. I used to say to him, 'Look when a contact breaks out it is very important that you stay alive my friend. Forget about the rest of us because you've got the radio on your back. So you head for where it's safest and I'll find you some time', and after we did this a couple of times he developed an SOP because he knew that I needed a cigarette, and I would jump next to him eventually in a contact and he would have a cigarette going for me and I would take a couple of draws on a cigarette and sort of collect my thoughts and so on. And we used to share cigarettes in battle and things like that.

> He must have looked pretty cool, calm and collected lighting up a durry in the middle of a fire fight?

Well he did, he did and I remember one day he was in a bit of a hollow and I was sort of, I couldn't get in the hollow with him - I desperately wanted to but I couldn't, and I was in a hollow about five feet away from him and there was a tree, and he lit up a cigarette and he leant over to give it to me. And a bullet came straight through the tree and shattered the back of the tree and he just dropped the cigarette and he rolled back and he said, 'Fuck that was close'. At the time I was terrified, but that night we laughed and joked about it and so that's a funny incident.

I think another incident is an incident that occurred I guess between you and I when 11 Platoon ran into the back of us when we had stopped that time. We had stopped to get a cryptic message and it was raining and we were sort of all, our uniforms would have appeared black. It was overcast in the jungle and I don't know who it was, but one of your guys contacted our fellows and I had a reinforcement who had arrived literally hours before that afternoon, and he was a big bugger and a surfer and so on. He was killed in that contact and I remember feeling angry and there was mayhem and I remember going past you looking at the expression on your face and it was a poignant point because I looked at you and I was furious. You didn't know what had happened, and I thought, no there's no point in getting angry because this is war and this is one of the unfortunate by-products of war where the circumstances at the time lead to that incident. And you would never repeat them a million times over, it was just that unique thing. I remember looking at the expression on your face and you couldn't say anything, but your expression said, 'Fuck I'm sorry', and that's all you could say in that situation; and your soldiers also. I remember (Sergeant D.K.) Daryl Jenkin sort of, he was brilliant in that little contact, I remember looking at Daryl and nobody said anything, but everybody - sort of the expressions on their faces said it all.

> I can still feel that day when that contact broke out, and I said to my radio operator, 'Send contact wait out', and he said 10 Platoon just did', and I remember my guts just tightening. I think it's the worst feeling I have ever felt in my life.

Yes. Because we were going down this track on a thing and there was this 'Contact, wait out', and the bullets were coming from behind us and I thought ... Remember when we had been in some serious contacts the day (before) leading up to that and we were in the thick of it and we got all these confusing intelligence reports. We knew that there was a lot of bad buggers in the area and I thought, shit, these buggers must have been around our harbour area all night and they have got us surrounded.

What was the reaction in your platoon after that when you lost one of your own guys killed, another guy wounded from friendly fire?

The reaction was one of initially disbelief and confusion and regret. I think they didn't believe it could happen and then quite obviously when it was all explained that night people thought about it; that it was raining; that we had been on operations for a long time so our clothes were pretty grotty and so the green was now black. But the thankful thing about it was we were in contact the very next day, so it wasn't one of those things that built up or we dwelt on you know. That was gone and we were in contact I think next morning, the big one.

Did you have to handle your men in a particular way?

No, no I think, no. You just get on with the job. I think the circumstances were such that the next day we were into it again and away we went. There was no regrets.

What was the toughest time do you think you experienced on operations?

The toughest time Gary, was in our infamous battle when we went into that bunker complex remember?

September (21 September 1971)

Yes. And then we came out and we had to get out so we could bring in the air strikes and the artillery that night and it was on dusk and we bumped another system and that night was the toughest time. You got shot, God you got shot five metres from me, we were both putting our platoons down, and that was a tough leadership exercise because I remember crawling around and a lot of our guys had given up the ghost. They had been in the fight all day, we were pretty down on our uppers then, we had lost a lot of people, a lot of friends had gone and I remember waking people up constantly, crawling around and they were lying with their head over their ... It was interesting experience in retrospect because they were lying there with a hand over their head. And I remember seeing a couple of them with a hand down their crotch, sort of going back to days of birth or protecting their head and their balls, or I don't know what they were doing - but fear. They were terrified. My medic was absolutely bloody terrified and that night and the next day took a lot of leadership skills to get that company together because we had to fight another day. We were fairly well isolated. We were waiting for Victor Company or Whisky Company what ever it was to reach us and Bravo Company were in the area and there was only (Major) Jerry Taylor Pete and (Lieutenant) Greg Gilbert - FO) and myself left actually and so yes, we didn't know what was around the corner. I think the great uncertainty, so, but a great challenge. That was probably the toughest time. And seeing you disappear in a jungle penetrator was a bit tough because I honestly didn't expect to see you again. I remember

strapping you on, I think (Corporal M.J.) 'Doc' O'Sullivan and I strapped you on and I said goodbye to you and I bloody turned away and I never thought I would see you, and that was tough.

What was the saddest thing that you probably saw?

The saddest thing I saw was (PrivateB.M.) Bernie Pengilly being dragged past me. He had just been shot by an M60, and he had literally been shot two minutes before and they were dragging him past me and I had only been speaking to him about half an hour beforehand when we had harboured up for lunch. And then that experience, and going back to Nui Dat and writing a letter to his parents. What does a 22 year old platoon commander say to Mr and Mrs Pengilly about their son? What do you say? But I made myself write the letter and I got pissed after it.

How did the platoon take the death of (Private B.M.) Pengilly?

Well. well, I admired them. They were saddened, it affected every body but they were tough buggers, and he was a lovely guy. It wasn't as if he was a ratbag or anything like that. But the platoon took it well they didn't miss a beat and I think that's important that people are trained to that level. In their private moments of course they reflect, I don't know what they reflect.

What was the reaction like with the guys when they saw enemy dead?

Business like, the reaction was business like. You had to, there was a series of things you had to do. You had to search; you had to document and then you had to bury; and I think naturally there was a feeling of compassion. I think in everybody there is a feeling of compassion, but as opposed to ours where you had to get the body out and away and there wasn't the same requirement. But it was a business like attitude and that end of it and that night of course when you're sitting down and brewing up, soldiers are soldiers - every body has a life. And I think underneath it all there's a feeling of compassion but business like in the sense that that is what we ware there for, sad and all as it is - that was our job.

Okay, I think you have just about covered those. We can talk about the tank battle in July. What do you think were some of the memorable things like that that sort of come out at you, and what were the hardest parts about doing that attack with tanks?

The hardest part, let's go to the hardest part first if that's alright. The hardest part was knowing where these big Centurions were coming from because in the jungle they are very difficult to pin point. You hear the noise, but you don't know where. Anyway once they entered into the battle area, the difficult thing, because we were in a bunker system and I guess that's the only place that you would use them in the jungle, and they were very effective. But as they came forward between us all they were pushing down trees that had the effect of camouflaging the enemy and the bunkers. So that was difficult, then once you had them spotted and you knew where they were and you were effecting fire and movement there. Once the tanks came through, and thank God they were there, they pushed the trees down and of course it was trying to find them all over again. The other thing was a little bit of difficulty in communication because the armoured people speak so well on radios because that's their mode of communication, whereas we speak a little more slowly - so there was a difficulty in that sort of communication. But once they were in

there, one of the nice things was that the tank commander, the troop commander was (Lieutenant) Bruce Cameron, and Bruce was at Portsea with me, so there was a feeling of Christ, this is what we had trained at Portsea to do, you know, and it was really happening. I remember him getting out of his tank or attempting to get out the first time and an RPG-7 whistled past his ear and down he went again. And then eventually he got out and jumped down and came and spoke to me on the ground and so that was excellent. Now the other thing was that they had a tremendous shock effect, particularly when they put their barrel down a bunker and went kaboom! And also in driving over bunkers.

> This is Tape Two of Kevin Byrne taped in Cairns, Saturday the 6th of March for Gary McKay's research project Delta Four - Infantry in Battle. Kevin we were talking about tanks.

Yep. You asked the question whether I had worked with tanks before?

> That's right.

Not with my platoon. I had obviously when I was at Portsea worked with them. We went up to Puckapunyal just to do our inf/armour cooperation bit, but we did work with APCs at High Range for an exercise but that was really I guess a completely different experience. So, yes, all my memories came flooding back on how to talk to these people and how to direct them. The difficulty with us was that we were already in combat, in contact, and the tanks really had to come through our lines and it was very difficult for the tank commanders and the tank drivers when they have their hatches closed, to see our people. I remember (Private) Bernie Pengilly, when he was killed, there were tanks amongst us and there is some suggestion, I didn't see him get killed, but there is some suggestion that he moved his position because he thought that he may have been run over by a tank and unfortunately went right across a fire lane and was killed pretty well instantly. There was some fear amongst the soldiers at the time with these big lumbering tanks that whilst their firepower was tremendous and of great assistance, that they were frightened that they may get run over by them. I guess the thought in their mind was which would be the more pleasant way to go, being run over by a tank or being shot by the 274 (VC) Regiment. The end result was fantastic I guess and we made the most in that situation with that troop of tanks and their cooperation was tremendous.

> I mean most people would be quite amazed (with) the fact that here is a company in contact, had never done an attack, a company attack in combat before, and then it gets a troop of tanks thrown into it - in close country. Why did it work?

It worked because of the people on the ground. It worked because of the quick wittedness of - not in a witty sense - but the quick wittedness of people to react, section commanders to say, look that tank has got to get through that area there because the other trees are too big therefore I have to shift my soldiers and shift them quickly. So people reacted instinctively and it was also a tremendous thing for (Major J.H.) Jerry Taylor, because I remember I think Jerry had arrived the day before or two days before and it was important I guess for the company commander to be blooded in battle fairly quickly and what better way for him to do it than to be involved in a company attack in close country and having tanks with him. But thankfully the intelligence was such that we had those tanks there and the intelligence did indicate a bunker system. And we were well into that bunker system before we picked it up, it was pretty good one and I remember how the contact started and

in fact there is a sadness about this because I remember being called forward by (Corporal P.M.) Paul Menner, the section commander, to the forward scout.

Now, I just … look his name just escapes me at the moment, no it was (Private) John Lawton, and he was a lovely fellow and he called me forward. And as I went forward, I noticed these trees that were obviously chopped down pretty well at the base and the tops were covered with ground and leaves and so on and I knew then that we were in a bunker system. And just at the point that I got to the forward scout, one of the enemy poked his head out of a bunker and fired an RPG-2, and it went whistling over our heads and exploded in a tree and that was when contact was initiated. I then went back and started to call in artillery and unfortunately one of the guns wasn't aligned properly and one of the 105 mm rounds exploded in a tree and the forward scout was hit by a fragment of the exploding shells. That was in the initial stages of that contact, and then much later the contact went on for some hours and I remember (Second Lieutenant G.D.) Graham Spinkston's platoon being behind us and you were on the right hand side, I think you were on the right. But Graham was in reserve that afternoon and he was definitely trying to get involved and he had come right up behind us.

> (AUTHOR: 10 Platoon [Byrne] was on the left, 12 Platoon [Spinkston] on the right and 11 Platoon [McKay] was in reserve. Later in the attack, McKay's platoon moved through 10 and completed the assault.)

But the the intriguing thing was the way we worked with tanks, it went very well and in fact gave us a lot of confidence at the time about our capacity in battle. We were pretty good at ambushing; we were pretty good at patrolling; we were pretty good at one to one contacts with small groups of people, but the fact that we were untested with armour in battle; and the fact that we used a troop of tanks - and they were commanded fairly well by (Lieutenant) Bruce Cameron I must say - and they were on the ball and they weren't reckless. They knew that there was a platoon on the ground in the jungle there and they had to be reasonably careful. But it gave us a hell of a lot of confidence to deal with was obviously going to be a lot other hotter issues later on.

> We read in pamphlets that the platoon commander will lead his men in contact. What did you really spend most of your time doing when your platoon was in that attack?

I spent most of my time coordinating the artillery and coordinating the tank commander. He and I had had a sort of a one to one dialogue. I remember even talking to him one the back of his tank phone. Having to get up and have to move to that tank phone. So, in that battle it wasn't as if we were in an ambush or just a normal contact situation, but my main role during that battle was to coordinate the artillery and the … and of course with the FO too, but it was more a coordination role. Because once the tanks got involved in the battle, they really were the ones that were going to be decisive, so once they came forward and took over from us our role then became a supporting role for the tanks in terms of protecting them from infantry attacks with RPG-7s and things like that.

> How did you control the movement of your platoon?

The movement of the platoon was dictated largely by where the three tanks went and that's the way I played it. It was futile for me to be dictating the movement of the tanks because

once the tanks came in I realised that they were the ones that were vulnerable but they were also the ones that had the firepower, so I manoeuvred my platoon with the tanks and that's the way I agreed with (Lieutenant) Bruce Cameron that we would fight the fight. And it worked. I really don't think I had any option and I quickly realised that. When Bruce (Cameron) got out of his tank and came down and he said, and we sat down behind a tree and he said, 'Right, where are your troops?' And I could physically point them out in rough area where the particular sections were, and we agreed at that point. We knew where the bunker system was - the main part of the bunker system - we agreed at that point that he would be doing the thrusting and that we would support and be alongside him as we went through the system.

> Okay. At the end of that day right on last light it all sort of settled down and we harboured in a company harbour with the tanks.

And we had the APCs come in and resupply us and extract the wounded.

> Right. How did your platoon react, because that was the first time that we had had a casualty in the company - a death ...

Yes, apart from (Corporal A.C.F.) 'Tassie' Wilkinson.

> Apart from Tassie ...

A death in battle, yes.

> A death. How did your guys react?

When it all settled down I think during the battle they didn't have any time to think about anything except themselves and the task at hand. When we all settled down, had a brew and got our orders and ... their reaction was that at last its happened. One of us has gone. One of us we won't see again. Yes, with a degree of sadness. (Sergeant B.K.) Butch Porter, my platoon sergeant was tremendous (on) that occasion, I remember well, because I was sad because I had seen this ... Bernie (Pengilly) being dragged past me. And I remember some very comforting words from (Major) Jerry Taylor at the time, he said to me, he said, 'Kevin', he said, 'You can't make an omelette without breaking an egg'. It was the first time I had ever heard that statement made and it's terribly true. He was a tremendous inspiration, Jerry Taylor, and so was (Captain) Peter Schuman. It was great to have them there at the time and also a platoon sergeant of the personal experience of (Sergeant B.K.) Butch Porter. Butch at that stage, he was on his second tour. He said to me frankly, he said, 'Listen', he said, 'If you want a sergeant that's going to charge up there with the lead section into battle', he said, 'I'm too old for that', he said, 'This is my second tour and I've got a wife and three or four kids'. I just forget the number, and he said, 'You better look around for somebody else'. And I said, 'No, all I want you to do is to be by my side and make sure we have got the best administered platoon in the battalion'. Which he did very, very well. But he had an older head on his shoulders and he went round and spoke to the soldiers that night and he did it very well.

> Did you ever see a mine incident?

No.

Okay. What do you think you learnt most from your time in Vietnam?

I grew up a lot. I learnt a lot about myself and I learnt a lot about people. I learnt a lot about how people react; I learnt a lot about what motivates people; I learnt a lot about what fear does to people and I learnt a lot about controlling emotion. Now that can be a good and a bad thing but I think we had to. We had an obligation, well I certainly believed I had an obligation, to control my emotions in a positive sense.

Because the men were looking to you?

Yes, there were some fairly difficult times where they were looking for inspiration, they were looking for, I guess they were looking for leadership. And I learnt a lot about myself. I came back a lot wiser and I guess the rebel streak was always in me - still is - but I was a more controlled individual.

Well, I'd like to talk about relationships now. What do you think your personal situation and relationship was like between you and your riflemen?

I think it was great. I often got accused of I guess, of being too close to my platoon. Throughout my Army career and particularly in my early days I would be accused, by those people who didn't know me well, of being too familiar with my soldiers. But I never was. I had a happy knack of being one of the boys and yet not being part of the boys - are you with me? I used to play rugby with them; I used to play cricket with them; I used to participate fully with my platoon. But at the same time I can honestly say I don't think I was, well with probably one or two exceptions of a couple of mugs that didn't last long in the platoon, but without exception that situation was never taken advantage of. I also had a very good, I didn't charge many soldiers. In fact I don't recall, I think I charged one soldier in my platoon. I didn't have to. And I had some good NCOs you know like (Corporal R.E.) Williams and (Corporal P.M.) Menner and (Corporal R.V.) 'Sludge' McGahan and Butch Porter and those guys. They were excellent NCOs and I related very well with them and they knew where I came from; I knew where they came from and I had a great empathy with my soldiers. And I think Gary, it's difficult to say why that occurred I guess because I was born in Papua New Guinea and I grew up there in an isolated area. I went to school, I grew up with Papua New Guinea kids - with black kids - and I could always assimilate and fit in. Then I went to boarding school for seven years and I had to fit in again; I had to be part of the team, so that made it fairly easy. I was always in trouble with (Major) Franz Kudnig for being too close to my platoon but I always knew I had control of it. I always knew that nobody would ever take advantage of that situation and I think they respected me for that.

Your relationship between yourself and your section commanders, how was that different to your relationship with say just the Diggers?

I worked on the principle that I trusted them, and I'd give them jobs and never check on them, well I'd check obviously, but I wouldn't be hounding people. I established a rapport of, what's the word, delegation and trust and I think they respected that. You see (Corporal) Paul Menner was a National Serviceman, (Corporal R.E. Williams) Willy and Sludge (Corporal R.V. McGahan) were Regular soldiers but they had been to Vietnam before as soldiers and I think they welcomed it. They were the type of people - I was very

lucky - they were the type of people that welcomed the opportunity of getting a job given to them and they would go away and do it. You know a lot of people spend a lot of time inspecting platoon lines and things like that. Well, I hardly did that. I would occasionally do a spot check and if wasn't satisfactory I would get cranky, but I'd just say to them, are your lines okay? Yep. And that was enough because I trusted them and I think that worked well in my situation. You couldn't do it with everybody, but I was just lucky with the type of people that I had.

Okay. What was your relationship like between you and your platoon sergeant?

Very close, very close. A difficult one to describe. Father and son is not the best description but I guess (Sergeant B.K.) Butch Porter, Brian Porter took it upon himself to teach me as much as he could in his own way and I guess I was, I guess he saw me as a bit of a protege of the type of young officer he liked serving with.

Would you say he was an adviser?

Yes, and a confidante, a confidante in terms of how to deal with people. Yes, he was a confidante of mine and as a consequence I got very close to him where I could trust him. I could say things to him that I knew he wouldn't repeat. I could discuss my relationship with my company commander with him knowing that it wouldn't be repeated.

What do you think is the most important part of a relationship between a platoon commander and a platoon sergeant?

I think that. I think that because if you are a young, well let's assume that platoon commanders go into platoons at a young age; it's your first job as an infantry officer - combat job. I think that if you can establish a rapport with your platoon sergeant of trust and he can become a confidante. I think he (Porter) treated me like that because he knew that I had an ability, he also knew that I enjoyed my job and I gave platoon commandering a hundred percent of my effort. I think he wouldn't have had the same relationship with a smart arse but once we were together he became a confidante and I think that was terribly important.

What was your relationship like between you and Kudnig?

Ahh. When I first went to the company my relationship with (Major) Franz Kudnig was one of, 'He's my company commander therefore he's my boss and I will do as you normally do'. My relationship with Franz Kudnig was one where I respected his ability; I respected his soldierly bearing but it was one where I was confused a lot of the time. I knew he would never be a mentor whereas (Major) Jerry Taylor was a mentor; Jerry Taylor was a teacher. It was one of aloofness I guess.

Is it because (Major) Jerry Taylor was more approachable than (Major) Kudnig?

Yes, but approachable both ways. He delivered downwards and therefore that encouraged us to deliver upwards. Whereas I always got the distinct impression from Franz that he only expected delivery upwards and that delivery downwards was something that he would pick and choose when he so did it. Does that make sense to you?

Yes. What was your relationship like with the CSM?

It was a nothing relationship. If he said, 'Mr Byrne or Lieutenant Byrne I am going to inspect your lines tomorrow morning', I would say, 'Yes CSM', and get on with it.

Why was it like that? Why wasn't it like the relationship you had with (Captain) P.J. Schuman, which I am assuming was very much a two way affair with the 2IC?

Yes it was. Difficult to say, I liked (Warrant Officer Class Two) Noel Huish, I liked him but he had a strange way about him. He was a nice fellow and I think he was competent, he obviously was competent, but I really didn't have much time for him. I respected him as CSM, I knew what job he did, I put in for him and supported that role. I didn't think he had that much of a rapport with soldiers. I didn't respect his ... I guess I expected more of him as a CSM in a rapport with soldiers; in his management techniques with soldiers. I expected a lot more, so when I didn't see that, I guess I was disappointed and I thought well it's not really going to affect my job as a platoon commander what sort of CSM you are, I'll get on with my sergeant and my company 2IC and do it anyway.

What was your relationship like with the CQMS?

Great.

Because?

I guess we were like personalities. (Staff Sergeant R.J.) Bob Hann and myself were like personalities. He also had a good relationship with Butch Porter. I thought he was a tremendously competent CQMS and he had all the interests of the soldiers in the company at heart and the officers and everybody. He was singularly patriotic to Delta Company 4 RAR in terms of trying to extract the best out of the quartermaster and provide us with the best. I liked that in him and you could laugh and joke with him. He trusted you, I trusted him. I thought he was great guy, (Staff Sergeant R.J.) Bob Hann, I really did.

How do you think you were treated by (Major) Franz Kudnig, and I am talking a generic type?

As another platoon commander, as any other platoon commander?

How do you think (Major J.H.) Taylor treated you?

As (Second Lieutenant) Kevin Byrne, platoon commander?

Okay.

Right?

Do you think, did you feel more trust from Taylor?

Absolutely, absolutely.

So, we're getting back to delegation aren't we, and trust and confidence?

Yes, trust and confidence. Because see that's what we were trained for from the outset. You know I'm quite sure that you know, (Lieutenant Colonel J.C.) Jimmy Hughes had to have trust in all of us and I think, well it's the same. Gary, it's the same in this job (Mayor of Cairns). You can't really fire as an organisation unless you've got an acceptable degree of trust in those people who have executive power. And whether we like it or not, platoon commanders did have executive power in the sense that they had the radio to call in the airstrikes; they had the radio to call in the artillery; they had the radio to call in for the food, and we went away for ten days at a time with 30 people at best. I guess mostly about 22, and a job to do so you had to trust people. I found that I had (Major) Jerry Taylor's trust, I didn't think I ever had (Major) Franz Kudnig's trust.

What do you think one of the most important qualities a junior leader should have?

People always ask the question, 'What is leadership?' Difficult thing. I think you have to be determined; you have to have confidence in your own ability; and you have to have ability. You can't lead in battle unless you have the rudiments of tactics; and how to get on with people and how to extract the best out of them. It was like one of the most pleasant things I've experienced, when I was instructing at Portsea and Duntroon later on - passing this experience on, and I remember years later seeing a film called 'Dead Poets' Society'. Robin Williams had a quality of leadership in that environment which was very similar to the military. You are extracting the best out of young people and I equated that situation to the military. I loved that movie because I could see, you know he was eccentric, that he had an ability to get the best out of people. I don't know whether I have answered that properly.

No, no. Now you were as young as most of the men you commanded. How did you handle that?

Ohh, I never thought about it to be honest with you. Sometimes in my quieter moments I would think, 'Oh he said that', or talking about a soldier now, 'Private Williams said that or did that because he was young and he doesn't know what he is doing'. And I would think to myself, 'God I am the same age as he, what am I talking about'? I think I handled it because, I don't know whether, you know you don't like to say this and I'm not saying it to feel big headed, but I came from a pretty good family; I came from a good background and I had good training at school. I went to a boarding school for seven years; I was a prefect there; I was the eldest of three in my family. So, when you put all those little blocks together; you know I captained the cricket team at school; captained the rugby team. I had done all those things so it never occurred to me that whilst I was the leader of the platoon, no there was some people older than me too. You know my section commanders and platoon sergeant and so on. I never really thought about it - I just did it.

Do you think that men under twenty years of age should go to war?

Ooh, yeh.

Why?

They have got enthusiasm and lots of it you know. It depends, if they've got the dedication and enthusiasm and ability I think the earlier they do it the better. And if you follow on in a professional career in the Army, whether you're an enlisted soldier or an officer, the

earlier you can go to war and experience the highs and lows and thrill of battle and the down side of battle; the better person you will be in the military.

What made you feel good when you were in Vietnam?

Buying Fosters cans at 20 cents. (Laughs) No, seriously, I genuinely believed I was doing a job for my country. I genuinely believed that and there's no point in turning back the clock now and saying well you know it may have all been wrong. At the time I genuinely believed that I was doing my bit for a country that I love. I'm a naturalised Australian. Ever since I was a babe I have been an Australian I guess, but I was doing my bit for the country that I loved and that I was prolonging a tradition of service to a country. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed my job as a platoon commander.

Okay. what pissed you off most when you were in Vietnam?

I guess our ration packs, isn't that what we all complained about? No, nothing much did to be honest with you. I enjoyed the camaraderie of it. I guess there were times when you think God, I could be at Brothers' Rugby Union Club here, and tonight, or down at the Breakfast Creek (Hotel) having a steak and I'd really love to be doing that, and here I am and it's raining and it's late at night. I guess what pissed me off most was endless nights ambushing and waiting up and nobody came through the ambush. And some nights were great; some nights were successful but I remember all that expended energy lying in ambushes and things like that, and yes, that used to drive me mad.

How do you handle that frustration you know when you spend days, sometimes weeks patrolling and you don't find the enemy? How do you handle that?

I think you handle it better if you are optimistic, that tomorrow is another day - tomorrow is another day. And I say that not because I used to enjoy battle; battle was part and parcel of our life and our training and the reason we were there, and it was frightening. If anybody suggests that you know, going into battle is all fun, well that's bull shit, it's a terrifying experience. But I was always optimistic that we were the best company, we certainly were; and that we were in the right areas; and we were well led; and we had good fire support and we had it all. So, day in day out we patrol, we patrol, we patrol; and people get frustrated. We would be on fresh evidence, we would be on good sign and everything was hot, and then we would get further away. But I think you just had to instil a degree of optimism and tomorrow is another day for your troops.

Okay. What was your parent's reaction to you going to Vietnam?

Oh, look they were very apprehensive, they were very apprehensive, but not once did they show it and not once did they discourage me. They were surprised when I joined the Army because my family, apart from wartime experience of my grandfather, my father didn't have any military experience or anything like that; school cadets when he was at school. And he didn't fight in the last war, so, from a family point of view there was no tradition there, so they were surprised I guess. But they were very proud and they were very supportive; they used to write regularly and my mother used to send - I remember you used to eat some of them - my mother used to send a cake a week! I would get in off operations and there were, there would be six fruit cakes. My mother and my sister used to send these things and of course I would dish them out to the soldiers and I would write

back to my mother and tell her that I ate my lovely cakes all the time and I never did. The Diggers did, we used to, you know I would have a bit and then pass them on.

How important was mail?

Oh, tremendously important, tremendously important. Yes, the mail bag was fantastic and I used to remember getting letters and I would look at the disappointment on the face of Diggers that didn't get letters. You know it was sort of almost as if, I know it's not the same, but saying,' Here read my letters from home'. That was really a sad thing to see the mail bag come in and letters would be dished out and you would walk around the platoon perimeter just before Stand To at night and people would be reading their letters and others wouldn't. And there were some soldiers who didn't get a letter for months on end.

If we could talk about allies now, any comments on any of the allies we worked with; the New Zealanders, the Yanks, the ARVN?

I always thought the New Zealanders, and this will probably create some sort of controversy, I always thought the New Zealanders were over-rated. The New Zealanders, I guess because that they were in a minority. They did their job, don't get me wrong, but they were always trying to one-up you. The Kiwis were always trying to be better than the Australians, who ever it was, because they were in a minority, and I found that is a normal course of events with Kiwis in any case. I found them competent, obviously there was no problem working with them. Some American units were first class as you know. Some of the fly boys were, the pilots; remember 'Jade 07', or what ever the call sign was. Tremendous. Larry Sariba was his name was. Fantastic comfort and the Jade FAC 07 I think it was. Some of the SEAL Teams; some of the artillery units were first class but there was a great disparity between, there was a great gap between the best and the worst, unfortunately. I remember when - on one of our first operations - we were putting in that cordon for 3 RAR's push and I remember marrying up with an American platoon on a river and they were just terrible. They really were. I got my platoon up and left at night. We had linked up but they had harboured up with us and I said, 'No, look you guys stay here and we will go and harbour up else where', because they were just so noisy and they used spray for mosquitos. And you know if you really wanted to telegraph to the Viet Cong where you were you just stayed with this unit - if you really wanted trouble. ARVN. Gee, we didn't work, I didn't work much with the ARVN so I really can't comment, except that I can understand why they really got belted. Mind you, we saw the worst I guess in the end because they were pretty well shattered by the time we got there.

What about the enemy, what did you think of the enemy?

Once again a mixed bag. The old Chau Duc District Company were grist to the mill and of course they weren't well trained. 274 (VC Main Force) [Dong Nai] Regiment were pretty good, pretty good; they were pretty solid, but that 3rd of the 33rd (NVA) - very good, very good. Very efficient fighting unit given the wherewithal that they had; given the fact that they fought without artillery and fought just with mortars that they carried around; fought without air power. I thought that they were excellent, excellent.

Did you ever feel sorry for the enemy?

No, no. I genuinely believed that we were there for the right cause and they were there for the wrong cause. So, no, I didn't feel sorry for them. On a personal level after contact and you saw enemy dead, I felt sorry for them individually but when you say did you ever feel sorry for the enemy, no. And I knew in a fire fight that it was either them or us, or he or me, and so, no I didn't feel sorry for them.

> Were they as you imagined they would be, you know after you had done all your training in Australia?

Yes, pretty well, pretty well.

> We talked about morale and letters and that before, we also had a lot of anti-Vietnam protesting going on in 1971. Did that personally affect you or your soldiers?

No, I don't think it did. It was more of a disappointment and I think it may have had some lack of, well lessening of morale value, but I think it was a personal disappointment. It was a bigger disappointment - while we were there I am talking about - it was huge disappointment when we got back, huge disappointment. I remember, well it's a light hearted incident now, but at the time it had a really big effect on me. I remember getting back and I was a skinny bugger with short hair and my sister, Maureen, was being crowned Miss University in Brisbane when I first got back and I went along because we were very close. She asked me to come along and I had to leave because I ended up in about three fights and taunted all night by these university students because I was a Vietnam veteran and I had just come back and they knew it. There was an element there - not all of them - but there was a fairly hard core anti-Vietnam element in the University of Queensland and I never saw my sister crowned that night. I had to leave early because, there was no point in staying as I was being harassed and you know I remember being belted and I got in a cab and went home. I remember my mother and father asking me what happened and I told them and I said, 'I'm really disappointed that I've come back to an Australia that treats its' own this way after going to Vietnam and fulfilling an obligation that we had nothing to do with in the original decision making process'.

> Any regrets in going?

No, no not at all.

> Looking back, in hindsight was Australia's involvement in Vietnam worth it?

A lot of people have asked me that, you know they ask me that more and more now and I guess it is because as time passes, people look back and wonder whether it was worth it. Incredible isn't it - nearly 25 years. And here (Cairns) we celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the Coral Sea and we weren't that far behind - Second World War. Yes, I think it was. Look it was part of the time; it was part of the foreign policy; it was part of the world then and obviously it was worth it at the time. The same question could be asked about, look at Japan's dominance here in Cairns, in terms of finance. Was it worth going to war with Japan, and at the time my word it was, and at the time I think Vietnam was worth it.

> Okay. What was the most important thing to you when you were in Vietnam?

The most important thing to me was to be thoroughly professional at my job, and this sounds trite doesn't it? Being thoroughly professional at my job, to ensure that we would all live another day and that we would see our time out and do our job to the best of our ability. I wanted to bring all the people home that I went with and still do our job to 110 percent capacity. Now that goes back to (Major) Jerry Taylor's sobering comments about you can't make an omelette without breaking an egg and obviously in that process we lost some people.

> All right. Now what question would you have liked me to have asked you? What did you think I was going to ask you today?

I think you have pretty well covered it, I'm glad you didn't ask me a whole lot of questions about leadership because it's one of those things that I've never been able, you know you read all the pams; you read all the literature on it; there are people now with training guarantee levy legislation money that are making a living out of talking about corporate leadership and you know leadership in council, and elected members of parliament, and military and everything else. It's one of those things that I don't say people are born to, but it's one of those things that gives you a great feeling. Leadership gives you a great feeling. It gives you a great feeling of belonging to a group; it gives you a great feeling of participation and it gives you a great feeling of - if you do it well at the end of the day and people respect you for it - it's great. But I don't know what the ingredients are I really don't. It goes back to Robin Williams.

> So, how do we make competent leaders? Is it by practice, is it by following the example of others, is it by reading about it?

I think it's a combination of all those, but it's about identifying who are - and you can do that in training at the military colleges and the experience of life - and nurturing those qualities by giving people authority, trusting, delegation; all those things and letting them get on with it. And if you are a good leadership trainer you don't lecture people - you guide them - and I think if you identify the leaders for the military and you give them all that wherewithal, they have to be disciplined - obviously - but guide them. The old cliche, give them enough rope and they hang themselves. No, give them enough rope, but give them plenty of rope and obviously as commanders you're going to be in control of your junior leaders, but nurture them.

> Do you think that is why you admired (Major J.H.) Taylor as a leader? (Because) He trusted you?

Yes, I thought (Major) Jerry Taylor was a fantastic company commander. I thought (Captain) Peter Schuman would have made an equally fantastic company commander. I think one of the great, one of the big tragedies of the military personnel management is that they assess people as, 'Oh, he was a good company commander, or he was a good battalion commander, but he won't make a good brigadier or he won't you know he doesn't know enough about this and', and the higher you go in the military - I'm out of it now and have been since 1987 - but I can look back at it and a lot of the people like yourself are still in there. You know you just told me about (Lieutenant G.D.) Garry Bryant today and the higher I look in the military the less leadership there is in there. The good leaders, they're not pensioned off but, 'Oh he won't make it any more, he was good battalion commander but that's the level for him and we'll sort of have another career path for those

people'. And I think the military lacks leadership at the highest levels because people get too far away from the manpower base; get too far away from soldiers; they don't provide them with the right equipment; they don't provide them with the right conditions of service and the military after a certain level becomes politicised and I found that very disappointing for the country because the military had some great men in it. All three services for that matter, who still owed a lot to their country and could have done a tremendous job but left the military.

Okay, well I think we are all talked out.

That's it.

That's the end of Tape Two - Kevin Byrne - the Sixth of March.