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INTERVIEWEE: Noel Huish

INTERVIEWER: Gary McKay

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This is tape one of two tapes of an interview with Noel Huish conducted by Gary McKay. Recorded on the 20 March, 1993 at Ferny Hills in Brisbane. The topics covered on this tape are training for war, National Servicemen, and jobs in Delta Company.

My first question, Noel, is why did you join the Army?

I don't really think I ever wanted to do anything else, not from High School cadets. There was never ... I don't think there was any question. That was it, I simply wanted to be a soldier. There was never any initial ambition to it, I just wanted to be a soldier.

Any relatives sort of been in the Army?

No, there was no great military background at all.

But cadets probably gave you the ...

But cadets probably gave me the inkling to you know, this is great - this will do me.

And this was in Adelaide?

This was in Adelaide. Family pressured me to wait until National Service, which was probably a good idea, although I would have been in the Army two years earlier had I not. Because there was such a backlog of National Service, I never actually went into National service until I was 19. But , yeah, it was a good idea and it only reinforced what I wanted to do, so, two days after National Service finished, I was Regular Army.

Cadet training is usually infantry oriented isn't it?

Yes.

But when you went to Kapooka, you were allocated to Signals Corps?

No, because of some strange reason I wound up in Signals Platoon in National Service and as a result of that, they accepted National Service as recruit training and they did it with everybody, everybody that changed straight over, and I went to School of Sigs for corps training. So I was corps enlisted into Sigs.

So you didn't actually do training at Kapooka?

No.

Okay. What do you remember most about your corps training then as a signaller?

(Laughs) That's hard to say. I enjoyed Balcombe except that it was too much 'back to school'. I'd relatively recently left high school and sig training, and I took a mechanics course, sig training is highly technical and it's like back to bloody school and that got me a bit angry. I wasn't all that keen on that. The algebra. That's what pissed me off, the algebra! Months of it! With the result that having completed what they called the basic mechanics course of some 15 weeks or so, you then got a choice of being a radio

mechanic; line mechanic; telegraph mechanic or a fourth option was a trade called driver electrician - field electricity. The first three options meant another 50-odd weeks of course and the fourth option only meant another nine weeks. So I leapt at it. Get me out of here! with the result that I wound up with a pretty low grade trade, but it did get me out into the real world of soldiers.

Into the Army?

Yes.

You spent a couple of years in an independent signal squadron then you went to 1RTB as an instructor. This is where you picked up your nicknames you were telling me.

Yes. I tend to think, after an initial period; holy mackerel that first six months at 1 RTB was terrifying, with no instructional ability or experience whatever. But in a period because it is so repetitious you get to be pretty reasonable at it. It's great background for future service, it really is. And I was pretty strict, so I'm told, and that is how the 'Little Hitler' came about. I tend to think that the 'Horror (Huish)' was sort of picked up in the more leisure hours because we really played hard. We worked very hard but we played even harder. It was a good time. I remember Kapooka so well, it was a great background for future service, it bore me well.

So, you're almost an advocate then that an instructional posting like that should be compulsory for all NCOs.

Should be vital, absolutely vital. It gives you the confidence.

So all these instructional skills were picked up the job?

Oh yes.

You worked in platoon environments didn't you?

That's right, yeah.

So, who was <u>your</u> instructor?

Well, you never really had an instructor as such, but the older members of platoon staff certainly acted as mentors. So that, I don't think I was even allowed on the parade ground for probably three or four weeks, you simply watched and learned and then you would given a couple of very easy lessons. And then watched and assessed, but you really weren't let loose for the full period of one platoon. That is what ever it was at the time -13 or 14 weeks. By the time you got your second platoon in you were just starting to pick up your legs and away you went from there. So the first few months, very much a training period. It's a tremendous ... it's like all instructional postings, you see immediate result for effort; you get instant job satisfaction and as we have said it's absolutely vital.

You did several years there and the Corps of Sigs weren't interested in promoting you so you corps transferred to infantry. You did no infantry IET training?

Only in infantry Subject B. In fact, as I found out after, the training major had had some inkling, and being pure blood infantry, this guy angled almost every other corps - remembering that 1 RTB of course is infantry oriented, and infantry ran and led. And this guy angled and worked on every other corps instructor down there to change over and he succeeded admirably. And there was one break where we had some weeks between platoons and he suggested that even as a sig, 'just for something to do, slip out and do an infantry Subject B'. And so for something to do I did. By the time I transferred I was already fully qualified infantry, but no, as such, I never did infantry IET. It was all on the job training.

But you had the advantage of having been an instructor hadn't you really?

Oh yes.

When you look back on that, when we were training our young soldiers at 1 RTB then, do you think the training was tough enough? and broad enough?

1 RTB was very basic, tremendously basic and yes, back in those days it was. It was a hard course. I don't know what they do these days, but we had what we called a 'back-squadding' system and a periodic assessment, and if you didn't shape up over a period of weeks, then you moved backwards and you had to repeat 'X' amount of weeks.

There would have been a lot of peer pressure not to get back squadded wouldn't there?

That's right. It was a pretty tough game and of course there was the incentives for high pass rates at recruit level. The top 10 in any given platoon had their choice of corps, others at the lower level were shunted off to what ever corps was desperate for soldiers at the time. So, yes, a lot of pressure on recruits.

If we can now switch across to about 1964 when 4 RAR was being formed, officially on the 1st of February, but you marched in as an initial member of the battalion and it was obviously ... was it warned for active service then?

Oh yes, 4 RAR was raised for service in Malaya and Borneo.

How did you feel about that?

Delighted, absolutely delighted, and that was the impression you got from everyone that came to the battalion. There was a purpose, it wasn't just that you were going to a unit, there was a purpose. But then, in those days, there was in every battalion of the Regiment. Prior to 4 (RAR) there were only three, and they were either in Malaya or training to go to Malaya on a rotation type basis.

And we had basically been at war the whole time hadn't we with Korea and all that?

That's right.

So, how long was the battalion together for, before it actually went to Malaya?

The first inauguration parade on the First of February, outside Battalion Headquarters in Woodside, there were 50 troops on parade. It formed fairly quickly but I couldn't say exactly at what stage it was up to full strength. I imagine probably by about May, April or May of that year (1964), and we didn't go to Malaya until either late September or early October '65. So at least twelve months.

So, a pretty good work up period?

Oh yes.

And you felt pretty confident in the way the companies and the platoons were coming together?

Yes, yes, it was the same system we used to train for Vietnam. Initially, company training leading up to battalion exercises; LWC or JTC as it was at that time; and then away and indeed the first twelve months in Malaya or first nine months in Malaya was again training, training, training.

Being almost a foundation member, or being a foundation member, and then watching all these people come and go; when we got around to the second tour of Vietnam, did you think that the company, Delta Company was ready to go to war?

Oh yes, yes. 4 RAR had a tremendous advantage and I guess other battalions will say similar, but we did. When we came home from Malaya in '67 we knew we were going to Vietnam in what, six months, seven months and the battalion was left very much alone. And so, I don't know the percentage, but it was a very high percentage did that first tour, (of Vietnam) and we were very fortunate in that when we came home after the first tour, although we scattered to the four winds, there was still a very, very high percentage went back for the second tour. That was important from a training point of view.

But it was mainly amongst the NCOs wasn't it, the soldiers, not amongst the officers?

Yes. No (To officers remark). Senior NCOs, section commanders. 125 I think was the figure.

Yes, I remember that figure. That's a damn good core to build on isn't it?

Yes it is, and by that time of course the Army knew what it was up against and so training was oriented in the right direction. Early, I don't think it was. Early on, we were still training for the very basic counter insurgency warfare and Vietnam had gone - escalated beyond that point.

Did you consider that you, yourself were well prepared? I am now talking as a CSM.

(Sighs) Yes, I guess probably not, because bloody Vietnam was so different. It was somewhere, God I don't know how to explain it I haven't got the words, there was definitely something lacking. We were training for a type of war and that wasn't it at all, if you see what I am trying to get at. We trained counter insurgency. There is no way known

that the WOs course prepares you for anything like that. The WOs course was still based on instructional ability and conventional warfare deals. Yes, I was well trained, but by gee, there was a lot of learning to do on the ground. A lot on the ground.

> Okay. The type of training that Delta Company went through, if we can look back on it now with the benefit of hindsight, would you have changed it in anyway?

I don't know that I would have gone out Monday and come back Friday for week after week after week! (laughs) Aahh.

> Like, do you think we did enough field firing?

There is never enough live firing. There could never be enough live firing. Our shooting skills were abysmal when you come to think of it and that's because we give each other weapons that you don't have to load too often. I said that to a general once. (laughs) There's always something more we could have done but we did work very hard and we had the background. We had the background short of actually doing it. LWC was of tremendous benefit, that's probably the ...

> Can we talk about Canungra then? The Jungle Training Centre, what do you think was so special about it? I mean everyone, it had this, I mean before people went there it was always spoken of in awe. What do you think made it so special?

Firstly, the topography because it was in like country. We knew that this is the sort of country that we were going to be into. But, more importantly, the instructional staff at LWC were all highly skilled and experienced in precisely the sort of thing we were about to become involved in, and their imparting knowledge was vital. Canungra I guess was a bit of an intangible thing, it was invaluable.

> You were in the position of being in Company Headquarters where you didn't have to do the instruction yourself and you were able to sort of watch.

That's exactly right.

> What did you actually see happen as the company arrived there?

Well, Canungra of course is oriented to the smaller unit training right down to section level, and I was able to get an overview of just how good or bad we were and of course so were the LWC staff, and so their reports were vital to fix any little bloody errors that we still had. It was the same on any exercise. If you got a decent umpire's report that said you're not doing this right, because on your own you could do it wrong a hundred times and not realise it. So, I think the assessment that we got was invaluable.

> So, you're an advocate of having an independent umpiring/ assessment type system?

Oh yes. You must have an assessment system. I mean look at the battalions that actually went to Shoalwater Bay and failed. Because they (the umpires) didn't think they were ready to go. Thankfully, we were never in that position, but yeah, Canungra was invaluable because you were in the environment that you were going to be in.

> If we can talk Delta Company 4 RAR, second tour, what do you think the strengths and weaknesses of Delta Company were?

I think Delta Company was an average company, I don't think we were better than any of the other companies, we certainly weren't any worse, and I really don't see that we had any weaknesses at all. There were individuals I suppose that could have been better or worse. I think we had a damn fine team and we were really ready to go. I don't think we had any weaknesses.

> Okay. What sticks most in your memory about Delta Company's time at Canungra? It might be an event, it might be just a feeling that you had.

No. I don't believe anything special. I would suggest that at some stage of the game there must have been a time when we realised we had suddenly become a company and not just a group of individuals, and LWC may have done that. It may have been later but perhaps not. LWC probably did that when we actually started to operate as a company and not just a bunch of characters. But nothing special - what a strange place! In 1958 I went to LWC and swore blind I'd never go again, and I think in total service I did six months, in two or three increments

> And I said I'd never go back there and got posted back there - God! Now you had had a lot of experience of fighting in the jungle, you'd had three campaigns, what would you do to better prepare people to fight in the jungle?

I'm not sure that you can do any more than what we did. You mentioned earlier live firing, there has to be safety parameters of course, but the more realistic you can make live firing training the better, but other than that there's nothing you can do. It's as, you well know, the first shot is an experience all on its' own. There's nothing you can (do to) train for that.

> A lot of people have said in the past, that if you can fight in the jungle you can fight anywhere. What's your opinion of that statement?

No., no. I would be against that entirely. We were extremely good at fighting in the jungle, we were fortunate in that aspect in that when we first started training for fighting in the jungle we had New Guinea veterans who were still serving, and then we had so many years of the Malayan experience, and there's no doubt in my mind, and a lot better than I have said it, Australians were the best jungle fighters in the world. We had the ability to out-guerilla the guerillas. but it is an incredibly specialist art and I do not believe that a highly skilled jungle fighter can just go straight back into conventional warfare. Certainly you couldn't throw a jungle fighter into street warfare, they're just not the same.

> Mmm, it's a good point. When you look back on your own training and preparation, and you went back for that second tour of Vietnam, was there anything that surprised you when you arrived there that you hadn't been prepared for?

Nothing had changed. Nothing had changed (laughs). The camp, our little patch of Nui Dat, one of the first things I did was go and have a look at my old tent. The sandbags that I had put there two years previously were still there. Nothing had altered, it was as if we had just walked back into yesterday.

That must have given you a lot of confidence and a comfortable feeling. Did you feel that way?

I guess to a degree. An entirely different attitude. I had a very easy first tour as the Sheriff (Regimental Police Sergeant) in a war that had absolutely no use for a Sheriff. None what ever, and so in fact I became 'Battalion odd-job' and I got some damn fine jobs out of it, but I had little pressure on me at any time. Most of my service on that first tour was spent working out of a fire support base; patrols; defence of; I think I was boss of the forward chopper pad for a while and I had some fine jobs. I spent a number of weeks at ARU on exchange. I LO'd with a Thai battalion for a while but there was really no pressure. When I went back the second time as a CSM, there was obviously a purpose, much more purpose, and much more intent to the task. So, yeah, second time around was entirely different for me.

I'm going to skip over deployment except for a couple of things. On the ship on the way over, what do you think was the most important thing we should have been doing?

We had to maintain our fitness. I guess that was important, but in that confined space I'm not sure what else you could do. We were so incredibly limited in what we could do. Lots of shooting - we did that, but it's a hell of a way to go to war. It's a waste of time of course.

Ten days on the water.

And you probably lose your edge. You're so damned keyed up and then ten days of intense boredom.

Because you didn't have direct command of troops you had the opportunity to see two lots of individuals. Was there any difference between the attitude of the soldiers between the first and the second tour?

I don't believe so, no. No, I really don't. No, the answers, no.

Okay, well I'd like to talk about soldiers now and in particular National Servicemen. Our Army blew out from four battalions to nine and these were men coming in for two years of their draft. What was your reaction to having National Servicemen in the unit, because you had been from a purely ARA organisation for many years and all of a sudden you have got all these draftees?

The big thing that I recall about National Servicemen is that they were absolutely no different from ARA, fresh out of IET, soldiers. I got, the first National Servicemen I ever saw, were three National Servicemen who arrived in my platoon in Borneo. Only one of whom I can remember, and who I will never forget, because he lost his rifle on patrol! But he was a damn fine soldier, so were the other two. So much so, that to me, except that I was in a position whereby I got to look at the roll book a lot and I could pick them by regimental number, to me after a period of time, there was absolutely no difference. I never, ever saw a National Serviceman who grizzled in any real way because he was doing what he had to do. I have tremendous respect for National Servicemen. They just weren't different.

Did you think that National Service, you often hear people say this, that National Service was either good or bad for the Army. What's your opinion?

I'd like to see it still there! I think it was not only good for the Army, it was good for the kids that did it.

Why was it good?

If you compare it with the young people of today, it gave them discipline, confidence, not to mention a hard core of military skilled people, but basically it was good for the Army. We had an Army.

We sure did, we had nine battalions. What did you think about the National Service officers?

The most, you will have heard this a thousand times and a thousand people have said it, the most dangerous thing in the world is a second lieutenant with a map and compass, and there is absolutely no difference between the two. They were equally as well trained, the only thing I will say about officers, is that, and this comes probably from my time at OCS, is that I still firmly believe; of course it doesn't happen any more; that I still firmly believe that a second lieutenant out in the unit with three years training is by far and above the better of the RMC man who did four years theory but, no there was basically no difference. They were as green as grass, keen as mustard and that's all you needed.

How did you see your role as the CSM with these young officers?

Hopefully as someone who could impart knowledge, whether it happened or not I don't know, but that has to have been the big thing. That had to be the experience that they could call on if they wanted it. As I say, whether it worked or not who knows?

I'm going to ask a hard question now because it has a deeper implication. I'm going to ask you what your job was in the company, but I mean, we know you were the Company Sergeant Major, but what did you see as being your job, your real task?

You're right it's hard, because it all happened and half the time you don't realise that you were doing it or that it happened. There has to be, the answer has to be, to a certain degree in the role of mentor to the company as a whole. And that's not just the CSM, it's all of the experienced members of the company. You're right there were the usual admin tasks and the CSM is predominantly an admin man. That's a damn hard question and I'm not sure if I'm skilled enough to answer it.

What do you think was the hardest part of your job as a CSM?

I don't think there was anything, without wishing to appear immodest, not trying to answer in that way. I don't think there was anything that was particularly hard.

What do you think of the role as a CSM as a company disciplinarian?

Well, that's part of the normal day to day task of course, but then we never had that problem in any tremendous way.

Why do you think that was?

Because we had a good team?

Does the Australian soldier need a lot of discipline?

Oh yes. The two 'Ds' get the Australian soldier in to more trouble that you can poke a stick at. And the two 'Ds' are drink and dick. (laughs) But, that's the Australian soldier. There's no problem with that it's just, hell, the Australian soldier hasn't liked discipline since he galloped off into the sand in WW1. But no, we never had a full time reprobate in that company. There were some in the early days that we used to say, we should have a cage at the gate at Battalion Headquarters. And there were certain people that went in it when you came back from exercise, and you took them out when you went back out on exercise. But we never had that problem. Beyond the AWOLs and the drunk and disorderlys, but there was no real problem. I don't think.

Who did you work closest with in the company?

Well obviously the OC, the 2IC and the platoon sergeants because the task is basically administrative. I would say the 2IC would be the key player.

Do you think that's right? Because here you are, you have had a tour of Malaya, Borneo: tour of Vietnam and your input into the war fighting side of it seems to have been pushed to the side as you ...

No.

Well how do you see it?

I don't believe that. You are still able to impart knowledge it doesn't stop you doing that, but the task is still a predominantly administrative task. You're right, the discipline of the company comes into that, but no, there is a high level of training responsibility because, and you have already said it, when you get out on exercise, the CSM is able to detach himself and look and hopefully teach.

You can almost be a sort of an internal assessor can't you?

Yes, yes you must be able to impart your knowledge.

What sort of arrangement did you and (Captain) Peter Schuman come to, the Company 2IC, with going out on operations? How did you work that?

I don't know that it was ever an initial arrangement, if you're talking about the tour now?

Yes.

You may recall that initially we both went bush and proceeded to get in one another's way enormously. There was simply not, I don't know that the tasks weren't there, but really there wasn't enough for two high powered administrators. And we then tried, once and

once only, a swap over system whereby one of us would stay behind and one of us would go forward. That worked once and then it became fairly obvious that the 2IC, much to his disgust, was required in rear. And Schu's hated that, gee he hated that and it let me go forward with the predominantly administrative task of continual re-supply and it became the CSMs biggest task in the field, besides the mundane defence of Company Headquarters. Anything to leave the OC to fight the company, run the company, and the CSM did all the rest.

So, you saw that as being your principal job in the field? To relieve ...

The OC does, fights the company, runs the company, the CSM does everything else or the 2IC if he is in situ.

Okay. What do you consider was the most important part about your job?

I have to say that in that, and probably it's not the right context, but in that context it is re-supply. We were re-supplied every five days. The 'one' re-supply day was probably the most hectic day but then you spent four days getting ready for the next re-supply and so keeping the company ammunitioned, watered, fed, clothed and probably in that order, became a very vital function. Along with the morale side of the goodie packs and the mail and what ever. But there's no doubt about it, the administration of the company became it. Because the platoons generally operated independently, that was the big task.

Delta Company often did six week patrols.

Forty two days was our longest as I recall.

Do you reckon they were too long?

There's no doubt about it they were too long. And I don't, think we did so long patrols on the first tour, indeed a couple of times in my capacity because we wanted to hold a patch of ground, I even stayed behind in the field between operations. Yes, they were too long because of the sheer boredom involved and a lot of people have said that Vietnam was weeks and weeks of utter bloody boredom punctuated by the odd contact. But in that time well, in that time you had to remember, the battalions were going home and two battalions were trying to do the work of three, I don't know that there was any, not any choice.

Not much option? When we were out on patrol, getting towards the end of our tour, we had reinforcements come out from 1 ARU. Did they go through you, I mean did you actually get to clutch these guys up and distribute them or how were they allocated?

Yes, I recall that one terrible time, as you do, and yes they came through Company long enough to say, 'You're going to this platoon and you're going to that platoon'. But no, in the field almost no contact before they went to a platoon.

When the company gathered together for these re-supplies, it was usually about every ten days I think, we came for the big one ...

Five days, five days for food.

When the company actually got back together, you know like the three platoons and Company Headquarters, was there anything special that you tried to do during that time?

It was a bloody difficult time, it was probably the one day that I was flat to the boards. It would have been nice to have been able to get around and talk to every soldier in the place but it wasn't always possible. You certainly were able to talk to the guys you worked to, that is the platoon sergeants and the section 2ICs, but yeah, that was a time to get round if you could. It didn't happen as often as it should have, it was a very busy day.

When (Warrant Officer Class One) Wally Thompson, the RSM came out, what sort of things did he talk to you about?

Wally's main interest was always morale I think, and I'm not sure if we ever discussed anything else. That was his main bag, 'How were the troops?' Always, always interested in the troops and he used to like to get around and have a yarn if possible. But morale, that was his greatest thing.

Okay. Did you ever take R & R?

Not on the second tour, first tour, yes.

Did you feel like you really needed it? Did you need that break away from the war?

Probably not.

When you came back from R & R, was it hard to get back into the swing of it again?

No, no, it wasn't long enough. Simply wasn't long enough. If you took a fortnight off it may have been difficult, but no, four days, five days what ever it was certainly not.

Those Rest and Convalescence, those R & Cs that the soldiers used to get, was that a time of trepidation for you as a company sergeant major (interviewee chuckles) or how was it?

The two Ds. No, I think that was a tremendous bloody break for everyone. It was difficult to let your hair down at any other time and you simply had to accept, indeed, do it yourself, let your hair down and blow off the bloody steam. No, they were never a problem. Again, Australian soldiers, you knew exactly what they were going to do, but no.

What was the biggest danger to soldiers, in that regard, in Nui Dat?

Probably the boredom again because the soldiers never really got a break in Nui Dat, there was still sentry duties and bloody mundane battalion type tasks that had to be done. Alcohol, and too much thereof, as much as we were rationed there was still miles of it. The soldiers had to be kept occupied all the time, one way or another, while at the same time trying to give them as much of a break as you possibly could. So, the first night home, well the first ... home. Hell, was it home? The first night back - barbie, and let them blow off a bit of steam. It was important - vital, but then I don't recall that we ever there

long enough to really get into trouble in Nui Dat. I mean, hell, sometimes we might have been three days and we were gone again. I'm not sure that we ever had a break that was longer than four or five days.

Yes, about that. Okay. Did you like your job?

Oh, yes. Yes.

What gave you the most satisfaction?

Seeing the result for effort where ever we got it, and I think that's the same in every, in any job. There has to be result for effort some where and when we did it well, it was good to see. The aftermath of a contact when it was successful was satisfying as much as the casualties were very sad. No, the job well done.

How were you, when you got promoted to WO2, how were you received in Delta Company as the CSM?

I don't know that I had any difficulty because I didn't go to a company that was up to strength. It wasn't as if I was transferring from one company to another. Delta Company was the last company to form and when I went to the company it was little more than the hierarchy on deck. So, we built right from scratch.

Okay. What sticks most in your memory about your time on that second tour?

An individual incident?

It can be anything, yes.

If it has to be anything at all, and there are so many incidents, then it has to be the accident that we had.

Okay, well we'll talk about that on the next tape.

This is tape two of two tapes of an interview with Noel Huish conducted by Gary McKay. Recorded on the 20 March, 1993 at Ferny Hills in Brisbane. The topics covered on this tape for Delta Four are battle, accidents, casualties, relationships and the enemy.

Noel, we were about to talk about the most single incident or the single incident that sticks out in your mind and we are talking about an accident where two platoons clashed.

Among a dozen incidents that has to be the one that made me sit up and take notice in a number of ways. You asked before or mentioned before did I ever see reinforcements come to the company. Well I did on that day or the day before, because we got three reinforcements by helicopter on that particular re-supply. And then of course I saw them again the following day as they were carried out through that tragic, tragedy of errors if you would like to call it and as you would recall, we got a SPA report, Special Agent Report, that basically said the enemy were right on our grid reference or very, very close. It

was an accident, a terrible, shocking accident. The one thing that it made me realise was that, certainly as I look back, was that where as Vietnam was probably not as traumatic to me, and I never ever felt any sort of great traumatisation except the instant terror when you get shot at, was how terrifying and traumatic it has to be for young soldiers. Here were people who had sort of come in on Day One and choppered out on Day Two. Was it all three of them or two of them?

Two.

Two. One dead and one wounded. It gave me a new insight on how soldiers must feel and just how bad it is. It's a hell of a way to come to a company and that's where our Australian system was so good over that American system, where at least we went to war as a unit. It's just a pity we had take reos (reinforcements).

We lost a lot of guys half way through the tour with National Service ending. Do you think that was a mistake.

Yes I do. We should have maintained the team, but it would have had to have been on a purely voluntary basis.

Yes.

You couldn't possibly say to a National Serviceman, 'you are serving on for the remainder of the tour'.

Or only take your National Servicemen in that you know are going to do a 12 month tour of duty with you.

Yes, yes. Or start off the right way around, and that's the way it was designed initially, it's just that it never worked that way all the way through.

What was the reaction like in Company Headquarters when that, when people started to realise there had been a clash?

Shock, absolute shock, but then of course the wheels get into motion. the procedures start to work and then of course all the bloody investigations that went on that should never have gone on at that time. The one young fellow involved was under enough pressure at that time without tearing him apart then, as they tried to do. And we made the right decisions ...

To leave him in the field?

To leave him in the field. There was no question of that, we had made the right decisions, but as a reaction: disbelief, total disbelief that it could have happened.

Okay. You mentioned before the terror of being shot at. What was your first contact like?

Just that, terrifying. You never expect it, you know it's going to happen, you never expect it. So, instant terror, followed by there is a job. Well, no the second thing is to conquer the fear and then do the job what ever that may be. I am very thankful that never happened to me very often.

How do you conquer the fear?

You just let your training come to the fore.

Instinctive reaction?

Instinctive reaction, yes, it has to be.

Was there anything that scared you when you were out on operations? Worried you, concerned you?

I suppose the constant fear of mines really and the thought of course of being disabled. Knowing as every soldier knows that it is never going to happen to you anyway, it's always someone else. But mines, and what they could do, and we saw, whilst I certainly wasn't involved, we had some terrible instances of that on the first tour where a whole section was taken out with mines. So that was a worry, something that you pushed into the back of your mind, but it was a worry.

In July 1971 the company was involved in a very heavy contact in a bunker system where we used tanks. What sort of images come back to you when you look back on that incident?

(Laughs) Several. Firstly, I was the CSM and I don't know how I won the job, but I was allocated the task of Company guide and I actually went back and got the tanks and led them in. (laughs) Which is frigging frightening trying to watch your front, and stay out of the way of the trees the big bastards are knocking down as they come. A feeling of absolute elation - when they started to come back because we knew at that stage that we had it won. At the same time, we took there our first fatality.

(Private) Pengilly.

Bernie Pengilly. And I recall one of the section 2ICs from 10 Platoon coming back for what ever, I just forget, and I said to him, 'How's it going up there? And he said, 'Bernie Pengilly is dead'. That was a very sad moment. It was a moment we had to realise, that we did realise, that we weren't bloody invulnerable. The first casualties that we had taken. Memories of the tanks of course and how relatively simple they made it once they got on the position. Memories of 12 Platoon about to attack Company Headquarters (laughs) which was ... In fact, I could hear 12 Platoon talking off to my right flank. Quite a way forward of me was the OC and the tank commander in a bit of a dip in the ground. And I could hear 12 Platoon talking about attacking to the front and I thought, well if they're on the right and the boss is up there, this is fraught with danger. So I had to hare off into the scrub and find 12 Platoon and suggest that they might not carry out their plan. In fact I talked to Spingo (Second Lieutenant Graham Spinkston), who told me to get down because we were being shot at. (Laughs) And in fact he did have trouble to his front, but even so, had he moved forward he would have taken out the OC.

But then, I remember in that battle, that Company Headquarters was leading from the front!

Yes, we were.

Because I went forward at one stage and I remember someone turning around and asking 10 and 12 Platoons to throw smoke and the smoke was behind Company Headquarters!

Yes it was.

So Company Headquarters was being very brave.

One of the things that I recall, and so does the OC, is that I went forward at one stage and tried to lighten the situation I think and the words I used were something like, 'Boss, we should be back there running this thing, not up here fighting the bastard!'. But that's not the way it came out at all. (Laughs)

What was the hardest part about that battle, I mean, we had never worked with tanks that closely before?

No, we certainly hadn't. It is entirely and incredibly difficult to stay out of their way in close country, because you have not only got to make damn sure they know where you are so they don't shoot at you, but you have got to stay out of the way of these crashing trees that are coming down all around you as they just trundle off through the scrub. So, it's very difficult in close country and by gee, that's the biggest point; every one has got to know where everybody else is.

Is that why 12 Platoon got left behind?

Yes, I tend to think it is. As I say, they were sort of out there and back, and it may well have been.

What was your main job in that battle?

Once the battle started, I had little to do. I remember at one stage of the game, I conned a jerry can of water out of one of the tracks because Company Headquarters were desperately low on water, I think everybody was at that stage. I was trying to get back ammunition figures to see if anybody needed re-supply from who ever, but that was, what? 30 - 45 minutes of complete turmoil, it really wasn't possible to do anything until after it had all, until after the battle had been fought.

And then once the tanks had crashed through all those bunkers and then what were left of the enemy withdrew, what was your main job then?

Again, to organise a re-supply of what ever was necessary. We lined up, I recall the tracks to get the wounded back and much of the ammunition we required we got from the tracks, because of course they always carried spare ammunition for infantry. So, the re-supply and getting the casevacs out.

I think we had four didn't we? Were those the guys wounded by the artillery?

I believe we had four, and I don't ... besides the fact that Bernie Pengilly was shot, I don't recall the others at all.

Do you remember anything about the reorg, or the next day when the Brigade commander came out, or the Task Force Commander came out; (Brigadier B. A.) McDonald?

Yes, I remember him being there and I remember him walking around, but no, it has just become another day.

Company Headquarters usually had a platoon attached to it when we went out on patrols, and so the opportunity for contact and all that sort of thing was often limited, but in September 1971, the company got into a very heavy engagement. What images come back to you from that September battle?

I think nothing early on except that again we had taken casualties. 12 Platoon first was it not? The first case that I had ever seen personally of total, well what shall we call it - shell shock, with one of the corporals, and I forget his name. And then there are other images throughout that whole entire day, night and the following morning that come back to the memory but they are individual, little ... One of the big things of course is that we attacked the second time, when 11 Platoon attacked, I think surprise that anyone was still there, because that had not been our experience. We always went back but we always went back to an empty system.

Yes, they usually withdrew.

That's right. So, surprise. The ferocity of that attack and once again I said to the OC that we should be back running it and not up here fighting it, because we were taking casualties behind us. Again, it didn't come out right. The casevac, and the difficulty of it, because we had no helipad.

Were you running that? The casevac?

No, KB (Second Lieutenant Kevin Byrne) ran that as I recall, because it was a platoon job to try and clear enough of an area.

This is when you were trying to get Ralph Niblett and Daryl (Sergeant Jenkin) and those other guys out?

Yes, that's right. Another image of course is (Private) Ralph Niblett when he was brought back through Company Headquarters, your platoon medic brought him back. And then it's just a series of incredible images. I remember the OC saying, 'we'll deal with rest of this', and then we had to call in or we were going to call in 'Python' and there was a requirement to withdraw 500 metres and I remember the OC saying, 'Take one platoon'. And it may well have been 11 Platoon, who led off.

Ten.

Ten was it? Yes, it was 10 and move 500 metres due South and we'll find you and of course 500 metres exactly due South, well 503 metres due South was that other frigging bunker system. So, that was a bit of a shock to the system just when we thought we had got out of it. And a fairly hectic night.

What was running through your mind when we hit that other bunker system? It was getting dark wasn't it?

It was getting terribly dark and that we were going to be in a lot of trouble. We had not closed our perimeter, it was like a horseshoe. There was one big open end of it, Thankfully it did close. I remember the OC making the comment back to Battalion that this was 'Custer's Last Stand'. I remember the CO, remember we had to leave our dead behind, made some stupid comment that got the OC's anger right up. Words to the effect that we shouldn't have done that (left them behind) and that we had to get them out. Which was a silly comment at the time and you know ... Trying to get a balloon up the following morning because we had all run out of water was interesting.

And rations.

And rations. Searching around for a pack in the middle of the night because it had spare ammunition in it which we needed, Again, trying to get figures out of people on how much ammunition they needed, resulting in my getting on the blower and saying, 'Bugger it, send in the first line!' By mid-morning we were up to our knees in ammunition (Laughs) and I recall that we buried an awful lot because we simply couldn't carry it. Ordering 11 Platoon new packs and equipment and then going back and finding all of their stuff intact.

When you went back into the area of the contact, the New Zealand company came out didn't they?

Yes.

You had an opportunity then to have a look around at the diggers. What were they like, what was the reaction amongst the diggers like?

Tired, very, very tired.

Physically or emotionally do you think?

Drained emotionally, physically tired. Break for a minute.

Okay. (Break in taping)

We were talking about the battle in September and the next day, what was your reaction of how the company, you said they were drained and tired, what was the most important thing from your point of view at that stage for the company?

I think to get out. We had done our bit and I'm not sure that we could have continued in any great successful way for too much longer. Not to mention that we were sort of under strength at that stage, having lost two platoon commanders, a platoon sergeant and an

awful lot of soldiers, and indeed we were relieved. We needed a break at that stage very badly.

After that battle in September, a new platoon commander had to come in and a whole bunch of new soldiers, how did that affect the company?

It certainly took away our edge and we were very fortunate that that was the last contact that we had. It's not that we wouldn't have been able to handle more, but I'm glad it was over at that time. We earned our spurs on that day without any doubt.

What do you think was the greatest strength the soldiers showed that day?

Their spirit, Never give up. Things happened that day, I didn't see them, like the number of times they tried to retrieve your gun. The Australian fighting spirit was absolutely remarkable.

And this is in an organisation that is 50/50 National Servicemen.

50/50 National Servicemen, well I think it was more than 50/50 wasn't it at that stage of the game?

Sometimes, yes. Yes. You witnessed casualty evacuation by helicopter, what was the hardest thing about organising a casevac?

I'm not sure if there was anything hard about it, it was all procedural. There was often, as it was at that stage, a lot of work to be done to enable us to do it. But, no there was nothing hard about it, it was procedure coming to the fore, and as long as your procedures worked - so did the casevac.

Did you go down and visit any of the wounded in hospital?

Yes, I did with the OC as soon as we got back and as soon as we were allowed. Rather stunned at the extent of the wounds, not to mention the sheer numbers, I recall they had to open up the hospital again, did they not?

Yes, another ward. Yes, they closed it down for the withdrawal and had to reopen it.

Because of course all B Company casualties were there as well. That was a hell of a day for the Battalion, we lost the best part of a platoon on that day between two companies.

Did you know much about the B Company battle?

No, we were too far involved in our own. We had learned over the blower that they had been mortared, but little more.

When you said the extent of the wounds, are you talking about the physical wounds or just the numbers?

No, physical, both I think. One of the things that they had gone to, you recall that operating procedures had changed time and time again, and this particular time they had

gone to that incredibly open surgery where they leave all the wounds open to drain or dry or what ever, and that tended to bring home just how badly off we were on that day, beside the fact that we lost four KIA. And I guess the bit that still rankles on that day is that we never really got a result, as much as we read a lot of after action reports, we never got the result that we were entitled to. But the wounds, yes I think just their extent, which looked a damn sight worse because of this open surgery.

> Okay. What I'd like to talk about now are relationships and if we can cast our minds back now to your relationship, and I think probably the one we should kick off with is you and the company commander. What was your relationship like between you and (Major) Franz Kudnig?

Close but remote if that's not a contradiction.

> What, close from a working point of view?

Oh, yes.

> But remote from a personal?

Very remote from a personal point of view.

> Is that the way he wanted it?

Franz was a martinet or at least tried to be. I don't say that Franz's style is wrong. I've worked with all sorts and more than one of the martinet variety, but it is a very remote style of leadership with very little personal type touch.

> Is it the type, is it the sort of relationship you would want to have when you are at war?

No, not at all.

> What type do you prefer?

(Major) Jerry Taylor's.

> Which was?

Oh, very personalised. He wanted to be very close, whilst at the same time being incredibly competent at what he was doing. In their own way both inspired a degree of confidence, but Jerry's way of doing it inspired it to a much greater level and degree. It was a pleasure to work for Jerry Taylor, it was a job to work for Franz Kudnig. There was always a difficulty with loyalty and you have to remain loyal. That was hard with Franz Kudnig.

> Is that because in your position as a CSM, you were sort of like that meat in a sandwich were you?

Yes, that's right. Had we not had Peter Schuman, who was the real meat in the sandwich, that company might never have been as successful as it was. Schu's was the perfect intermediary if you like and his sense of humour often saved a serious situation. I could work with Franz Kudnig, I could work with anyone, you simply trained yourself to do so, but it was much easier and it was a pleasure to work for Jerry Taylor.

> You mentioned a sense of humour before, do you think it is an essential ingredient in a war situation?

Yes, yes you have got to be able to lighten up occasionally.

> How would you describe your relationship with the platoon sergeants; the CQ, those sort of guys?

It had to be close, again they are the administrative link. We were entirely fortunate, we had a tremendous team and we worked at getting who we wanted. you will recall the trouble we had getting (sergeant) Daryl (Jenkin) promoted, but we worked hard at that and we won. We had good platoon sergeants and we had a damn fine CQ, no doubt about that. All were competent, all were efficient - no problems.

> What do you think was the hardest part about working with Franz?

That's bloody hard to answer, it really is hard to answer.

> Was it the loyalty thing?

That's got a lot to do with it.

> Well, can I ask you another question then. What do you think was the best thing that Franz did for Delta Company?

Unrelenting training and there's no doubt about it, Franz trained us well and Franz was a good leader. It was his style that tended to get backs up, but he gave us the training. There's no doubt about that.

> You mentioned leaders, so we might just get onto leadership. What are some of the essential qualities you think a leader should have?

He has to be able to impart knowledge; he has to reek of confidence; he obviously has to be efficient. He doesn't necessarily have to be popular but he has to have a personality - a likeable personality. But I guess his competence and efficiency, and he has to be seen to have that because otherwise no one is going to follow him anywhere. he simply needs to be good at his own job and be able to instil the response, to get a response out of others.

> You said you liked, and it made it easier and a pleasure to work for Jerry Taylor. Can we go into that a little bit deeper? Why was that?

I think for that exact reason. Jerry simply exuded confidence, competence, ability, talent. He had it all and he was an incredibly personable, personable man. The company fell in love with Jerry Taylor two minutes after he arrived. I will recall his words when he got off

the track (APC) I think, and I think that's the way he came forward into that rubber plantation where ever the hell we were, and I said, 'Welcome aboard, Sir', he said, 'Thank you, CSM, why are we shaving?' Now the company fell in love with him from that moment. Remember the beard growing competitions? (Laughs) Now that's only a stupid little thing but it went a long way toward his immediate acceptance, and whether he planned it that way, and I suspect strongly he did, but it was Jerry Taylor.

Okay. Let's talk about the ages of these young fellows. Do you think men under (the age of) 20 should go to war?

Granting the training is right.

So that's the real catalyst?

Yes. Age is not the criteria, capability is the criteria.

Okay, righto. Is there any thing that pissed you off when you were in Vietnam?

No, the grizzles and the whinges that are part of Australian soldiering, but no, nothing that really got up my nose.

What made you feel good, apart from Fourex (beer).

(Laughs) Fourex.

What sort of gave you satisfaction?

Certainly coming out of the scrub and being able to relax for a short period of time. But I've said it before some where, seeing the job well done, doing a good job. I think I got satisfaction all of the time just being part of it.

Being part of the team?

Yes. I enjoyed what we did.

Okay. If you were put in charge of that company would you have done anything differently?

No I don't feel competent enough to answer the question. No.

Okay. Our allies, did you work with any of our allies reasonably closely on that second tour?

Not on the second tour, we certainly had contact with other soldiers, with other allies, but fleetingly. No, not on the second tour. First tour, not second.

Did you have the chance to compare us with the New Zealand company?

Oh, the Kiwis of course. Again, no, because we never sort of worked in a close environment. We generally operated as independent companies, so you never got close

enough to see them actually in operation. Kiwis aren't all that much different from Australians, and they were very good at what they did too.

> On a couple of occasions during this interview you have smiled a bit on things and obviously some funny recollections are there Have you got any funny incidents that really give you a giggle every now and then?

Oh yes (Laughs) Oh yes, because it's the funny things and the good times that come to the fore. Always. You tend to push the bad stuff back into the back of our minds. The funniest story of that second tour would have to be an ambush which I put in. You will recall that Company Headquarters, with all its' attachments etcetera was a formidable body of ...

> It was bigger than a platoon!

It was bigger quite often by the time you got your 14 or 15 attachments. Company Headquarters, a full strength support section; MFC, FO parties, combat engineers; we were a bloody fine body of troops! And it was early in the tour and because we were so big, we decided that we could handle our own defence and the platoons could slip off and operate independently. And it was decided again, because we were so big, we could afford to actually put out a small ambush each evening if we were static for several days. The ambush was alternately commanded each night by myself and the support section commander with about 12 stalwart cooks and bloody bottle washers. On this particular night I had put out the ambush, it was just about dusk. I had the rear protection party in position, the claymores and flares were out. We were just settling down, and there was noise, movement, but it was behind us. And I thought, shit! we are now in trouble. It happened very quickly, there was no chance to turn the ambush around and in any case the rear protection was going to be over run at any minute. And suddenly out of the bush came the biggest bloody monitor lizard I have ever seen, indeed I'm convinced that not all the Komodo dragons live on Komodo, this thing had a head on it like an Alsatian dog. And tromped straight over the top of the ambush and disappeared into the jungle. And of course the ambush broke up. Went totally to pieces and I said words to the effect, 'Oh, settle down, settle down. It was more scared of you than you were of it.' And the voice came back from the end, 'You want to fucking bet?' (Laughs) And I will never, ever forget that single incident. The ambush was stuffed, I think we settled down and went to sleep. (Laughs) There are a lot of little things like that, but that has got to be the one I will never forget, never.

> We're getting, haven't got long to go, the enemy. Now you have been pretty fortunate to have seen three campaigns. What did you think of the enemy on that second tour?

There seemed to be a grading, if you like, and the higher up the level of that grade you went from sort of Local Force guerilla through Main Force VC to NVA. It always seemed to me that when we took on Local Force we won, when we took on Main Force we took casualties and on the couple of occasions we took on NVA we not only took casualties, but we got into trouble. Little respect for the Local Force fellows, but a tremendous amount of respect for the fighting capability of the NVA soldier. No love at all but you had to respect them considering that they had only themselves and little support. they were a fairly formidable force.

> You said you had no love for them, but did you ever feel sorry for them?

Never.

Because they were the enemy?

Never. Initially, early in the tour we at least went to the extent of burying them as per their, or as we were taught, their customs laid down. After we took our initial casualties, there was a degree of hardness came over the whole company. There was no more Mr Nice Guy, and so absolutely no sympathy for the enemy what so ever, from that point in time on. There may have been a little before hand, but certainly none after we had taken our first casualties.

Were the enemy as you had imagined or had been told they would be like? Did they surprise you in anyway?

Initially, no but then initially I think we were still thinking of things in the local counter revolutionary warfare, minimal contact, guerilla type activity at a rather low key and it turned out not to be that way at all. The two big contacts we had could by no means be classed as a few bloody counter revolutionaries, they were either Main Force or they were NVA. So, no it wasn't like we were told. We expected not to get into that sort of bother, not early on anyway. It seemed that it got worse each time.

So, you think that the NVA and the Main Force are pretty good fighters?

Yes I do, considering that they had no damn support, yes.

Okay. What did you think of the anti-Vietnam War protesters?

(Sighs) In some ways laughable because they had such little effect. Disliked it intensely because of course it was directed in the wrong way because it was directed against the soldier and not against the politicians. A gullible, gullible people led by Rent-a-Crowd. Led by Bob (Jim - sic) Cairns, I will hate that man till the day I die, I detest him and his bloody union cronies. They were entitled to protest but not in the way they did it. Not against the soldier, they caused strikes, when I say laughable, it was the strikes, or at least one of them which was somewhat laughable. The wharfies strike, which except in probably one or two items, had absolutely no effect and I'm sure if we had have pushed the Yanks we could have got tank ammunition through them anyway. The mail strike on the first tour, that had an effect. If you think about that conceivably, by loss of morale and therefore loss of concentration, that could easily have caused loss of life, That was damn dangerous. But, the right to protest, but not the way they went about it.

Okay. Last question then, in hindsight was Australia's involvement in Vietnam worth it?

Now that's the hardest question you have asked. I firmly believed (in) what we were doing, perhaps I was brain washed as a Regular soldier. I'm not sure. I <u>did</u> believe in what we were doing in Vietnam and had the war kept going there is no doubt that I would have gone back. But I can't answer that, I really can't.

Any regrets?

None what ever, absolutely none.

Okay, is there any question you would have liked me to have asked you?

No, I think you covered it very fully. No, you have got it covered.

Okay, righto well that will complete the interview with Noel Huish. This is the end of the second tape of two. Thanks Noel.