Australian War Memorial

Sound Collection

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

ACCESSION NUMBER: **S01138**

TITLE:

INTERVIEWEE: Mick O'Sullivan

INTERVIEWER: Gary McKay

RECORDING DATE: 27 MARCH 1993

RECORDING LOCATION: Fremantle, WA

SUMMARY: Enlistment; training for war; impressions of Vietnam; jobs; people; relationships; leadership; the aftermath.

TRANSCRIBER: Gale McKay

TRANSCRIPTION DATE: 22 OCTOBER 1993

This is Tape One of two tapes of an interview with Mick O'Sullivan recorded by Gary McKay on 27 March 1993 in Perth, Western Australia, for Delta Four - Australian Infantrymen at War. The topics covered on this tape are enlistment, training for war, the people, the jobs and relationships.

Mick, why did you join the Army?

I felt at the time that my life was going nowhere. I had had a past exposure to the 'Green Machine' in the Army Cadets at school and I felt it was time to do something with my life so I joined the Australian Army.

So you enlisted in Perth?

Yes. May 1968.

Did the presence of the SAS Regiment have anything to do with that?

I think it had some bearing and that may have been a consideration or a career plan. Once I got into the system it didn't come up too much more as a forethought.

You signed on for six years, and after your training at Kapooka I take it, you were allotted to Medical Corps?

Yes.

When you joined, what sort of things did you imagine you would be doing?

Well, I think at Kapooka I didn't realise the physical side of things was going to be so intense. Initial plans I did want to go to Infantry. There were five other mates and we all joined the Army and sort of basically decided that we would try to keep together in the Army, but after the heavy exposure to Infantry-type skills in the recruit training I think we all changed our minds and decided to go off on our own tangents. Hence I had had some exposure in the St John Ambulance area and I elected to go Medical (Corps).

What sort of jobs did you have before you came in?

In fact I had worked at the Postmaster-General's Department as a junior postal clerk/teleprinter operator.

And you were doing some St John's Ambulance stuff?

Yes. I had basically done that as an after-hours course as I did enjoy that sort of thing.

What do you remember most about Kapooka?

I guess the strong influence on discipline and the physical aspects. Although I felt I kept myself reasonably fit you soon knew that if you hadn't you wouldn't be able to handle that side of Kapooka.

1968, the Vietnam War had been going some time for Australia, and a matter of fact at the time that you enlisted was after the Tet Offensive that got a lot of television and newspaper coverage. Did you know a lot about Vietnam when you enlisted?

No, not a great deal. I don't think it was probably until further on in my career I decided to push all endeavours to see if I could get a tour over there, purely to broaden my knowledge and I guess to prelim myself for a career plan.

After you were allotted to Medical Corps, where did you go then?

After my initial recruit training, IET training was at the School of Army Health at Healesville and then up to 1 Military Hospital where I was exposed to several areas in the nursing ward. It was then that I started to be exposed to some of the returned wounded from Vietnam, and I guess then I wanted to pursue more the opportunity of getting over there and being involved myself.

How did you get to be posted to 4 RAR? When did that happen?

It was about the middle of 1970 in fact that I pushed the issue that others were being considered to go to Vietnam that were reluctant, National Servicemen and such, and here it was that I was a Regular Army soldier and I wanted to get over there to pursue a career progression for myself and have that exposure and was being overlooked. I started to do a bit of jumping up and down and eventually people started to listen to me.

So you were at 1 Mil(itary Hospital) at this stage?

1 Military Hospital in Brisbane.

What rank were you?

At that stage I was a private/lance corporal, and then towards the end, jumping up and down, as a corporal and then was posted in September 1970 to 4 RAR.

You had only been in the Army two years and by now you are a corporal.

Again, progression within the Medical Corps is normally pretty easy up to the rank of corporal, particularly if you had been exposed to certain areas. I guess I was lucky in that area in that I had after my IET Training been posted to 3 CCS (Casualty Clearing Station) initially where I was given a reasonable exposure to the casualty clearing evacuation styles within the Army. When that unit was disbanded, I was co-located to 1 Military Hospital where again I had a heavy exposure to nursing skills within the ward. Hence I guess I was lucky I got a couple of those career aspects out of the way very early in my career that I was then able to get on promotion courses and effectively be promoted.

So, after the IET Training, what other formal courses did you do to prepare to go to Vietnam?

Part of our completion of the Med(ical) Assists' course, was that you went from a 10 week course at the School of Army Health, you then had to complete a six month on the

job training period at a Military Hospital or another designated training facility before you were deemed then qualified as a medical assistant. That is basically what occurred to me when I went to 3 CCS and 1 Military Hospital when 3 CCS was disbanded.

What do you remember most about your IET training at Healesville?

Tents, the whole complex, for our accommodation we were all housed in tents during the winters in Melbourne. Very cold and such. That would have been the greatest reflection I had.

Why were they in tents?

I think there was always the supposedly short-term plan that Healesville was only a temporary staging area for the School of Army Health, but I think some 12 years later they were still there, so they never got around to putting buildings up.

Did you go through in drafts, in platoons, or how did you go through?

Yes. We went through in probably two-platoon groups, those being selected from the National Service area, from 'Pucka' (Puckapunyal) and Kapooka. In fact when I arrived at the School of Army Health I was two weeks after the initial course had started so in fact I was eight weeks waiting at Healesville prior to getting on my IET course.

You have got two (and a half) years up and you are now posted to an infantry battalion that you know is going to Vietnam. Did you know it was going to Vietnam?

Not for sure. It had been identified but of course there was still some doubt as to whether the conflict in Vietnam was going to finish and such. Yes, I was very happy in fact to know that I was getting posted there. Again, not so much for the chance to go to Vietnam although that was a consideration. I think I wanted to get to a battalion where I would have more exposure and use my medical knowledge and such more in an area than just wet-nursing people in a ward.

If you look back on your medical training now, and your training before you went to Vietnam, do you consider the training was good enough, relevant?

I think yes, at the time I did, I was probably overly keen that I pursued as much in my medical knowledge above what I was required to know in my position as a medical assistant, particularly in the fields of drugs. I had a keen interest in that I wanted to know all side effects and everything I could get to know about the idiosyncrasies of drugs (and medicines). I guess I pursued that interest more so than a lot of my peer group to enhance my own knowledge.

In all this medical training that you were doing, was there any particular part that was emphasised more than others?

No, I think overall because of the Vietnam situation going on a lot more of our training was centred around gunshot traumatic injuries to that extent. That would have been the

heavy emphasis on training because that was the scenario (Vietnam) in the situation at the time.

> You marched in to 4 RAR in September1970 and you went into Admin Company. How did you get allocated out to the companies?

Basically you arrived and yes, you went to Admin Company as being the base of the battalion. From there the RAP Sergeant in cohorts with the Doctor would decide which company you were to go out with. That was basically how it was decided.

> So you went out with Delta and you stayed with them.

Yes, at the time I spent a little bit of time settling in to the battalion and did a couple of small detachments with other companies. There had been a big problem in Delta Company, in that the current OC, Major Kudnig at the time, had basically sacked three of his previous company medics, and I believe that was purely because he didn't think they were up to the standard that he wanted within his company, or due to personal conflicts. When (Sergeant E.A.) 'Bluey' Chapman, the RAP Sergeant, said to me how I felt about moving across there, I guess I had some apprehensions at first. Yes, I did want to get situated with a company, a company that I could call my own and identify the personnel in that company as my own, so I took up the challenge. What a challenge it ended up being.

> How was your reception into the battalion? Obviously they were warming up and getting ready to go to Vietnam and you lob in reasonably late. How were you received and did it take you long to settle in?

I don't believe it took me long to settle in. I believe my own personality allows me to mix in and get on with everyone very quickly. As I said, I took some pride that I had eventually been posted to a battalion, and I felt that I settled in very quickly and was there to accommodate and work for the 'Grunts' and not against them.

> As the Corporal Company Medic you had three stretcher bearers?

Yes, basically within the company group, (Captain) Paul Trevillian (our Regimental Medical Officer), had instigated it before we moved across to Vietnam and before our training really started to intensify we ran a Platoon Medics' course. We decided that we would place our 'bandies' (Bandsmen) on that course, we also offered it up to company infantry soldiers to come along and be exposed to some basic principles on first-aid. Of course in the long run they would then be able to facilitate some of the pressure that may be applied on us as company medics in a big stoush if that was to eventuate. Yes, we ran a two week course at the battalion area there, and I think we had about 40 odd members on the course. Probably 20 of them stretcher bearers from the Band Corps and probably another 20, 25 from across the battalion out of each of the platoons.

> Did the Medical (Corps) personnel in the battalion do any other special training to prepare them for Vietnam?

No. Besides our normal basic maintaining of the RAP and the medical records, overseas medical examinations, and inoculation parades and such, our exposure to infantry training

was relatively minor, and this was of some concern to me in our build-up to going across to Vietnam, in that I knew that I was going to be in the forward line. Some of the contact drills and aspects of that was of concern and would I be able to react and do as I was directed to do under conflict.

Do you consider that you personally were well-prepared to Vietnam?

Probably not, in that I did not have enough settling in or posting time to the battalion before I moved across, but as I say I was just thankful that I had got to them and to have the exposure and experience to work with them.

What sort of responsibility did you have for the stretcher bearers?

Again, stretcher bearers were identified to the company, and particularly the rifleman first-aider that we had trained I endeavoured to keep them as close to my little company group to give them any extra training or to ensure that they were up to speed in what I considered and I wanted them to know.

Was that a formal responsibility?

I wouldn't say it was formal. I know some of the other company medics didn't so that line. It was something that I wanted to make sure that if we did get into a stoush I knew to what knowledge my stretcher bearers had and to what extent they could work for me, basically.

From an outsider's point of view, what did you think of Delta Company?

As I say, some apprehensions when I was told I was going across there. Very quickly I learnt that they were by far the fittest company within the battalion group, and I guess that is attributed back to the extent that Major Kudnig used to push the guys. But very quickly I identified that I had the best company in the battalion and nobody was no going to take me away from it.

Did it take you long to settle in to Delta Company?

No, not really. Again the apprehension was there, but I had a clash with the OC very early in the piece and at the time he was basically not accepting my advice as the medical adviser to the company and I think at the time I offered him a notebook to accept the responsibility in writing. He back-peddled a little bit and we seemed to get on alright from then on.

That is a pretty gutsy play for a corporal with a major?

It was at the time but I thought I had heard of his past reputation with medics in the past and thought perhaps they hadn't taken that line. I was there primarily as his medical adviser and if I felt that he wasn't going to adhere to that advice I thought then why then can't he accept the responsibilities if the situation arose of life or death.

Not long after you got to the battalion you went off to Canungra and you did all the JTC training with Delta Company?

I can recollect back that yes, I did. That was a whole new ball game. Again as I indicated, I didn't have a lot of infantryexposure before and Canungra was particularly an eye-opener for me.

> You had spent some time in Papua New Guinea with the 'flu epidemic that had broken out, and that was probably your first exposure to the Tropics I imagine?

Yes, it was in fact, and again I believe it was invaluable in my career, in particular giving me some knowledge there of what I could carry on my pack in the way of medical stores and my limitations of being able to move with what I had on my back.

> What sticks most in your memory about Canungra?

Probably the humidity and the afternoon monsoonal rains where you could be sweating and pushing yourself rather hard most of the day and then you get wet as a shag in the afternoon.

> What is the hardest part about being a company medic with a rifle company?

On reflections probably getting emotionally involved with some of your guys. You very quickly got to learn the stronger pain thresholds and personalities of some individuals and the weakness of others. By the time I got to Vietnam; I believe I had got to know my company members very well and I knew their weaknesses and I knew, sometimes, a lot of their personal backgrounds. And in that case, to see a couple of them get killed probably affected me more then I ever let out.

> Before we get into Vietnam and you look back on this training, before you went to the war, when you actually got there and started going out on patrols with the rifle company, was there anything you weren't prepared for?

No, I guess again my keenness to learn and be an infantry soldier, a 'Grunt' with a secondary role as a medic, I endeavoured to learn very quickly as much as I could about their role, their performance so that I would be able to work in and fit in with the team.

> Is carrying a weapon a hindrance to a medic?

At times. Although again, your primary role is that you are a soldier, secondary role a medic, so in part it is a necessity.

> Did all RAAMC guys take that line that you do?

Probably not. Again, I have seen many of my peer group say that, 'I am a medic and my secondary role is an infantry soldier' and perhaps not give it the full gutso outlook to serving in an infantrybattalion as what they should have done. My pride with having served with 4 RAR, Delta Company, was probably the greatest experience in my life.

> What did you think was your hardest exercise you went on in your work-up to Vietnam?

Just one of the battalion exercises up at Mount Stuart I think was a particularly hard one that I can reflect back on because we in fact had a lot of blokes go down with heat exhaustion, and I think it was attributed at the time to again perhaps our OC at the time not taking use of vehicles that were available. He wanted to show that the company was physically able and hence as I said we had a particularly high proportion of heat exhaustions.

That same OC also had a water-discipline policy which sort of flies in the face of what we are all taught today.

That is right.

How did you approach situations like that where the company Commander is obviously not listening to your advice. What do you do?

Well, that OC at the time was a very difficult man to sort of respond to. Again, all I could emphasis to him was that 'I am here as your medical adviser and my medical advice is I think your water-discipline is too stringent and you are pushing your troops too hard.' Again, I could take the line as 'you sign this book and accept the responsibility'. I guess he was a difficult man to work for.

I think some of the stretcher bearers you had were National Servicemen?

Yes, that is right.

By this stage you have been in the Army from early 1968; almost three years. You were a Regular soldier yourself - what did you think of the National Servicemen?

I was very impressed with probably a high percentage of them. Some, of course, and you have always got them in any sort of group environment or any bunch, don't show the application that perhaps they should of, but I would say a high percentage were as good as soldiers as most.

Do you think National Service as a policy was good or bad for the Army?

I think it was good, and I have a strong belief now that I believe there should be a compulsory aspect within the current economic climate.

Why was it good for the Army?

May be good for the Army may not be the interpretation I had. I think it was more so that it would teach a lot of people in today's environment self-discipline and how to work and operate as a team and keep a lot of these ratbags out of trouble. Good for the Army? I don't know whether I would say that was an appreciation that I agree with.

Did it worry you have National Servicemen under your own personal command as stretcher bearers, or would you have rather had Regulars?

Not concerned. I think the majority of the National Servicemen were as good as soldier in their limited training as the Regular Army guy would be. Some of them had the correct and full application. A very, very small percentage didn't.

I would like to get on with a segment called 'The People and the Jobs'. Your title was Company Med(ical) Assist, is that right?

Yes, Company Med Assist - Company Medic for short.

That was your job title, but what do you consider was really your job?

As I say, I probably looked at it in a different view. I was a member of a large team, I was primarily a rifleman within that team with a secondary role of having a very good expertise in the medical field. I see my primary role there was to operate in whatever area that the rifle company superior that I had wanted me to operate in, and in the time of a battle situation - then come to the forefront, and again with my experience and knowledge, help save the lives of my mates around me. That knowledge of having more expertise than most was probably comforting I guess.

How many people did you actually work closely with when the company was in the field?

You are with the Company Headquarter group so you were closely involved with people in that headquarter group. But again, whenever the opportunity arose, I would circulate amongst the platoons within the company; first off liaison with the platoon stretcher bearer and then get around and circulate amongst the troops as much as possible to see if everything was going fine and see their health was preserved.

What was the most important part of your job?

I think in personal relationship with the guys in my company. I like to think that I had become very close to the majority, and maintain that close link with them which I felt would be important later on in the time of trauma or injuries.

Did you like your job?

Very much so. Loved it.

What gave you the most satisfaction?

A respect and rapport that you build up with the infantry soldier if you have done your job well. I felt that I had established that rapport and respect amongst Delta 4 guys.

Let's talk about battle - what was your first contact like?

Scary. Again I had always had a concern not so much for my own ability to perform but my major concern was my stretcher bearers or my first-aiders and their ability to perform. My concern was that they may not handle the scenario and it may cost lives. So, my reaction in that scenario of battle - I had never had a great consideration of it. It was more so for others that I had trained in the company and their ability to perform.

After that first contact, was it like you imagined it to be?

Yes. I guess until well after the contact that I got the nerves aspect of it. But I felt that during the contact initially and the call for me to go here and there, although that was not considered my job I was quite adamant that I wanted to be there and do this and that. It all went so easy as if I had been doing it for years.

Maybe that is good training?

Possibly so.

Before going out on operation, did you ever think about what was coming up, or was there anything that scared you when you were going out on operations?

No. I had always prepared myself well and having a complete check list in my mind of what I needed to take. I was again kept pretty well informed of the scenario of each operation that we were going in to. I was the only one of the battalion medics that had been given the authority by the Doctor to carry strong analgesics such as pethidine or morphine, so I believe I was pretty well prepared and set for any of our operations that we had to go out on.

Why were you the only guy allowed to do that?

(Captain) Paul Trevillian in part of our pre-training before we had to go over had set several, let's say tests, extra work that he wanted us to prepare in our own minds and in our own way to show him that we were capable of handling different situations. As I said in the early part of this interview, I had always had a strong interest in the drug side of medicine, side effects and repercussions and such, and I think in one of our tests I think I was able to show him I had a very good knowledge of the side effects of morphine and pethidine and hence he had no hesitation in allowing me to carry those drugs.

When you look back at your time out on patrol, who was the person who most stands out in your memory?

There would be many and varying, there is no doubt about that, but the one who comes to mind is Peter Schuman. There was a particular contact scenario, quite a bit of heavy fire and flak coming in our way, and he in his own way walked up amongst the rest of us and said to keep your heads down and be ready to go and the morale boost him doing that was absolutely unreal. I can reflect back on that quite easily.

What incident stands out most on all your time on operations?

Probably the big contact battle in September. One where I was confronted to probably one of the medic's biggest worries in the way of an injury, and that is the sucking chest wound with a Digger of ours, (Private) Ralph Niblett. We spent some time initially curtailing the bleeding and treating the wound which is a real nasty one, the sucking chest wound. That sort of sticks in my mind. I felt we had followed everything to plan but unfortunately we lost him. That is one incident that really plays on my mind.

I guess the other one is a situation with yourself, when you got wounded and the concern I had in the amount of blood loss that was occurring with yourself. I was trying all methods to stop your bleeding, and I was only so thankful that you were such a big robust, fit sort of guy that you had the ability to lose that fluid loss and still be with us the next day; and with us now thank goodness.

When battle breaks out in a situation like we had in September where it was a formal company assault, how far forward do you think the medic has to go?

Well, the policy is that he goes no farther forward than the Company Headquarter group. That is where he is to be and then your platoon stretcher bearers/first-aiders, their role is to bring the casualties back in to the Company Headquarter group where you then complete the stabilisation and prepare the casualty for evacuation. That is supposedly the policy in the role of the company medic. I guess the worry there is that if the company medic goes up in the forward line and he gets hit or wounded or killed you then do not have the medical expertise in your company to stabilise and prepare for evacuation. I probably saw it as a different role a little, in that if again I had people hit in the forward area, I would expect or hope that my first-aider was there to manage the wound initially. I see my role up there to see that that was occurring and to ensure that the lifesaving methods were being adhered to.

How did your stretcher bearers perform?

Very well. As I say, I initially had the concern as to how they would react more so than myself, but I guess again it relays back to we had worked well together and we had done probably a little bit extra training than what some of the other companies had done, and hence they performed admirably - all of them.

What do you think was the toughest time you ever experienced?

Again, the September battle. When we started to move the casualties back we had to leave bodies which the Australian soldiering policies normally dictate that we normally don't do. We had to get our wounded back at that time and move back out of the big battle area that was there. That was probably the toughest thing that I can reflect back on.

Did you go back with the company when they recovered the bodies?

Yes.

Had anything happened to them?

Yes. The sight of them was again very hurting, having sat there in the climate until the time that we got back. They were very bloated in size and that is a reflection that I don't like to go back on.

Mick, you were in a position to look at the company when this was going on - what was the reactions like of the men around you, the other infantrymen?

Again, I believe having a reasonably good knowledge I like to say of the majority of the guys in the company, I was able to see that those I guess I had identified as not being a

problem, that were stronger willed or stronger in their abilities than others, in fact showed me that in that particular battle. Some that I thought that would have weaknesses in fact displayed them to some degree - they started to panic, they started to react and scream and carry on which I guess I gauged that may occur with some of them in the scenario.

> We are always seeing on television when people are shot, in war movies and things like that. Did you ever see anyone shot?

Yes, several over the different conflicts, battles as we like to call them, in 4 RAR Delta. And treated several at the time. The portrayal on TV and the screaming and carrying on is not the way I saw it in Vietnam. Some of the guys were very strong-willed and again I think it refers back to their pain threshold and were able to handle it better than others. In fact I can reminisce on some that I could have very easily owing to the traumatic aspects of their wound administered morphine or pethidine to accommodate their pain, but those individuals were able to suffice through that pain threshold and in fact I didn't have to administer it when I very well could have been in a position when I would have had to.

> Did you ever see enemy dead?

Yes. In fact the very first contact the company had - 10 Platoon, and I had a look at this dead soldier at the time.

> What was your reaction, can you remember?

Other than to look down on a limp body and think that that was a human life some two hours ago, probably no other reflections other than perhaps that it is one less that can be firing or killing the rest of my company group.

> Soldiers talk about an adrenalin rush when they get into contact. What was your initial reaction when shooting broke out or you heard that there was a contact on?

Again, I have reflected back at different times, and I don't believe I had that adrenalin run at the time because I was so keyed up to perform and be ready to move in whatever area I needed to to look after my troops, and it was after that first big battle in July there that I really had an adrenalin rush afterwards. As I said, I think it was an attack of the nerves. I didn't let anyone know about that although the CSM came and saw me afterwards. I don't think I had an adrenalin rush at the time of the battle - I knew I had a job to do and I wanted to keep as steady in the sense that I could.

> What do you think you learnt most from your time out on operations?

Command and control in a situation where, if it wasn't there, everything could have fallen to pieces. I think that is probably one of the greatest things I learnt from our tour of Vietnam. During a contact and normally just out patrolling, the ability of command and control that the platoon commanders and their platoon sergeants had down to section level was important. Their command and control was outstanding; more so as I say in a battle scenario for the commands and control to be given when there is heavy flak, heavy fire, and a lot of other associated noises going on, was outstanding.

What do you think are some of the more important attributes that a medic should have?

Confidence in himself I think is probably one of the greatest attributes. Of course, knowledge of what he is likely to go in to and how he is going to handle that, and I guess a later one is calmness. Nothing I believe upsets your patient or casualty more than to see that you are a nervous wreck yourself.

Wouldn't be good for morale.

No.

What about battlecraft? What do you think are the important things in battlecraft, when a guy actually gets into contact?

Knowledge of contact drills, and again, the knowledge of command and control when he is told to move to a particular high ground, low ground whatever direction it may be, that he does that without any question. Command and control is probably the greatest thing I think is taught with not enough emphasis on (it).

When you look back on your time on operations, what was the saddest thing you can remember?

The loss of KIAs in the company, probably a couple as I said that I may have started to become too personally close to. One being (Private B. M.) Pengilly who was one that always plays on my mind because in fact he was a National Serviceman and had also worked in a close environment with my mother. So that was pretty hurtful when in fact I lost Bernie. Another one was Ralph Niblett being a very close identity within the company. I guess overall it was the loss of all the lives we had in the company digs down deep.

What about the funny times? Any funny things you look back on?

Yes. We had several identities within the company. One that always reflects back is the company sig, (Lance Corporal P. M.) 'Paddy' Leahy. When we were in fact back at the Badcoe Club towards the latter part of our tour, the Officers' Mess were having a rather larger evening function than they would normally be exposed to in the Officers' Mess. Paddy and myself had had a reasonable sort of drinking session that afternoon and he had decided that he was going to go and pinch one of their turkeys that they had set up. I didn't think anything more about it and went to bed and an hour and a half later I woke up to find a big turkey wing stuck up my bloody nose. Paddy Leahy had achieved his aim and had got into the Officers' Mess and knocked off this bloody turkey. We then sat up and endeavoured to devour half of this turkey, of which I then sent him off to bed. A quarter of the turkey was found in the swimming pool the next day. (Warrant Officer Class Two) Noel Huish, the CSM at the time, was the one that found it as he was walking past the pool.

Did you ever take R & R?

Yes. Basically only about three months before our tour finished which was over the Christmas period. We had again moved down to the Badcoe Club towards the latter part of our tour and I was not contemplating taking it but a bit of pressure was put on us that it was there and an entitlement, so I came home for Christmas in 1971-72.

You were a single man and came back to Perth?

Yes I did.

How long did you spend here - a week?

It was in fact five days back here at Christmas. We then got back to Sydney and missed the interlocking flight. There were floods on at the time in Sydney and the rest of those on R & R hadn't been able to get back; we then diverted back through Darwin and had two days in Penang. So in fact we were away from Vietnam for about twelve days.

Did you find it hard to get back into the swing of things when you got back?

Yes. Relatively so. You were back here knowing that you could completely relax and haven't got the problem of keeping one eye open all the time to see what is going on around you. Yes, there was some difficulty initially for sure.

But the company had really stopped going out on those long operations by that stage?

That is right.

So, you were probably relegated to more of a role within the Badcoe area?

Yes, basically an RAP set-up in an office area just to maintain the daily health of the troops.

What was the thing that affected the soldiers most back in that static environment in Vung Tau?

I guess morale wise all we basically knew at that time was that our role was to maintain local perimeter defence. One of the platoons was always a ready-reaction platoon basically, so they sat around on a 15-30 minute notice to move at all times, so they could not really relax. The morale was probably the most difficult to maintain and keep going.

This is Tape Two of two tapes of an interview with Mick O'Sullivan recorded by Gary McKay on 27 March 1993 in Perth, Western Australia, for Delta Four - Australian Infantrymen at War. The topics covered on this tape are battle, casualties, the allies and the aftermath.

The first question I have is casualty evacuation - when a casualty evacuation is done either by helicopter or APC or whatever, what was your primary responsibility?

Basically to make sure the particular casualty was stabilised enough to then be evacuated by APC or by helicopter. Although at times the helicopters had their own aero-medivac

personnel on board, it may be at times that we put them on an APC and got them out with no medical support on that vehicle. So it was basically just to stabilise and prepare so that they could then endure the transportation.

Did you ever try to follow up what had happened to the guys after that?

Yes. I would endeavour, either through the Medical Officer if and when he came out on operations to visit us, or through the company commander endeavour to find out how the casualties were going back in the rear admin areas.

What were the worst wounds to treat?

Sucking chest wound or a gunshot wound I believe. Of which I explained, I was confronted with Ralph Niblett and to some extent (Second Lieutenant) Gary McKay.

Illness always plays a great part in any military operations in a tropical environment. What was the most common ailment that affected the Delta Company soldiers?

I think skin conditions, mainly because of the humidity and the jungle environment that we were in. Our lack or inability to be able to wash or maintain a close health and hygiene aspect of our bodies. So probably skin conditions more so overall. And surprisingly enough, haemorrhoids. I had more cases of haemorrhoids at different times than I had ever come across in my years of experience in the Medical Corps.

Was there a particular reason for that?

No. I had spoken to the Doctor about that and I guess we couldn't put it down to anything. Probably just the individuals we had in the company.

We used to have six week patrols quite regularly - was it the fact that you were on hard rations for so long?

It may have attributed to it, but it was never really pinpointed to any particular cause.

You talk about skin conditions - were you prepared for that?

Again, yes our training had centred around the type of skin conditions we were likely to confront, and I reflect back on one some many years later when I was the RAP Sergeant at 3 RAR that a young Medical Officer I had there had called me in to have a look at a guy's back because he had a particular skin condition. At the time I was able to very quickly diagnose that it was a tinea versicolor I think we diagnosed it as; a discolouration and loss of pigmentation colour in the skin. He was absolutely amazed after reading about it in some of his journals at home that I had diagnosed this above his (own) knowledge. A skin condition that I can reflect back on as seeing of lot of in Vietnam.

(Corporal A. C. F.) 'Tassie' Wilkinson - what took Tassie from us?

Again, a sad scenario that I reflect back on, and unfortunately I centre some blame back on our current OC at the time, because we had a pretty large confrontation about my

wanting to evacuate him a lot earlier than what eventually occurred. The stretcher bearer who I again had a lot of admiration of had been giving me very good up to date prognoses of Tassie Wilkinson's condition, particularly his very high temperatures, and I asked to evacuate him a lot earlier than what initially occurred. A follow up after his death, gave indications by the doctors (who tended to diagnose the occasional death or patient in Vietnam when they were unsure of his actual cause) and listed it as pyrexia of unknown origin. And that was basically the cause that was listed as Tassie Wilkinson's death. He had several episodes of malaria over his past years and although they don't believe it was a malarial attack at the time of his death, it was assumed - because of his many exposures in tropical areas before - they say it may have been a contributing factor.

He wasn't a young man was he, for a section commander?

No, no Tassie was perhaps what we would nearly say the grand dad of the company. Very well liked guy, very experienced guy and had done I think a tour of Vietnam before and also done several tours in New Guinea and places like that and so had an abundance of knowledge of jungle type warfare.

Did you ever treat an enemy soldier?

No, I did not.

What was the evacuation procedure like in Delta Company?

Yes, very good in fact. Again because I believe we had air superiority. We had the ability to be able to call in air support to casevac pretty readily, although again the difficulty there was confronting with the OC (Major Kudnig) at times, where he would simply say, 'This a war time situation, the compromise of giving our position away by calling in helicopters to move casualties out was a by far larger consideration than the moving of the casevac'. I did have some difficulty accepting that, but I guess in its' entirety is true.

Was that only with Kudnig?

It was only with Kudnig that I had the problem. Again I think (Major) Jerry Taylor was more easy to relate to and talk to and more understanding than what the aggressive nature of Kudnig was and hence I would probably accept more so an explanation of the difficulty in getting in vehicles to evacuate some one. I would accept it better coming from Jerry Taylor than what I would of Kudnig because he was too aggressive in his simply, 'No Corporal O'Sullivan you cannot have' and such.

The procedure we had with the helicopters and so on, was there any way you think we could have refined that when we saw it in 1971? Or had we reached the zenith of ...

As I say, I was pretty impressed with the ability for them to come in, particularly in jungle type areas and drop winches and such. Again, I was a little concerned in one evac scenario that I can reflect back on, and again it was Ralph Niblett. I had asked for a Stokes Litter to come down in a prone position but when they dropped it, it came down in a horizontal position and to evacuate a guy with a sucking chest wound in that type of

position with the stretcher going straight up with his head up in the air was of great concern to me. But, at the time we were under fire and trying to get what casualties we had out as quickly as possible it was too late - but that reflects back on me a lot.

> Mick you were decorated in Vietnam with the Military Medal, why do you think you received that award?

Again I reflect back on it and I take no kudos, I believe I was doing purely what I was there to do and that was to react, to save life, to maintain life and evacuate life as quickly as I was able to in what ever scenario that confronted me. I think the situation of the award of the Military Medal was probably over recognised and over highlighted for myself, because as far as I was concerned I was purely there performing in my job as the company medic for Delta Company, 4 (RAR).

> I would like to talk about leaders now and relationships, and you were in a position where you saw one type of leader in Delta Company and then another with Franz Kudnig and Jerry Taylor. What do you think was the major difference between those two men?

Their inter-personal relationship I believe. Their ability to be able to communicate with their subordinates even down to the grass root levels of the private riflemen. Franz Kudnig had a great difficulty in doing that because I don't believe he had that ability to have a more familiarised knowledge and communicative skill with his soldiers. I have accolades for Kudnig in the sense that he had the company to the highest physical level that I believe that we could have been in our going across as a company, no doubt as I have said before and reflect back on as the best company in the battalion. But that is probably the only accolades I have for the man. Jerry Taylor came in at a time when morale was down a little, particularly because of the loss of Tassie Wilkinson, a very well identified and a very popular guy within the company. Jerry Taylor came in at a time when morale was waning - lifted it - purely because of his presence; his ability to be able to relate to people; and his ability I believe to be able to have a more personal contact and knowledge and friendship. of his platoon commanders and again right down to the soldier level.

> So, which style was the most effective?

By far Jerry Taylor's.

> What would you say were his qualities that sort of stood out with you?

His ability to be able to communicate and relate effectively and personally to soldiers under his command.

> What was important to you when men like Jerry Taylor - the officer commanding - dealt with you when you were out on operations?

His ability to listen, understand and normally accept your advice as the key medical person in the company.

What was your personal situation in your relationship between you and all the riflemen. What was that like?

Again I believe very good. As I said, I endeavoured once I was allocated and associated with the company to very quickly build up[a respect; a rapport with the troops at all levels. And this was easily done by particularly going out of my way to pay attention or addressing any of the little or personal medical matters that the Delta guys had when they came to the RAP or they would see me around the battalion area.

How did they address you - as 'Doc'?

Normally as that. It took some time. As I say, if you establish a good respect - a rapport with the infantry soldier, you know that you have been accepted well by them when you are normally addressed by the nickname of 'Doc'. In some short time I felt comfortable that I had attained that respect with them.

What about the other section commanders, the other corporals?

Again, I don't think there was any demeanour shown at all. They knew that I was a corporal whether it be Medical Corps or whatever. As I say I very closely associated myself as close to a rifleman - a grunt - as what I could and I think towards the later part of our tour where I was presented in fact a cigarette lighter, which in fact was inscribed on the side, 'To Corporal Mick O'Sullivan, part time grunt, Delta Company 4 RAR' by one of the platoons. It was probably one of the greatest reflections of a gift that I have ever received.

Did you feel more a part of Delta Company than Admin?

Oh, definitely so much more, yes. I would only associate myself with Admin Company if I was told to or directed to do so by the Medical Officer or the RAP Sergeant, because as far as I was concerned I was Delta Four.

What was your relationship like between you and the platoon commanders?

I felt that I had a good relationship with them. Again I believed and hoped that it was the same respect that I had built up with their soldiers, that yes, I was shown the same rapport and respect that I had endeavoured to build up with everybody in the company.

The CSM?

CSM? Again, in Company Headquarters, worked very closely with. Not an easy man to relate to at times, but yeah, if you got to know him it became much more easier. Yes, I had a good rapport with (Warrant Officer Class Two) Noel Huish.

What did you look to him for?

For guidance sometimes on the infantry-type skills I felt may have been lacking. And as I say he was very supportive in those ways.

On the admin side it tends to be the Company 2IC and the sergeants within a rifle company that get all the admin things done and a lot of that administration sometimes includes the medical side of things, so what was the relationship like on that admin side with the sergeants and Company 2IC ?

Yes, again, very close. Simply I would ask for any particular needs from my platoon medics to be directed back through me and on a resup (resupply) system or such I would go to those individuals and yes, again I had a good rapport with them. Not a problem.

Did the Company 2IC and you have a special relationship within Company Headquarters itself?

Yes, I believe so, in such that when there was particular personal or medical needs of some individuals in the company, in the platoon groups, it would be the Company 2IC that I would go and have further discussions with and say, 'We might have a problem if this guys particular constipation doesn't clear up in a certain period, that I may have to evacuate him or what ever was the case'. Yes, so we had a contact in that area.

When you were back in barracks (Nui Dat) and then later in Vung Tau, what were the things that you treated most as far as aliments went?

It would be skin conditions that you had the difficulty of in treating out in the field because of the lack of toiletry conditions to wash and clean and the body. With the application of creams or drugs in treating the problem out in the field may purely be to contain - more so than to remedy. So once you got them back in for that three or four days break and they were able to toiletry - clean their body - on a more regular basis, you would then be looking at ways to completely eradicate the problem. So skin conditions probably mainly.

On a slightly different tack with discipline. What did you think the discipline was like in Delta Company?

Under Franz Kudnig - very strong and yes, I think probably it relates back to him; his strong, hard line tack didn't allow for many disciplinary problems at all. I think it was probably more so talking behind his back - at all levels - which is a concern, and of course doesn't help morale. But when Jerry Taylor came in, again I don't think there was any disciplinary problems. There didn't need to be the talk behind his back so I think he was very well respected in the short time time he was with us.

Do you think that with well trained soldiers the discipline comes from within as opposed to imposed discipline?

No, I think it comes within.

So, self discipline?

Yes, self discipline.

What do you think drives guys to impose that on themselves?

Probably their ability to perform, to higher levels or to the levels expected of them, by ensuring that their discipline is to a level where they will give their maximum performance.

Was there anything that ever pissed you off in Vietnam?

Yes , there was a scenario where the company medics, after one or two operations, at battalion level would be changed around by the MO (or) the RAP Sergeant and in fact you would be relieved of your company for a period of the six weeks operation. You would have a rest back at Battalion Headquarters. I had a lot of pressure on me to do that and I stood by my guns and refused to. At that stage Delta Company was my company and no other bloody medic was going to go out with them, so that caused quite a bit of a rift within the Battalion RAP group. But, yeah, as I say I stood by my guns and no-one was going to have my company and hence that was the way it was.

Okay. What got men into trouble most down in Vung Tau?

No doubt their exposure to alcohol, having been on operations and not having that exposure and then coming back and having a three or four day break and the ability to consume or drink as much as possible. Their tolerance (laughs) wasn't there and hence they used to let their hair down pretty well.

A lot of the patrols Delta Company went on were six weeks, what do you think was the effect of that?

Well, the effect medical-wise it didn't enhance our skin conditions or other minor ailments or complaints (garbled). Medical areas again, keeping them away from the alcohol lessened any disciplinary problems or ability to let their hair down. Operation wise, six weeks was probably just long enough. I think any longer than that and at times it was probably a little bit longer, your nerves tended to be really at that fine line point. Yes, so I think that six weeks was probably the maximum that I would envisage or see.

Mick did you ever see any cases of battle shock?

Yes, I did in fact. A couple of times where death had been very close to individuals, I can't reflect on his name, but a bullet in fact hit the woodwork of his SLR and to see the after effects of that on a member was quite horrendous and in fact we casevaced him out. Yes, I can reflect back on a couple of different cases. Again the easy answer was if viable was to casevac them back out give them a rest period and they would come back out again after one or two five day breaks for a resup and then they seemed to fit back into the company alright.

We had a case in 11 Platoon where a guy accidentally shot and killed another soldier and we didn't evacuate him because we figure if we did that, he would feel he was being punished. What is your reaction to that statement?

I can reflect back on that incident as well in fact and yes, sometimes by confronting the stress that he was put under to cause that battle stress, can be the answer and I think in that scenario it was. He stopped, he was with the rest of his troops who rallied around

him, gave him the support that he needed and it was very quickly put behind him and forgotten. Which I think in that scenario was no doubt the ultimate answer.

> Would you say that the important thing with those sort of battle shock things that there has to be that expectation that they are going to return to the battle front again?

Yes, yes, I have no doubt of that and sometimes yes, the quicker you are able to do that no doubt it is the short term and better plan.

> Sort of like falling off the horse type of thing?

And jumping back straight on, yes.

> Okay. Mick did you have a girl friend when you went off to war?

Yes, that was lost probably a quarter of the way through the tour.

> What was her reaction to your going?

I probably hadn't become that close to her to allow a concern to arise between us. Of course she was concerned that there I was going off into an area, yes, but I don't think enough or there wasn't the closeness I had allowed to build up between us in case something did happen.

> What about your parents?

Being the only son, yes, considerable concern was shown but again I am third generation in the Army, so both my grandfather and my father had some understanding and in fact probably rallied around my grandparents and my mother to give them support. Although, of course, there was that concern.

> I missed one question on relationships and it was the relationship you had with Major Jerry Taylor. How would you describe it?

Yes, very good in fact. As I said, I found Jerry Taylor a sort of OC that you could relate to and he had the ability to communicate back to you on the same level that you were discussing the problem that you may have had and had a complete understanding. So yes, I found that I had a very approachable, close relationship with the OC.

> Is it because Jerry Taylor was approachable that you think he was more effective?

Yes, no doubt.

> You had, like, you could go up to him and talk to him about something but you couldn't with Kudnig?

Yes, that's right, no Jerry had that definite ability to be able to relate and communicate to far more easily and effectively than Major Kudnig.

Okay. What did you think about the enemy?

For his limited resources, and of course his being on his home ground, home terrain, he was a very good soldier. As I say, probably his limited resources, his ability to fold back into the local countryside, the local villages made him yes, a very good soldier.

Did you ever hate the enemy?

When I was confronted with the death of our own individuals within our company - yes. A very strong hate, very strong hate, but other than that, probably not so.

Did you ever feel sorry for them?

No. No I don't think so.

Do you think they were good fighters?

Again, for their lack of resources and their ability to operate within their terrain, their knowledge of that was no doubt their greatest advantage, yes, he was a good soldier.

Were they as you imagined them and you were trained you know with 'the guys in black pyjamas and little hats' at Canungra and places like that? And when you got there were they like what you thought they would be?

Yes, I guess so, again the emphasis being that we had been told that they had limited resources and and still showed they could operate effectively for the ten years before we had even got there to confront them on our tour of duty. No doubt, our outstanding numbers against them with the American forces there and of course with us and the New Zealanders and others they had still performed and held their own.

I want to just revisit a couple of areas about battle. You were in a position where you are not really worried about shooting so much - you have probably got other things on your mind. The time when the company was doing their attack with the tanks what were some of the images that come back at you in that fire fight?

One is my surprise in the ability of a machine that size and such to operate so effectively as they did in that particular battle that we had in close jungle areas. Their ability to manoeuvre and get in and sometimes knock down small trees to get to exactly where the battle was and at the time that they moved forward to where I was treating a wounded guy, (Private J. M.) Johnny Lawton, in the forward position. We were under heavy fire and I was able purely to give the hand signals and the bloody tank came up and sort of traversed directly in front of us, took all the fire on the side of the vehicle; and the crewie was up the top with his 30 or 50 cal firing into this bunker system. But I was then able to get Johnny Lawton out and Bernie Pengilly unfortunately had been killed while assisting me. Yes, but I was probably amazed in the ability of those bloody tanks to operate in such close country.

So, the tanks actually shielded you while you got this guy back out?
Yes.

Bernie Pengilly was killed almost immediately wasn't he?

He had come across the open ground that I had just gone out to Johnny Lawton and yes, it was. He was hit three quarters of the way across and I then moved five paces back to get him. I started putting tourniquets and dressing all his wounds and realised it was only the nerves of his body that were reacting. He had taken several shots and he was killed almost instantly.

Some of the guys that I have spoken to believe that he got up and moved because he thought he was going to get run over by a tank. Was that your impression?

No, no. Bernie was one of the platoon first-aiders that we had trained back in the battalion before we left Australia, and no, my belief was that he was definitely coming out to assist me in the management of Johnny Lawton.

Oh, is that why? What do you remember about the noise?

Again, the noise of battle didn't play a lot on my mind because I was more pre-occupied with the stabilising and dressing the wounds on Johnny Lawton and then attending Bernie Pengilly. The noise that probably really shocked me was when the tank first came forward and he could see the bunker system to the front that I was taking direct fire from and he in fact put a round into their bunker. And the noise of that bloody gun firing across my head was bloody excessive and it really knocked the shitter out of me, yes. I lost my bloody hearing for probably a couple of minutes after that. As I say was more pre-occupied with the dressing of the casualties that I had there.

Lawton had shrapnel wounds didn't he?

Yes, he had taken heavy shrapnel impact to his right arm from the artillery that we had called in by our FO party.

That was coming over the head and hitting the trees was it and coming down?

Yes.

Okay. In September (1971) when the company was doing its assault into the bunker system at Nui Le, what images of battle come back at you there?

Again, at that stage I was very close to the radio at Company Headquarter group, so I was getting a lot of first hand indications of the fire that the platoons were taking and of course and the casualties. And of course the proximity. We could hear it was quite a bun fight. Yes, I guess the traffic that was coming over the radio and we could hear what was going on.

What was it like when artillery was falling around you?

Quite scary to know that this artillery was being called in at such close proximities but again the confidence of knowing that you had a good FO officer who knew what he was doing and could call it in so close. It was reassuring.

What was the scariest part of the night of the 21st of September?

It was the continual fire that was going on initially before it started to get dark, after moving out of an area where we lost several individuals; casevacing some of those individuals; trying to reorg in an area and still taking fire. And because of some of the falls of the rounds I knew that fire was coming from a high treed area and then of course your getting wounded; your running and prior to getting wounded and coordinating the command and control of your platoon; because I think at that stage you had lost your platoon sergeant; so your ability to be able to reorganise your machine gun groups and things like that. And then as I say, you got hit, of course the initial concern, because at that stage I was right up in the middle of all that. I had a young bloke next to me and I can't remember his name either, getting quite hysterical and I said to him that he was to stop because this guy up in the high treed area was honing his fall of shot in and around this guy next to us. And as I said, you got hit and I thought, 'Gee, that's going to cause more confusion', but you were still able to give command and control and as I say were probably then fortunate we started to get some darkness come in and also this guy in the high perched area had been killed and he was our most worrying aggressor at that time.

What was it like the next morning when the light broke and you looked around the company area?

Well, basically as I hadn't got much sleep all night, my concern was for maintaining and stabilising the bleeding from yourself. Shit, it had been a long night, but yes, I guess to wake up the next morning and realise that there were still individuals around us. We were still alive basically and no doubt with daylight, hopefully some reinforcement body would be coming in to help secure us.

You came back from Vietnam in March / April 1972 and the Vietnam war was virtually over for Australia eight months later. At that time that you were in Vietnam the protest movement was at its height. What did you think of protesters?

Well I believe in the democratic aspect that everybody has the right to protest, but yes, I wasn't particularly supportive of those that were protesting, I guess, and that's purely the soldiering instincts in the guy, that we are directed and told to go and do something for Australia. It is not for us to say no or disagree. Why should the protesters take their protest against us as individuals as they did, in fact, when we marched through Townsville, there were some foreign objects thrown at us. And as I said, a lot of the aggression by the protesters was directed towards the Army and we are directed to do a job and so that probably had some ill- feelings by myself against them.

Do you still feel that way today about them?

Again, only because I say that you know, we were professional soldiers, whether we be National Service or Regular Army, we are told, we are directed to do something, and yes, it still plays on my mind to say well you know, again here were these bastards to direct their animosity against us and again I think when we returned from Vietnam, being the last rifle company to come back, there was no acknowledgments again for the tour of duty or the acceptance of us being over there to do something you know the country had directed us to do.

Was our involvement in Vietnam worth it?

I guess for the economy aspects of it and they say that a war improves and lifts the economy. Probably yes. For the experiences we gained and the knowledge we gained - again yes. But for the loss of lives we had - probably no.

Have you got any regrets about going to Vietnam?

Oh no. As I say it was a chapter in my life. I don't reflect or like to reflect back on it a lot now. But, no doubt it definitely enhanced ,my ability and my learning to then effectively perform in other areas, of which again helped my progression career wise through my twenty odd years in the Army.

So, from that point of view, Vietnam was good for Mick O'Sullivan, were there any other changes it made to you?

Initially when I came back of course there was always that transition period. Difficulties to re-associate, readjust yourself back to an environment where you are not sleeping with one eye open all the time or looking over your shoulder all the time. So there was a transitional period. Again, some difficulties now in a sense of reflection back, and a lot of times reflections you don't want in a sleep pattern or such. But, oh yes, it was a chapter in my life and again for the camaraderie that I enjoyed and built up and learnt from, yes, it was good all round.

Mick, are there any questions that you would have liked me to have asked you today that I haven't? Or anything that you would like to say?

No, not really, I can only say that for half of my life that I spent in the Army, I enjoyed that immensely, but by far my greatest posting ever was to have served in 4 RAR and in particular, Delta Company 4 RAR, which will remain even with its' pitfalls and its' downfalls and some of the bad times - one of the greatest memories of my life and my twenty years in the Army.

Mick O'Sullivan, thanks very much.