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This is tape number one of two tapes of an interview with Garry Heskett conducted by Gary McKay recorded on the 15th of May 1993 at Bringelly, NSW for Delta Four, Australian Infantry in Vietnam. The topics covered on this tape are enlistment, training for war, National Servicemen and battle.

Garry, the first question is pretty easy, why did you join the Army?

Well, I joined the Army because of two reasons mainly. The first was a sense of family and military tradition, that is my grandfather served in the First World War, and his two sons, one of which was my father, both served in the Second World War. My cousin served in Malaya so it was a sense of combining both military and family traditions that I joined. The second main reason was because Dad kicked me out of school at an early age and being the oldest, in those days you had to go and work. So, I was kicked out of school and sent to work. I knew the importance of having a trade qualification behind you in those days and it was thought then that the Army would be the best place to obtain it. So, in a sense that was mainly the two reasons. I achieved the first, however, the trade was never meant to be.

Whereabouts were you living at that stage?

We had moved from the bush, Lismore in fact, and were living at Rosehill in Sydney near the race track. Dad had been promoted in the Department of Agriculture to a what they call a stock inspector around the County of Cumberland. That was it basically. I was working in the Post Office at Granville and I was thinking about being a linesman or something like that - along those lines - (no pun intended) and I thought this is an opportunity for me to get taught a trade and fed three meals a day. Going to Vietnam never entered my thoughts, although I was aware of it but it just never entered my thoughts. I joined the Army to do a trade course or get some sort of trade qualification.

You didn't know much about Vietnam?

I was aware of it then, yes. I was well aware of it. It was on the news and in the papers and you would see soldiers from time to time. I was aware that our government had sent our soldiers to fight in Vietnam ,and I had some belief at the time from what I was reading I recall - I was only seventeen year old, sixteen year old - but we were fairly well aware of it, as were most people in those days. A lot of people subscribed to the Domino Theory, I believed in at that stage, and believed what we were doing was right.

Now, a lot of guys are hesitant about coming into the Army because you get ripped away from home and you get ripped away from the complete fabric of the society that you have been in before. What were your main interests in life as a young fellow then?

I had a pretty bad family upbringing I suppose one could say. So it was not only the trade it was the fact of getting away too, it was a way of escape for me. But I thought I could <u>be</u> something, I could <u>do</u> something. I didn't know if I was going to fit, but my interests in those days were, when we came to the city, was going to watch Parramatta play football, you know watching the Thornett brothers up on the hill at

the old Cumberland Oval. Going out on a Friday and a Saturday night to either a pub or a dance. I was a mad rocker in those days with the pegged jeans; the pointy toed shoes. Oh, pegged pants actually- we never wore jeans - we wore pants, and the Saturday night dance, the odd fight. They were the basic interests. I didn't know where I was heading, but it wasn't until I ran into a mate of mine who lived opposite me in those days, a fellow called Tommy Gissane. Tom served in Vietnam as an engineer. He is a T.P.I (Totally and Permanently Incapacitated pensioner) now but does a lot in the area of veterans' welfare. Tom lived opposite me in those days and I went over when Tom had come home on leave and I was talking to him about it and I said, 'What's the Army like Tom?' and he told me about it and I asked, 'Is there an opportunity for me to do a trade there?'. He said, ' Mate it's a way of escape, it's a trade', he said, 'Get away from here'. A lot of my mates were in a lot of trouble at that time. A few of them had been locked up for rape and a few other matters and I was knocking around with a fairly heavy crew, in Parramatta, in those days. I hung around with what they called the Argyle Street gang and you would fight the gangs from the other suburbs of Sydney. It was the bodgies and the widgies, the surfies and the bloody sharpies you know and the big go was having a blue and a dance on a Friday and a Saturday night and you would get home and of course Dad would give you another flogging for being in a fight. So I don't know I was a bit rebellious I suppose, and I knew I was meant to do something but maybe by joining the Army, I thought I could settle down a bit and maybe this would teach me a little bit about life and maybe get my head screwed on right. So, in answer to your question, I joined the Army of my own volition and upon reflection it was probably a wise move when one considers the alternative could have been a lagging at one of H.M. Prisons. It would appear I was on target for it.

So you went to Kapooka?

Went to Kapooka.

What are your impressions of Kapooka?

Well, I remember after I got off the bus we were all greeted by an Orderly Sergeant and he told us that virtually the Army now owned you - no running home to Mother any more and it was their task to transform us bloody long-haired, baggy-arses into some sort of disciplined unit and first rate soldiers. I recall that I had a fair bit of trouble assimilating to all the do's and don'ts and the orders, but once I got the hang of it, I did alright and I finished up marching out of Kapooka with the, I've still got it here, the Most Improved Soldiers Award out of my platoon.

Was it an enjoyable time?

Yes, it was. I finally felt... I have even got letters back from then that I used to write home. Somehow I felt as if I fitted You know how you are looking for a place to belong?

Yes.

A lot of things stick in your memory; running out on the parade ground in the morning with a sheet stuck around you. I thought I would be smart one morning and I

got up early; I got dressed; my bed was made - everything was spot on - and I waltzes out on parade while everybody else had their sheets around them. And of course, I was sent back to get undressed, put the sheet around me and come back out again. You had to be uniform, everybody had to be the same. I recall that our clothing had to be squared away, I remember that pyjamas had to nine inches square when they were in the locker, and as a result of having your gear squared away like that, once you got it squared away, and it was squared away correctly, you never touched it again and consequently to this very day - I still don't wear pyjamas! (laughs) So, that's a fact. I think we were trained by very good instructors who were all veterans themselves and of course I went from a baggy-arse to a fairly disciplined unit and I think that discipline was the start of what has carried me through to this very day. What I was taught. Further, a couple of enjoyable aspects of recruit training was the development of teamwork and the sudden realisation that the Army was a place where good friendships were made for life.

When did the trade course go out the window?

The trade course went out the window the day before the march-out from Kapooka. When we got our postings, I can recall we were all lined up as a platoon and our platoon commander gave us our postings. My first choice was engineers, however there were only a couple of the soldiers that got what they wanted. I think one got catering corps and another fellow got teaching - education as he was a teacher anyway, and the majority of us were sent to the Infantry Training Centre at Ingleburn. I remember standing next to (Corporal D.L.) Dennis Rayner in the platoon line up. Actually, Dennis was one of our interpreters in Vietnam if you recall, These days Dennis is a member of the New South Wales Fire Brigade in Sydney. Anyway, I recall the platoon commander telling the rest of us that, 'Those who did not get their first choice will be posted to the Infantry Training Centre, Ingleburn for further infantry training'. Dennis and I both laughed and I recall saying to him, (whispering, sotto voce) 'Vietnam will be well and truly over by the time we're old enough to go!'. We were both only 17, however, the platoon commander was adamant. We continued to laugh - 'No, not us, we're too young. Little did we know. I recall questioning the platoon commander as to why as Regular soldiers, we were not given our first choice and we were basically told that the Army knows what's best and we will do as we are told or something similar along those lines. Perhaps, I did not have sufficient qualifications to get on a trade course - I don't know, it was difficult to understand how the inner sanctions of the Army worked at that time, but you would think they would tell you all this at the recruitment office before you sign the dotted line for six years. Anyway, after march-out I went off to Ingleburn for grunt training.

Well, it really depended on the vacancies that were available.

Yes, we weren't aware of that at the time.

I wanted to be a gunner or in armoured corps when I graduated from Scheyville. Infantry - that's all there was available and not only that the Chief Instructor said that if you played front row - you went to infantry! (laughs) That was it!

Upon reflection, funny as it may seem, I am proud of having been an infantry soldier.

Well, what do you remember most about going to Ingleburn?

Well, as I have said, Ingleburn and infantry wasn't my first choice and we have spoken about the march-out and what happened, however, I felt proud that I survived recruit training at Ingleburn, Army life was more relaxed. We were treated like humans. I recall my training at Ingleburn was fairly top rate; I thought it was first class; once again we were being trained by Borneo and Vietnam vets who knew what they were doing. So you were looking at the experienced fellows all the time and you held those fellows in a lot of respect. I recall that the trophy was up for Best Soldier Award and I knew I was in the running at that stage and going fairly well. About a week before our march-out we had to have our week out at Mittagong in the bush. Anyway at that time part of the exercise out there was to do your turn at forward scout; section commanders, and so forth. On this particular occasion I was being forward scout - where you had to lead the section through the scrub and if you were in contact you had to go to ground and identify the enemy fire and the type of weapons that were being fired upon you - so, who ever the section commander at that time was, could deploy his men accordingly. On this particular occasion, we only had about three days to go and we would be back from bush, and I was leading the section up through a creek bank when I stepped over a fallen tree. It was a large fallen tree, that had a lot of moss on it because Mittagong being that type of area you see? Anyway, as I put my foot over the tree - 'Contact front'! Of course I couldn't go to ground straight away because I was on this log. So, in attempting to dive and go to ground to call back what I had seen and so forth, the foot slipped and I finished up straddling this huge tree, slipping down it on the moss and with your gear and everything on your back adding to the weight, I came to a sudden stop at the bottom. My balls had stopped my descent on a fork at the bottom of that tree. So, I was conveyed back to Ingleburn with what was termed as 'elephants balls'. I couldn't walk and I was put to bed and given heaps of needles and everything and finally the platoon came back from bush and the platoon commander came and saw me and he said that I wouldn't be marching out with my platoon because I had to complete that week's exercise in the scrub. So, therefore once I got right I had to go bush with the next platoon and then march out with that platoon. At the same time he then mentioned that if I hadn't injured myself I had sufficient points up to go for the award then. So that hurt, in more ways than one. Fate dealt me a terrible blow, but not be outdone, I got well; finished off the exercise in the bush and marched out, instead of with Dennis Rayner and the boys I marched out with (Private D.G.) Derek Bayliss; (Private P.G.) Smythe; (Private - later Lance Corporal - R.J.) Murray - I can't recall - and we were posted to the Fourth Battalion.

So. Okay, that was my next question. Now, when you look back on your time for that IET (Initial Employment Training) training, was it tough enough?

Yes. I thought the training was tough enough, with numerous field and classroom exercises, by the time march-out came around. I felt very well prepared. Once again, I was impressed with the professional attitude and training of the instructors, who were mostly veterans. We were taught that to survive you depended on the man next to you, just as he had to depend on you. Our training was centred on the Army manual with the bouns of having the instructors' own experiences thrown in, which caused you to listen with interest. After having been taught the basics at Kapooka, corps training was a step up as they honed your weapon and soldiering skills.

What's the main difference between rookie training and Corps training?

The first thing was being promoted from Recruit to Private; 'Wow'. At recruit training I was busy every minute of the day with barely enough time to shit, shower, shave or shampoo. At 17 years of age, I had no whiskers to speak of and the Army had cut off all my hair; perhaps there was a method in this madness after all. I did not smoke in those days, however, I recall the poor buggers that did, because when allowed a smoke break, they only got through half of it. Recruit training was where they had a difficult job of transforming me from a baggy-arsed civilian into a disciplined, regulated outfit. It was a place to sort out the wheat from the chaff. You were a number and you did not question orders as your thinking was done for you. However, having said that, that's the way it has been done for centuries, and who am I to argue? Infantry Corps training on the other hand was tough, although far more relaxed. We were treated more like humans. If we weren't rostered on guard or Mess duty, we were allowed weekend leave. The instructors, in my opinion, were far more approachable, and as the training intensified, they made you feel that there was a sense to it. You felt a little bit more at ease with them; you could talk to them from time to time as opposed to down at recruit training you were just...

Standing at attention - rigid...

Yes, and saluting every damn thing that moved (laughs). That's the way it was. I believe you needed it, and if you couldn't hack it, you just had no right being there. To do anything in this world today you have got to have that basic training. It's all part of building your character, building to what you are going to be - you know what I mean? And you fall back on that training every time. I think it's to do with survival. Your own survival and dealing with men, living with men. I believe every soldier alive today has good and bad memories of his time spent in basic training.

So, you get to 4 RAR who were you allotted to there?

(Privatre D.G.) Derek Bayliss and myself went straight to Mortars, there was (Sergeant S.P.) Stan Klysz, he was in the platoon then - they hadn't been that long back from Vietnam. Stan Klysz, another sergeant called Snowy Stafford who ended up running a car yard in Townsville and (Sergeant M.L.) 'Yogi' Upton, I think was with them then, and there was a couple of other corporals from memory. But anyway, they said you can go to Mortars and I thought yeh, alright - what's Mortars? And that's where I stayed until such time as we were pulled in by the CSM. He said that the battalion is moving to Townsville, do you want to go to Townsville? I thought well this is further away from New South Wales, yep, I'll go to Townsville. So off to Townsville we went.

So where was Four (RAR) at this stage?

Enoggera in Brisbane.

Right, Okay. Did you do a Mortar Course?

Not there I didn't, no.

So, where did you do that?

Townsville.

Okay. So they ran a local Mortar Course?

Mmm (nods head in agreement).

Okay. Tell us a bit about your training as a mortarman.

Well, I think with the added bonus of being trained as a rifleman with the extra training of being a mortarman. I enjoyed it. It was differen. I think (Lieutenant G.D.) Garry Bryant, who was the Platoon 2IC, will be the first one to say, and I hadn't seen Garry Bryant for twenty odd years when I ran into him down in Canberra at the Vietnam Memorial (unveiling), and he said that it was the best trained platoon that he had ever served with. It was just repetitive, strenuous and continuous training (un)til you got it spot on. So you were not only Number One, Number Two and Number Three on the mortar, you were trained to do each and every other person's job. If you were Number One on the mortar, well you were the boss of that mortar; Number Two loading and Number Three checked and prepared the rounds. So, you built yourself up gradually. I succeeded in going from Number Three to a Number One in Vietnam. I suppose through the drop in numbers and so forth, but there was some sort of self achievement in that too. But the training was good, we were spot on. I think we were an excellent mortar platoon. The training, is was very difficult to explain. We just went through normal lectures just like anything else, you know what I mean. You underwent lectures and continuous training within the battalion until you could do your job blindfolded.

How much live firing did you do?

Heaps. A lot of live firing, in fact we had to get rid of all of the Battalion's ammunition before we went and I remember we set the High Range (Training Area) on fire (laughs) before we left!

How many deployments did you do, did you do multiple deployments per day or did you only move every couple of days?

In Townsville or in Vietnam?

No, in Townsville.

In Townsville, within the battalion area, a lot of the days might be spent doing the stores, another day you might do your guard duty, your Mess duty and everything else that went along with the battalion training at that time. But basically being deployed as a Mortar Platoon. You were able to set the mortars up in a miniature mode whereby you fired miniature rounds and that was good training for us because it did away with the live firing but it still meant the same practice. It was just continual repetition until you had it spot on. Some guys were quicker and would pick up things quicker than others - just like anything I suppose. Some guys were better at sitting in

the CP doing the grid references and doing the bearings and elevations and calling them out. It just depends where you were - where you fitted in the platoon. On different training days within the battalion area, we would be deployed as a rifle company or platoon. When the battalion went on field exercises we would practice deployments as a Mortar Platoon or Section.

In about October I think it was 1971. So, you got into the battalion in 1970?

Sixty-nine I joined the battalion.

(Nineteen) Sixty-nine. So you spent the rest of that time after the move to Townsville in Mortars just working your way through the mortar line and getting up and then we went to Canungra. Mortar Platoon went to Canungra?

Yes, we did.

As a rifle platoon?

As a rifle platoon.

What was that like?

It was good. I enjoyed it. It was hard, it was meant to be hard. We underwent the same section training as the rifle companies; we underwent the Vickers, we did the obstacle course; the confidence course; running from each lecture to another lecture. Once again we had been trained by veterans and good instructors that knew what they were on about.

What do you reckon the aim of Canungra was?

To prepare you for Vietnam; prepare you for jungle warfare; prepare you to be a combat soldier. Regardless of whether you were a cook, bottle washer, driver, regardless of what you were. Canungra was there to prepare you for combat.

What do you reckon was so special about Canungra? A lot of people reckon it was special.

It was the name.

Was it the fact that you...

It was the fear, they used to say, 'Wait till you get to Canungra'. (Laughs)

Yes, we heard that a lot. Do you reckon it was because the instructors weren't our own blokes, that they were sort of assessing us more or less weren't they?

Yes. And it was a sense of achieving something you know. I have sat down and talked to (Private R.J.) Bob Meehan about this you know and Bob said to me once, 'You know', he said, ' When I went through', he said, 'I won the fastest time on the

Obstacle Course'. And I said to Bob, 'Why did you do that?'. He said, 'I have often asked myself that question'. And I said, 'You are mad'. However, there was a sense of achieving something, there was a sense of being better than anybody else that went through, and Bob did just that. In fact we all achieved something as a Battalion.

> There is probably a lot to be said for that isn't there? To have an outside organisation prepare you so that you know you are going to get to a certain level.

Yes.

> Okay. Is there anything that sticks in your mind about Canungra?

I can recall most distinctly the tower at the end..

> Where you jump into the creek?

They asked us, they said, 'Can you swim?' or 'Are you a good swimmer?' And I said,'I'm not a good swimmer', but I said, ' Why?' and they said, 'Well it depends on whether you jump off from the top one or the middle one'. I said, 'I want to go to the top one, I want to go as far as I can'. Because we would have that little rest in the creek before we swam back out. (Laughs) Anyway, after I did that and I swam back in, I pulled one of the instructors aside and said, 'Why do you ask us that question for, because I'm only curious, I'm not a smart arse or anything?'. And they said, 'Because it is the National Servicemen that have stuffed this for us'. Apparently what had happened was at that time we were going through Canungra, it was alleged that some of them - not from our battalion - but somebody obviously - a National Serviceman had written down to their mother and told them about this tower and as a result parents had written in and complained about the fact that their sons shouldn't have to go through this type of thing, and be pushed into a creek or river and as a result then they had to ask you, it was a request. I don't think a request has anything to do with it. When they are training you, and these men who have been there, they know what's best for you - that's the way I have always looked at it. You are guided by their experience.

> Okay, so we have got all this training at Canungra, then we went back up to High Range and we do all that other training, was there any training you reckon we could have done better?

Hmmm.

> Was there anything that surprised you in Vietnam thatmaybe we should have covered better before hand?

I can say with confidence that our training was excellent. However, at the very least as an infantry soldier, I believe, we faced the greatest dangers; we suffered the most casualties, and of course there are enough books written from past wars that truly reflect the hardships, courage and the fighting skills of the infantry soldier. Training for Vietnam was no different within the battalion, as you would be aware, the training we were exposed to was strenuous with full scale military exercises throughout

Queensland. Combined with the other training of becoming a mortarman specialist, and of course the four week jungle training course at Canungra. I don't believe there were any exceptions or apologies made, as every soldier had a duty to satisfy all the requirements and the aspects for combat duty in a war zone. However, all the training in the world does not prepare one to fight an unseen enemy. An enemy that was prepared to.. or rather maim rather than kill; and of course we were all put through the lectures of the constant fear of booby traps and mines by all the instructors. The jumping jacks; the bamboo (Panji) pits. But I don't think all the training in the world prepares you to fight something we couldn't see - that was the hardest thing. So maybe that was the biggest surprise.

Well, we will cover that when we get to the enemy, I think. Now, how did you get across to Vietnam?

HMAS *Sydney* .

Anything stick out in your mind about that trip?

Yes, I was the one picked to be dunked going across the Equator with the Ceremonies.

I remember that (laughs) with that green bloody custardy-type stuff.

That's right, I was the first in, yep. I knew it in my own heart I would be picked. But, I copped it, which I did. It took ages to get that custardy-type stuff out of my hair and greens. So, I remember that most distinctly. But apart from anything else on the ship, I remember the first night - leaving - my parents weren't there, I said goodbye to no-one and no doubt you have got questions there to talk about pre-embarkation leave and so forth, but the first night on the boat out, was the quietest night I ever spent on that ship. It was absolutely deathly silent. You could have dropped a pin as far as I was concerned; we all just lay there and I remember laying there, on the bunk and waiting for the Captain to come through and do his inspection or whatever it was at that time, and just looking around and it was deathly silent. People must have just been thinking. My mind was going back and thinking well here it is, I am actually going to war. So, what's it going to be like? All the things that could face you; the terrors; the fears.

Were there any reactions from your parents or...

My father. When I came home on a weeks pre- embarkation leave I said to my father when he picked me up from the airport, 'Dad, do you know I am going to Vietnam?' 'Yes, son'. And we were driving home at the time. I said, 'Dad, what do you think about that?' I tried to ask him for advice, he was a World War Two combat veteran himself. He said, 'Well I can only say what I suppose what my father must have thought when I said that I was going to war'. I said, 'What was that Dad?' 'Keep your head down, stay safe, that's all I can say'. I said, 'It is not as if we are going to fight a war that has a uniformed enemy; where obtaining one's territory meant the biggest thing. In the Second World War taking enemy territory and patrolling it was good for morale and everything else, but there was no territorial gains in Vietnam - which was an issue in itself. Where in the other wars there were territorial gains. There was no

territorial gains in Vietnam and so what do you think about that?' And he just couldn't tell me, you know. I don't know whether he hurt or anything like that, I don't know. I had no girlfriend to speak of, so who knows. I don't know to this day what they thought. I know he said I needed psychiatric treatment when I came home and I used to fight with my brother a fair bit, but that's another story in itself, but that's about it.

National Serviceman. What did you think of the nashos?

I got a lot of respect for National Serviceman and that's a very touchy subject, the old nasho. I had no problems serving alongside National Servicemen, some of those men of 4 RAR are my closest and dearest friends to this very day. Bob Meehan, (Private P.W.) Peter Sidebottom; (Private D.T.) Dave Morris, (Private D.W.) Doug Sewell they are all nashos. Whether you are a Regular or a nasho, we all have the same bond - which is Vietnam. I generally felt sorry for them because conscription for Vietnam created such deep political and public disagreement amongst all people and upon reflection I think the greatest tragedy was, and I don't know if I am correct in stating this, I don't think that the National Servicemen - that those fellows that were conscripted in those days - really were old enough to vote - from my memory.

You had to be 21.

Yes. That's correct, I thought that was right.

But National Service was the thing that changed it (the voting age).

Yes.

Down to eighteen.

Down to eighteen, but the thing was that at that time, they weren't old enough to vote and probably half of them wouldn't have been old enough to earn a man's wage, yet they were directed by their government to go and fight for democracy. And die for it. So, I generally felt sorry for a lot of the National Servicemen who were ripped out of their jobs. I know some of the mothers who grabbed their sons and put them into the Reserves and kept them away from that, so they wouldn't be called up. Well, we can talk about conscription from here till eternity. I was a Regular soldier, but I generally felt sorry for a lot of the conscripts.

Down in the platoon level was there any conflict or division between them?

The only conflict at platoon level and at section level, was the fact that I was a Reg and they were a nasho, and that was all there was to it. As they used to say, 'You joined the Army to find a job, they got us in here to do a job', (laughs).

That's right, I was trying to remember what that saying used to be actually. Do you think National Service was good or bad for the Army then?

Look I think National Service was good thing, in the pure sense of the word. There should be a National Service today - where young men can go and serve, join a

Service - be it Navy, Army or Air Force - for two years. I think it teaches you a lot; it teaches you discipline; it gives you a different perspective - a different outlook on life. You learn to become an individual; you learn to think and I think in those terms National Service was good. I don't think National Service is good when you have got to go off and fight for something you really don't believe in. You know, it's either one in all in - or no-one.

So, the selected National Service where there was a ballot, that was not a good idea?

I don't think so in my opinion.

Did you ever notice a difference between National Service officers and say Portsea or Duntroon officers?

Yes, a little bit, but o the whole we always looked upon officers back then - and I'm talking as a baggy-arsed grunt - as very academic, educated men. All be it, they were twenty-one, twenty two, younger than some of the soldiers that they were leading. But, they were your leaders and they were the men that had all the knowledge and possessed all the qualifications. Look, you can only judge a man by the way he leads you and his calibre you know. If he was an experienced man, like a lot of your corporals and a lot of your sergeants were, you sort of listen to them with more intent that you would if you were a young platoon commander. Whereby, when they came into a platoon in the battalion, their corporals and their sergeants were all returned servicemen - they were all veterans. So, a smart platoon commander would look upon those fellows for advice and guidance. A smart leader I would tend to think, you know what I mean, no-one is saying that they were silly, but at least be guided by what they could advise you, because they had been there and done it. For the welfare of their men, however, officers - whether they be Portsea or Duntroon trained - it didn't matter. So long as they did their job. Some performed well, others didn't. Similarly the NCOs or privates, it is an individual thing.

I think we will stay on that relationship thing here then. What was your relationship like between - you mentioned you and the other nashos - you and your section commander?

Good.

Because? Why was it good?

He was a veteran and he had been there before and you knew that he would look after things; you knew that the decisions he would make were the right decisions; you hoped that he had the foresight, so you wouldn't fall into any traps.

But on the other hand a guy could be a veteran and be a real mongrel.

Well, that's very true. Some you respected; some you didn't; but you still did as you were told, you know what I mean? The discipline within you - you did as you were told.

Who was the guy that did most of the leadership for you in the mortar line? Was it the Mortar Line Officer, Bryant or was it..?

No, I don't think it was (Lieutenant G.D.) Garry Bryant as much I thought it was... we sort of relied on (Sergeant S.P.) Stan Klysz a lot. He was our platoon sergeant, that's no disrespect to Garry, because the orders came down the line from either Captain (J.) Sullivan or Garry.

What was he like as a leader?

I thought Stan was very good, a very good leader. He exuded confidence; he could joke with you and laugh with you and still.. probably have a drink with you - but you respected him.

You talk about guys that might be good leaders, what do you reckon are the qualities of a good leader?

Oh, I suppose the quality of a good leader is to get the best out of his men with the least amount of effort, but in turn, to get that, there is a certain amount of respect that you have got to earn - between men. We can look upon officers; we can look upon any leader and if he has got a wimpy little voice and can't exude that little bit of authority, you would say well, this bastard is a pushover, we will fix him. So, I think it's just men amongst men. You have got to be able to do your job. Do your job competently, and you have the welfare of your men in your heart - first and foremost. I can talk as a leader today - of Detectives - that I know would be here at a moments notice and back me up if I was ever in strife. And I don't lead under the true management principles, because I teach and I lead my team. I don't give them a job that I can't do myself; and I am there for advice at all times, regardless. Even if I am at home, I say ring me at home if you have got a problem. So, their welfare is in my interest, I try to look after their welfare and I'm sure they rely on that and they know that if they are in strife they can ring me straight away and they know I will give them the right advice - hopefully! That's what is important, I believe in being a leader and you gain respect that way. And I think that's the same thing that if you had corporals living in the same lines with you who are veterans, you can discuss things with them. I remember Stan as a Platoon Sergeant, you could pull Stan aside and have a talk to him. 'Listen I have got a beef, I've got a problem'. 'Come over here', and he would throw his arm around you and he would have a talk to you, he had your welfare at heart.

So, this being able to talk to the guy was important?

Yes, I believe so.

Okay, We will go onto jobs I think. What was the hardest part of your job, being on a mortar line?

At a fire support base; filling sand bags; building the fire support base and knocking the bloody thing down again and keep going. The hardest thing I suppose, was the boredom between fire missions. That was about it. Reading books, just standing around waiting.

You have spoken about the physical work in the fire support base, what was the most important part of your particular job?

The most important part of my particular job was ensuring that mortar was dead on target because there is nothing worse than the fear of the unknown, that is not knowing where your rounds landed half the time. The most fearsome thing was when we fired missions in the middle of the night, particularly from fire support bases and we were going flat out. You had to know where everything was and there was one time when I got up the next morning - because you can't see - there's no lights, and a round had gone straight up and landed straight in the fire support base in the dirt beside me in the pit - and not gone off! That's just some of the things that happen. But not knowing where your rounds were landing, let's say you were clearing a grid, and you were firing in sequence. Clearing a grid in support of a rifle company, platoon or section that were moving in searching the area for enemy or clearing it or whatever the case maybe, it was not knowing that was the fear until your F.O. radioed in and all you ever hoped for and I know we talked about it amongst ourselves, 'Jesus, I hope these bloody rounds are landing in the right spot'. All you had to rely on was your forward observers and making sure they were giving back the right drum.

Riflemen talk about a rush of adrenalin when they get into a contact out in the field, when you are sort of standing slack and all of sudden there is a call for a fire mission, is there a rush of adrenalin?

Yes. Well, we had contacts from the fire support base, but it only ever happened to me on two occasions and, yes, there is an adrenalin rush, of course. It was not the fear of being killed that never entered my mind to a great extent. I was scared yes, but it was more important to do your job correctly. You did not want to foul up and let your mates down.

What gave you the greatest satisfaction?

For someone to come up to you and say you did a good job there, and this is what it has achieved. If no-one tells you, then you never know.

Did you ever get any feedback from the MFCs?

Not a great deal, not a great deal. They might talk to (Lieutenant G.D.) Garry (Bryant) you know, and Garry would pass it on and say, 'That was good fire mission boys, we did well there'. But it didn't come down to individual efforts, you never got it as an individual mortar crewman, you got it as a whole unit. So, everybody felt that they had achieved, which was good for morale.

Were you usually firing as two tubes or...

Most of the time as two (tubes)

As two, yes. How long do you reckon it was before you became unworkable with tiredness and stuff. Did that ever really affect the mortar line?

Yes, you were tired, I suppose but no, not too any great extent, boredom was the biggest issue - waiting for something to happen. You did your picket of a night, you see after a while we became conditioned. We ended up on tracks our section, so we were out in the field most of the time then too. That was easy - it was a quick set up and you remained alert. The tracks scared us. Most of us were like that. It always scared me because you just didn't know what you were running over. There was no where to escape in the bloody things, as far as I was concerned.

> Well, we will finish this tape here and we will talk about APCs when we start off.
>
> This is tape two of two tapes of an interview with Garry Heskett, conducted by Gary McKay, For Delta Four - Australian Infantry (sic) in Vietnam, recorded on the 15th of May 1993, at Bringelly New South Wales and the topics covered on this tape will be armour in Vietnam, mobile operations, battle, casualties and the enemy.
>
> Garry, we will take up again with armoured personnel carriers. What were some of the things that made you like or dislike working with armour - even though it was easier on you as a mortarman, you didn't have to dig in and all that sort of stuff.

Well we were able to deploy a lot quicker, once we became mobile on armoured personnel carriers. 4 RAR first tour used mortar carriers too because there was a mortarman killed. From memory there was an APC hit by a mine during the first tour of 4 RAR '68 - '69. I would have to check with that, but anyway, you were able to deploy a lot quicker, set up a lot quicker and you would be in closer contact with whatever rifle company you were backing up at that particular time; they were useful in that regard. The worst thing about them is the fear of the unknown and they scared most blokes, and I was certainly scared of them only because you had no power - you had no control. You were in their hands, and you were all fully aware of how the Vietnamese operated through mines and booby traps and God knows what else and APC drivers, whether they drove along a track or they drove off or they would go boring through the jungle and you would be aware that the VC would mine certain areas and you just didn't know where you were. You were in their hands, it was just too scary. I would rather be on the ground anytime. APCs were for troopers and as far as I was concerned the infantry soldier should be on foot and that's where he belongs (laughs). Bit more comfortable. You can hug the earth, you can't hug an APC I'm sorry! (laughs)

> What was the general sort of operation that you went out on. What was the sort of routine that you had?

Well, on one particular operation we went out (on) it was, I can't remember the exact details now, however, we were a Mortar Section on tracks (APCs). It was one of the operations that we were involved in where Victor Company had come in contact with 274 (VC Main Force Regiment), I think it was Operation *Hermit Park* , anyway, the contact was close - as usually with VC and what happened was we were in this particular area for three days and on this particular action we fired for three days practically non-stop, supporting Victor Company who had taken some casualties at

that stage, in fact some Centurions had come in and from memory, the Centurion tank commander had been killed from an RPG and the action was just in front of us, although we could hear it all - we couldn't see it. The worst thing was at that particular stage was that the MFC for Victor Company was calling in the mortars - but we were wounding our own blokes and there was not a damned thing we could have done about it. They needed the support but we knew we were hurting our own blokes but because the action was just so close there was not a damn thing you could do - you had to continue firing. They needed the support. We couldn't move from where we were, and of course we finished up on that third day. That third night they drove the VC out and where we were stationed was about, oh, three hundred metres in front of a creek bed which came towards us then around us so... I know this is difficult to explain on a tape, but to give you an indication, we were there, the creek bed came like that and went like that (draws a semi-circle) so it sort of went around us, and we could see all the VC coming - they had all their torches on - and they were running through the creek bed. It was dry creek bed - there was no water in it, we thought they were going to come straight and over run us but that never did happen. Although we were prepared for them; but there was only a small number of us. We would have been over run as far as we were concerned. We were stuck out in the middle of the J in this clearing.

What, just a couple of carriers?

Well, from memory there were two mortar carriers plus two M113A1 APCs and one Command APC. We were there for three days firing our hearts out and it has got me stuffed to this day how we got away with it (laughs) but we did! It was a long time ago and no doubt some of the details are incorrect. As I said, it was from memory.

I will go on with the question of how long did you go out on operations for?

Well, my longest time out was five weeks.

Is that too long or is it too short or what?

Far too long, far too long.

Because?

The reason was because I have just been to the doctors now and I suffer from what they call diverticulosis and when you live on ration packs for that length of period of time, you just don't shit. And I have spoken to other guys who have gone without a shit for twenty days. My longest was ten days straight and you wonder why your guts is such a shape the way it is today. But, it is a long time away and all you can rely on is letters from home - occasionally - and reading books while you are waiting and waiting and waiting. Sometimes you would be in an area where an operation was being performed by the battalion as a whole and of course they are doing search and destroy missions while your just based there while they are doing them all around you. But five weeks is far too long.

Apart from the ration side of it, what about the mental pressure, did you ever feel that?

Yes, I did, but you learn to cope. Once again it comes back to your self discipline. I have always felt that regardless of whether I had to be there twelve months or I had to spend six months out bush - I would be there without a quibble - you would do it because you were trained in such a way, and that is the way it is, albeit you get bored at times and other times you are on your toes. You had enough to do throughout the day to keep you busy and if you weren't reading a book or you make sure all your gear was clean; you made sure your weapons were spot on; you made sure everything was spot on; you had your guard pickets at night time; you had your clearing patrols morning and night time; and of course our APCs when available and you would go out occasionally, zip around and have a further clearing patrol. But, how one survived so long in one area without being hit by the enemy has got me stuffed and we only ever came into contact a couple of times like that.

Did you do much foot patrolling?

Did a little bit, not a great deal.

Did you ever have a contact while you were out on patrol?

No, only from the Fire Support Bases.

Do you reckon you were well trained to do your job as a mortarman?

I was more than well trained - we were over trained.

Over trained?

Over trained, because of the fact that we knew what we were going to do. We were trained by men who had been there, and you listened, because they had the experience. I did anyway. I can't speak for everybody else, but, he has got the experience and you would be a mug not to pay attention to what he has got to say. I know I was very well trained for my job. That goes back to what we were saying before and that is you did your job properly - that's what it comes back to. And you learnt not to whinge nor gripe - everybody was in the same boat. And you always had your platoon larrikins, ones that tell jokes and carry on which was always good for morale.

How important is that, having a sense of humour do you think?

Oh, terribly important. It is good for morale. You have got to have a bit of a jackass, you have got have a fella to have a bit of a joke around - but still do the job. Be serious when the time comes to be serious, but to be able to draw that light relief was good. It showed you that war is full of humour too.

You talked about mail too. Did you get much mail?

Yes, I got a bit of mail but only from Mum and Dad, some from my cousins. I never had a girlfriend back in Australia so I wrote to my 'rels', but a lot of them still didn't understand what was really going on over there, only apart from what they were

seeing on TV. I remember I used to send tapes, Dad suggested I should send home a tape and I have still got a couple of them here. He would play the guitar for me and I would play it to the platoon and we would sit there and listen to it. It was all good old country and western. But he would talk on the tape and I would send the tape back and talk to him. Because then the whole family would be sitting around at tea at home. You know my sister would be on it; my mother would be on it, 'How are you going over there?' 'I've got a cake on the way for you', things like that. It was great. You felt like you were just across the road you know what I mean (laughs). And I have now no doubt with the wars today, everybody has got videos so they are sending videos home. That would bring you closer. 'Oh, look at him. he's looking well', you know.

What was the thing that lifted your morale the most?

I think leave.

Did you get R & R?

Got R & R.

Where did you go?

Hong Kong.

Awful was it?

Had a great time and...

Spend a lot of money?

Spent a lot of money, wasted a lot of money but I don't care - I had a great time.

When you came back to Vietnam after your R & R, I suppose you had been there what five or six months?

Yes, something like that.

Was it hard to get back into the swing of it when you came back?

No, it wasn't, because I felt guilty being on R & R...

You felt guilty?

Yes. I felt guilty because the rest of the platoon, some of them hadn't had R & R at that stage, I think our section was one of the last to go on R & R and you felt like you were letting the team down. It's that bonding. It was team spirit. It's like laying in hospital you know, you've got no right being there. Do you understand what I am saying?

Yes, I do.

In your own heart you say well I'm bludging on my mates here, you know you just don't do it. That commitment you had...

You're leaving the platoon.

Yes.

How did you get hospitalised?

It happened on a fire mission. I can't remember which rifle company we were backing up now, but what happened was that I was Number One and we just lost a couple of National Servicemen from memory, and a fellow called (Private R.G.) 'Rick' Teeling had gone back home, he was the Number One, and I moved up to his position and another nasho named (Private P.W.) 'Bob' Sherer from Victoria came up from Number Three to Number Two. Bob was a nasho and either Stan Klysz or Garry Bryant were calling out the bearings and elevation and so I am listening. Your trying to listen with, most times you try to put your earmuffs on but most of the time they never were on. You put them aside because you couldn't hear what was going on otherwise. That's why we spmetimes used just cotton wool. So, what had happened was that I have got the bearings and the elevation and I had one fuze undone , checked it alright, on line, I said righto, got the command 'Fire'; 'Fire for effect', 'Fire!' and put it down and had my hand on the sight. Someone said, 'Fire!' and Bob was having some trouble pulling the charges off one of the rounds and I thought 'For fucks sake', I walked in and I stood up and I said 'For fucks sake, FIRE!' you know, and of course he dropped it unbeknown to me one the way up and as the round was going out of the tube - as it left the barrel - at the same time that I stood up. So what has happened is I had this ringing sensation in my ears for days. As a result of that and that was the time I was out scrub and deaf at the same time.

Remainder of tape indistinct