



Australian War Memorial

Sound Collection

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Oral History project

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INTERVIEWER: Mr Alistair Thomson

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THOMPSON: Perhaps we could start and you could tell me where and when you were born?

D'ALTERA: I was born in Geelong in 1897.

THOMPSON: What were your parents doing then?

D'ALTERA: Father worked in a Geelong tannery and mother didn't do any work, like, after she got married. The factory got burned down, my father came to Melbourne and he sent for the rest of us, you know. Had two brothers alive then, and myself and mother and father.

THOMPSON: So how old were you when you moved to Melbourne?

D'ALTERA: Three years old.

THOMPSON: So you can't remember Geelong?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: What did your father do when he came to Melbourne?

D'ALTERA: Well, he got a job ... he's a big solid-built man, you know. A labourer. In fact the owners liked a lot of the ...hard work then. They went for a big and powerful man. He got a job in a ... Wischer's Super Phosphate factory in Yarraville. He lived there until he retired. Well after the age of 65.

THOMPSON: Well after: Where did you live?

D'ALTERA: We lived in Ovens Street, Yarraville. In a rented house.

THOMPSON: That was as soon as you arrived in Melbourne. You went to Yarraville?

D'ALTERA: Yes. Wages were only small. The Harvester Award hadn't come in then.

THOMPSON: So what, this was early this century?

D'ALTERA: Yes. It just became custom for labourers to get six or seven shillings a day In our home, God it was a hard struggle for my mother, she was a wonderful housekeeper. We didn't have any lino on the floor. We got a three-roomed house. Two bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. No washing facilities. Mother had to work her guts out, you know.

Repairing our clothing, keeping the place clean, cooking meals. She was a wonderful housekeeper. She lived till she was 91.

THOMPSON: Did you share a bedroom with your two brothers?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Did you have any sisters?

D'ALTERA: The sister was born in Yarraville, later, you know. She came later.

THOMPSON: Was your father a member of a union?

D'ALTERA: Yes. He believed in unions. He believed in always voting Labor. But he didn't take any active part.

THOMPSON: What union would he have been a member of?

D'ALTERA: The Fertiliser's Union.

THOMPSON: Did you go to school in Yarraville?

D'ALTERA: Yes. Francis Street, School. Til I was just over 13. I won a certificate which permitted you to stop home from school.. Occasionally ... a Standard Certificate they called it. I used to stop home every Monday. I still won a prize as the head of my class.

THOMPSON: Were you a keen student?

D'ALTERA: Keen student, yes. I could learn quicker by going down the quarry hole with me books, than what I could learn in school.

THOMPSON: Can you remember what your main interests were?

D'ALTERA: Oh, just ... a friendly game with the other pupils. I was never good enough to get in the football team.

THOMPSON: Can you remember any patriotic celebrations while you were at School?
Empire Day for instance.

D'ALTERA: Oh yes. Empire Day was a great day, you know. In the Education Department, it was mostly English history, you know, very little Australian history. Always the history of the, so called, Great British Empire. Got that drummed into us all the time.

THOMPSON: Did you have Cadets when you were at school?

D'ALTERA: No. Not in our school. Although there was in some schools.

THOMPSON: Did you join the workforce immediately when you left school?

D'ALTERA: Yes. I left school just before I was fourteen years old. My father was keen, him being a labourer, that I had a trade. I got apprenticed to fitting and turning.

THOMPSON: In Yarraville?

D'ALTERA: No. In South Melbourne. Lawson's was the name of the factory. It's disappeared now. But before I was sixteen, I enlisted in the A.I.F.

THOMPSON: At what age were you then? Before you were sixteen?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: I might come back to that in a moment if I could.

D'ALTERA: Yeah. Righto.

THOMPSON: Were your family a church going family at all?

D'ALTERA: Yes. They went to the Church of England. We used to be sent to Sunday School. We used to get a penny for the collection, and I'd go and buy a ha'pen'th a lollies at the corner store first and put a ha'penny in the collection plate. Ha, ha, ha.

THOMPSON: How important do you think the Church was to your parents?

D'ALTERA: Well they didn't ... never attended, but they were believers, you know.

THOMPSON: That was at St John's was I?

D'ALTERA: No. In Yarraville, the Church of England in Yarraville.

THOMPSON: Were there any other societies or clubs that your parents were members of?

D'ALTERA: No. My father worked that hard, relaxation ... on Sundays he'd go fishing off the piers in Williamstown, or out in a boat sometimes. He just sat there quietly, you know, contented to sit there. Take a flask of tea and some sandwiches.

THOMPSON: What about yourself? Were you a member of any particular clubs or societies in your youth, before you went away?

D'ALTERA: Not before I went away. There wasn't many clubs anyhow, except for football and cricket clubs, cycling club ... a few dramatic societies. That's about all I think.

THOMPSON: You didn't take any part in any of those activities?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: You said your father was a firm Labor man. Was he involved apart from election times. Was he involved in the party at the local branch?

D'ALTERA: No. He never joined the Labor Party. I remember, he was overjoyed when the first Labor candidate was elected in Williamstown. We were part of the Williamstown district and John Lemmon was elected.

THOMPSON: Can you remember that time?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Was Yarraville mainly an industrial suburb at that time?

D'ALTERA: Yes. It was an industrial suburb, yes. Factory suburb. Quite a few ... a lot worked outside Yarraville. Newport Workshops. Spotswood Glass Works. But most of them worked in Yarraville, there were a lot of big factories. The fertiliser factories, the sugar works, some metal factories. Very few clerks or things like that, nearly all were labourers. They paid a small rent for their houses. Many of them bought their houses, slowly.

THOMPSON: Did people who worked in Yarraville think of themselves as Yarravillians, rather than Footscrayites?

D'ALTERA: Yes, they were very clannish people in Yarraville. On the south side was Stony Creek, on the east side was the Yarra, on the west side ... open plains, and between Footscray and Yarraville was some breaker-man's scrub. They hated Footscray.

THOMPSON: Did they really?

D'ALTERA: A lot of them'd never go to shop in Footscray. Ha, ha.

THOMPSON: So Yarraville really was the centre of people's lives?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, we were our own centre. Kids of Yarraville used to be always fighting the kids of Footscray. If we come near anyone.

THOMPSON: Were you ever a member of any gang of kids, or larrikin push, or anything like that?

D'ALTERA: No, no. I joined the Boy Scouts, ha ha.

THOMPSON: Did you? When was that?

D'ALTERA: When I was still going to school. When they first started in Melbourne.

THOMPSON: Can you remember the day that you first heard that the war had broken out?

D'ALTERA: Yes. Just vaguely. We never used to get the newspaper, like, we couldn't afford it, you know. There was no wireless or anything like that, but, when the war broke out my mother scraped up enough money to buy the newspapers then, for a while.

THOMPSON: What was your initial response?

D'ALTERA: Oh, I was patriotic like, we'd had all this patriotic stuff at school. My brother, elder brother enlisted immediately.

THOMPSON: What was his name?

D'ALTERA: His name was William.

THOMPSON: What did your parents think of that?

D'ALTERA: Well, they knew he was mad on going to the war and they consented and let him.

THOMPSON: Was he older, at the right age?

D'ALTERA: Yes, he was about eighteen at the time. He went to ... he was in the landing with Anzac. He got promoted and finished up as a Captain. But, not so much in the Second World War but in the First World War General Jess came to my brother's funeral. He told my mother that he' recommended my brother for further promotion, but he said he couldn't go any further because he was the son of a labourer.

THOMPSON: The General said that?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Do you think that was very common?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, it was common, because all our higher officers were from a middle class, higher class.

THOMPSON: Were there many people like your brother who did work up through the ranks?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. Oh yes, there was a lot. As I said, they only got a certain distance. He had a great reputation, my brother. Later on I joined the same Battalion, I transferred from the Battalion I was in to his Battalion.

THOMPSON: Can you tell me about the circumstances of your enlistment?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, well, I wasn't, I wasn't eighteen. I'm working on the lathe, like, next to another chap, and I thought he ... everyone said go to the war, and I said to him, "Why don't you enlist?" He said "I'll enlist if you do." I was apprenticed, not of age. I went straight up to Victoria Barracks and enlisted. We left the factory, and I had to get my father's signature. Well, I forged that. Went out to Broadmeadows. Father found out I was there, I'd told my mother what had happened. My father arranged that I be discharged for being under age. So I only stopped home two days, then I run away to Ballarat and enlisted there, under an assumed name, and I went away in May 1915, and in Egypt I changed my name back to the proper one.

THOMPSON: Why were you so keen to join up?

D'ALTERA: Oh, I suppose it was all this ... first my brother, Adam, enlisted, and secondly, like, I thought the British Empire, you know, the stuff we learned at school. Britons never shall be slaves. I thought they treated all their subjects properly. But when I went to the war I found out that wasn't the case. My first big shock came at Colombo, when we had to refuel. The natives of Ceylon, we called in at Ceylon, had to carry baskets of coal up a gangway to the ship, you know, and they treated brutal, you know, getting ... by the foreman, or whatever you'd call him. They were treated most brutal and that was a big shock to me that this could happen in the British Empire. And when we got to Egypt, about once a week, all spruced up, you know, our uniforms neat, boots looked highly shined and shining bayonets, we'd march through the native quarters of Cairo, you know, and give them the impression that's what they'd be up against, if they revolted.

THOMPSON: What were your impressions of Cairo?

D'ALTERA: Cairo. Thought it was a dirty city, you know. I didn't mix ... I just ... a lot of the blokes, you know, older than me, they went to the brothels of Cairo, but I didn't. I was more interested in seeing such places as the Sphinx and Pyramids, you know, different other old monuments in Egypt.

THOMPSON: What was your interest in those?

D'ALTERA: Oh, just curiosity, I suppose.

THOMPSON: It must have been so different from Yarraville, the pyramids and so on? How did the Australians get on with the Egyptians?

D'ALTERA: Oh, pretty good, but they treat a lot of the ... you know, that brutal element in the ... among them. Wack 'em over the jaw for anything, you know.

THOMPSON: How did the Australians ... what were their impressions of other soldiers from other nations? For instance the British.

D'ALTERA: Well, it's been fostered, it's been fostered ever since Anzac that the Australians are superior ... we were far superior to the British tommies and any other, the New Zealanders or anyone else. I suppose we were in one way, because we were a very fit body of troops.

Many of them had come from the country you know and they were all very tall, active, young. So, they got this superior feeling. I think that had a lot to do with their success on Anzac.

THOMPSON: The superior feeling or the fact that they were superior?

D'ALTERA: I think they were superior. Better nourished. They had more initiative.

THOMPSON: What did you and your other fellow soldiers think of the British that you met?

D'ALTERA: Well actually, at Anzac we didn't meet many British. But since the war we've come to realise that the British done as much as we did at Gallipoli. Cause the British had a serious failure at Suvla Bay, you know. They landed at Suvla Bay, they could have just marched, if they'd have been well led, they had to just march across the peninsula, and cut the whole place off, but their Generals instructed them to dig in, you know. This stuck in our mind. They could have finished the war. And, of course, when Kitchener came to Anzac, he ordered the evacuation.

THOMPSON: Going back a bit, which Battalion were you in?

D'ALTERA: The 23rd Infantry Battalion.

THOMPSON: Did you know Mr Hocking?

D'ALTERA: Hocking. Oh, I might have known him at one time, but not now.

THOMPSON: Did you go straight from Egypt to Gallipoli?

D'ALTERA: Yes, we went on transports. On our way there, the Southland, that had the 21st Battalion aboard, a Company of the 23rd, and the Headquarters of the 6th Brigade, was torpedoed. It didn't sink but there were a few casualties, including Brigade Commander, Colonel Linton. We started to pick all people up, out of rafts, and in life belts. The destroyer

ordered us to proceed to Lemnos at full speed, you know, to get out of the way in case we were torpedoed. Actually, a torpedo did pass the stern of the boat I was in, the Haverford.

THOMPSON: When did you land on Gallipoli?

D'ALTERA: We landed on Gallipoli on the 4th September, 1915. We immediately went into Lone Pine trenches and from then on till the evacuation, the 23rd Battalion, a Company of the 13th Light Horse and the 24th Battalion, we had 24 hours at a time. We'd change over every 24 hours. The trenches at Lone Pine, the Turkish trenches were only a few yards apart. How we put up with it I'll never, never able to ... know since. We were half starved, particularly when stores couldn't be landed in stormy weather. Our clothes were full of lice. The flies ...you had to put a shirt or something over your head to eat, otherwise the piece of bread or biscuit would be covered in seconds. We suffered from dysentery and weakness. But yet we stuck it out, because ... will power. Because, when the evacuation come our party went to Imbros Island. We had to march a mile to the tents that had been set up for us. We knew there was good food awaiting us, and lots of us couldn't make the distance. We just collapsed. But, yet if we'd have remained at Anzac we'd keep sticking it out.

THOMPSON: What was the feeling amongst the soldiers while you were at Lone Pine?

Oh, mateship to help your mate, and to stick it out.

D'ALTERA: What were the relations between the officers and the men?

THOMPSON: Oh, they were good. 'Cos we got to know them all personally, they lived among us. We had faith in them, because they'd proved themselves ... their value.

THOMPSON: What about your attitude to Staff Officers?

D'ALTERA: The Staff Officers. We used to dodge them. Course we didn't know much about the work they were doing, you know. We were really isolated in the trenches, you know, we seen nothing but that. When we came out of the trenches, our Battalion was just a hundred yards behind the trenches, in dugouts among the hills.

THOMPSON: Where did you go from Imbros?

D'ALTERA: Then we went back to Egypt. Went to ... we thought we were going to have a good time in Cairo. But the train, we landed at Alexandria, by-passed Cairo and we went down to Tel el Kebir, site of a famous British battle, against the Sudanese. And after we'd got fit again, we went across the ... thought the Turks would attack the Suez Canal. We went about ten miles out into the desert and waited from there, but they never came. Then we went to France.

In France I transferred to my brother's Battalion, where he was Signal Officer at that time.

THOMPSON: What Battalion was that?

D'ALTERA: That was the 7th Battalion. I'm a member, on the Committee of the 7th Battalion Association now.

THOMPSON: Are you. And where was the 7th Battalion?

D'ALTERA: We relieved them in Lone Pine. There was only a few of them left. They went to Lemnos for a rest and they were made up to full strength by reinforcements, and they came back to Gallipoli until the evacuation.

THOMPSON: Where did you join the 7th in France?

D'ALTERA: Oh, ha, ha, it's funny that. We were in a line at Fleurbaix. Orders came for me to transfer to the 7th.

THOMPSON: Where were they?

D'ALTERA: They were out of the line at a place called Etaples. I was cashed up, I'd had a good win at a two-up school. I had me papers. It took me three weeks to find them. Ha, ha. I went round having a good time. Ha, ha.

THOMPSON: Doing what?

D'ALTERA: I was really A.L.W. But I wasn't A.W.L. really, officially.

THOMPSON: So how did you spend those three weeks?

D'ALTERA: Oh, going to what they call the pub, the estaminet, and having some good feeds and that. Then my brother was my officer there.

THOMPSON: In the 7th Battalion.

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: How was it having your brother as your Officer?

D'ALTERA: It wasn't bad for me, like, he didn't give me any favours. Was good for our mates because every time they were broke, they'd say, 'Your brother gets plenty of money, go and bite him.' A few francs. He often gave it to me, you know. He was pretty good to his men.

THOMPSON: How much higher was the Officer's pay?

D'ALTERA: Well, we got ... like our pay was six bob a day, course we didn't get all that. And theirs was ... my brother's at that time would be over 20 shillings a day. I don't know exactly what it was.

THOMPSON: Did the 7th Battalion leave Etaples.

D'ALTERA: Yeah. Then on our way to the Somme, I was riding a bike. I rode it into a big roadside ditch and done my knee in and I had to be sent to hospital in England. That's the end of my war experience.

THOMPSON: Was it really? What did you do to your knee?

D'ALTERA: Oh, I got it twisted.

THOMPSON: So you missed out on the Somme?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Do you count yourself very lucky?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. 'Cause the casualties were very heavy. Specially amongst signallers.

THOMPSON: You were a signaller? Can you tell me, I didn't ask before, did anybody query your age in the army? While you were away?

D'ALTERA: Oh yeah. Oh, yes. On the way to Egypt the C.O. came round and inspected us all. There was about a dozen of us obviously under age eighteen, and he said we were to be returned to Australia. We were put ashore at Suez, that's the southern end of the canal, to be returned to Australia. But Anzac had got going then, and the authorities said we want all the men we can at Gallipoli. Ha, ha. We arrived, we were sent north by train and we were in camp by the time the Battalion arrived. Our C.O. got the shock of his life. It was a funny thing, all these were young blokes that were going to be returned to Australia. We stood the conditions better than the older men. We were more capable of putting up with the hardships, than man older than us. Except those that got wounded, like. We remained at Anzac until the evacuation.

THOMPSON: Many of your friends killed at Anzac?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Where did you go to in England, when you did your knee in?

D'ALTERA: I went to Wandsworth Hospital, Military Hospital. And the English people were wonderful, they used to visit the Hospital, bring us comforts. A lot of those that could travel, they'd take them into their homes for a while. I developed a hernia in England. They decided to send me back to Australia.

THOMPSON: When was that?

D'ALTERA: That was late in 1917.

THOMPSON: Had you had much, in your couple of years away from Australia, much correspondence with your family or friends?

D'ALTERA: Oh yes. They used to write regularly and I used to write regularly to them.

THOMPSON: What sort of things would you write to them?

D'ALTERA: Oh, we couldn't write much because all the letters had to go through the censors. We couldn't discuss much, just tell them you were well. You'd tell a lot of lies, saying you were well fed, ha, ha, and all these sort of things.

THOMPSON: How aware would you have been of what was happening in Australia at the time?

D'ALTERA: Newspapers were a scarcity, but when we got one we would read everything in it. Advertisements and all.

THOMPSON: Can you remember the conscription referendum in Australia?

D'ALTERA: Yes, the first conscription referendum, I was home in that time I think. I don't know, I forget whether it was the first or second.

THOMPSON: Must have been the second, in 1917.

D'ALTERA: Yes, well the majority of us front line soldiers vote d no. We weren't conscripted ourselves, we were not prepared to conscript other people, agin their will.

THOMPSON: Were you in Yarraville at that stage?

D'ALTERA: Yarraville, I come back to Yarraville. After I had a hernia operation at Caulfield Military Hospital. I came home with T.B. I had a haemorrhage from the lungs. A specialist advised me to get out of Melbourne. And I went up to Mildura and gradually recovered.

There was none of these wonder drugs then, you know. T.B. was a real serious complaint then. But I recovered, recovered enough to take up on the hard working jobs in Mildura. Navying jobs, plus work on the vineyards. My health got better and I came back to Yarraville.

THOMPSON: Was this before the war ended?

D'ALTERA: No, it was after the war.

THOMPSON: Can you describe, when your war experience ended, do you think you were a different person in any way?

D'ALTERA: Oh yes. When I came home I wasn't still twenty-one, you know. I applied for my old job back, where I'd been apprenticed at fitting and turning. The factory owner gave me my job back, then when I turned twenty-one, I went to him and said 'I'll have to get full money now.' He said 'I can't do that. You should be prepared to work all the time you missed from your trade. You should be prepared to work for a time as an improver. At a lower wage.' I told him to stick his job, and walked out of the factory immediately.

THOMPSON: Was he saying that, because you'd been away, you had to make up for it?

D'ALTERA: Yes. Like the time I'd missed. What angered me, on his advertising pamphlet, you know that he sent farmers and that, he had a copy of the Honour Roll there, in colour. That would be to entice them to buy his goods. My name was on the top of it, you know, in coloured lead. That's where his ... that's where his patriotism was – to himself.

THOMPSON: I might come back to the problems of employment after the war. But first of all I was wondering, did you feel in any way yourself, a different person when you came back from the war?

D'ALTERA: Oh yes.

THOMPSON: In what sort of ways?

D'ALTERA: I was more broadminded. I lost all this idea about a wonderful British Empire. I was resentful, after I left that factory, you know, where I couldn't get full money. I found it hard to get a job. There was much unemployment about then.

THOMPSON: Had your attitudes to war changed?

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: In what sort of ways?

D'ALTERA: I studied up a bit and I'd come to the conclusion that it was an unjust war.

THOMPSON: This is during the war you studied up or after the war?

D'ALTERA: After the war.

THOMPSON: An unjust war?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, unjust war. It was just for trade. It was to redivide the world between the great powers. I had a different attitude to the last war.

THOMPSON: What about your attitude to Australia, had that changed?

D'ALTERA: No, no. I was still a mad Aussie, and I'd proven that Australians were the best at anything. Best in the world. Ha, ha.

THOMPSON: When you were coming home in 1917, did you have any particular aspirations or plans for your return?

D'ALTERA: Oh, I thought I'd just get a job back immediately and start to save money. I hadn't contemplated getting married or anything like that.

THOMPSON: Did you have any fears or worries about returning after the years away?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. My main worry was whether I could get a job, because we'd learned that there was much employment in Australia. Like in, among the working class, anyhow.

THOMPSON: Can you remember the day that you arrived back in Melbourne?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. We were taken to Victoria Barracks, those of us who had to go into hospital were given a fortnight's leave and after they had to report out to Caulfield Military Hospital. The operation was successful and then I started seeking a job. Well, I went, as I said, I went back to my old job. I found it hard to get work.

THOMPSON: Is this before you went to Mildura?

D'ALTERA: Before I went to Mildura, yes. I got a job for about four weeks in a pottery, labouring. I couldn't get a job at my trade. Then when I went up to Mildura, well I gradually recovered in health, and when I came back from Mildura, I joined the ... before I'd gone I'd joined the Yarraville Citizens' Club. And when I came back to Yarraville unable to get work, I spent most of my time at the Club, and got elected to the Committee as Assistant Secretary, then later on, Secretary.

THOMPSON: Was this in early 1920's, do you remember which year?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, in early 20's. Yes, I got elected Secretary and Assistant Secretary in 1924. Later on Secretary, and I remained Secretary for 30 years.

THOMPSON: Tell me, when you were looking for work, was there any resentment from men who had stayed behind, to the returned servicemen coming back and competing for jobs?

D'ALTERA: Oh year, there was some, because see they brought in, the Government brought in a rule, or law, preference to returned soldiers. The Returned Soldiers' League had been formed. When it was first formed it was a militant organisation. I think the name of the Secretary was Roberts but I'm not sure, and he organised demonstrations for better pension and those sort of things.

THOMPSON: This wasn't Captain Pimental?

D'ALTERA: No. Then gradually other people, mostly from the officer rank, began to get into leading positions at the R.S.L. and it developed into the body it is today. I'm a member of the R.S.L. For instance they brought in a rule that no communist could be a member of the R.S.L. You'd be sacked immediately if you were known to be a communist.

THOMPSON: This was after the Second War? Was there resentment amongst non-returned servicemen to preference for returned servicemen?

D'ALTERA: Oh yes. Yeah, because there had been some court cases, you know, where employers were... had to have an inquiry into why they appointed anyone else.

THOMPSON: Can you remember any problems like that in Yarraville?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, like as I said there was much unemployment. There's something similar now. The employed seem to me at least, I might be mistaken, they seem to have a resentment to the unemployed. They're afraid they'll take their jobs, the younger blokes will take their jobs. They'll have to share work.

THOMPSON: Did you believe that returned servicemen deserved a privileged position in the labour market?

D'ALTERA: Yes, well I did, because, see the attitude of the people who didn't go away.

We'd got good pay while we were away, it seemed a lot, six bob a day. And when we came home we got a gratuity. I got one hundred and twenty dollars, one hundred and twenty pounds. They thought we were well treated but they didn't know, they didn't realise how the returned soldier had given away opportunities for promotion in their job. He's missed getting money to buy a house and all those sort of things. So they weren't very sympathetic.

THOMPSON: So you agreed with the policy of preference for returned servicemen? Apart from, you told me about how your past employer had made it difficult for you when you returned, was it common for employers to be wary of taking on returned servicemen?

D'ALTERA: Yes. Oh, they thought they'd be unreliable, they wouldn't stick to their job and give it away half the time. Well, that was true too. 'Cause, many of the younger ones of us, we still had the wanderlust, you know. I used to go off all over the place, you know. New South Wales, South Australia. Soon as I saved enough money, like, that's when I started to work, when I'd save enough I'd go away and chuck the job in.

THOMPSON: You were just saying that you and others when you returned had a wanderlust, and used to travel all around the country, and found it difficult returning to work. Did you find that you'd lost many of your skills in those years away?

D'ALTERA: Oh yes. We'd lost a lot of the, at least I did, I'd lost a lot of my ambition, you know, to become a tradesman.

THOMPSON: Why do you think that was?

D'ALTERA: It wasn't easy for me to get a job in me trade.

THOMPSON: Another returned serviceman told me that when he used to go looking for work, after the war, he used to take his Anzac badge off and put it in his pocket, when he was going to private employers. Would you have thought that was common?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, I think it was. I knew I never wore mine.

THOMPSON: Why was that?

D'ALTERA: Because they'd think I wasn't skilled.

THOMPSON: But on the other hand in some employment there was preference for returned servicemen.

D'ALTERA: Yes. Yeah, but it couldn't be enforced very much.

THOMPSON: In what ways did the army help you after you got back? You said they gave you a gratuity of one hundred and twenty pounds.

D'ALTERA: Yeah, I got a pension, thirty shillings a week.

THOMPSON: This is as soon as you got back?

D'ALTERA: No. This is when I reported my lungs were bad. It came up for review at Mildura, and the doctors there said, 'There's no record of you having T.B. in your papers.' He wiped me off and I lost my pension.

THOMPSON: When was that? When were you in Mildura?"

D'ALTERA: In the early twenties. Well, I was paying twenty-five shillings ... I got thirty shillings, I was paying twenty-five shillings a week for board and lodgings, five shillings for ... no three and six for medicine, left me with one and six. To get a few bob I started writing different paragraphs for different publications. The Bulletin and so on, where I earned a bit of extra money. Later on, when Smith's Weekly started in 1919, no it had started in 1919, I was a regular contributor to that.

THOMPSON: What sort of things were you writing?

D'ALTERA: Oh, mostly rubbish. I'd study the paper and, and see the stuff they wrote and I wrote what I thought would be accepted, included a lot about the war. They had a page they called the 'Unofficial History of the A.I.F.', you know, and I was a regular contributor to that.

THOMPSON: Under your own name?

D'ALTERA: No I used pen names.

THOMPSON: What were your pen names?

D'ALTERA: Mostly under the 'Unofficial History of the A.I.F.', "Signaller", "Lone Piner" and "Franzac". But I used over a hundred different pen names in Smith's Weekly, because they didn't like to publish a lot of material under the one pen name. So, I used plenty of different pen names. Later on in the depression, I was earning more than the average worker, and I occasionally wrote a ... was able to sell a short story or an article.

THOMPSON: What sort of things would you be writing about the war in Smith's Weekly?

D'ALTERA: The war, oh Smith's Weekly. They had all sorts of columns you know. They had columns headed "Secret History". "Fish and Fish Tales", "Lead us to the Legion", "For 'em and Agin 'em", and about ten other headings. I wrote for them all. I studied their style and wrote to suit their style.

THOMPSON: Did you make much money out of that?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: A living?

D'ALTERA: Well, I was living better than the average worker out of it. Course, there was plenty of other publications I contributed to, The Bulletin, and a publication called Aussie, the Sun News Pictorial, oh and publications all over Australia.

THOMPSON: What percentage of your stories would have been stories and what percentage news articles?

D'ALTERA: I suppose only ten percent would be stories or articles.

THOMPSON: Did you write a lot about your own experiences at the war?

D'ALTERA: Yes, and I supplied, like the wording for illustrations, you know, gags they call them, or jokes another name for them. I was very successful with them in Smith's Weekly, particularly.

THOMPSON: What sort of stories did you write about your time at the war?

D'ALTERA: No, the stories they were on all sorts of subjects. When the Sun started in Melbourne it wasn't run by the Herald. A Sydney crowd had come over and started it. The Sun, they had the evening Sun and the morning Sun, and they had a section in the evening Sun, real live stories, I was very successful writing for that.

THOMPSON: You said that when you got home you got a gratuity of one hundred and twenty pounds, how important was that?

D'ALTERA: Oh, it was a fortune then.

THOMPSON: How did you use it?

D'ALTERA: My brother and I, my younger brother had enlisted too.

THOMPSON: He enlisted too?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Did he go to France as well?

D'ALTERA: He went to France. Well, we put it on a deposit of a house in Yarraville.

THOMPSON: The two of you?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, and then when they got married, I paid the instalments. It was only six pound ten a quarter to the Credit Finance at the State Savings Bank, with the help of me he paid it off.

THOMPSON: Did many other returned servicemen use their gratuity in that way do you think?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, I think a few did, but most of them wasted it.

THOMPSON: Did the army help you in any other way, for instance, in training or in education after the war?

D'ALTERA: Well, we could have got help, when the Repatriation Department got going properly there was help in that. Oh yes, when I lost this job on my old employer, I went to Geelong to Gordon College there, for six months.

THOMPSON: When was that, in 19?

D'ALTERA: Oh, that would be in about 1919, yeah, about 1919.

THOMPSON: What did you do at Gordon College?

D'ALTERA: Oh, you know, learned about the trade ... fitting and turning.

THOMPSON: Did the army put you through that?

D'ALTERA: I think the Repatriation Department paid the course off.

THOMPSON: Were there many other servicemen who used those sorts of ...?

D'ALTERA: Yes, quite a lot.

THOMPSON: Were you ever given any opportunity to obtain a War Services Home or go on a Soldier's Settlement?

D'ALTERA: No, see, that was for married men, War Service Homes.

THOMPSON: Could you tell me about your work experience then throughout the rest of the 1920's.

D'ALTERA: I came back to Yarraville, as I said, joined the Yarraville Club, and I'd take any work, outside my trade. I used to get a job every busy season down at T. Robinson & Co., down Spotswood. They manufactured agricultural implements. But it was a seasonal job, but while there, I didn't smoke or drink then. I don't smoke now, and I'd save like mad, and as I said before, soon as I had sufficient money I'd go on a trip somewhere. So I didn't save very much then.

THOMPSON: So, what were these trips? What would you be doing?

D'ALTERA: Just going sight seeing.

THOMPSON: All around Australia?

D'ALTERA: New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria.

THOMPSON: By yourself?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Were you using these trips to gain experience for your writing?

D'ALTERA: No. Just for recreation.

THOMPSON: What other types of work did you have, apart from in the factory in Spotswood?

D'ALTERA: Oh, well as I said I was there for many years, in the busy season. I'd be rabbit trapping. Just casual work here and there.

THOMPSON: Were you a member of a union?

D'ALTERA: Yes, I took an active part in a union.

THOMPSON: What union was that?

D'ALTERA: The Agricultural Implement Maker's Union. It had gone out of existence during the Depression.

THOMPSON: This is after the Depression you took an active interest in it?

D'ALTERA: During the Depression. When the union wasn't meeting, some chaps from our Sunshine Harvester factory, myself, got it going again. We used to meet in Footscray once a fortnight. We elected a Secretary, and we got going again. I tried to ... I came into conflict with the union Secretary. I wanted to get amalgamated to the A.E.U. or the Ironworker's Union, and he had me in the gun for that. I beat him ... we used to elect all officers of that union meeting not by a ballot of all members. In fact, the membership was very low. We only had two state branches, one in Victoria and one in South Australia. I beat him in the ballot to the union delegate to the A.C.T.U. Congress, and then he got me really in the gun. He came

down to T. Robinson unexpectedly one day, and he got a shock to find me working there. He came up and said, 'You won't be working here this evening, after today.' Sure enough, four o'clock up came the foreman and said, 'You're finishing up tonight Stan.' I asked him why and he said, 'The Union Secretary got you the sack. Told the boss you were a militant.'

THOMPSON: Can you tell me how you got involved in politics when you came back to Australia?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, well, not so much before the Depression, but early in the Depression, there was a hall in Yarraville, Friends of the Soviet Union used to hold lectures there. Ralph Gibson was one of the main speakers, and they had on sale their literature of many sorts including the works of Lenin, and I read everything I could possibly read.

THOMPSON: Was this in late 1920's?

D'ALTERA: No, this was in early 1930's. I became real interested. A chap named Bill Miller, he was Secretary of the Footscray Unemployed Association, he was a member of the Communist Party. He suggested I join the Communist Party and I said yes, and I became very active in their affairs. I was Secretary of the Yarraville Citizens Club and I wasn't working. I was earning enough with free-lance journalism to keep myself. I was able to spare a lot of time. The Unemployed Workers Union used to issue a weekly duplicated news sheet and I became its editor. Different people among the unemployed would write articles and I'd sub-edit them. They'd be distributed among the unemployed of Footscray. Then I helped in factory propaganda work. We'd prepare duplicated material, a foolscap sheet on both side of the paper printed. I'd help prepare it and distribute it at the factory gates.

THOMPSON: What sort of material would that be?

D'ALTERA: It would be on working conditions. One was called 'The Harvester' and distributed at the Sunshine Harvester works. They used to go out there by an early train, and

be at the factory gate before the workers started to arrive and as they arrived I'd hand them a copy. Same down the glassworks in Spotswood.

THOMPSON: Were they interested?

D'ALTERA: Oh yeah, they were interested. It got a lot attending union meetings.

THOMPSON: Can I come back, in a few minutes, to the Depression and your political involvement and various questions about returned servicemen during the Depression, but first of all ask some more questions about when you first returned from the war? In particular, I'm interested in how returned servicemen fitted back into their families and the domestic scene.

Did you come back to live with your parents at all, when you first came home?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: How was it when you came back to live with them again?

D'ALTERA: Wages had improved, their conditions were better than when I'd left before, before I'd went to the war. There was money I was putting in. Improved their conditions immensely.

THOMPSON: Did you have any trouble readjusting living with the family after leading the wilder life a of a soldier?

D'ALTERA: Yes. I couldn't sleep at night, in fact, you mightn't believe it, I got used to sleeping on the earth and that. I couldn't sleep in a bed for a while, I used to get out of bed and sleep on the floor. Ha, ha.

THOMPSON: For how long did you do that?

D'ALTERA: Oh, for a few months. The softness of the bed used to keep me awake. Ha, ha.

THOMPSON: Had many of your habits changed in the years away, so that it was difficult to get on with your family?

D'ALTERA: Oh no. There was never any difficulty. We were a close knit family.

THOMPSON: So that was not a problem. Did you find there was any problem, because you'd had these experiences as a soldier fighting, because they hadn't had those experiences?

D'ALTERA: No. Well, as I've said, my brother, he came home after, he went right through the war, from the start till the finish. See, well the only one that wasn't experienced was my father and my sister. Mother of course.

THOMPSON: Were you and your brother able to talk, and happy to talk freely about your war time experiences?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, but we didn't talk much. You'll find, among ... except for interviews like this, you very seldom hear a returned man talking about his war experiences, except when he might be at an R.S.L. meeting.

THOMPSON: But you did write about your experiences?

D'ALTERA: Oh, I wrote about my experiences, but that was to get money.

THOMPSON: Have you still got any of the things you wrote, in those years?

D'ALTERA: No, no. I used to keep cuttings of everything I wrote, but I left it in a train one day, and I never bothered ... I never recovered it and I never bothered with anything after that. I wish I had.

THOMPSON: The things that you did write, what sort of stories and what sort of theme would you have had about the war?

D'ALTERA: They were only paragraphs about the war. Say, about forty or fifty lines.

Smith's Weekly used to pay me threepence a line. Well, a forty line paragraph, well that would be ten shillings.

THOMPSON: In your writing, did you tend to be bitter about your war experiences, or happy about ...?

D'ALTERA: No, happy about them. I used to write humorous things about it.

THOMPSON: So, was that the main thing you wrote about, the humorous side?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: And mateship, was that an important theme?

D'ALTERA: Mateship, yes.

THOMPSON: When you came back, from the war, did you maintain contact with other returned servicemen?

D'ALTERA: No. Only with one chap in Adelaide.

THOMPSON: Why him?

D'ALTERA: He was my particular friend. I went over to Adelaide, he was working in the Railway Department, and after a few days, I wasn't welcome at his house, his mother wouldn't let me in. She thought I'd got him to stop home from work, and we went around drinking a bit, ha, ha, making him miss work. But the only time you'd get among your mates, old mates, was the Anzac Day march or the Battalion Reunion.

THOMPSON: Were you a regular attendant at those?

D'ALTERA: Yes. But now, now there's not many alive, you know. My friends.

THOMPSON: Did you join a serviceman's organisation?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. I joined the R.S.L. but dropped out during the Depression. Then about seventeen years ago I helped to organise the Yarraville Branch of the R.S.L.

THOMPSON: Was that with Jack Flannery?

D'ALTERA: Jack Flannery. Do you know him?

THOMPSON: I interviewed him a few weeks ago. He said to say hello.

D'ALTERA: Oh gee, he was a character, Jack.

THOMPSON: So you rejoined then?

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: How did you first hear of the R.S.L. when you first joined it?

D'ALTERA: Just newspapers.

THOMPSON: Why did you join?

D'ALTERA: I thought we should have an organisation to battle for better conditions. Better pensions, better conditions all round.

THOMPSON: Can you remember in those first couple of years, any conflict between different returned servicemen organisations?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: So you can only remember the R.S.L.? Can you remember any particular confrontations between the R.S.L. and between other groups in society in those first few years?

D'ALTERA: Only public demonstrations. That was when the R.S.L. first was formed, because I was home in Australia then.

THOMPSON: What sort of public demonstrations, what for?

D'ALTERA: For better pensions and that. We had the authorities against us.

THOMPSON: Against you?

D'ALTERA: Against us, yeah.

THOMPSON: Why was that?

D'ALTERA: Because they reckon we were a lot of hoodlums, they branded us

THOMPSON: This is the returned servicemen, they branded you as hoodlums?

D'ALTERA: Because we were battling for better conditions. They reckoned we had adequate pensions.

THOMPSON: Were you in Melbourne, I think it was in July 1919, during the Peace Day march when riots broke out, and there were three days of rioting, and Premier Lawson got attacked at one stage, and there was a march to Victoria Barracks?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: And a person was shot, a soldier was shot?

D'ALTERA: No, I wasn't here then.

THOMPSON: You must have been in Mildura. So the returned servicemen who you were associated with were battling against the authorities?

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: It's strange because it seems to go across the normal idea of the R.S.L. being on the side of the authorities? How would you explain that?

D'ALTERA: I think the R.S.L. has developed into a social club, now. A big social club. A lot of them, they've all got their club rooms, Yarraville Branch haven't. We meet in another place. They're more interested in getting together and having a drink.

THOMPSON: Were you involved in many social activities with the R.S.L. when you first came home in early 1919?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Not at all. It wasn't a club in which you were involved?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Which branch were you a member of?

D'ALTERA: Footscray Branch. See, when the Depression came they were rescinding the membership of people who couldn't pay their dues. They should've kept everyone financial, but they didn't.

THOMPSON: I might come back to that in a moment, because I've got some more questions about that. Just briefly, a bit more about those first years when you returned. How important was it to you to march in Anzac Day parades?

D'ALTERA: The only importance it was to me was to see my mates.

THOMPSON: Would you march here or in the city?

D'ALTERA: In the city. I never went to this last one, I thought I wasn't capable.

THOMPSON: Can you remember monuments being created around the suburbs to the returned servicemen, in those first few years after the war?

D'ALTERA: Well, there's none in Footscray, there was a lot of erection of honour boards. We've got one down the Yarraville Club.

THOMPSON: One other question about the memorial activities, did you read many of the novels or histories of the First World War? For instance, C.E.W. Bean's War Histories?

D'ALTERA: Yes, I've got that here.

THOMPSON: Or C.J. Dennis' poetry? 'Ginger Mick', for instance.

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: You read those.

D'ALTERA: I haven't got that but I've read it.

THOMPSON: The depictions they gave of the war, did you find them ...?

D'ALTERA: Well, they were true. Bean was particularly accurate.

THOMPSON: So you admired the work of C.E.W. Bean. Perhaps I can ask some questions now ... I've got together all the material I can from reading the Footscray newspapers and speaking to Mike Roper and using the Council Correspondence of the Depression and of returned servicemen in the Depression, and last night I sat down and worked out all the different questions that you, more than anyone, might know about, because there are a lot of things I'm not certain about. So perhaps if I can run through this. To begin with, do you remember, late in the 1920's the Shrine was being built, of Remembrance. The War Memorial Committee, or whatever it was called, made an appeal for funds to pay for the Shrine, do you remember any negative responses to that?

D'ALTERA: I don't think they collected much in our

THOMPSON: Would you have approved of giving money to build the Shrine?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Why not?

D'ALTERA: Well, I thought the money could be better spent on improving conditions for the returned men. Besides that, all the work about the Shrine, initial work, was done by the unemployed. They had to work for their dole on that. There were a few strikes there among the unemployed.

THOMPSON: Down at the Shrine site?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: So you didn't approve of that?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Do you remember late in 1929, when Scullin was Prime Minister, he cut out compulsory military training? Do you remember that?

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: And apparently the 32nd Battalion, the Footscray Militia, decided to continue on a voluntary basis.

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: Can you, firstly, tell me how important was the 32nd Battalion in Footscray, and the Militia in Footscray?

D'ALTERA: Very important. My brother was an officer in it, before he went to the war and after. He was very active on military training.

THOMPSON: Would many returned servicemen have joined it?

D'ALTERA: A few, not many.

THOMPSON: Would many people have opposed, or been ambivalent, or disliked the 32nd Battalion and the Militia in Footscray and Yarraville?

D'ALTERA: No. I don't think the people took much notice of it.

THOMPSON: In May of 1930, you might remember, Scullin tried to replace soldier preference with union preference in employment.

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: Can you remember what your attitude to that was?

D'ALTERA: By then I'd give away about soldiers preference.

THOMPSON: Why?

D'ALTERA: I thought every worker should be equal ... opportunity.

THOMPSON: When did your opinion change?

D'ALTERA: It changed early in the Depression and during the Wharf Labourers strike and the Timber Workers strike.

THOMPSON: Why did that change your attitude to returned servicemen preference?

D'ALTERA: Because they tried to recruit a lot of returned soldiers as scabs, but they didn't succeed. They tried to use us as a union smashing force, and I think there is a big danger of that today. The R.S.L. in my opinion, considering the present leadership we've got, could become a sort of fascist organisation.

THOMPSON: Going back a few years before this preference issue in 1930, during the 1926 Police strike, were returned servicemen active at all then as scabs, do you think?

D'ALTERA: A few were, a few joined.

THOMPSON: The Special Constables?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Were you involved in any way during that?

D'ALTERA: No. I didn't involve, but my elder brother did.

THOMPSON: As what?

D'ALTERA: He joined what they called the Special Police Force.

THOMPSON: What was your response to that?

D'ALTERA: I was mad about it, because he was helping to smash a strike.

THOMPSON: Why did he join it?

D'ALTERA: Because he believed that the Police should have kept on duty. He always supported law and order.

THOMPSON: So you and he had a big fallout over that?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, we had an argument over it.

THOMPSON: Did many other returned servicemen in Footscray join the Specials?

D'ALTERA: Not that I know. There could have been some but I don't know of any.

THOMPSON: Returning to when Prime Minister Scullin tried to replace soldier preference with union preference in 1930, can you remember what the response was in Footscray, especially, perhaps, of the R.S.L.?

D'ALTERA: No, I wasn't particularly interested in the R.S.L. then, I'd dropped out of the R.S.L. I had no discussion with anyone about it.

THOMPSON: how important do you think preference was as an issue in Footscray and Yarraville during the Depression?

D'ALTERA: It was a big issue, because Yarraville had ... well a lot of unions were formed in Yarraville. Fertiliser's Union, the Glass Workers Union, plus a few others. The Quarrymen's Union. Yarraville was a strongly unionised suburb then.

THOMPSON: But how important do you think preference for returned servicemen was, as an issue during the Depression, apart from preference for unionists?

D'ALTERA: I don't think anyone took any notice of it. Everyone was struggling to live. The percentage of unemployed in Footscray and Yarraville was very high. The main concern for everyone, for the great majority out of work, was to get enough food to eat.

THOMPSON: You can't remember the R.S.L. or other returned servicemen groups fighting for their members for employment over and above other unemployed?

D'ALTERA: Oh yes. The Footscray R.S.L. were insistent that the Footscray Council give preference in employment to returned men and they advocated the employers of the district to do the same.

THOMPSON: Were they successful with either ...?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, they were successful.

THOMPSON: With the employers too, do you think?

D'ALTERA: With a fair number of them.

THOMPSON: Do you think by that stage employers would be less worried about returned servicemen not fitting into their work?

D'ALTERA: They wouldn't be worried by that any more.

THOMPSON: Did that create, the R.S.L.'s insistence on preference for soldiers, create much tension and many conflicts in the area?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, it did among the unemployed.

THOMPSON: There are a few incidents that I have picked up, I might come to them. I might look, for a while, at your involvement in the unemployed organisation in Footscray. In about October of 1940 the Rank and File Association, the Footscray Unemployed Rank and File Association started and it was running the depot in Buckley Street, am I right? You were involved then?

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: In what capacity?

D'ALTERA: I was only helping them produce their bulletin, and helping them in their struggle against evictions. We had one big eviction battle, in Simpson Street, Yarraville. A chap named Tom O'Farrell

THOMPSON: Who was also a Brunswick man? Did he move? He could have moved to Brunswick? Because a friend of mine called Les Barnes told me about Tom O'Farrell.

D'ALTERA: Yeah, well he might have moved to Brunswick. Yeah, I know Les Barnes.

THOMPSON: Oh, we might talk about him later. Anyway, Tom O'Farrell, the eviction story.

D'ALTERA: Tom O'Farrell, he had a wife and

THOMPSON: He was a returned serviceman?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. He'd applied for a soldier's block, he got a block up the Mallee. They had an impossible task. They didn't have enough finance, they built a shed and lived in that, and lived under hardship conditions, and most of those returned soldiers failed and just walked off the block. Well he walked off his and came to live in Yarraville. Somehow, he got a house in Yarraville, in Simpson Street, and he got behind with his rent. He didn't have the money to pay the rent. Struggled to get enough to eat for his family, and he got an eviction order. The Unemployed heard about it. Bill Miller was Secretary of the Footscray Unemployed Federation, came to me and asked would I help. I said yes. We duplicated a leaflet and put it in letterboxes all around the neighbourhood and a big crowd gathered out. Anyhow, the police had to do their duty, they put his furniture out onto the pavement. All the crowd were shouting out abuse to them, and Bill Miller and I were speaking to them, addressing different parts of the crowd. We sent and asked Dr Gerald O'Day of the Communist Party, he was one of the agitators, to come. He arrived and could speak much better than us. The policemen were really shame faced to have to do this job, you know, they were as red as anything, and hung their heads, you know, every time they'd come near the crowd. There'd be a shout at them. There was a good Catholic population around Yarraville, and when the police brought the portrait of the Pope out, you know, in a big frame, they put it on the footpath, well I got it and put it on top of the furniture where the crowd could see it easily. They began to call the police Black and Tans then, because here was a good catholic getting evicted from his home.

THOMPSON: Tom O'Farrell was a Catholic, wasn't he?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: He was a Catholic and an R.S.L. member?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: And a member of the Communist Party?

D'ALTERA: No. He never joined. I don't know if he later joined the Communist Party. Bill Miller might have tried to get him, he might have joined later, I don't know.

THOMPSON: Would there have been many returned servicemen helping their old digger mates?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, there was quite a crowd there. And the police wagon screeched along the street trying to disperse the crowd, the crowd wouldn't disperse. In the finish they went away. The Special Police had come out. The other police had done their job and departed. Then we formed a deputation from among the crowd, about ten or twelve and we went looking for the Mayor. We found him.

THOMPSON: Was that Hanmer, or not yet?

D'ALTERA: No, no, not yet. Ester. We found him and told him he's never going to sleep again until Tom O'Farrell had a home. Well Ester had a house that was vacant, and he said, "Well, he can live in there temporarily". So we put him and his furniture into this house. Tom was back in a house. At that time there were about another twenty evictions pending in Yarraville. The house owners didn't go on with it. The house owners couldn't help it, because they might have been paying off the houses they rented.

THOMPSON: So you were successful.

D'ALTERA: Yeah, we were successful in that struggle, and, as I said, like, the others that had eviction orders against people, withdrew them. Out in Collingwood, after an eviction, they'd pull the house completely down. The unemployed youth. Demolish the house that the bloke was evicted from.

THOMPSON: Early in February, 1931, this was in the Footscray Mail, apparently digger members of the Rank & File Unemployed Association formed a Diggers Club, which was a section of the Rank and File Association. Can you remember that?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Why did they do that, and who were the particular?

D'ALTERA: Because they reckoned the official R.S.L. were only trying to get employment for their own members.

THOMPSON: And not for people who weren't financial members?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: And you were saying before that if people who were unemployed couldn't afford to pay their subs ...

D'ALTERA: They couldn't, no.

THOMPSON: ...and so they were no longer members.

D'ALTERA: No longer members. They wouldn't get any of them a job. Course they weren't able to get many lads that were financial members, they weren't able to get employment for many of them.

THOMPSON: Right, so these were members of the Rank & File Association who were returned servicemen, formed this Digger Club. Who were they?

D'ALTERA: I can't remember their names.

THOMPSON: Were you part of that?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Even though you were a returned serviceman?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: What would they have done different from the other members of the Rank & File Association.

D'ALTERA: Nothing different. They didn't believe ... they didn't try to get a job ... they didn't believe in preference for themselves above everyone else. They just wanted to take their chance with everyone else.

THOMPSON: We were talking about the Diggers section of the Rank & File Association. I'm interested in why members of an unemployed association who were returned servicemen, would want to form a special section of their own.

D'ALTERA: I never found out the reason, and I never tried. That question hasn't struck me before today.

THOMPSON: Do you think it was anything to do with them wanting to show that they had a special identity as returned servicemen?

D'ALTERA: Oh, I think the main reason was they thought they'd get employment out of it.

THOMPSON: Was there any conflict between them and other members of the Rank & File Association?

D'ALTERA: I don't know.

THOMPSON: Can you remember what was the response of the R.S.L. and it's unemployed branch to this new Diggers Club of the Rank and File Association?

D'ALTERA: They disowned it.

THOMPSON: So the R.S.L. disowned it. I'm confused about names, because we find in the Council Correspondence something called the Footscray and Yarraville Returned Servicemen Self Help Association, now do you remember that?

D'ALTERA: No, I can't remember that.

THOMPSON: Because I think that that's what was originally the Diggers Club of the Rank and File Association. But you're not sure. Right.

On another note, later in February 1931, and this was after the eviction struggles over Tom O'Farrell's house and others, apparently in the newspaper it said there was a rumour that the army was going to be called in to quash the demonstrations.

D'ALTERA: That's in the city. I was in one of those demonstrations.

THOMPSON: Was the army called in or not?

D'ALTERA: No, it wasn't called in.

THOMPSON: Can you remember how the Footscray and Yarraville Rank and File Unemployed Association responded to that rumour?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Apparently they decided to get rid of members of the Association who were in the Militia. Do you remember that?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: And there was a great debate then, when the Rank and File Association tried to expel Militia members, and the Militia members tried to get Council to kick the Rank and File Association out of Buckley Street and the depot.

D'ALTERA: Yeah, they tried that but the owner probably wouldn't ... oh, that was the depot. The Council had a depot in Buckley Street.

THOMPSON: Which you were using, were you?

D'ALTERA: No, see we rented a shop in Buckley Street and also in Buckley Street, further up the street, was what they called a Sustenance Depot, where people could get their boots fixed there, and things like this.

THOMPSON: So, can you remember any conflict between the Militia members and the Unemployed Association?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Do you remember, tom O'Meara was the ... is that his name, Tom O'Meara, was one of the leaders in the Rank and File Association. Have I got the name wrong?

D'ALTERA: I know the name well enough, but I can't

THOMPSON: Not to worry. Apparently his opponent from the Militia was a man called Turner. Do you remember a man called Turner, who was in the Militia?

D'ALTERA: I know the name Turner, but I can't remember what he was.

THOMPSON: Not to worry. Later in 1931, the Council and Mayor Hanmer successfully kicked the Rank and File Association out of the Buckley Street depot. Am I right?

D'ALTERA: Yes, that was the depot, the Sustenance Depot.

THOMPSON: And established their own Mayor's Relief Distress Committee, who ran sustenance instead of the unemployed themselves. Apparently a man called Vic Glenister was the administrator of the Mayor's Relief Distress Committee and he was a returned serviceman.

D'ALTERA: No, I don't know him.

THOMPSON: You don't remember him. The only other major dispute I'm interested in was something we found in the Council Correspondence, between May and July 1931, apparently there was a great debate between the R.S.L.'s employment branch and the separate one which had been set up by the Unemployed Association of people who didn't like the R.S.L.. a great argument amongst them and the Council tried to intervene to try and amalgamate the two Clubs. Do you remember that?

D'ALTERA: No, I don't remember that.

THOMPSON: Amongst the Council Minutes there are quotes like people saying that there were, 'Deep seated conflicting opinions and policies between the R.S.L. and between the Digger members of the Rank and File Association'.

D'ALTERA: I could tell you on all these questions it would be best to see a chap named Bill Miller.

THOMPSON: Would he remember?

D'ALTERA: Well, he was Secretary of the Unemployed Association continuously.

THOMPSON: He'd remember even though he wasn't a returned serviceman.

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: I might go and see him then.

D'ALTERA: Yeah, he lives in Windsor Street, he's on the phone.

THOMPSON: Fine. There's a few more names, I'd be interested, just in case you remember some of these people. Three of the members of the R.S.L. were, Mr Fordham, do you remember him?

D'ALTERA: Fordham. Not the Member of Parliament?

THOMPSON: Probably his father, I would think.

D'ALTERA: Oh yeah, it would be his father, yeah.

THOMPSON: Do you remember him?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, I know him now.

THOMPSON: Do you. He's still alive?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, he comes to our R.S.L. meeting, the Yarraville Branch.

THOMPSON: He's a First War Digger?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. Bill Fordham.

THOMPSON: A man called Higgins?

D'ALTERA: Higgins. No.

THOMPSON: Or Rose. A Mr Rose.

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: On the other side, the member of the Rank and File Association's Diggers Club was a man called Mr P Raynor.

D'ALTERA: Raynor. No.

THOMPSON: You don't remember him. Can you remember, anywhere else in Melbourne, whether there were conflicts between the R.S.L. and various other unemployed associations?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: For instance in Brunswick, I remember the R.S.L. put up Council candidates in Council elections against Labor men.

D'ALTERA: No. Les Barnes would be able to tell you all about that.

THOMPSON: I'll speak to Les about that. Do you think that in any way, the war service of some returned servicemen had any sort of conservatising effect upon them, do you think it in any way made them ore conservative?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, I think so. We seem to be a bit, among our Battalion Association, they seem to be ver conservative. Course, a lot of them were conservative before they went to the war. They came from the country districts.

THOMPSON: Can you explain, is there any way that the actual war experience would have made them more conservative, or their experience away?

D'ALTERA: No. It should have made them the opposite way.

THOMPSON: Why do you say that?

D'ALTERA: Because the experience of the war.

THOMPSON: It had that effect on you, didn't it, the opposite?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Do you think your experience was common, in that way?

D'ALTERA: I think it was pretty widespread.

THOMPSON: Of returned servicemen who were radicalised by the war?

D'ALTERA: yes.

THOMPSON: many of your friends.

D'ALTERA: Yes, quite a lot.

THOMPSON: Do you think that the fact that the returned servicemen, especially the R.S.L., were so involved in patriotism, and patriotism as a conservative issue, that that might have drawn them into conservative politics?

D'ALTERA: It would. The R.S.L. leadership itself was conservative.

THOMPSON: The leadership.

D'ALTERA: Yeah. It puts a lot of propaganda out, and along those lines in the official journal, The Mufti, you know, we get that once a month. That's a conservative journal.

THOMPSON: Who were the leaders of the R.S.L. in the period between the wars? What sort of class of people would you have said they were?

D'ALTERA: Mostly, as time went on, they became more in the officer class. I don't know what the present President is, Ruxton. He's a most conservative sort of bloke.

THOMPSON: Would you say that they were also of a business and professional class, or how many working men do you think would have been?

D'ALTERA: Not many working men, except perhaps in the Western Suburbs. They were not conservatives. Like the Annual Conference, was packed with conservatives. You get advanced copy and Mufti of the motions submitted from other various branches. Well many of them, the majority are conservative.

THOMPSON: Why do you say that in the Western Suburbs that working men would have joined?

D'ALTERA: Oh, seeing the branches out here, they might be more inclined, the Presidents and the Secretaries, to be workers, or former workers.

THOMPSON: Is that because it's a working class area? Would you say that the Footscray branch itself, members of the Footscray R.S.L. now, are generally conservative in their politics?

D'ALTERA: Oh, I don't know much about the Footscray branch.

THOMPSON: What about in the period between the wars?

D'ALTERA: Between the wars, they were just like the average working man, in the leadership of the Footscray, R.S.L.

THOMPSON: Can you remember any antagonism, though, to Footscray R.S.L. from other working people?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: For instance, why did you leave the R.S.L?

D'ALTERA: Oh, I left it because they were putting the unfinancial members out when I thought the R.S.L. should have carried them.

THOMPSON: Was there much antagonism to the R.S.L. from other returned servicemen in the area, do you think?

D'ALTERA: Yes, quite a lot wouldn't join the R.S.L.

THOMPSON: For that reason, or for any other reasons?

D'ALTERA: Oh, they thought they were agin the unions.

THOMPSON: Looking back now, how true do you think that was?

D'ALTERA: Oh, there's a certain amount of truth in it, but I don't know how much widespread it was.

THOMPSON: On a slightly different note, do you have any recollection, or did you ever hear anything about various right wing secret armies or militant conservative groups, during the Depression?

D'ALTERA: I don't think there were any out this area.

THOMPSON: What about elsewhere in Melbourne? Les Barnes told me about the Order of the Silent Knights in Brunswick. Do you remember that?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, I've heard of those.

THOMPSON: Or the White Army.

D'ALTERA: No, I never heard of the White Army.

THOMPSON: But you don't think there was anything out in this part of Melbourne?

D'ALTERA: No.

(Jump in tape)

D'ALTERA: ... finding jobs. The only time I can recollect there being full employment, is directly after the first ... or during the Second World War and for some years after it. That's the only times I've known of full employment.

THOMPSON: We were talking just then about your involvement in the Communist Party and how you don't now believe that a socialist Australia is likely, all that likely, because Australians are reformist in nature. But you were saying that, at the height of the Communist Party in the 30's and 40's, you did believe then that a ...

D'ALTERA: Yes, we did believe it.

THOMPSON: And, was the Communist Party very strong out west?

D'ALTERA: Yes, very strong.

THOMPSON: How much, was that because of the Unemployed Associations?

D'ALTERA: Most of the Communists in this area were recruited from the unemployed, or from militant workers in the factories.

THOMPSON: How many would you have said there were in this district, how many involved, say members?

D'ALTERA: I wouldn't know. You see, you had your branch, or factory branch. You didn't come into contact with others except at conferences. District conferences or State conferences.

THOMPSON: But you still had a feeling that in the west there were a lot of members of the party, and it was quite strong and active:

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: Did you in the later 30's, you were saying before, the Depression didn't end till the Second World War, did you yourself get more work later in the 1930's?

D'ALTERA: I didn't try because by that time I was Secretary of the Yarraville Citizens Club and we'd had a battle to exist and I was able ... it went out of existence for six months.

THOMPSON: When was that?

D'ALTERA: In 1933. October 1933 till June 1934, and I had to lead the battle to get it going again. I'm not saying it in any boastful way, but if it hadn't been for me, there'd be no Yarraville Citizen's Club now.

THOMPSON: What were the main functions of the Yarraville Citizen's Club?

D'ALTERA: Like sporting. We had billiards. When I first joined, billiards and library were the main activities. Cards. But then, now we've got a Liquor Licence, we got it in 1959. We got 2,500 members now.

THOMPSON: Is it a working peoples' club, mainly?

D'ALTERA: Oh, it's not called a Worker's Club, but the majority of the people are workers, because they come ... either work ... live locally or work locally. They come straight from work to the Club.

THOMPSON: Was the Club politically active in the 1930's?

D'ALTERA: No, we weren't allowed to be political. See, a millionaire named James Cuming, he owned the fertiliser firm of Cuming, Smith & Co. He built our building for us, and one of the trust conditions were we don't engage in any political activity.

THOMPSON: So, you weren't allowed to?

D'ALTERA: We weren't allowed to.

THOMPSON: So the focus of your political activity was through the party, the Communist Party.

D'ALTERA: Yeah. And the Unemployed Association. The members of the club knew I was active in the Communist Party.

THOMPSON: Did you find much hostility to yourself as a member of the Communist Party?

D'ALTERA: No. No, see I had a great reputation because they knew I'd got the Club going again. Anything I suggested they'd do.

THOMPSON: Can you remember then, the outbreak of the Second World War? What were you doing at that time?

D'ALTERA: The end of the Second World War?

THOMPSON: At the beginning, sorry, the outbreak.

D'ALTERA: At the beginning. 1939. Secretary to the Yarraville Citizens Club, it was called then, and that took up, except for what I mentioned, you know, doing work in the Communist Party, the Unemployed Workers Movement.

THOMPSON: Which was still going then? The Unemployed

D'ALTERA: Yeah, 1939 it would have been. All my time was devoted to the Yarraville Citizens Club.

THOMPSON: What was your response to the war? Having fought in one war already?

D'ALTERA: The response from the Club, a considerable number of members enlisted, and later on conscription came and a lot of them had to join.

THOMPSON: You said the First War, after reading, you decided it was an unjust war, did you think that of this war?

D'ALTERA: No. It was like, we'd been opposed to Hitler, the Communist Party. In fact, we thought the British Empire wasn't doing enough to stop Hitler. When he attacked the Soviet Union, of course, the Communist Party became particularly active in the war effort.

THOMPSON: Did you feel some ambivalence when Stalin was allied with Hitler?

D'ALTERA: Oh yeah. I did, I know. I thought he should have attacked Germany.

THOMPSON: Did that make your position as a member of the Communist Party of Australia uncomfortable?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, it did.

THOMPSON: Did you get involved at all, during the Second War, in any war related activities, patriotic organisation or anything?

D'ALTERA: Yes.

THOMPSON: What were they?

D'ALTERA: Collecting for war efforts, organising amusements for servicemen.

THOMPSON: Was this through the Yarraville's Citizen's Club?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: So it was fully in favour of the war effort?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: But at this stage you weren't a member of the R.S.L. or any returned servicemen organisation?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Was the R.S.L. in Footscray very active during the war?

D'ALTERA: Oh yeah. In all sorts of war efforts. Organising war loans and all those sorts of things. In the Yarraville Club we put as much of our finances as possible into war loans.

THOMPSON: The Yarraville Citizens Club, right. When the Second War ended and the soldiers returned do you think they had comparable difficulties with when your group returned after the First World War?

D'ALTERA: No they didn't have our difficulties. Because there was full employment, they could get a job immediately.

THOMPSON: Do you think that was the big difference, when you came back it was much harder to get work?

D'ALTERA: Yes. See all the work had been done, the conditions, the pensions, the war service homes, education and all sorts of other things.

THOMPSON: So you think those were battles well won?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Even though the organisation which was at the forefront of the battle, the R.S.L., became a very conservative organisation?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Can you remember after the Second World War, were there any problems of preference, conflicts over preference for returned servicemen as there had been after the First World War:

D'ALTERA: No. I don't think it was raised much, because anyone that wanted a job could get one.

THOMPSON: You were saying before how you and, I think Jack Flannery, and some others, formed the Yarraville branch of the R.S.L.

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: And this is how you returned to the R.S.L. Can you explain what happened?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. I was Secretary to the Yarraville Club.

THOMPSON: The Citizen's Club?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. It changed it's name to the Yarraville Club. About twenty of us went to the Dawn Service at the Shrine.

THOMPSON: When was this?

D'ALTERA: Oh, it was about seventeen years ago ...

THOMPSON: During the 1950's?

D'ALTERA: Yeah. So anyhow, we used to get rum at the war, you know, on the odd occasions. We come back and ...

THOMPSON: Why did you go to the Dawn Service?

D'ALTERA: Oh, it just became a habit?

THOMPSON: So you were a regular?

D'ALTERA: In respect of our fallen comrades.

THOMPSON: So you used to go every year to the Dawn Service?

D'ALTERA: Yeah.

THOMPSON: And to the Parade in the city?

D'ALTERA: Later on in the day, yeah. But on this particular day we went to this Dawn Service, and some of the chaps had driven us in cars. We came back to the Yarraville Club, of course the Club was closed on Anzac Day, and some wit among the crowd said, 'What about it Stan, a drink of rum?' So I let them into the Club rooms. There was no beer on tap. Those that wanted rum could have rum, and those that wanted whisky. They got talking, naturally, about different matters affecting returned soldiers. Some said, 'why don't we have a branch of the R.S.L. in Yarraville?' Good idea. And a chap named Bill Poolie, he's dead now, he said, 'Well, I'll go Secretary, if you like, and get it formed.' And we got it going. We've been going ever since. We've got about one hundred members. We got no club rooms. We meet at the Yarraville Club, permitted us to meet there the first Friday in every month.. We had a general meeting, like, we don't have Committee Meetings, just General Meetings. We get a very good attendance. The only things we bother about are welfare work, seeing blokes in hospital get comforts and helping anyone with pension troubles or any other sort of troubles. We're a very successful branch.

THOMPSON: Are there many First War diggers in it?

D'ALTERA: No, there's only about three of us.

THOMPSON: So, you weren't formed until about seventeen years ago, so in fact you weren't a member of the R.S.L. when they banned members of the Communist Party?

D'ALTERA: No, I wasn't a member then.

THOMPSON: Can you remember your response to that?

D'ALTERA: Only hostility. Quite a few members of the R.S.L. dropped out of the R.S.L. over it. I told them they should have kept in it and worked within the R.S.L. to get rescinded this motion. But there's no hope of getting it rescinded.

THOMPSON: Were you still a member of the Communist Party then, when you helped form the Yarraville branch of the R.S.L.?

D'ALTERA: I just forget whether I'd dropped out or not.

THOMPSON: You dropped out of the Communist Party in 1956.

D'ALTERA: Yeah, well I wasn't a member of the Communist Party when I formed the Yarraville R.S.L.

THOMPSON: So you didn't have that conflict then?

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: How did you feel helping to form a sub-branch of an organisation which was explicitly opposed to the Communist Party?

D'ALTERA: The people who formed the Yarraville R.S.L. weren't opposed to the Communist Party. They weren't politically minded at all. They were all my friends, and we gradually built up a membership until we had an average of a hundred every year, which isn't bad, because we have no club rooms and no facilities to offer them.

THOMPSON: Finally, a few very general questions. When you look back now, to your experiences at the First World War, do you look back at a positive memory or a negative memory?

D'ALTERA: Oh, a positive memory. It broadened my mind, it developed the spirit of mateship, made me more knowledgeable.

THOMPSON: How important do you think that experience and the results of that experience were later in your life?

D'ALTERA: Well, it made me go for education, like self-education.

THOMPSON: Why was that, why did it have that effect?

D'ALTERA: Because I realised I didn't know hardly anything.

THOMPSON: And it was the war that really stimulated your self education?

D'ALTERA: Yes. Yes. I travelled in countries, like France and Belgium and Egypt, and I realised that I knew practically nothing about their lifestyle or their living conditions. And I'm a great reader, like, on historical books and travel books.

THOMPSON: Do you think the war had this effect on many other returned servicemen?

D'ALTERA: Yes, I think it did.

THOMPSON: Apart from that, are there ways it had a disruptive influence on your life?

D'ALTERA: Oh, it disrupted my life. Well, I suppose I would have been married, only for my war service. Getting T.B. when I should have been going with girls. I was struggling to keep alive. I couldn't afford to take girls out and I suppose its ... got a lot to do with me being a bachelor today.

THOMPSON: On the other hand, though, you've been talking about all the various friends that you made through your war experience. Has that been a continuing influence through your life?

D'ALTERA: Oh yes.

THOMPSON: On another similar note, people talk about the Anzac legend, especially nowadays, more and more. Do you ascribe to any particular patriotic nationalist memory of Anzac?

D'ALTERA: No, I don't. Not patriotically, Anzac, it's only a mateship, and I think of Anzac, I think of the great blunder it was. Blunder of Churchill.

THOMPSON: Recently, there seems to be an increasing interest in Anzac and in the First World War.

D'ALTERA: There is now yeah. I just can't understand what's created this. More propaganda by the media or what.

THOMPSON: Can you see any parallels between that during a recession of 1980's and an increasing patriotism during the Depression of the 1930's.

D'ALTERA: No.

THOMPSON: Is it something that you admire or are worried about, this increasing interest?

D'ALTERA: I'm not deeply concerned about it, because I still think the gathering of Anzac Day is a gathering of old mates, and that's the primary reason that people march and get together on that particular day. Because they all have their reunions about that time.

THOMPSON: Do you think, apart from that, it's possible to say that, in Australian history, Anzac Day and the rhetoric of Anzac has been used by conservative forces in ways which help their interests?

D'ALTERA: Yeah, I think all these school essays, they have at school now, every State school. My grand niece, for instance, she was writing an essay on Anzac. She asked me for material, did I have any, yeah, I had some. I gave it to her. See, it will have a big influence on their mind, all this.

THOMPSON: What sort of influence do you think it would have had on her?

D'ALTERA: Influence, like, to make her more conservative.

THOMPSON: And why?

D'ALTERA: Because, patriotic influence of the war.