AWM ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN SIDE A.

Catchline Delayed Action. Interview with Mr Alfred Hughes Lawrence of Bendigo, the co-inventor of the legendary delayed action rifle that was used during the Anzac evacuation of Gallipoli. Interviewed by Peter Baster.

Mr Lawrence, can you remember the conditions of those days, the situation right in the time of the evacuation?

Yes, quite well, pretty vivid. I've got a fair memory of it. It was very exciting times and I have a very vivid recollection of the last few hours of Anzac.

How old were you then?

Eighteen - right on the legal limit.

What were the conditions? What gave you the idea for the delayed action rifle?

Oh, it was just a question .... It was very very obvious we were going to evacuate, even though we were told that if we mentioned the word `evacuation' or [inaudible] we'd be court-martialled. But so many things were happening that it was too obvious. We were marching down every day, down from our positions down to the beach. It was timed accurately so that the average time, and in the final analysis which we know now - now we have what the plan was from the history of the AIF - we know exactly what it was all about. But at the time we didn't know, but it was so obvious we were going to evacuate that that was the germ of the idea.

But what gave you the idea for the delayed action rifle? Why delayed action?

Oh simply delay action because the idea was to make a noise after we'd gone, to deceive .... The whole basis, the whole concept of the evacuation was to timing so that the Turk would not know when we were leaving. It was pretty obvious he must have known because for weeks before it'd been both in the London and the Australian papers. Now, the only question was did he know when we were going? And the idea was to give time so that he would - rifles firing from his trenches a few yards away - he would have the idea we were still there.

This was a normal condition of warfare I suppose? Rifles firing all night was normal?

Oh yes, rifles, sundry fire, just anyone fired a shot at times, but there was a lot of deception about it. One night we weren't allowed to fire at all; another night we fired two rounds a minute. Now the idea was all this was part of the scheme of deception as to when we were leaving.

So the delayed action rifle was to continue this deception, the illusion?

Yes.

Yes, but what I wanted to get onto was what were the thoughts in your mind of how to get a delayed action rifle going?

Oh, somebody, one said to the other, `Well we might work mother's hour glass with the egg timer, with the sand in the hour glass'. `Yes, not a bad idea'. But with only rigid canned tins and signal wire and a pen knife was all we had, it was finally decided that water was a better thing, and then finally with the process of thought, it was decided that to drop a weight .... It takes five pounds pressure to pull the trigger of a .303 rifle. Well, if you can drop a one pound weight it naturally .... And that was the genesis of the idea.

So it was a matter of getting the tins, testing the time they took to ...?

Oh the time was easy. You just bored a little hole and you had a pretty good idea. They haven't got to be accurate to within a few minutes, only we soon learnt the size of the hole in the bottom and the top tin which would increase the weight in the lower one on top of it.

How many rifles were made altogether?

Oh I would say about fifty.

Oh, quite a number.

Oh yes. And they were all in the strategic position that if you look at the view of Anzac - Anzac when they landed - they had to get up two main gullies. The two main gullies to get up - you couldn't get straight up because it was almost a precipice - but Victoria Gully and Shrapnel Gully were the two gullies, and Victoria Gully was the same thing. The way they went up in the first place was the way the Turks had to come down, and it was obvious they would come over Victoria Gully. And [Silk Spur?] where our unit was, was at the top of Victoria Gully just at the right of Lone Pine.

And so these rifles were spread in an area that the Turks would think that the lines ...?

What was that?

The rifles were therefore put in an area so that ...?

Oh they'd be about every twenty or thirty yards.

And how ...? Did they take much setting up and ...?

No. Make 'em in about half an hour.

No, the actual putting them in position, on the sandbags.

They were set in position. There were spare gunpits because the men were going away and we just put them in there and they were all ready on the last night, but the last thing, the water had to be poured in to start them going.

And you did that?

Oh yes, I did half of them.

You stayed right up till the end, to the last evacuation?

Yes.

What sort of trouble - or did you have any trouble persuading the officers to give you time off to do it?

No trouble whatever. They were very glad and said, `Yes, go ahead'.

They thought it was a good idea?

Once they saw the thing - we demonstrated it to General Birdwood - and the big thing was to get any water. We hadn't got enough water to drink there. We were on a special ration of half a pint extra of our three drinks of tea because we were tunnelling, but when we said to the officer who interviewed us before Birdwood came out, `We want some water Sir'. He said, `What do you want water for?' `Oh, it works with water Sir' (laughing). So the next thing we were given a furphy cart full (laughing).

Good heavens. That'd be plenty. And you drank the rest?

We promptly filled our water bottles (laughing).

What did your other mates think about the idea, the other soldiers?

Mm?

What did the other soldiers think, the mates in the line?

Oh, very few of them knew much about it. I don't know what they talked about. But when we came back it was all over and nobody thought there was much to it, and it wasn't until we got back to Australia there was very much discussion on it.

But they would have seen you making the rifles, your mates in the trenches?

Oh it was dead secret.

Oh was it?

But everybody knew (laughing).

How do you feel, or how did you feel when you realised that you'd become part of Australia's military legends?

I don't think we realised that we ever would, and I think at that particular time it wasn't considered very important. And as far as these things are concerned, the military importance of them has been exaggerated beyond all recognition, because the very brief that I've read where they saved thousands of lives - but there were only 150 men in the line still on the

peninsula when the water was being brought into them. We deserved something for ingenuity, but its military value was not of any great consequence.

No, but illusionary techniques are part of the military aren't they?

What?

Creating illusions to bemuse the enemy is part of fighting a war.

Oh yes, I'm sorry.

So, you know, it had a military value. But at some stage in the last sixty-odd years you must have realised that you had done something that, you know, will go down.

I don't think we did at all. I think that we felt that we were sufficiently rewarded by the fact that we had an extra bottle of water (laughing).

But I remember learning at school in the thirties about the delayed action rifle, so it's part of Australia's military legends.

Oh well ....

And so are you.

I think I've had enough of this (laughing).

I'd like to get back to the early thoughts on the making of a delayed action rifle. I mean, you knew that once the line was evacuated it would be silent, so you thought, `Well now to continue the illusion of occupation, we have rifles'.

That was the principle.

Now, at that very point, how did you say, `Now how do we do it?' What were the thoughts that came to your mind?
What were the thoughts that came to your mind of `How we'll do it'. `How do we do it?'

The fact of the egg-timer with the sand was the first thing, and then we decided that well, with greasy tins - it was tins and water - we must be able to get something out of tins and water. And from then the weight toppled off, which we learnt at school - because we were both at school together. I don't know, I think it would be physics you learn when you drop a weight at so many feet per second increases the weight.

Yeah, and at eighteen years of age you hadn't long left school had you?

No.

So those sort of tricks would all be in your mind. At the point of leaving, you'd filled the water tanks and then you withdrew. You were among the last dozen or so men weren't you?

Oh, we were in the last lighter, the last lighter to leave the peninsula, 'cause they were recording there the history says that the `last lighter left at 4 o'clock', and we knew it was the last lighter. We knew that it was nearly four when we got there. We were almost in the extreme. We had further away from the beach to walk than most of the other people, and when we got there we never saw .... I walked it again in 1965 when I went back to the anniversary, and it's a long way (laughing).

Not for an eighteen year old.

Yes (laughing).

With the enemy behind him? Did the rifles start to fire while you were evacuating?

Oh there were shots. There was a Turkish rifle, occasion one. We heard shots, just one every few minutes went off, possibly one of ours, when we were walking down. You could hear them all from the beach.

Do you think the Turk was really fooled by this or do you think he was just very glad to get rid of you and let you go?

That is one of the things that's been .... There's been a lot of controversy about this - The Turks. There was a suggestion the Turks had let us go. Now history has never confirmed that. I've spoken to all military people, for instance, senior officers in the Service, and they've never heard that before. They say that the Turks were deceived. But two hours after we left they were over our lines. They swarmed over .... The Navy was there, that's authentic. The Navy patrolling the beach at 6.40. We left at 4 o'clock. At 6.40 in the morning there was heavy shelling of Anzac and it suddenly stopped, and over the top of Lone Pine came the Turks, swarmed over. Now so that .... They didn't take long to find out we'd gone.

No. And were you still on the water, or had you reached your ship?

Oh we'd be gone by then. See the lighter, I suppose it took us about .... It might have taken us an hour to be towed out in our lighter out to the waiting transport, and the transport .... We were heading back to Lemnos by this time. We wouldn't see any of that.

Have you worked out any more ideas like that since you left?

I don't think so.

But Mr Lawrence, what actually gave you the idea of using a sudden drop weight instead of a lever?

Well we were both at school together in the same class, and we remembered our teacher to give us, to impress on our memory, that a weight dropped, increased in weight .... He reminded us that we were looking down into the remand yard of the Russell Street gaol at the

time, and he said, `Well now, Ned Kelly was hung down there, and it was done with a lever underneath him. When the rope was placed around his neck and they pulled the lever it took eighteen inches drop to kill a man with a rope round his neck - eighteen inches of slack'.

So that would be enough to pull a trigger?

Yep.

END SIDE A.

END OF INTERVIEW.