

S01753 Valentine Gardner, ex 2/14th Battalion, New Guinea

[PLEASE NOTE this is a draft transcript – it is not verbatim or spell checked]

Tape ident

PART ONE

01:00 Born at Houston, NSW 1920

Were you named after the Saint?

Maybe for my uncle

01.33 My father was in the early days involved in lumber.. irrigation settlement, 1880s by the Chaffey Bros.. timber supplied for the engines to pump water and irrigate the blocks. Mainly box timber.

Not much influence of WW1 growing up, no..

06.17 Had a row with my boss and I left my job, I left just before , a couple of months before the war began.. when war began I was working in Mildura, in a retail grocer.

07.10 Most of the boys that heard about the war, it was a sun day night and we used to have concerts in the town hall of a Sunday night and it was at one of these, someone was singing .. and the manager of the concert came onto the stage and stopped the act and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I have to tell you that Britain has declared war with Germany.. '

08.00 and that stunned everybody.. and they played 'Australia will be there'.

08.28 Later I heard it [Menzies' speech] on the radio, yes...

09.05 things were very tough, people forget, the main thing was in peoples' minds was that things were very tough.. people weren't so politically minded and aware of things then as they are now.. as they seem to be today.

10.05 The concert fizzled out after the announcement.. people came outside and I was with my friends and someone said, 'well, what do you think? And someone else said, 'may as well be in it', and that seemed to be the general feeling. .. we weren't very educated

10.44 no there was no philosophising,.. they were more down to earth, you might say.

11.14 I was in the militia before the war.. 7th Battalion , an infantry Battalion, and I'd been in it for . years, I'd joined when I was 16 and I'd been in it for three years. I was a Lance Corporal. My preference was always, the infantry.

12.08 and you got paid as well. Not as a cadet, you had to reach the age of 18 to be paid as a cadet, I wasn't paid but once you reached 18 you got paid for each attendance at camp and training. There was about 300 or so men in Mildura district...

13.00 I think .. Wentworth was B company... .. two yearly.. go to camp at Broadmeadows or Ballarat or locally.. there were thousands of men, right throughout the state.. they learned how to handle

the Vickers machine guns, the rifles of course, Lewis guns also in those days. .grenades, mortars, how to handle communications and they were quite well trained.

[the next ten or so minutes relate to training and trainers and equipment.]

21.17 I enlisted in the second AIF in I think April '41. Because I'd had this militia background, I was in camp, in '40 and was utilised as an instructor.. firstly at Mt Martha and then Balcomb [?] and Williamstown.... I was corporal and acting sergeant.

22.27 Cadets from the Melbourne university, AIF mainly but also cadets from the university

22.58 from memory I think we were notified fairly promptly, there was a parade and told the possibility we would be called. .. enlist to go away.

23.34 I had no idea in those days where we would have been sent. .. but I really didn't think about it.

You were in charge of a group of recruits coming though?

24.35 I was in charge at times of some hundreds of them.. there were NCOs and officers from the militia battalion who were utilised to teach these boys how to march in step, even. What to do and how to do it cos most of them didn't know anything about it.

25.40 my brothers – Neil Robert and Reginald Charles, they'd enlisted in '40, I was in camp then,. I wanted to go over to the AIF and it was very difficult, because they wanted you as instructors. Doing ore for your country as an instructor. That was alright up to a point, but all your mates were going away and when my brothers want, I wanted to go but I didn't want to go with their unit, I wasn't to stay with infantry. .. they went away with First Australian Corp something craft..

27.33 I really didn't want to be an instructor, to be honest with you. I knew a lot about Vickers and rifles and what have you but I really didn't want to do it. My mates were going away. My time in the militia and the time there held me back from doing what I wanted to do, which was to get away. But there you are.

29.00 explains how he'd got into regular AIF – 29.20 And I got approval to join the AIF, right away.. I joined – can't remember where I joined! I was allotted to a training battalion, 2/14th I think but then I was.. to the 2/7th and from there to the 2/8th battalion. In Darley, out back of Bacchus Marsh, thousands of men were there.

30.20 and I was on my way to the Middle east and taken off my draft at Darley and sent to officer school. .. I was called in, and to an officer who was from the 7th Battalion Militia who I'd known in Mildura and he was one of the nicest men and knew more about Vickers machine guns than anyone I'd ever.. and he said, I want you to go officer's school – and it will only take three months.

31.20 it was held at Bonegilla.. and I think it was three months. Then came back to Darley and utilised again, made acting sergeants and utilised as instructors once again.

PART 2 (tape one side 2)

Yes he said it would be for three months.. finally I said I wanted to forego my commission and I paraded to the Brigade Major and told him this and he was a very nice man - I was 21 at this stage and he said, 'look young man. The government has spent a lot of money on you.. it's a foolish thing to do'. And I said, 'my friends, my brothers are overseas and I want to give away my commission'. And he told me to sleep on it so I did but I was still of the same mind. And he said 'you know you're being very foolish. Alright but you'll have to sign something'.

02.20 But I'll make sure that you be in the next reinforcements leaving Australia. Now keep this paper it will stand you in good stead. But it didn't at all !

03.16 .. the next month, Japan came into the war - different kettle of fish then.. went to Qld, Toowoomba and stayed there for some weeks, and they sent us up some 70 miles west of Townsville, a big camp about 11 miles out of Charters Towers. Singapore had fallen and Darwin had been bombed. Yes, there was a sense of desperation

04.15 At Toowoomba I think it was a young officer, I think he'd escaped from Rabaul and his view was that the Japanese were very - buggers, real fighters..

04.45 When Singapore fell I thought there was a feeling of desperation but .. my brother , Reg and Bob, they were - come back over from the Middle East and Reg came in a different ship to Bob and the ship he came back on touched down in Java and the troops aboard were taken off board there and taken prisoner of war. ..

05.35 yes he survived the war but knocked around very badly. [yes Dunlop was on the same ship]

06.00 the military situation was so unstable people being shunted about everywhere

06.20 I was stuck in this camp called Selheim. Training and all of this but no idea of going anywhere. No one seemed to know anything. ..

07.20 About fifty of our boys in the camp with us went down to ... in Qld, where the 2/14th battalion were camped, and we were transferred to 2/14th. My commission had followed me and I could eventually - it caught up with me.

08.20 At one stage I was posted to 2/22nd and they were annihilated I was lucky I never got sent there.

09.00 Just rumours that the boys had been massacred. No numbers or anything.

09.45 Not sure if it were July or late July [1942]but..

10.15 got to the battalion, George Moore myself and fifty others, the Battalion at Gandina for not very long before they ordered us to march out . I knew a few of the boys in the battalion from my own home town but we were with them for a very short while before we went to New Guinea.

10.58 yes we went straight to Brisbane – it was done very secretly, got aboard the trucks and went like made to Brisbane, got aboard American Liberty ships there, perhaps two, we got aboard the James Fennimore Cooper. About 10000 tonners, these ships, and went very quickly up the country.

12.16 The corvettes took us to the wharves, yes there was a bit of damage and the ship lying off the – The Mcdooley, that was there

12.50 no I didn't see any at all (newsreels)

13.20 we were disembarked then we got into trucks and taken straight up to Kwetakky plantation, for two or three nights, I can't remember. The planters had got their native boys to lay out great long sheets of, looked like hessian, 60, 70 feet long and put various fruit and plants and things you could eat and some things that you couldn't, and we had to walk up and down the lines of stuff lying out on the ground the planters would point out what was ok to eat and what was not. .. what was deadly. We must have remembered SOME of it.

15.11 I think it was about a 100 miles [from Japanese advance]

15.35 There was a militia battalion we knew, turned out to be 39th, at Kokoda, that meant nothing to us but we were going to relieve the militia battalion, and also we were told something about the Japanese – we were told, I remember this very well – in these mountains, these Owen Stanley mountains, there was this gap. And I listened to this, very closely. It was said that in this gap a determined company could hold back an army. And we were also told that the Japanese was a poor soldier; he was a little stunted fellow; he was myopic; couldn't see beyond about 20 yards, and in another words he wasn't worth two bob.

17.12 We were the first AIF troops over the Kokoda trail, other than the militia. But that's what we were told and that's what the Australians believed, that one aussies was worth ten aussies. That wasn't true at all.

18.00 we went over the Kokoda track, met up with the 39th at a place called Ishirava. First 39th Battalion I met was a fellow I met was a chap I used to play football with, in my home town, he'd been wounded and they were carrying him out. He was a fellow called Bjorn Bukeka. He was badly injured, he'd got a machine gun burst high up on his thigh, smashed nerve and so on. I gave him a tin of lucky tobacco and papers. We shook hands. He said, I'll see you back in Mildura.

19.02 Dreadful. They looked ery sick. Their eyes were in th back of their head. He was on a rough stretcher the cobbers had put him on. And he was a real good looking fellow but his eyes were in back of his head, he looked terrible, they all looked terrible.

19.55 on the way up the conditions were very hard going on the way, very hard.

20.10 remarkably very few as far as I can remember [casualties from disease etc.] I can't remember anyone going sick.

20.39 No, I don't think anyone had any idea what it was like, I don't think anyone could have been prepared for the Track. I don't think anyone would have believed what it was like.

21.10 Blackhill ranges.. nothing would prepare you, for the Track.

22.30 We were only in the plantation, Koytake, for.. and this Gap was, you know, very narrow entrance – it was about 3 miles wide in reality. .. a matter of urgency to get troops over the trail. Wasn't any time to dwell on anything, it was get up and go.

22.31.. track wound round these mountains, that was Ishiwara. Left Koytike plantation and went up the track. First village was [] that was easy, the next one was a real bastard. The next one I think was either Manari or Naru, and the next one I think was Templeton's Crossing, the next one was Eori, bastard of a place. The next one was Myola

23.32 and the next one, dreadful place called Eori Creek. Bastard of a place. And each place we get to takes us a day to get to the next one, and stay the night and move on early the next morning. Just native villages. We camped inside or under the native huts. They were carrying ammunition and food up [the natives] they were being organised by this ANGAU officers (Australia New Guinea officers).

24.30 Most of the native boys had flannels.

25.10 We went up in shorts and American canvas gaters,.. below the knee.. strap .. came down like that over the front of the boot and strapped underneath the boot. They were excellent. Our own were useless.

25.50 We had to cut everything by half. If you have two pairs of something, you took one.

26.12 I carried our equipment, a haversack on the back. A water bottle, a bayonet, rifle, 150 rounds, also had 50 rounds of .45 calibre ammo and 45 calibre Webley, revolver; I had a - six – four grenades, six high explosive grenades – two inch mortar shells and two magazines of Bren gun ammunition.

27.14 we started off with gas respirators – were ordered to throw them away somewhere up the track! We had our food, dehydrated food. Tin of emergency rations and a tin of corned beef or bully beef and the other stuff we had was all fried stuff, dehydrated potatoes, cabbage – we used to have them tied, pieces of sock or anything, to your belt. They was light but couldn't be eaten - if you lit a fire you'd be dead.

I reckon about 56 pounds. [carrying weight total]
[you had to carry everything with you, nothing was air-dropped?]

30.15 There was - yes at a place called – Myola they dropped food and some ammunition and mortars there. That's right a big open area, apparently there'd been a lake of some sort. They dropped food and ammunition, four inch mortars and they came just straight down and disappeared, we never recovered them.

31.16 we waited in the jungles on the edges of this big cleared area and there was all sorts of stuff, including tinned butter. Unfortunately it all went rancid. But that was the only place I ever saw anything dropped, was at Myola. .. they dropped flour and all sorts of things, just went everywhere..

PART 3

side A of Tape 2

[what did you think when you saw the condition of the other men coming out]

.44 Not really, no, I remember the boys were ready to go, to meet the Japs, pleased and happy to get into it. There was no feeling of, we're changed our mind now that we've seen how the 39 boys look, just the opposite.

01.25 we left the village each day and reached the front line the same time each day. When 39 pulled out at Ishiwara they left some of their men to show us - where their C company area was and where D company was and that's what happened, left behind individuals to foster us into our positions. I met a fellow from my own home town, we shook hands, he showed me the position where the particular section was, that we were to take over from.

02.29 After we said goodbye to each other, and said, see you back home, he walked out, and was shot in the head. Never made it out, poor Georgie.

03.00 that was the area that we were in, that's the area we're holding there - nothing, no provision, I didn't see any pits dug, I don't think they had any time to dig any pits - they were just holding as best they could, holding back..

03.40 The track dropped away to Euro Creek and rose steeply up to our left and the track wound around and was cut the side of the mountain. Their position was astride the track, and down running towards the creek. .. in various areas, they held, both on the left and the right of the track, and the track itself. And we took over the positions approximately, that they held.

04.50 I must say I had no idea of Japanese tactics and I feel fairly sure no one else did, none of our people and the least idea what Japanese tactics were like. We were told certain things, I think by the 39th Battalion, that number one, all officers remove ranks of insignia; to take your revolvers off, or put them at the back of your belt;

05.40 The officers were given names which they said the Japanese would find difficulty, or couldn't, pronounce. And all the platoon commanders were called Elizabeth, and then the number of your platoon. So if you were .. I was Elizabeth 19. .. He was Elizabeth 16. And that's how it was. And the Captains, the company commanders, were called another name, I can't recall now but it was a name the Japanese found difficult.

06.52 The men were never to call you captain so and so, they were to call you Elizabeth or whatever it was allotted to you, . Pips came off; pistols were put out of sight, because they were told they picked off officers, and they did.

07.45 The majority of them were ex-middle east. There were a sprinkling of boys who hadn't seen action in the Middle east .. but most of them had been in the ME with the Battalion.

09.06 Straight away, immediately. (into action)

09.30 My platoon took up a position (at Ishiwara) along the track. In depth. Along both sides of the track. . got themselves into position as best they could, on the right side of the track the ground dropped away to the creek.

10.10 the battalion was I understand under strength, I think it was down a couple hundred men in strength. The platoon was about 33 men.

11.00 [standard weaponry for you?] Rifles. Two inch mortar. Bren gun

11.35 This was probably later in August ('42) middle to late August.

12.00 (wounded?)

12.10 They'd broken through us. They'd – we were the forward company, D company and they'd broken in behind D Coy and separated from the rest of the battalion. Attacked D Coy and my friend, Lt George Moore, he was killed the first day in action I reckon. Or the second. I reckon it was the first day of action he was killed. I reckon he was about 25 . Ah.

13.35 They'd got in behind us and cut off the company . . . the platoons had to get together .. we were behind enemy lines, they'd cut us off from the main battalion. Very heavy, savage fighting there a lot of men, officers killed very quickly. Four that I knew of went off, just like that.

When they'd got behind us. The platoons got together, 16, 17 and 18 platoons together.

14.23 Lot of casualties.

15.00 We woke up to this fairly quickly. Bear in mind you couldn't see at all, and they were only 15 or so yards from you. They were so close. We moved, we always moved in silence, we never made any noise, in moving. Never spoke and they, called out to each other, all the time. They moved and directed their men. We couldn't see them but they were moving all around. I think their system was probably a better way for that particular climate or terrain. We couldn't see them but we knew they were very close. Someone would call out to the left flank and someone would call back –

16.33 and they found it difficult to move their men too no doubt but.. that's the way they did it.

17.00 The first day they were in, went back to company headquarters about 50 yards back along the track and there were some blankets, wet blankets in the corner of the dugout, we had nothing - gas cape, we used to wear. I took a dozen or so of these wet blankets and took them back but there was no contact with the rest of the company, because of the difficulty of the terrain so we were cut off pretty early in the piece.

18.10 When we knew we were cut off.. the platoons got together and formed a perimeter. But they knew we were there and they wanted us. For two or three days at least we were in this small perimeter they gave us everything they could and we lost a lot of men there. Why they just didn't – we were only a company in strength but they wanted us, they were busy attacking the main company but they kept at us. Lt George Pierce who was in charge of 16th Battalion, a nice man, he was later killed.. won an MC, killed at Gona.

19.26 All we could do was hold the perimeter, we knew we were cut off, we were holding it as best we could. One night, just at dark, we had our back up against a bank and we were under quite heavy fire at this stage. We were crouched down with our back – head pulled down, as it were. My friend Doug Wilson, he was the one who was waiting outside the office when I got the commission – well Dough was alongside me and it was just coming dark. And this grenade, landed right between the two of us. And it gave off two blue sparks, like that [clicks finger]. And I went to the left, and he went to the right. Doug got killed. Or he died later. I got hit. And two or three others got killed. I feel forward on my face, and that's how I got wounded.

21.15 George Moore, he asked me where I was hit, and I told him, on his stomach or lying on his side really, he took out his shell dressing, a dressing and bandage combined really, and he bandaged me. Because of the dark, he bandaged me where I'd told him I was hit, where I was getting the pain but he missed most of it cos of the dark but he did it under extreme difficulty lying on his side and in the dark..

22.20 We had to get out. It as about 3 days after that, we had to get out of that position, we just had to get out of there , somehow.

22.42 I was aware, yes I was aware. George – when it was decided, he said to me, look we've got to get out of here.. and ah, my sergeant was there, as his was. But they had to get out. The wounded, they'd given orders before to get out if they can, every man for himself as it were. But I got out, and George - George was going to leave me - there was a log, about 3 foot high, this log, an enormous log that been there many years no doubt and there was a big excavation under a part of this tree where some animal had got in there and slept. And George said , "Look Val, I'll leave you here with a couple of grenades, a pistol and some rounds , some bully beef , a blanket. And I said, if you leave me here George, I'm gone, I'm dead.

24.15 And he said 'we can't carry you' and I said , I know that. Because you couldn't possibly carry anyone in that, really, I said I know that, He said, ' well how are you going to go, I said I'll walk. He said how are you going to walk. I tell you what. When you want to live you walk. I said, get me to the other side of that stream, and I'll stay there.

24.35 We were on a sheer drop to a fast flowing stream which run into the main Euroa creek. And they dropped me other this side of this cliff and I crashed, as all the boys did , landed on all gravel – not gravel, stones – pebbles, yes, fairly reasonable sized pebbles. We landed down on these and.. higher than this, had to drop you down over - at least, 20 feet yes

25.33 I was gone if I'd had any broken bones. And the dropped me down, and they came hurtling down, there was nine of us.

25.52 I had a compass and I gave my compass to George Pierce because, I was no use, I was the only one wounded. And we crossed this creek and they fired a machine gun at us, for nothing.. as we were crossing this river.

26.22 and it was about hip high and very fast. And they didn't hit one, I don't know how but they didn't hit one. And we got to the other side.

26.35 There was one man who had held me after George Peirce had bound me up in a blanket. I never found his name out. I thought he was a Swede or Dane who had jumped ship ,, but that's what I thought. [were you feverish?] I don't know, I don't know. I was very sore, I can hardly.. but he had a stick, like one of the ones we used to go up the trail with, every man had one of those and he held one out to me and I held onto the end of it.

27.28 He was one of the older ones in the team, I thought he was in his 40s. But anyway that's how we got out, out of Ishiwara. .. and I was the biggest liability because I was wounded. .. that's how the group I was with got out, dropping down..

28.27 we wandered round the jungle for about four or six days. We ran into Japanese and we scarpered pretty quickly.. we didn't know where we were but we knew we had to head south and of course that terrible country, we had no food for five or six days. I had one tin of corned or bully beef, and I think that was the only food we had among nine, for six days. We finished up eating bark and grass, off trees.. Never thought of that [the bush food training] We ate all sorts of things, I know I ate grass, bark, some sort of fruit, that had fallen off some sort of tree – but couldn't get your teeth through it, very light on food and hard on the boys. That man who held that stick for me, he was magnificent.

30.29 We followed tracks we found in the jungle and walked all day and came no where.. we didn't know whether the Japanese were in front of us or what.. but George had decided we needed to find our way along this track, quietly

31.05 for 20 minutes or so when all of a sudden a soldier stepped forward, from 2/23rd I think. And he pointed a submachine at us and said Who are you blokes. You're bloody lucky. A patrol has just come in and told us that there's a Japanese patrol about half an hour behind you on the track..

31.55 and we kept going to Kagi, where troops were coming through to take up defensive positions.. they fed us.. doctors dressed my wounds for the first time properly.. they were smelly, they stunk. The leaked and .. stinking like anything. And probably slightly infected but not much apparently.

33.09 It was virtually every man for himself. They were heavily armed. I had my 45 and a grenade, the rest of the boys were heavily armed but had no food, and were tired, and were desperate men and trying to get back to their unit and they were terrific fellas, terrific men. When you got to walk or die, you walk. Its as simple as that.

33.58 it would be impossible for any man, to be carried. Native boys .. would have been impossible.

35.20 Dressed my wounds and gave me something to eat. They made me a stretcher on the spot, the native boys, there were six of them and I was carried back, from there.

PART 4

.40 they wanted to clear the villages as quickly as possible, .. units and companies mixed up trying to find their units, it was a bit chaotic at that time. They had wounded and they wanted to get out of ..

1.55 injections, put in a hut, sleep there, in the morning you'd get a stew or something then pick up and go... try to move you in an ambulance train, as you were. Most of the time I don't recall .. depends on his weight..

2.46 I don't recall any other stretcher, anywhere – but they'd be all spread out but they'd all reach the next village and they'd all come in eventually from late afternoon till after dark, mainly before dark though I got to two villages after dark, I think.. and the same sort of thing, they'd dress you, doctors give you an injection, feed you, cooks in each village and they'd be cooking up for the wounded and also.. the villages were always congested cos of troops going up the line. Native boys taking ammo and food forward, and troops coming back.

04.50 I didn't know Albert was there, I met albert there because he was cooking, making tea and coffee.. and I knew Albert, didn't know him well but we - I met him in Nandina, and he knew who I

was and I told him, he asked me about, asked me about some officers and I told him that they'd both been killed , and I know he was terribly shocked about that, cos he knew these fellows from the Battalion longer than me and he was shocked.

06.00 Nice biscuits. He gave me a coffee and some nice 'Nice' biscuits.