Australian War Memorial

Sound Collection

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

TITLE:	BILL KIRWAN
INTERVIEWEE:	BILL KIRWAN
INTERVIEWER:	SONIA JENNINGS
SUMMARY:	BILL KIRWAN'S EXPERIENCES AS A CHILD IN CHANGI PRISON DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION OF SINGAPORE, WORLD WAR II.
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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: This is Tape No. 1 of an interview with Bill Kirwan, conducted by Sonia Jennings, recorded on 7 February 1996 at the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered on this tape are Bill's remembrances of Changi during the Second World War.

Bill, I was wondering if we could start with just a bit of background about your family, about your parents. Perhaps you could start by just telling me about your father, where he was born and brought up.

Well, my father was born in New Zealand, but the family then came back to Australia. He left school at ten - he was a stockman - and at the age of fourteen he rode with [Kewthorpe]. Lance Kewthorpe had sort of a wild west show at [eastern] - go up and down Tamworth, all the inner parts of country towns in New South Wales. Because he was good with horses and with guns - he was a crack shot - a brother-in-law received an order to send a consignment of horses to Singapore, and they got my father - [Milners Bertie] - to accompany them.

How old was he?

One story is that he was eighteen, the other was that he was twenty. He landed in Malaya with the horses - they asked him to stay because he was a stockman, and would he break them in. These horses were for the racing industry that was starting off there. So he stayed there - he was a young boy with a very minor education, or hardly any education at all - to land in Malaya, and be a specialist in his field, was quite a thing.

Mrs Kirwan: I thought the horses were for the Sultan of Johore, weren't they?

Well, they could be, yes. I thought it was for the horse industry there, the racing industry - but the Sultan was a big instigator in that move.

So he stayed there and he did the only thing he could do; he broke the horses in, and he started a saddlery business - chaff and oats for the horses, bridles and saddles, all that sort of thing. He then, because of his marksmanship, became a government hunter, and he then also worked for the government in getting rid of man-eating tigers that were taking of tapers from the rubber plantations, and also going out as a hunter with the Sultan who was a very close friend of his. And that wasn't bad for a young fellow from the bush.

And after that he became a jockey - he rode. When he got too heavy he became a trainer, so that's basically ...

Mrs Kirwan: And can I just say, when he arrived as a young guy, when he was still training the horses, I thought he was in the Sultan's household - he was befriended by the Sultan of Johore anyway, and he encouraged him to go to night school ...

Yes.

Mrs Kirwan: ... because he'd left school - they lived in Gippsland, in Victoria - and

he'd left school at ten, he was a farm boy. And so he went back to night school and educated himself with the encouragement of the Sultan, and that's where their friendship developed.

Yes. The Sultan was a very keen hunter, he'd been educated in England and had come back, and he and dad just got together because they had common interests.

Mrs Kirwan: I think this is the present sultan's grandfather.

That's right, yes. So he ended up staying there fifty years, he loved the country - he spoke [Boyenese], the River Malay, very well. They used to train their horses, and they'd do a circuit like they do in Australia. They'd start at Singapore and go up to KL, and the next meeting would be at Ipoh, then Pinang, then Alor Star, and then they'd come back, work their way down the peninsula, unless other racing gave them work there. And the racing game was full of Australians, and Kiwis, and British people there too - English people. So he carved out a very, very good life for himself. He ended up with about three or four houses there, big resort house at a place called [Pungu] which is opposite Johore. And he was a very wealthy man for the time.

He married someone else before xxx ...

That's right, yes.

... and he met her then?

Yes, he met an Australian girl, Robina Bachelor, and had two children by her; one of them was Lucy and the other was Pat. His wife died, and he stayed single for a long, long time, and then remarried again, married my mother. And my mother was a Eurasian, and she was Portuguese - English/Portuguese/Malay - which is rather a common mixture. Originally they all sort of congregated around Malacca, which is the actual Portuguese - original Portuguese settlement there. But he then had just one child, myself, and then the war started. So things got pretty hectic then.

We did have - the British Army put in two truck loads of ammunition under our main house in Robinson Road. They also had three ack-ack guns in the front yard, and, of course, there was nothing left of that. After the war there was nothing left of all the - he had twenty-two horses of his own that he owned and trained - every horse had either been eaten or the thoroughbreds sent back to Japan. He had the biggest collection of firearms, and medals, and trophies, and all we got back was an old broken double-barrelled shotgun, that's all that was left. He was really cleaned out after the war. But you know, that's how he'd gone, from one extreme to the other, just through the war, but that's probably a long story.

What was your mother's name?

He name was Gwen - Gwen Eileen. When the war had come, we had actually got as far as the wharf, we were actually on a ship to leave. My father had to stay because he was in the volunteer medical forces, he was an older fellow, not available for military service; so he was in the medical forces and he had to stay. And because he stayed, my mother, who was rather a

stubborn woman, actually got off the boat, and we stayed and we were interned.

And that was the [Vinabrook], that boat?

That was the Vinabrook, yes. One story that I've heard is that it was the Ladybrook, they used to call it - the Vinabrook. That was supposed to have had the Australian nurses on that crossed the bay and got to Sumatra and was torpedoed, and the women got ashore and were machine-gunned. So in one way we can't really complain - it's better to have three and a half years in prison than meet that fate. By a stroke of luck we were very lucky, yes.

Just wondering if you could tell me what your earliest memories are of being in Changi.

Well, I was only three and a half when the war started, and all I can remember in the very first part was the mass of people congregating on what they call the [Pedang] which was the big sports ground in front of the municipal buildings. And that's all I can remember of that part. I do know that we did spend two years in Changi Gaol, and that was a prison that was built for 600 prisoners, and they put 4,000 of the internees, men, women and children, in there. And next-door was the big army barracks, [Salaram] Barracks, which was originally made for about 17,000 troops, and they'd actually put in 80,000 POWs, crammed them into that space. And you could see them from the windows, you could see the barracks from there.

But after a while the Japanese - some bright Jap - worked out that it was safer to have the troublesome POWs in the gaol because the internees were no threat whatsoever. So they did a switch; after two years they took us out and they put us into an all-RAF camp at [Syme Road], and we stayed there for another year and a half. And that was heaven compared to the prison because you could walk around, it had the tin fence and guard posts. I think it's now the Singapore Golf Club. But, you know, the surroundings did change very, very sharply, and even though the conditions were getting worse, the food was getting less, and less, and less, and medicines were hard to get and all that.

Do you remember being ill while you were there?

Oh yes, yes, I did. I remember - there were no medicines there - I cut my knee on a flower pot - I opened up my knee on a flower pot, and they carted me in to what must have been the chapel or something because they put me down in - there was all these religious paintings on the ceiling - and that was the anaesthetic - look at that lovely angel there, and in would go a needle, and so you obviously ... so, of course, I gave them a couple of good yells, like all kids do. But there were people dying there, there were people dying of starvation, people were going mad. There was one woman used to sing every time there was a full moon - she would go off her head. There was one woman who had a lovely taste for toothpaste, if she could get it; she used to spread it on leaves and eat it.

When people died earlier in the war they used to take the coffins out and burry the person, but later on, as wood got scarce, they used to take the coffin out and burry the corpse, and bring the empty coffin back. And the men used to fight to get on the details because when they bought the coffin back they used to have it full of bananas, and medicines, and clothing for the kids. The Japs never used to check the empty coffin coming back. So that was one way of

getting supplies in.

Did you have any contact with your father while you were there?

Well, the men were all in one compound, and boys over thirteen or fourteen, or something like that, and I was, of course, in the women's compound. But I think the men did the cooking, and they used to bring the big barrels of rice in on poles, to the women, and then they used to serve it up there. But if we were very good - there was a park in between, or a neutral land - the commandant used to allow both sides to meet and have sort of a picnic on there. But that was very seldom, you had to be very good.

The Japanese had a funny habit of every time they drove down, they would press the horn of the car, and you would hear this beep, beep, you know, and you, of course, had to turn around and bow. That was the significance of letting you know he was coming.

That's all I can think of at the moment.

You probably remember when the war finished. Do you have any sort of vivid memories of what happened once you were released?

Well, that's what I was leading on to. The Japanese had this method of blowing the horn, and we'd all turn around and face the commandant's office and bow. And on this one particular day I do remember that the horn was blowing, and we thought, oh, it's on again, and we turned around and this time it was an open car, and it had an officer in jungle green with a red beret sitting up high - which we hadn't ever seen before and we knew something was up there, everybody was muttering and whispering, and there was excitement everywhere. And it turned out, he was a paratrooper who'd come in to take over from the commandant - or [Tominaga], who was the commandant. But they still didn't let us out when it all happened because the medical crews came in, but they did take us out to a hotel called 'Sea View', and the army provided one of these army ducks - put all the kids in it and took us for a little cruise around the bay. And when we came back we had our first ice-creams, army style, in little buckets - I'll always remember that - and we had our first coloured movies, or movies, but this was in colour. They are just the things that I remember at the tail-end, you know.

Mrs Kirwan: And you were sick. Your mother said you ate ice-cream and you were sick.

Yeah.

Mrs Kirwan: They hadn't had any dairy food or anything for years.

That's right.

Mrs Kirwan: All the kids then threw up.

(Laughs). But one of the funny things was towards the end of the war, the British planes used to come over from Burma, and they would just fill the skies - the planes would come over and it would look like hundreds to us. And every once in a while a plane would come and they

would drop Red Cross supplies. And the funny thing was, the Japs had a little ack-ack gun and it would just keep firing, and these little puffs of black smoke would be way below the height of these planes. The whole idea was, if a parcel landed in the camp, everyone ran out and hid it, and hid the parachute, because the Jap soldiers used to charge down from the top to confiscate these packages, you see.

Well, one day we were successful. Our hut actually had a large box of Canadian Red Cross supplies to itself, and at night it was opened up and the paper straw, which we'd never seen before, was taken out and we had cigarettes, and strips of ham, and tins of butter - things like that. By the time it was all divvied up amongst the hut members, mum and I got a tin of condensed milk each - that's all we had, a tin of condensed milk each - and for my birthday I sat in a corner, in an area about as big as this ...

Which birthday was this?

Oh, this was my sixth birthday. And I sat in a corner, and mum sat in a corner, and we just got stuck into this condensed milk. And of course, in the tropical heat it was like toffee, it had gone to caramel, and it was lovely - but boy! we were sick, we were crook after that, you know. But that was one of the best birthdays I've ever had.

And the hut that we were in was at the end - our little room was at the end of the hut - and on the wall were paintings by Ronald [Serl] - you know, he was a British soldier and he did caricatures of the [Bells of St Trinians] - those terrible girl's hockey sticks that you used to see - and he had in charcoal, he had beautiful paintings of an English apple orchard, you know, with apples and all that on - apples trees. And on one side he had a sketch of cats they'd eaten - in memory of cats. I think I've seen a similar thing in Russell [Bradon's] 'Naked Ireland', something very similar to that.

What happened to your family after the war? Did you stay xxx?

Well, after the war we had nothing left in Malaya, in Pinang - in Singapore, I beg your pardon - so what we did was, dad decided we had to go or leave the area immediately, so we went up to Pinang where he started his racing business again - he decided to collect horses and trainers, and get back into the racing game. I went to school there.

After a while the war tribunal started, and mum was a key witness, and she had to go back. And she flew back to Singapore a couple of times and gave evidence at the war trials. Her testimony was - the judge commented on the accurate and forceful way her testimony was given, and commended her on her memory. She ended up being one of the principals who got the commandant executed - Tominaga - who was a very, very cruel man.

What actually happened to her?

Well, she was involved ... At one stage there, the Japanese had asked the women to make caps for the soldiers, and kidney belts - which was a very common garment the Japanese soldiers wore - and for that they got an extra handful of rice for the kids - and most women did that, of course. But, of course, my mum was rather a stubborn women in many, many ways - in fact, she told [Trish] a lot more than she told me about that - but she did have - what did she say

about these? - there were a couple of women that ...

Mrs Kirwan: You say it was because she refused to knit.

Right - she was labelled as a trouble-maker.

Mrs Kirwan: But she didn't tell me that. There were a couple of women in the camp who were having affairs with Japanese officers - and she was a very forthright woman when she was young - and she went up to one of them and said, 'You might be having a good time with your little xxx bastard now, but you wait till this is all over, I'll see that you get your comeuppance'. So the next time there was this search on - and they used to search for radios and things all the time - the next time there was a search on they - the next identity parade or what have you - and she was taken off to the guardhouse and bashed up. She said there was one on either side holding her arms, and the fellow in the front started asking questions - and they said to her, 'You are a trouble-maker' - and one behind - the one in front then picked up a baseball bat and he hit her, but she said he didn't aim for her face, he hit her in the breasts, one each side. And when she fell back the fellow - there was one behind her - the two held her and one behind - and the one behind then kicked her forward, and then the one in front would bash her with the baseball bat, and the one behind would kick her again. And that's when she used to say that she had arthritis, thanks to the [Jap's] boot, she used to say.

Mrs Kirwan: But I think they did it till she passed out, but she never said she was raped. You always said that, but she xxx.

I thought she did tell me once that she had - after that they had taken her out and raped her in the guardhouse, just as a show of force.

Mrs Kirwan: But they dragged her around by her hair and things like that. Anyway, I think they just did that till she passed out, but they didn't ... and she was sure it was a retaliation for saying this to these women because they didn't ask her any questions about radios. The civilians had a bad time, like when the [Krate] went up to - you know, that fishing boat that went from Townsville up and bombed a few ships in Singapore Harbour. Your mother said that was a terrible time after that, the Japanese just went berserk and went through the camp and slit all the mattresses, what everybody had, and slit everything open, and pulled out half the walls, and screamed and yelled. And they took out, I think it was thirty-five civilians, off to be tortured by the Kempetai, and I think about fifteen of them died, because they thought that it was hatched in the camp. But it wasn't, it was all done from Townsville and totally independently.

It was a military operation, yes.

Mrs Kirwan: So she thought when she was dragged off to the guardhouse that they were looking for information, but, she said, they didn't question her or anything, and it was just purely to bash her up. And so she decided it was because - although she had made remarks. I think she'd refused to knit the kidney belts and all that, but she

seemed to think it was because she'd made remarks to those British women - who were probably [packing death] about later on.

And were very glad to go back to England right away after the liberation.

Mrs Kirwan: And that was one of the reasons that she gave evidence, because most of the women, of course, were British and they cleared out as fast as they could, and she was one of the locals who stayed. And they, to a certain extent, were worse off because the British Red Cross came in and looked after the British, and shipped the British women out - the Australians weren't terribly well looked after either, so my [Bill's brother said they] ... He said that when he got back after the camp, and got back to Singapore, he fronted up to the Red - there was a British Red Cross - they just said we don't want to know you, find the Australian Red Cross. So the locals, the people who had been there, were really, to a certain extent, worse off, they really just had to fend for themselves.

Mrs Kirwan: And she was determined; I mean, nobody locks my mother-in-law up for three and a half years and thinks they are going to get away with it.

(Laughs)

Mrs Kirwan: And so she - I don't know whether she volunteered, or how it came about ...

No, she would have volunteered.

To give evidence?

Oh, my word.

Mrs Kirwan: So she appeared at the war crimes tribunal - she had a very good memory.

Where was that held?

Mrs Kirwan: In Singapore, in 19 ...

She pulled back a couple of times.

Mrs Kirwan: ... 1946.

'46 or '47, something like that, yeah. There was a slight delay. They seemed to have been two lots of retribution: one was immediately after the war when the prisoners were released - soldiers went around and they identified certain guards, mainly Korean guards they were, they were the real bastards - and those executions took place right away. The Brits put up a ten-man gallows, right outside Changi at that time, and everyone was selling soft drinks and ice-creams, and it was a real fair - and I was a little kid, running along, watching all this happening.

Mrs Kirwan: Cheering.

Yeah.

Mrs Kirwan: You said all the kids sat up and xxx.

And what they did was, whenever they brought a Japanese out who tried to commit harakiri in the wheelchair, and they sat him up and they shot him - in the wheelchair. Then they brought these other fellows out to hang them - and I never knew, but apparently they hang everybody according to weight; a fat man has a short rope and a thin man has a long rope - and the British major got them all back-to-front, and he had the fat man with the long rope. And it wasn't until they pulled the lever and these bodies had dropped that they realised what they'd done. So the British ...

Mrs Kirwan: Didn't your mother say the sandbags were the wrong weight or something?

Something like that.

Mrs Kirwan: With a sandbag on the end xxx.

What happened was that the British major didn't turn a hair; he went to the fat bloke, who nearly had his head pulled off, and said, 'Yes, you're dead' - certified him. By the time he got to the end, the thin fellow, who had the short rope, had strangled to death. Whenever they brought the soldiers out to execute them, every time they ejected a shell, you know, from a .303 - they ejected the empty, spent cartridge, the kids would run in and pick up all these cartridges and sell them at school for ten cents because they had killed a Jap, you see, and they all had a certain status. But that's the atmosphere that was going on at the time; people had suffered so much, especially the Chinese, because the Japanese - while the Malays were sort of neutral and didn't do very much, the actual Chinese really suffered, especially in Singapore because they were linked to the Chinese in China where Japan had been fighting a major war for a great number of years - about six years. So the Chinese really suffered, and they were really celebrating when the time had come, you know.

But [Trish] was talking about the Red Cross and how they helped their own kind. My brother Pat, who was in the Singapore Volunteer Rifles when he was captured, he was sent to Kuching where there was the 'Death Railway' there - they call it 'The Forgotten Railway'. Not much has been written about it because it was small compared to the big Burma one that everyone knows about.

How old was he when the war broke out?

Oh, gosh ... 1913 ... what was that?

Mrs Kirwan: I think he was twenty - he was born in 1913, and this was 1942.

Twenty-nine.

Mrs Kirwan: He was twenty-nine.

Twenty-nine, yes - twenty-nine, thirty, something like that.

Mrs Kirwan: He was actually captured in Java.

Java, yes. And he was taken to Kuching and [one in ten thousand] were taken to Kuching. When they made their selection for the men that had to go to [Santachen], he was too sick to travel; they wouldn't release him, or the doctor wouldn't let him go, so he was very lucky.

Mrs Kirwan: Because he was chosen.

Yes.

Mrs Kirwan: He was one of the ones to go on the march.

He was picked to go, and he actually was one of six hundred out of that ten thousand that came back. He was covered with tropical ulcers, like I have, but he was covered from head to foot; he was just bone and he was covered from head to foot with tropical ulcers - but he survived.

Then he had to find his family. Now, his family, like us, he had a wife and a son, and they actually had to get out by boat - and it was also one of the last boats that had left, but there was a big naval battle and the Japs had actually ... were cutting off the line to Perth. So that convoy was diverted to South Africa. And so his wife and son spent three and a half years in South Africa.

Mrs Kirwan: But they put in at a whole lot of South-East Asian ports first ...

Did they?

Mrs Kirwan: ... and they were pushed back out to sea - yes, xxx told you that - they pushed them back out to sea, they wouldn't have them. The skipped back from Singapore across - no-one would have them. They finished up in Durban, just by default really, they didn't intend to go to Durban, they were going to go anywhere.

Yeah.

Mrs Kirwan: And they finished up, and she spent the war in Durban. And then after he got out he ...

He had no idea of where his wife and children were?

Mrs Kirwan: He didn't know where they were. So finally I think the Australian Red Cross helped him and he finally located them. And it was up to him to get them back, so he hopped, he begged and borrowed, and hitchhiked rides on planes, all the way over to Africa. And he arrived up somewhere in the desert, and he really didn't have

anything to his name - he only had the clothes he was in - the Red Cross had given him a suit or something. And he arrived at a British Army base, somewhere in the desert there, by hitching a ride on service planes. And he laughs because he walked in to a tent and there was a British officer standing there, and he had - I suppose it was an Australian jacket or something on - and the officer stood up, and before he had time to introduce himself, told him off because he wasn't wearing desert rig.

And this is a bloke that spent, you know, three and a half years in a Jap camp.

Mrs Kirwan: He said, 'I'm half dead' - he had TB - and they shipped his ... he was working, when he was captured, before that, he had been working for a tin dredging company up in Java, and he was working for a British firm. And they were very good to him, they paid his fare to Perth and put him in a sanatorium for eighteen months till he was cured of his TB, and then they back-paid him, all pay for all the time he'd been in the camp, and helped him after the war.

Yeah. Then he went back to Malaya because he was in the tin dredging business, and he stayed there for a fair while. But he used to live eighteen months in Perth - sorry, he used to live six months in Perth, and work eighteen months in the jungles, getting the new fields established. And as soon as they were established, Malays would come in and take over the operations, and he'd dismantle the unit and move further in to new fields and establish it. He was always on the go, making new fields. But then he retired and he went to Brisbane, and we found him after thirty-five years, because we thought he was dead - last time I'd seen him was 1951 when we left to come back. And the reason that we came here was because what the British had done after the war, they had forbidden the Communist Party - which was a big part of the anti-Japanese army that was fighting the Japs - it forbade them to take part in the victory parade because at that time the Cold War suddenly started. The minute the war ended, the Cold War was starting. So the communists then went back in to the jungle, they dug up the supplies that the Brits had dropped by parachute for them to fight the Japanese, and started the campaign of terror against the occupying forces. The Emergency then took place, and Australia had troops there, and Britain had troops, and New Zealand had soldiers there too, and it was starting to get bad, you know. About 1948 onwards to about '51.

You were still living there?

In Pinang, we were living in Pinang. They were throwing grenades in theatres, and shooting police on the street and everything. And then I think dad got a bit worried and he sort of said, oh, you know, we mightn't be lucky the second time round, let's go back there. So we left by boat and we came to Brisbane. We stayed there a number of years, then I went up to Darwin - my family followed me up to Darwin. That's where I met Trish and got married, and ended up in Canberra.

Trish was walking in a shop one day at the Gold Coast, where we were holidaying, and picked up this book and said, 'Look, Bill, there's a book on the girl in Changi'. And then she flicked through the pages, and she said, 'Hey, you're in it' - I said, 'Oh, great - ah, ha, ha' - you know, very funny - but there was, and there was a two-line spiel on it. And then we decided to get in touch with Sheila. It was very nice talking to her, it was much nicer meeting her in person, she's a lovely person. That's how we are here.

Mrs Kirwan: And, [Lisa] your older sister?

Lucy?

Oh, Lucy. Lucy died and left a husband and two girls.

Mrs Kirwan: She died in 1938.

Where were they living?

Mrs Kirwan: They were living in Singapore.

They were living in Singapore. And when the war started - this is the only information I've got at the moment - is that the husband ...

Mrs Kirwan: He was an Australian.

He was an Australian fellow called Edwards - he had two little girls, and he had to get them out of Singapore, and he actually left in an open boat with his two little girls and made his way all the way down to Perth in this open boat. I've contacted Lucy, my niece, and asked her to give us details of the story - and she has an aunt that's still alive, and she's going to pump her brains to get all the details off her there. So that should be a very interesting story, it was a remarkable trip.

Mrs Kirwan: All they had was a singlet on.

Singlet on.

Mrs Kirwan: But he went straight in to the Perth office and identified himself and said, 'I've just got here', and they put him in the RAAF and sent him straight back to Malaya (laughs). Don't we need every man we can get?

That's what he wanted, I'm sure.

Mrs Kirwan: And these two girls, well, they stayed in ...

They were put into a convent.

Mrs Kirwan: They were put into a convent in Perth and they grew up there.

They grew up there - and they were so surprised when they found us because we'd been scattered all over the place, the Kirwans xxx, so it was nice. All of a sudden we had relatives we hadn't even heard of for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years, then suddenly we've got all these relatives that we didn't know we had.

Did your father carry on with his horse business?

No, no, he was an old man, his health had gone after the war.

He was retired.

He tried horse racing again, and that didn't work because things had changed in Malaya, it was no longer the gentleman's sport, and he was a man who wouldn't change; he'd been brought up in a particular era where your word was your bond, and things like that, and he found the racing game had changed to the extent where they were doping horses, and pulling horses, and everyone was doing it. And he was losing his horses, the trainers were giving them to the men who would do these things, as he saw. The Communist Emergency was bad, and I think it was an accumulation of getting the boys back to Australia, that was the big thing, so that they wouldn't have to go through another war - perhaps if another war came.

Mrs Kirwan: His health wasn't good.

He wasn't well, and he came, he retired, and we had a place in Brisbane. Then I got a job with the Lands Branch in Darwin and we went up to Darwin, and it was just a matter of about three months and I got accommodation and everything, and they came up and joined me up there - because the weather was kinder to us in Darwin, having been in Malaya most of our lives, than it was in Brisbane. We actually froze in Brisbane, it gives you an idea of the comparison.

Mrs Kirwan: And then Bill's father died.

He died in Darwin - then I met Trish. My mum was a very restless person and she went all over the place; she went to New Guinea, and Fiji, and Atherton Tablelands, and she really went walkabout ...

Mrs Kirwan: She really didn't like Australia and she couldn't settle, that was really ... and she couldn't adjust. I think it's like a lot of those women who grew up in that area.

You know, we had servants galore over there and we were quite wealthy there, and we had amahs, and cars, and that sort of thing, and after the war when we virtually had nothing, and having to start again, and my father was too old - he was very, very old and very sick. She was very, very restless, she couldn't accept anything. She went back to Malaya - she always talked about Malaya, under the British, of course - but she knew in her heart it wasn't the same, because we told her - we'd been back a number of times - and we told her it's all changed, it's run by the Malays and things are just not the same. So she finally went back, and she went back for three months officially, and she was back in two weeks and not a word was said - very sad when people know, they actually see for themselves something they already knew. But if she'd done it earlier, she might have been a happier person.

Mrs Kirwan: I think she would have settled down here better, but she was ... yes, she couldn't accept the Australian egalitarianism; she'd been somebody who'd been used to being deferred to ...

Yeah.

Mrs Kirwan: ... and she still expected a level of that, which in Australia you do not get.

People do not bow to you in the shops and ...

Even after her experience in Changi?

Oh yeah.

Mrs Kirwan: No.

But that was only one small little interlude of three and a half years; you are talking about a generation - a style, a way of life, that still exists in some parts, even today - not so much in Malaya, now - but in other parts of the world, colonies where people have benefited from the fact that they are the ruling class - you know what I mean? She came out to Australia, she did the best she could - she couldn't cook, she had never cooked in her life, she had never looked after a family in her life - I mean, we were fairly poor after the war, but we still had two amahs - we had one amah to do the house and cooking, and one amah to look after my younger brother who was born in Pinang. You know, she came out to Australia and she had to do the washing - she'd never washed clothes in her life - she hadn't cooked, she hadn't made beds - it was a hell of a shock.

Mrs Kirwan: She didn't like Australia; she said women in Australia worked too hard. She thought it was a lousy country actually and she wasn't all that fond of Australians either. So it was, for my part, a rather difficult relationship.

(Laughs)

Mrs Kirwan: But anyway - I mean, she died the way she ... she didn't really ever give in.

No, she never gave in.

Mrs Kirwan: But she was very, very hurt when she - just not long, about two years before she died - when she went back to Malaysia, she wanted to go back to live and she sold everything she had here, and so forth. And she was going to draw the Australian pension and live over there, and the Malaysians didn't want her. They said as far as they were concerned, she'd been here so long she was Australian, and that really ... I think that was the end. Everything you'd sort of believed in, that it was always better. Even though she was Eurasian, she was still terribly, terribly British, and my friends would say things like, 'Oh, Trish told me you used to live in Malaysia', or something, and she'd say, 'I was born in the British Crown Colony of Singapore' (laughs).

So it was always British Malaya, not Malaya - it was British Malaya.

Mrs Kirwan: And if somebody sort of said anything was ... anything was ever mentioned about nationality, she'd always say, 'I'm British', and I used to think, British what? There's British Canadian, British African, but ... But even so, I mean, she spoke about when they were leaving Singapore, when they were trying to get on the ships, and the wharfs were all crowded and everything was a mess. She said there were

British officers knocking women and children in the water to get onto the boats to get away. She wasn't impressed about very much she saw.

There were two kinds; there were those that had panicked and everything, and on the other hand, there were the others who just calmly waited, playing cards, waiting for the time. You know, you get this mixture in all wars; you'll get the people who are in full control, and those that just panic - in any army, in any army. The Gordon Highlanders were a group that really suffered badly because they were virtually wiped out when the campaign had started. Of course, the Australians had just got off the ship, virtually, a lot of them unarmed and were diverted to that area because they were really going to the Middle East, to Egypt. So it was quite a shock for them. They still acquitted themselves very well. But, you know, they suffered greatly on the railways. What people forget is, there were a lot of local Singaporeans and Malaysians - British Singaporeans and Malaysians - who were in the forces - in the reserve forces, in the Volunteer Rifles, and that sort of thing - who were also interned because they were classified as soldiers, you see, which they were. But they also suffered, and they had no Red Cross to look after them, as Trish was saying, and all that.

The Japanese took the whole of Malaya, fighting in six weeks, fighting an army that was two to three times as large. When the British reoccupied that place, it took them six months to occupy from Singapore up to Alor Star, to take over a country that had surrendered, that was actually in the hands of the communists - they were the law-enforcers because the Japs were moved in to certain areas to protect themselves, until the British could get there, to hand over command. But in the mean time, the communists came down from the hills, they worked out who had been collaborating with the Japs, and they got their eye for an eye from that lot. And then the British would not let them take part in the Victory Parade, so they went back into the jungle, they started the war again - they didn't know anything else, any difference. So that was very bad policy on the Brits, they had a lot to answer for that.

Did you consider yourself Australian?

Oh yes, yes, I did because I'd heard my dad talking; in fact, I had a nickname called 'Winkie'. I never even knew what Bill was, what my name was - I knew my name was William - but I was in the theatre one day, next to two Aussies, and they just said, 'What's your name?', and I said, 'Oh, I'm William', and they said, 'Oh, that's Bill in Australia'. And that was it, that's the first time I'd heard the name and I grabbed it because I really thought it was a great name, but it had to take two Australians to tell me (laughs) what the nickname was - you know, for William.

Yes, I always did.

You always felt Australian, did you?

Yeah, I always did - because it was different, there were so many Poms, and Welsh, and Irish there - I always wanted to be different, didn't I - and there were very few Aussies there by comparison.

Dad used to tell me about the animals and all that, even though I'd never physically been there - and he used to tell me of his life as a stockman. He didn't talk very much, which is quite a

usual thing for that era, especially someone who's married twice, but what little he did tell me was about Australia - but he had left many, many years ago. And when we got off the boat here, he got a hell of a shock because he said when he left you could buy a four-square meal for four pence, and we got to Brisbane and the local paper four pence, for the local paper. He looked at that and he said, 'Oh, my God!', and that's when it hit him that what little money he had wasn't going to be sufficient - yeah. He was going to buy a property, go back to the land, and that sort of thing; of course, he couldn't do that, we had no money, our money was worthless. All our houses had been destroyed by the Japanese, our horses had either been eaten or removed, all his weapons and trophies and all that had gone, his health was gone.

> Mrs Kirwan: Also they fought for years to get compensation. They took the home that they had, over the water, that you used to go to by boat, that they kept for entertainment ...

[Pungu], yeah.

> Mrs Kirwan: ... the British took it as officers' quarters, they put the machine-guns in the front yard of the other one so it was blown to smithereens - I don't know what happened to the other one. But your mum fought for years for compensation - I think she got £500 or something.

Yeah - we got 800 ...

> Compensation from where?

> Mrs Kirwan: From the British.

From the British, for loss of four houses, including one on the water, motorboats, horses, everything else - personal belongings and everything - for three and a half years internment. I think each adult got £400, that was all they'd give them. So that was just one of those things ... because we were locals there, and that was our home at that time, you see, and it was all gone. When we came back here we had nothing. That, of course, didn't endear Australia to mum, but dad's principal thought was to get his two sons back into Australia.

> Back to Australia because it was peaceful.

Right.

> How old were you when you came back to Australia?

I was thirteen - thirteen, yeah. I had my thirteenth birthday xxx xxx, in a months time. Then I completed my education in Brisbane - I was drafting, and I got a job in Darwin, which was great. And I went up to Darwin, and the family followed me up there, and eventually I met Trish there, and we were married there, we went to Timor for our honeymoon, which was 'overseas' - that's all we could afford. But it was interesting, even Timor, because in those days, as we walked down the street, or as we drove past, a lot of these little fellows would snap to attention and salute, you know, because ...

Mrs Kirwan: They'd bow.

... because they'd helped the Australians during the war, and all that; they'd helped all the commandoes in the independent companies that were there.

Mrs Kirwan: Poor little Timorese: we went past the governor - there were no vehicles, we stayed in a [Akow], and the only people who had a Jeep were the army - the Portuguese Army was still there - and the governor, and the governor sent his Jeep down, and his driver, to take us to the beach - remember? I said to Bill - I'd never seen people bow before ...

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Mrs Kirwan: ... and the Jeep would pass people and they'd stand on the side of the road and bow. I said, 'What are they doing?' - I don't like people bowing - and he said they are bowing, and then Bill's comment was, 'Once the Japs teach you to bow, you never forget'. But they were bowing because it was people going past in a Jeep - I mean, just us, I couldn't believe it - this is 1965. Timor was very peaceful then.

It's very sad to think what we've done, or haven't done, for them, since then. I think we have a lot to answer for.

Yeah. If you think of anything else, say, but I think we can stop there.

I can't think of ...

Mrs Kirwan: Bill did tell us that as a child in Changi, his main job was making frog traps - wasn't it?

Yeah, frog traps.

Mrs Kirwan: He used to catch frogs for people to eat.

We used to get those little rat traps, you know, that used to catch them alive; they used to have a lid and a bate, and as they took the bate the lid would come - made out of chicken wire. And the women used to - there used to be a big hunt to get all the snails they could get; as soon as there was a bit of moisture on the garden, everyone would be out snail hunting and frog hunting. The whole idea with the traps was to catch something a bit better, you know - cats probably (laughs). Everyone was constantly looking for food. Sheila tells me that there was a lady that was - the Red Cross representative - and allowed out. I can never remember anyone mentioning that somebody was actually allowed out; it was only when somebody was buried that the men went out there and bartered, and got stuff in the coffin and brought it back in again - that I can remember, or that xxx said.

Mrs Kirwan: She used to collect worms; they used to collect worms, and frogs, and rats - mostly eat them raw.

I remember once, at the queue there, we had this big screen, and this woman went running down saying, 'I've got a piece of meat, I've got a piece of meat, out of the stew' - on a fork - and it was just some harmless frog that had hopped in. She hadn't known it until they had a good look at it, and then, you know, and realised it was a frog.

Mrs Kirwan: She'd eat it anyway.

But that's all I can think of (laughs).

That's great.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW

2/96