



# **Australian War Memorial**

## **Sound Collection**

### **ORAL HISTORY RECORDING**

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**INTERVIEWEE:** Graham Spinkston

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This is Tape One of three tapes of an interview with Graham Spinkston conducted by Gary McKay for Delta Four - Australian Infantrymen at War. Recorded on the 13th of November 1993 in Canberra, the A.C.T. The topics covered on this tape are training for war, relationships, people, the jobs and National Service.

Why did you join the Army?

When I was at University I joined the Army Reserve predominantly because I needed the money, and I spent two years in the University Regiment and that got me interested. In fact the second year at Uni, after failing the first year, I had already decided that I wanted to join the Regular Army but my parents wouldn't let me and made me go back and try again, and at the end of the second year they agreed. At that stage you had to have your parents' permission until you were 21. So the Army Reserve got me interested and from then on I couldn't get in quick enough.

But Vietnam was really getting to it's hype then in '68 - you would have been fairly aware having been at University that the Vietnam War was on. Did that not put you off at all?

No. In fact we used to, I don't know why we did it but we always used to, wear our uniform to the University on parade days.

Big move!

Yes, but they never gave us a hard time. This was '66/'67 and the demonstrations really didn't start until just after that. By the time I had gone to Portsea I think they were just starting to get serious.

This was in Adelaide?

Yes.

So, South Australia wouldn't have really been the hot-bed of radical thought then - it was probably more conservative I suppose.

Yes, pretty well. The then Premier of South Australia, Lyn Arnold, in fact led and organised some of the marches. I didn't realise that at the time.

Did this Army Reserve training that you did, did that give you the desire to go into infantry?

Certainly. Because the University Regiment was predominantly an infantry battalion and in those days of National Service it was 500-600 strong, so we trained as infantrymen.

Can you remember if you had any special thoughts about Vietnam at the time?

Not really. We were always interested, and most of the cadre staff on the Army Reserve Unit, had been to Vietnam. The RSM was a guy named Ray Baldwin who had started with World War

II service and had been to Vietnam and he was at the end of his career and he certainly influenced me. I think he probably influenced me to join the Regular Army more than anyone else.

Did you apply direct to go to Portsea?

Yes.

How old were you when you went there?

Just turned 20.

What are your recollections of Portsea?

Well, I have been back quite a few times over the years, so I guess they are coloured a bit. I enjoyed it. It was always hard work from the beginning and there was always a degree of uncertainty about who was going to graduate, you would be aware of that from Scheyville. So you were always on your toes, but I guess I was lucky that I was never fronted to anyone to explain my actions, so I always thought I would probably graduate and I think my two years in the Reserve certainly helped me - it made the transition a lot easier than for some people.

Recollections of training as a cadet?

The thing I remember most is non-stop. We would get up at six o'clock in the morning and you rushed from then until 10 o'clock at night. Constant change from parade dress in the morning to field order to PT gear, back into classroom activities, then to PT gear again. We just never stopped.

Was the emphasis that you would be going to Vietnam?

Yes. Everybody who was there really expected that would be the ultimate destination. Again, most of the staff had all come back from Vietnam recently. In fact, (Captain P.J.) Peter Schuman was one of my instructors.

Do you think that this basic grounding that you had as a 'could be' platoon commander was relevant, and secondly was it tough enough for you considering what you then had to face?

I think it was relevant and I think it was probably tough enough except that we didn't have the time to do or practice all the things that we would like to, and I think as it was a year's course things were a bit rushed. We did everything, but we probably didn't do enough of it, and I wouldn't have liked to have gone to Vietnam at the end of graduation. I certainly didn't know enough then to go.

I wonder how the Scheyville guys felt then?

There were people who went pretty well after graduation. (Lieutenant S.V.L.) Simon Willis and (Lieutenant P. A. O'Brien) 'Obie' from RMC.

So where did you go after graduation?

To Singleton. In fact I arrived at Singleton about a week before you left but you were too busy packing up. I went to Singleton and did two intakes of National Service recruits.

Did you find that was handy?

Yes.

Sort of gave you a sort of a bedding in period.

Yes. There was very little infantry in that sense. It was just basic training but it taught me a lot of things I needed to know - how to relate to my NCOs because they again were all ex-Vietnam veterans, about half of them were National Servicemen. Corporal National Servicemen that had come back over the last few months, so I learnt a lot there. I had a very difficult company commander who in many ways prepared me for the one I was about to get, so I learnt a lot there.

Wasn't (Major) Peter Young was it?

No. Adrian.. (ed. Major Nesbitt) can't remember his name now - I will think of it later.

After this period of work at Singleton as a platoon commander training Nashos and IETs?

No, just recruits. I did two platoons and then got a posting to 4 RAR.

Before you arrived to your first posting in the Regiment, did you think that Graham Spinkston was on the way to being prepared? Were you feeling more comfortable?

Yes. I suppose I was because I had got over the initial shock of graduation and actually being faced with a platoon because two platoons of sixty National Servicemen were a challenge. Just to see them change from when they marched in to three weeks later - you barely recognised them. You learnt how to train soldiers and what you could do with them. I still had a lot to learn about infantry skills, about commanding a platoon in infantry minor tactics, but I learned a lot about being an officer by that stage and that made it a lot easier to go to the Battalion.

You marched into 4 RAR - what job were you given?

Well initially I was posted to Delta Company but at that stage Delta Company consisted of Company Headquarters and a few soldiers so I was sent on a Mortar Officer Course with (Lieutenant G.D.) Gary Bryant and when I came back I was posted into the Ack Adjt (Assistant Adjutant's) job which I did for about 10 months.

You weren't getting much 'hands-on' with soldiers then were you?

No. None. I was again learning a lot of things about the Army and about people but I wasn't getting any hands-on infantry training.

When did you finally get to have your hands on a platoon?

When the Battalion went to Canungra, the rifle companies went and then Administration Company became an infantry company for the purposes of Canungra, and I commanded one of those platoons.

So when did you actually get 12 (Platoon)?

When we got back from Canungra. I am not sure how it happened but I guess the CO decided that (Lieutenant R.L.J.) 'Robby' Martin would make a better Assistant Adjutant and I would make a better platoon commander. I am not sure exactly what happened but that was when we changed places, and I took over straight after Christmas.

So this was a really late time to join the platoon before going to war wasn't it?

Yes. I really only had five months with the platoon. But I didn't see that as a problem because I had done other things. I had done my Mortar Course and I had been through Canungra, albeit with a composite platoon. I had done everything the rifle platoons had done but I hadn't done them with my platoon if you like.

It must have been an advantage with you as a platoon commander having done the Mortar Course?

Yes, it was. It was a big advantage.

Did you often carry an FO Ack or MFC?

We mostly had one, but I knew what he was doing and I didn't have to check or ask him for things.

If we can just go back to Canungra - what are your recollections of Canungra?

It was hard. Again it was in many respects a lot like Portsea. It was physically hard. I learnt a lot there but I found, as I have always found about Canungra, that the staff, if you like, considered themselves to be the experts and wouldn't listen to alternatives, and I had a bit of difficulty with that, but the standard of instruction was good and the exercises we did and the training we did I think was critical to our preparation.

I mean everyone used to talk about Canungra in revered tones suppose - what do you think makes Canungra special, or made it special then?

I think it was the training package they had that everybody did. It covered everything, well not everything but most of the things that we needed to know. It was a common standard if you like that everybody had to pass, and it was really the first, or for me it was the first time, I had operated in jungle or had done any training in jungle. Certainly there was no jungle in Singleton - there was a lot of thick scrub but no jungle, so that was my first experience with jungle so it was the difficulties of navigating in jungle and those sorts of things which were things that I

needed to do.

What about the idea of (Major J.H.) Jerry Taylor's of putting Admin (Company) through as a Rifle company?

I think that was a great idea. A lot of those guys had been riflemen before anyway, probably a lot of them on a previous tour, but it gave them an understanding of what the rifle companies were doing and it gave them a degree of credibility because they could say they had done the same. For example, the guys in the Band. I had one of my sections from the Band, and (Warrant Officer Class Two D.A.) Doug Thorenson was a section commander as a warrant officer - a piper with really very little military experience was just so keen to do well. He did a good job and he was a good section commander in what was basically an infantry platoon. There were some quite surprising results out of that.

So, when did you really get to know the men in 12 Platoon?

Not until after I joined the platoon.

When we did all those exercises at High Range, Mount Spec?

Yes. And the final one at Mount Stuart. I knew some of them. I knew Captain P.J.) Peter Schuman from Portsea, I knew (Second Lieutenant K.M.) Kevin Byrne from Portsea because he was in my junior class; I knew you. Certainly I knew nothing of (Major F.J.) Franz Kudnig because I hadn't had any exposure to him at that stage. I knew a few of the soldiers.

By the time you had finished the exercise at Mount Stuart, a cordon and search, did you think that you were well prepared for Vietnam?

Yes. I don't know that I did then necessarily because it was still something new, but in retrospect I think we were. I think the battalion had gone through quite an extensive training period and I seem to recall from when I went to the Delta Company we didn't stop training. Everyday we were doing something. There was a fairly extensive build-up. I am not sure that the final site for the exercise was as good as it could have been. I think we probably should have gone to Shoalwater Bay, but it was underwater. I still was happy with what we had done and that exercise, talking with umpires and others, I think we did a pretty fair job.

When (Lieutenant Colonel J.C.) Jim Hughes and the Operations Officer and all those guys were planning that training, what do you think the aim of their training was for us?

Well, I think they were trying to do two things. I think they were firstly making sure that everybody, but I guess the Rifle company in particular and Support Company, could do their job under what they expected to be the conditions that would face, and in many respects they probably worked us harder than they needed to. And I am sure they were looking at people to make sure that they, and in particular the officers, could hack it.

Well, you had already been attested to that hadn't you? You and (Lt R.L.) Rob Martin.

Yes. That was the sorting process, and there were a number of officers who had gone to 4 RAR, in fact guys from my class at Portsea that had gone to 4 RAR, who never went to Vietnam and who were posted out. So that was a sorting process that the CO was going through. He was training the battalion but also training his officers.

And also taking out the dead wood?

Yes.

What would you do, with the benefit of hindsight which always gives us clear vision, to better train for fighting in the jungle or do you think we covered all the bases?

I think we didn't probably spend enough time in the jungle. Canungra first and then Mount Spec were the only two areas of jungle we operated in and I think now that we have Tully we could have spent more time in the jungle. I think we probably didn't spend enough time in one hit. Exercises tended to be 10 days including one day getting there and one day getting back. I think we needed to spend three weeks solid in the jungle and get used to being tired, dirty and under the pressure that we had on operations; whereas you knew that you were there for 10 days and you could pace yourself for that and with a couple of days to go, you knew that the exercise was nearly over and there was a battalion attack or a cordon and search coming up and when that was finished, we were all going home. I think that was the difference.

(Corporal W.W.) Warren Dowell said to me that he thought that if he was training for war again he would take his organisation out of Australia for three months in that build-up period, right away and in a training environment like Malaya and run them through. What do you think about that idea?

It's a good idea. In fact I went, from coming home from 4 (RAR) to Singapore with 6 (RAR). I joined 6 RAR in Singapore and we had a lot of good exercises in the Malaysian jungle which, had it been acceptable and I expect it probably wouldn't have been at the time, would have been a better place to finish our training before going to Vietnam. I think it would have acclimatised us better although Townsville was hot and we did most of our training for Vietnam during the wet season, the morning I got off the plane in Saigon it was hotter and more humid than I had experienced except for a few bad days in Townsville.

When you look back on your training for war, and then you got to Vietnam, was there anything that really surprised you that you hadn't been prepared for?

Only the thing that I mentioned earlier. I think our training was good and all those things - we were ready for it in that respect - but I don't think we had the length of training in one hit that we got on operations. As you will remember, the first operation was six weeks and that was a long drag and at the end of that the whole company, I think, was just about stuffed.

Especially if you don't have a contact.

Not a particularly happy time as it turned out.

You mentioned getting off the plane - you flew to Vietnam?

Yes.

On the Advance Party?

(Captain P.J.) Peter Schuman and I and the section 2ICs. I am not sure of (Staff Sergeant R.J.) Bob Hann, but about ten of us went across on the Advance Party.

So you went out of Townsville to Singapore?

Townsville/Darwin/Singapore.

Did the dreaded change into the white shirt?

Yes.

Then you hit Tan Son Nhut? How did you get from Tan Son Nhut - where did you go from there?

Straight to Nui Dat on a Caribou. I in fact missed the plane.

Is that right?

It was a regular shuttle service to Nui Dat - on that particular day anyway, and we were all sitting around amongst the crowd at Tan Son Nhut which is quite crowded and seemed relatively disorganised because there were people going everywhere, and I don't know how it happened but when my group got loaded on the Caribou, I was somewhere looking around and when I got back they had gone. I got there about two hours after the rest of them. It wasn't a real good start.

Where there any special circumstances you remember from that deployment from the time you left Townsville?

Only the ridiculous charade in Singapore where we were allowed out of the aircraft and into the terminal where we still were in our uniform and still had our polyester trousers on but had a civilian shirt. It don't know why we bothered - everyone knew who we were.

What was it like on the 707- did you go on the 707?

Yes.

What was it like on that plane on the way up?

I am not sure I can really remember too much - we left at night and there was a degree of anticipation from everybody because we had prepared for this and we knew what we were going to do so I think everybody thought they were off on a big adventure in many respects because

whilst in the Advance Party there were a number that had been before there were a whole lot who hadn't. The crew made us feel good. We got a beer and they looked after us and made us feel as though we were doing a job, anyway. I think anticipation - let's get there and get on with it.

That was the feeling you felt?

Yes.

What was your wife's reaction to you going?

Again, I was trying to think about that. I think it was just a job that I was in the Army when we got married and she knew what I was going to do and we had known I was going to Vietnam for quite some time, or that it was inevitable once I went to 4 RAR, so it was just my job and I was part of the battalion and I was going. I don't have any other recollections other than that was what I had been going to do for some time.

No great dramas about it?

No. It just happened. She went home to Adelaide and lived with her parents. I got on the plane to Vietnam and she went back to the motel and next day got in the car and drove to Adelaide.

When you lobbed in to Nui Dat what was your first impression when you looked around there?

Because I was running late I had to find everybody. It was big and it didn't really strike me as what I had expected. It was just a big area with lots of trees. I always thought it was going to be sort of a fortified camp if you like and I thought it was fairly slack. And again in a degree of disrepair. Because as I learned later, with the battalions always out, things were a bit run down. It was a lot bigger than I thought it would be.

What did you spend your time doing between the time you arrived late at Nui Dat and when your platoon arrived from the boat?

We did the normal in-country briefings about safety and things like that. I went to A Company 2 RAR which was the lines we took over. I went on operations with them for about four days and I went with 3 Platoon; (Second Lieutenant T.J.) Terry Petrie's platoon, so that gave me a look at the country and a chance to acclimatise. We did a lot of preparation for the company to arrive in the sense finding out how things worked. We also did a lot of painting - we changed the colour from yellow to red! The day we did that we were all stripped off and painted the soldiers' boozers which was in those days bright yellow and we just painted it all red. We went through the lines and did some cleaning up in preparation for the battalion arrival. So it was just looking around and getting a feel for the place. (Captain P.J.) Peter Schuman got the administration squared away and had that all ready, as he always did.

What was your impression of the 2 RAR platoon that you went with?

I didn't think they were as good as we were.

But that is not a biased view?

Of course it is. But I guess, again, when I saw them they were right at the end of the tour and they knew that the operation they were on was their last operation.

Search and evade.

Yes.

So, it is probably a bit unfair to ask for that comparison isn't it?

Yes it is. The four days operation we didn't see any sign and I didn't see anybody. It wasn't close to Nui Dat - it was quite some distance away.

Do you think it is a good idea - going out with another platoon commander?

Yes, I thought it was a good idea because it gave me a little bit of a feel for what the country was like and just in and out of helicopters and things. Whilst we had done it back in Australia it was different. Yes it was good.

I would like to move now to the next part which is National Servicemen, and you mentioned before that a fair percentage of your platoon were National Servicemen, about half. What did you think about having National Servicemen under your command?

I was happy to have them. I had spent two intakes training them at Singleton and I had a lot of respect for them, and as far as I was concerned they weren't any different from the Regular soldiers.

A general question - do you think National Service was good or bad for the Army, and if so why?

I think it was probably good. It was done for a purpose, no doubt about that, to boost the numbers to go to Vietnam, but I think it introduced some new blood. I think National Servicemen were on average a little bit smarter and in fact some were a quite a bit smarter and would not normally have joined the Army so they I just think raised the standard a little bit across the board. Out of all my National Servicemen there might have been a few that really didn't want to be there, but it was never obvious. I probably had one that gave the platoon a little bit of trouble because he really wasn't all that interested, but the rest of them were always...

There was no bitching en masse. There was only the odd exception.

Yes. And that was probably a guy that would have bitched no matter what he was doing, it was just in his nature. You couldn't tell them apart on a par and I think they did the Army a hell of a lot of good. I am sure it did them a lot of good.

Many guys that I have asked have said that it was one of the watersheds of their life and they always look back on it with some pride.

Just running into them now, when you see them now.

What did you think of National Service officers?

I think by the time we were ready to go to Vietnam there was no difference, particularly amongst the Arms guys. They might have had a little less time in training but that was all picked up in the preparation for Vietnam so I don't think there was any difference. Again, I don't think you could tell the difference. I think you could tell between OCS and Scheyville as opposed to RMC and I still think there was a different culture there which probably has disappeared now, but in those days you could tell who the RMC graduates were. Not only the fact that they were lieutenants as opposed to second lieutenants, but they had a different attitude towards things. But I think the Scheyville and OCS graduates were very much similar in philosophy on what they were doing.

You obviously found yourself getting on with them?

Yes.

Did you have any National Servicemen as section commanders or 2ICs?

I had one section commander who didn't stay all that long because he was almost at the end of the tour and that was (Corporal M.P.) 'Harry' Duggan. He was a bloody good section commander and we missed him because not only was he a good section commander, but he had an incredible sense of humour and he kept the platoon entertained and I felt pity that he left and we couldn't get him to stay. Most of the section 2ICs, certainly two out of three at any one time, were National Servicemen. (Lance Corporal L.T.) Len Dickman was a particularly good one as was (Corporal P.L.) Peter Foley who prior to going to Vietnam had been my platoon sig. A vacancy came up and we promoted him to Lance Corporal as a section 2IC. He was particularly good.

They were also a little bit older weren't they from the rest of the Regular Diggers who were about 18 or 19, and they were usually 20 or 21.

A lot of the Regular Diggers just scraped in. They had made the 19 year cut-off and in cases by only a few days. The National Servicemen were good. The ones we took to Vietnam had been in the Army, generally speaking, over a year, and in many cases 18 months, so they were nearing the end of their tour, their National Service obligation.

I always think that is something we could have done better where we could of taken in a batch that would have got a full tour of duty with us and we didn't have reinforcement problems.

I agree. They were particularly good, and whilst we continued to get some very good ones they hadn't been through the same things, and whilst it was never a problem like the Americans had with their reinforcement system, it took them a while to settle in and they had to earn the respect of the rest of the platoon and that took them weeks.

It was still disruptive at a time when you really don't want that.

Yes.

If I could go on now to the people and the jobs - I am going to ask a very obvious question here. I know you were a platoon commander but I want you to read into this a lot more if you can. What was your job in the platoon - what did you see your job as being?

I think there was a whole lot of things. I had to make sure the platoon did what it was required to do in the sense to carry out the instructions of the company commander. I think one of my roles was to keep the platoon informed of what was going on so that they knew what they were doing and why. I certainly was responsible for their welfare to make sure that they were getting fed properly and had everything they needed as best we could. I was responsible for their standard in the way they operated because it would have been very easy to say 'let's have a nice easy day today', but once you drop your standards people start to get killed, and that was something I saw I had to do along with the platoon sergeant. Ultimately I think it was to keep them all alive - we were there to do a job but we would like to do it with as few casualties as possible.

What do you think is the hardest part of being a platoon commander on operations?

I think maintaining the standards on long operations, because right up to the very last day of an operation you have got to keep on to them because you only need to make one mistake and you can lose people.

What sort of things would you and your sergeant be looking for to keep that standard going? What were the sort of things that you were kicking arse for?

Little things. People not putting out sentries or section commanders not always doing it - sometimes they would say that they could see further than a sentry can so there was no point in having one out. People not paying attention on gun pickets; cooking and eating while they were on gun picket. Those sort of things - little things that if you do it once and think you can continue to do it. That is when the standard slips.

All the things you mentioned there really come down to the genre of security, don't they?

Yes.

So, security on the move, security at the halt? Personal security; those things.

Making sure they maintain their personal standards if you like. You had to keep doing that all the time. You can't say 'I will do it every couple of days' and it will be right - you had to do it every day.

You have 30 odd men in your platoon, if they all turn up and are all fit. How many do you reckon as a platoon commander really work closely with?

The platoon sergeant. No doubt about that - everything you did he had to know what was going on and you had to work very close with him. section commanders. Again, they probably were the people you dealt with on an operational sense more than the platoon sergeant. He kept the platoon going administratively and was your understudy, but the section commanders are the ones that actually did the work. The platoon sig - if you didn't have a good platoon sig who could listen to things and pick out those things you needed to know and make sure you got them you were in big trouble. I reckon I always had good platoon sigs, initially with guys like (Corporal P.L.) Peter Foley. They were always National Servicemen incidentally, my platoon sigs. The MFC or the FO Ack, whichever one of those was with us, you were always talking to him. So I guess they are the closest ones.

Did you go through any special sort of selection for your sig - I mean was he a likely contender for section 2IC or that sort of thing?

Yes. I always tried to cycle the people I thought were going to make good section commanders through platoon headquarters because it gave them an understanding of what happened and.... from radios and dealing with Company Headquarters, working with the MFC.

What did you reckon was the most important part about your job in all of this?

I go back to what I said before - I think maintaining the standard and keeping on top of what was going on around the platoon.

Did you like your job?

I loved it.

Why? There is a lot of responsibility for a 21 year old man.

Yes, it was, but even since, well not immediately since I joined the Reserve, but no long after I joined I decided that's what I wanted to do. Prior to joining the Reserve I had no interest in the Army at all strangely enough. I thought the cadets were a complete waste of time, and the unit school I went to had quite a good cadet unit but I had little time for them, so it was quite a change for me. But once I joined the Reserve and got to work with people I always wanted to be a platoon commander. I never had any doubts that I wanted to be an infantry platoon commander. As soon as I went to Portsea that is what I wanted to graduate as, and I would have been quite devastated if I hadn't got my first choice.

Was there a lot of pride in getting Infantry at OCS?

Yes. The only other corps probably that was very sought after was Armour, we had two who went to Armour and about a dozen to Infantry. Infantry was always the one, from my point of view anyway, mostly sought after and I think those guys actually wanted to work with people. I think that is the difference in the Arms, particularly Infantry. You are actually working with soldiers as opposed to machines or stores or something else.

So, if I was to say that an infantry platoon commander has got to be a people person, what

is your reaction to that?

Absolutely true. If you can't deal with people and work with people you will never make a good platoon commander.

Is that an important part of the job of an infantry platoon commander?

Yes.

Communication skills - that sort of thing?

Yes. To build up a team and you have got to be approachable; you have got to know what is going on. I think there are examples of people who didn't have those people skills who I don't believe were good platoon commanders or whatever.

In the overall time you spent in 4 RAR, without getting into particular incidents, what part of that period sticks most in your memory?

The actual time in Vietnam, on operations.

And out of that time in Vietnam?

There is a couple. Two major contacts.

The bunker battle and Nui Le.

Yes, I can remember both of those like they were yesterday. There are things that I have forgotten, but basically I can remember the outline and I can picture it still in my mind what it looked like and where it was.

We will go on to those later in our interview. When you left being Ack Adjt and were told you were going to join 12 Platoon what was your initial reaction?

I was delighted because having got to the battalion I was quite disappointed about being given the job of Ack Adjt. I understand why I was sent there, because someone had to do it. If I had gone to a rifle company that didn't have any soldiers there was little point in me sitting there doing nothing. And as it turned out, I learned a lot of things that were good for me as a platoon commander in the sense of looking after the welfare of my soldiers and were good preparation for jobs I was going to get later on. But I was disappointed to be Ack Adjt and I couldn't wait to get to be a platoon commander. I was really concerned as the tour was getting closer that I was going to go to Vietnam as Ack Adjt and I would have been terribly disappointed to have missed out, to have gone in that situation. Although knowing that probably halfway through the tour I might have got a change.

What was the reception you got like when you arrived in 12 Platoon?

I am not sure, thinking back. I think it was fine, because I had been in the battalion quite a

while; I wasn't a new officer, and I had been to Canungra and had done those things. I wasn't really a newly graduated officer. I had spent two and a half years in the Reserve which didn't count for much in the Regular Army, but at least I had been through Portsea and I had been to Singleton, so by the time I actually got to a platoon I had had about five years military experience. I don't remember any animosity or 'here's a new boy we've got to train'.

What about the departure of (Lieutenant R.L.J.) Rob Martin?

There was no 'we used to do things this way'. It just happened and we just changed.

What was your first reaction on meeting (Major) Franz Kudnig?

It is a bit hard to describe it. I had very little to do with him before that. I am sure I had met him in the Mess, but I had had practically no dealings with him. He just struck me as he always was as a very aloof, hard to get to know, hard to talk to guy. I think I probably avoided him as much as I could. Like the rest of us.

What was your impression of Delta Company? You must have seen the other three rifle companies dealing with them as Ack Adjt and that sort of stuff and seeing them on the parade ground and on the sporting fields - what was your impression of Delta Company before you joined it?

Well, I had a soft spot for them anyway because, albeit it very briefly, being in Delta Company. They had a reputation of being fit and hard and that was the company commander - he kept them fit and Delta Company were always doing things better. I always thought they could, and I think they went to some lengths to perpetuate that, that they were always better than the rest of the companies anyway. Not in a cocky way but when things had to be done, Delta Company could do it. I think we kept that all the way through.

Going on to our operations now. Delta Company did a lot of four to six week patrols. You mentioned that you thought the first one almost shagged the company - what is your impression or reaction to six weeks patrols? Are they too long?

Yes, I think that they are too long by about two weeks. I reckon three weeks to four is about the maximum. You only need to go back for a few days, you don't have to go back and have two weeks in base camp or anything like that. I think just three or four days back, clean clothes, hot showers, decent food and you are ready to go again. I much preferred to be out in the jungle on operations than back in Nui Dat, but I was always glad to go back to Nui Dat just for those few days.

A lot of people look on that as being rather odd, especially non-soldier type people, that you would rather be on a patrol facing potential danger than sitting on your butt in a nice safe place.

But that is what we joined the Army for. I think that is what we were trained for and when you were out there you were on your own and you were the boss. Sure you had a company commander who was telling you what to do and where to go, not necessarily where to go, but

giving you tasks to do. Out in the bush you were on your own and you relied on your mates and your platoon and that is what it was all about. Once again, I think it is one of the joys of being a platoon commander.

That responsibility.

Back in base camp you had all the other pressures and all these other people getting in the way and interfering.

How did you maintain discipline within 12 Platoon? Who had the prime carriage for it - were you just there to command and control and get (Sergeant K.D.) Kev Philp to kick bum? How did you guys work it?

I think probably we did it together. Kevin would look after the administrative side of things and he would look after the particular incidences where there were problems if someone really needed to kick an arse he would go and do it. I think I spent more time generally just looking at the platoon as a whole and seeing how things were going. Being aware of what was going on, I would sort of give a broad overview and if I thought something was wrong I would talk to Kevin about it and he would go and fix it, or I would. I used to spend a lot of time talking with soldiers and wandering around, probably more than I should have in many respects. So I felt as though I had a pretty fair idea.

If you were out in the middle of your six week patrol and you wanted to discipline somebody how did you do it? I mean, did you have sort of field punishment system or what did you do?

There were from time to time dirty jobs that had to be done, digging latrines. If there was an extra job that had to be done or if someone was needed to be punished for being a bit slack; not for breaches of discipline and I don't really know that we had any of those in real terms. Just people not doing their job as well as they could of and just being a bit slack, they would get those jobs.

Did you have to charge anyone when you were in Vietnam?

Yes. Private (J.R.) Mason I think. I am not sure whether I actually charged him but we came back from Vung Tau from R & C and he had spent the day on the beach and got himself very sunburnt and he couldn't carry his pack. So he couldn't come out on operations for five days until his sunburn got better and that I think was the most serious incident. I think Private Mason was the one National Serviceman in the platoon who was the most difficult and that was the one incident at the end of a chain of him sort of losing interest.

That is a pretty low record for having to charge people, or a lot of people would say these days. Where do you think the discipline comes from, from a well-trained platoon?

From team work. If you are in a good team you do things because you don't want to let your mates down. There is no doubt about that. I am not saying they were perfect. There were little things that they did, but there were never any serious breaches of discipline where people would

let their mates down. When the crunch came if it had to be done they would do it without question.

Did 12 Platoon run on enforcement discipline or self-discipline?

I think self-discipline. I am certainly not into the forced discipline business. It is not my nature and I don't think many successful platoons had to force discipline. They did what had to be done because they were part of the platoon and wouldn't let anyone down.

If I can squeeze in one more question - what was your greatest fear when you were out on patrol?

Being caught unprepared and getting into a situation that I hadn't anticipated or we weren't ready for. Not knowing exactly where I was when it happened.

This is Tape One of three tapes of an interview with Graham Spinkston conducted by Gary McKay for Delta Four - Australian Infantrymen at War. Recorded on the 13th of November 1993 in Canberra, the A.C.T. The topics covered on this tape are battle, casualties, relationships, the Allies and the aftermath.

Graham, what was your first contact like?

The first contact 12 Platoon had was the Battle of the Song Ca. It was bloody noisy. That was the first thing that struck me, how noisy it was. The huge amount of enemy fire that we were getting and how demanding it was to keep track of what was going on and who was doing what, where they were, what the enemy were doing, what the company was doing. One of my major concerns was where Kevin Byrne's platoon actually were because whilst we started off two up we couldn't see them and once the contact started, and it started with 12 Platoon when (Lance Corporal J.A.) John Bergmans fired on an enemy soldier. After we had gone into a sort of contact drill, 10 Platoon actually hit the bunkers. It was confusing, noisy, but the enemy fire that was coming over us, certainly at that stage, I was a bit detached from that. It wasn't hitting anybody; it was going over the top and you had so many other things to think about that you weren't really conscious of it other than the noise.

What sort of things were you thinking about?

What am I going to do now platoon commander!

Trying to find out where they were because this guy that (Lance Corporal J.A.) John Bergmans fired at disappeared, and when the platoon closed up, we started to receive more fire than it was apparent as to what we had.

That was when you twigged that it was a bunker system?

No. Even at that stage I don't think I was aware that it was a bunker system - we were just getting a lot of fire. As I said, most of the bunkers were off to our left where Kevin (2LT K.M. Byrne) was and not where you (11 Platoon) were. We only hit the edge of it.

How was your platoon reacting in it's first time under fire?

I think they just did what they had been trained to do. They just did it automatically and I was so busy thinking about what was happening and what I was going to do, that their initial reactions I don't clearly remember. But by the time that things had settled down enough to work out what was happening they were on the ground in the right places and ready to do whatever had to be done.

When you finally got sorted out, and you were on the right I believe, and KB (10 Platoon) on the left, 11 (Platoon) at the back, Company Headquarters somewhere in the middle, and then you started to advance in. What then were you doing as the platoon commander most of the time?

Trying to work out where fire was coming from and how many there were and where they were. And where my guys were in relation to it. I wouldn't say we got bogged down, but I was always conscious that we appeared to be in front of 10 Platoon. As I said, we didn't actually have direct contact with them and one of my major concerns was where they were in relation to us. That was a preoccupation at one stage because I didn't know where they were and the last thing I wanted to do was to start shooting at each other.

How were you controlling the movement of your sections?

Only by moving a section at a time and trying to close up on the enemy.

Did you end up with having a tank in amongst you?

No. We never actually got any tanks.

So you were actually on the flank when all that was going on?

Yes.

What do you remember about that enemy machine gun that was somewhere out the front that was causing all the concern?

Only from what I heard on the radio. We weren't aware of any particular enemy machine gun.

Did you have any wounded there?

Yes. One.

How was he wounded?

Bullet wound to his leg. (Private C.D.) Colin Sedgwick Fairly early. When I say fairly early, after the platoon had closed up and were on the ground returning fire. When he was in a standing position, I am pretty sure. Shot through the thigh and he was treated on the spot, where he was

shot pretty well.

By whom?

By Kempey. (Private C.J.) Colin Kemp, the platoon medic (sic - stretcher bearer), and evacuated as soon as things settled down enough to get him out.

What sort of other things do you remember about the Battle of the Song Ca? What sort of images come back?

As I said, we didn't have the tanks with us but I was aware of what was going on. I was listening to it. I have greater memories of things after in terms of what the company was doing. 12 Platoon didn't actually have a lot of enemy or a lot of bunkers in front of us; in fact they were off to the left and we were being fired on from them but we didn't actually get to clear any bunkers. By the time we got in that far you guys had pushed through and the enemy had pulled out. But I have lots of memories of it afterwards of looking around and the mess the tanks had made and the clearance that they had done, and the bunkers that they had destroyed. In fact the biggest recollection when it was all over was that the bloody thing, the place, was nearly cleared. There was a bloody big clearing in the middle of the jungle.

What about the artillery?

Again, we didn't have any falling close to us. So, only to hear it and see the impact of it afterwards. That was the first time we had actually called in artillery.

Were you advancing two up?

No. Just (Lance Corporal J.A.) John Bergmans' section was up at that stage.

Well, how were your other sections deployed?

I honestly can't remember. In two minutes we hit them and had the contact and the company was just advancing two up and we were treating it as just an advance along an axis, and it was only when Johnny Bergmans opened fire that we closed right up, and then I had two sections up once we were in contact.

Can you remember your initial reaction was?

'Oh shit!'. Not in so many words, but, yes. It just happened as it always does, out of the blue, and we were just patrolling along and then all of a sudden everybody was shooting.

I would like to move on to the 21st September then, or another contact. Is there another contact that you can recall?

No. We only had two major contacts.

You saved them for the best. Let's run through what happened to 12 Platoon on the 21st

September (1971).

We found the track that you had seen the day before and had started to follow it and we had probably only followed it about 100 metres and we noticed another little track running off to the left. So I stopped the platoon and they were deployed and I took (Corporal C.R.) Charlie McKenzie who was a section commander of 7 Section, (Private) Jimmy Duff or James Duff as he was called, and my sig (Private T.B.) Trevor Gorrige and myself and walked along this footpad, it wasn't even a well-worn track. It was just like someone had walked in there, and we walked in there about 20 metres, and all of a sudden there were people shooting at us. At that stage we hadn't seen anybody but they had obviously seen us and started firing. We pulled back to about the vicinity of the track and went to ground and at that stage it became obvious the enemy were using fire lanes and started firing RPGs into us. There was an RPG, well I'm not exactly sure it was an RPG that hit Jimmy Duff, but it went off right next to him, in a tree right next to him, and killed him instantly. There was no doubt about that. If he wasn't hit directly he was hit by a big explosion very close by and he was killed instantly.

Then what happened?

The platoon at that stage was basically deployed facing the enemy. It would have been two sections up but only because the two forward sections were involved. The third section would have been back to the rear and behind. At that stage we had been advancing one section up in line with three sections - one, two, three - and we had moved off to a flank so that the first two sections were in contact and the last one wasn't. Once the firing started, the last one pulled around to the left and that was (Corporal D.W.) Dave Carlyon's section - he was a new section commander that we had picked up about three weeks before. That was when (Corporal M.P.) 'Harry' Duggan went home and he took Harry's place and he put in a lot of fire from the flank because he in fact could see them better than we could.

By then we had had, I'm not sure exactly, but about seven or eight casualties including one killed and about six shrapnel wounds. No bullet wounds to my recollection. All shrapnel from RPGs. At that stage it was obvious that we were in a big contact.

The noise?

Yes. A huge amount of fire from both directions. I was concerned that we were using a lot of ammunition, even at that early time, particularly (Corporal D.W.) Dave Carlyon because he kept firing and I suspected that at the rate he was using it, we would have run out very quickly, and I had to tell him that if he didn't have a target not to fire. But at that stage we had so many casualties, although they were all capable and there were no wounded that had to be carried - they were all walking wounded and it was only shrapnel except for (Private J.) Jimmy Duff.

So, we pulled back about 20 metres, back across the other side of the track.

The whole platoon?

Yes, the whole platoon, and called in artillery initially onto the position.

What time of the day was this?

My recollection is that it happened at 8.56 am.

More or less!!

More or less. We hadn't been going all that long and I seem to recollect in my mind that it was 8.56, it was certainly about 9 o'clock.

So, what were you thinking now platoon commander, with almost a section wounded?

Again, it wasn't immediately obvious how many. When I said we had that many wounded, I didn't know at the time how many there were, and I didn't even know I had been wounded myself. I was aware of someone hitting me with a big flat board. That is what it felt like, like the flat blade of a cricket bat. It was only when I got back that I realised I had got some shrapnel, and my platoon sig, (Private T.B.) Trevor Gorringe had a shrapnel cut across the back of his neck. I knew about that but it was only as we pulled back and (Private C.J.) Kempy started talking about the casualties that I realised what had happened and how many we had. We were just getting back far enough so that we could call in some artillery. Kempy had, to his credit, gone straight to (Private) Jimmy Duff, because it was close to Platoon Headquarters anyway when it happened, and he determined that he was dead and there was nothing we could do for him.

When you withdrew you left him there?

Yes we did. There was that much fire and because he was dead I figured that it was better rather than risk more casualties to pull back.

You had told company at this stage?

Yes.

What is happening there?

My major recollection is in fact that (Major J.H.) Jerry Taylor told me that he was moving 10 Platoon up and Company Headquarters. I knew where you were - at that stage you were off to our right. Don't ask me what direction that was but I knew you were off to the right and some distance away and far enough to be out of it. You were having your own problems. But, at that stage the company was closing up and whilst we were calling all the fire support we got rid of most of the wounded.

Casevaced them out?

Yes. Back to Company Headquarters.

Walking type?

Yes. Again I don't know a great deal about that because I was not involved in it. (Sergeant K.D.)

'Philpy' did all that. 'Philpy' and (Private C.J.) Colin Kemp got all the people that were going out. Again, to my recollection, they all went except me. (Private T.B.) Trevor Gorringe certainly went and my batman took over the radio and the others all went over a period of about half an hour.

What happened then?

We went into all round defence. We were still receiving some fire but only sporadic. At the stage we called in artillery and then fire power from everywhere was queuing up to have a go - Americans, Australian gunships, artillery. We spent the next three or four hours bringing fire on to what we believed was the enemy bunker position.

Were you aware of what was happening with 11 Platoon?

Only what was happening over the radio. I knew you had had contacts but that is all. I didn't have time to listen to what you were doing.

You had enough problems.

What is going through your mind now that this is all going on? Did you have to reorganise your platoon?

No. Because the casualties were pretty well spread evenly. It wasn't as though they had taken out a great swathe of one particular section, and at that stage we were fairly well up to strength, and we had, as you had, some National Servicemen reinforcements march in ten days before, or less. So it was a pretty well full strength platoon and the number of casualties we had were spread fairly evenly so there was no need to actually reorganise the platoon.

The suppressive artillery and fast air and that was put in. I guess your next piece of action was when Delta Company did its' assault?

Yes. We did a whole lot of things during the day. We kept up fire; we got ammunition resupplied, as you did. We spent a lot of time putting up a marker balloon. I think (Sergeant K.D.) 'Philpy' actually pissed in the bloody container to get enough water, and I can still remember him running around looking for water to get this balloon up and try and get it up through the canopy. Not long afterwards, the CO (Lieutenant Colonel J.C. Hughes) dropped all the ammunition. We collected that, and again, most of it was ready to be used.

It was prepacked wasn't it?

Yes. It was in magazines ready to go and it was just a matter of distributing and putting it on the weapon. During the afternoon we made a decision that we would go back and get (Private) Jimmy Duff.

Who made this decision?

(Corporal C.R.) Charlie McKenzie I think. Well, I made it, but Charlie McKenzie came and said that they wanted to try, and it was Charlie McKenzie's section.

How far away was he?

60 or 70 metres. It wasn't that far. The firing had stopped basically at that stage and there was a lull in the fire support, so Charlie and I think two others went and recovered his body which was good for the platoon's point of view because I wasn't happy and neither was the platoon about leaving him there.

My question is why would you risk your life to recover a dead man?

Because he was a member of the platoon. There is no doubt about that. We couldn't leave him there. If we had not been able to get him I guess it would have been different, but we knew we had at least a fair chance of getting him and it was worth it.

Describe the recovery operation.

Again, I didn't go on it. Well, I understand that they literally crawled into the position and put him on a ground sheet and dragged him out on a ground sheet, on a hoochie.

Were they firing on him?

No they weren't.

I always thought that was when you took the bullet in your book.

I don't remember getting the bullet in the book. All I remember was when we were fired on initially there was a lot of bullets going past. When the RPG went off there was a huge explosion and the closest thing to that noise I can remember, was as a cadet firing the Carl Gustav on the Puckapunyal range when I was wet and getting a boot in the backside from the back blast on the wet shirt. That was the sort of feeling it was. Something cut my hand and I don't remember that happening. It may well have just been a piece of shrapnel but it could have been a bullet, but I don't remember that happening either. It was just so fast and so much happening so quickly, that I was not even conscious of it.

So, they bought the body back.

Yes. We evacuated him back to Company Headquarters. He was pretty badly shot up, most of his chest and part of his shoulders and part of his face were badly shot away. He was a real mess. But he was wrapped up and no one saw him, in the sense that no one had to look. He was taken away with a degree of dignity anyway.

Do you think that it important?

Yes. It is not good for soldiers to see dead mates just lying around. They have to be looked after and when (Corporal C.W. McKenzie) Charlie bought him back he was wrapped up in a hoochie, and except for the three guys who recovered him, no one would have seen him after the event.

How were those guys selected to go on the recovery?

Volunteers. Charlie (Corporal C.W. McKenzie) wanted to go and do it and he took a couple of volunteers. He did that. He just asked permission to go and get him, and I said yes, and he organised it.

What are some other things that happened leading up to the company attack?

The next thing I remember is the company orders. At that stage this was about 3 o'clock, and (Major J.H.) Jerry Taylor giving orders to the company and shaking out into formation into what was going to be a company attack, or more likely a company probe I think, onto the position initially until we located it exactly. At that stage I could barely walk and 12 Platoon was on the left, I think, and only again at that stage took a fairly minor part in that particular part of the battle. You guys bore the brunt of it. We were off to a flank and receiving fire but not directly at us.

What are your images from that assault?

I didn't take a very big part because I could barely walk. (Sergeant K.D. Philp) 'Philpy' did most of it. I remember one of the new National Serviceman, Private (P.J.) Shand as being wounded, out of nowhere, and fairly early on in the piece. Again a bullet wound to the leg. He wasn't directly involved in the contact but it appeared just to be a stray bullet. It was all happening around 11 Platoon and the next thing I can remember is that (Major) Jerry Taylor had made the decision to pull out because we had taken so many casualties.

What was the noise like?

Horrendous. But at that stage I was used to that. All contacts were horrendously noisy and that is the hardest thing - to make yourself heard trying to give instructions to people.

Where were you travelling in that assault?

At the back of 12 Platoon, close to Company Headquarters.

Because of your wound?

Yes.

When did you actually get casevaced?

About 6 o'clock that night, after we had regrouped. I went out with (Private R.J) Ralph Niblett (KIA). Daryl (Sergeant D.K. Jenkin) and I went on the same helicopter.

Was (Private R.J) Niblett on that chopper?

Yes.

What was his condition like when you were on?

(Major) Jerry Taylor told me I had to go and Ralph was put on first; winched up first. He was barely alive when he left the ground.

How did you feel being casevaced out of the fire fight?

I think at that stage I was probably a little bit relieved. I had been in there all day. I did never contemplate going except that I couldn't walk but at that stage I obviously could not function properly and (Major) Jerry Taylor figured it was better to not be there because to get around someone had to help me. I guess it was with some degree a sense of relief that it was over. I was disappointed in the sense of course of leaving the platoon behind, but I think it was over for me from that day.

Of course you were unaware that we were about to get in to a whole lot of shit later on.

Yes. I had no idea and it wasn't until later that I realised what had happened.

What was your reaction when you were sitting in the helicopter with Daryl (Sergeant D.K. Jenkin) and there was Ralph Niblett, who you probably knew?

I didn't know him real well. Although I knew him better than most of your other guys I think because he had been around such a long time. I think by then, not that you ever get used to it, we had had a bad day and he wasn't the first. I had lost two at that stage - one (Corporal A.C.F.) 'Tassie' Wilkinson from illness and Jim (Duff) - so again, Ralph was wrapped up and it was sad but it was just something that had happened. To my way, if you like, he had been shot, but he wasn't badly injured in the sense he was shot up badly and he was in bad shape. He was a dead body. It was sad, but Daryl and I - I don't think we talked about it. Again, we had no communication over the noise of the chopper. We were just sitting there. It was getting dark and we didn't really know where we were going.

If we can just talk about your casevac now - you were winched out on a penetrator?

Yes. First time on one. I hung on with one hand - I had very little equipment. I didn't have my pack because we had dropped our packs in the initial contact and I remember I actually carried a rifle which belonged to (Bombadier R.) Russ Pullen's signaller because that morning he had cleaned his rifle and jammed his pull-through cord in the barrel, so he in fact had gone through the whole day in contact with a weapon he couldn't use. That is not something that many people would be aware of. When I came out I gave him my M16 and carried his rifle out and I think I hung on and carried Daryl's weapon and another SLR with the other hand. That was quite a high extraction.

Was that a RAAF helicopter?

No - American.

How did they treat you when you got on?

Well, because there were four of us. Ralph, who was by now dead, certainly Daryl, and I think Private Shand was on the helicopter too. None of us required any treatment. There was nothing they could do for us and it was getting dark so they just headed off to wherever we were going at that stage and it wasn't until we landed that we knew where we were going.

Was it a casevac chopper or just a slick?

Just a slick.

Where did you land?

At Black Horse which is a base in the province to the north, I think from the Air Cav, the American Air Cavalry, where they ripped off our greens - I would say it was the closest thing to a MASH hospital that I have seen other than on television. Ripped off our boots, changed the dressings. In my case ripped off my boots, cut off my greens, changed the dressings and put us back on a helicopter and took us to Long Binh.

Was it American again?

Yes. We seemed to hang around for quite a while. We had a shower, got into some clean clothes.

It was in a hospital was it?

Yes. Long Binh Hospital, so we were well looked after, but we just seemed to be hanging around waiting for a helicopter to take us back to Vung Tau to 1 (Australian) Field Hospital. The thing I remember about that is there was an American soldier in there who had an overdose of heroin and I can still remember him lying on this bed twitching and carrying on, and in fact Daryl (Sergeant D.K. Jenkin) and I were quite fascinated by it. You could have sworn he was having an epileptic fit the way he was writhing. It was an interesting experience.

Something to put you off heroin.

Haven't touched it since!!!!

When did you get down to Vung Tau?

About 9 or 10 o'clock at night. Flew us down at night, direct.

In a Huey?

Yes. Unloaded us and took us into hospital.

Where did your rifle go?

With me. I took it as far as the hospital and after that I don't know what happened to it. We lost

our boots and those things and never saw them again, but then I got their pyjamas.

So, what was the difference between arriving at Long Binh and arriving at Vung Tau at 1 Aust Field?

I guess there was a degree of relief to be amongst Australians again, because at least you had a feeling that you knew what was going to happen, whereas when we had been with the Americans no one ever bothered to tell us anything - we were just three other bodies in a whole bunch and we never really knew what we were doing until they put us on to helicopters and said you are going to Vung Tau. So it was a relief to get back with Australians and you knew where you came from.

You were down in 1 Aust. Field Hospital - what happened down there?

We lined up for surgery, and I can remember a padre coming to talk to me. I can't remember his name, but it was just to see how we were basically and to say hello. I can remember preparation for surgery; I can remember getting the anaesthetic and the next thing I remember is coming to and seeing them sewing up one of the other guys right next to me. It was just like sewing up a piece of meat. That was my impression of the way it was being done. I guess by that stage they had done so many. But it seemed to me like they were just stitching up this leg or whatever like it was a piece of meat.

Then what happened after that?

Into the ward and I went to sleep until next morning.

When did the enormity of the 21st start to hit you?

Not until you guys arrived, you and Dan (Second Lieutenant D.N. McDaniel), I think, and we started to appreciate what had happened to 11 Platoon, because even on the night when we roughly knew what was there, we weren't aware of (Private K.M.) Kingston-Powles (KIA) and the other guys who were killed at that stage. It was only next morning when you and Dan arrived. And looking around realising just how many of 4 RAR were in this ward, because I think Dan (Second Lieutenant D.N. McDaniel) had about eight or nine and I had about six or seven and you had some, so it was then that I realised how big it had been.

What was your guys' reaction to guys being wounded - do you remember any of that?

No. Because they generally weren't bad wounds - none of them were life-threatening in a sense - and the worst two were (Private C.D.) Colin Sedgwick on the first contact on the Song Ca who was shot through the leg, through the thigh, so it was a flesh wound. The only other one that I can remember is a guy named (Private J.A.) John Gilchrist who was also shot in the leg. That was quite a bad wound but again, it wasn't life-threatening so my recollection of it was that (Private C.J.) 'Kempey' patched everybody up well and efficiently and then they were gone. Our guys were evacuated very quickly.

Did it ever affect the efficiency of your platoon?

No, I don't think so. In terms of numbers it certainly did because there were less people to do things. The way they operated no, because I think it was done so well and relatively quickly that there were not great masses of people wounded hanging around waiting to be looked after. They were wounded, treated and they were gone. I honestly can't remember how long it took, but it was within the hour they were gone.

You had a non-battle casualty, Corporal (A.C.F.) 'Tassie' Wilkinson. What sort of an effect did that have on the platoon?

I think that probably had more effect than the battle casualties.

Was it because of the circumstances surrounding it?

Yes. In retrospect I am still not sure that they really know what killed 'Tassie'. In many respects it may well have been a long hard life. Not such a long one, but a hard life and there was an accumulation of things that he caught something and it was just enough. In the jungle when he was sick he was weak and he didn't feel well, and then he rallied in hospital for a short time and then died, and I still don't know if they really know what it was that killed him.

Do you think that Kudnig's refusal to air evac 'Tassie' had any effect on that?

No, I don't think so. I don't think it resulted in his death in the sense that if we had medevaced him quickly it would have made necessarily any difference, but I don't know what actually killed him, so I couldn't say for sure. But I think it was more that we wanted to get him evacuated and we couldn't, and knowing that no amount of pleading was going to get him evacuated. That was the frustration and anger.

(Sergeant) Kev Philp reacted very angrily didn't he?

Yes, he did. I almost had to physically restrain him when we found out that 'Tassie' had died. He was off to Company Headquarters to sort out the Company Commander, and my reaction was that was not going to solve any problems. It has happened and it was unfortunate and no matter who you want to blame it is not going to do you any good and it certainly was not going to help 'Tassie'. The platoon was very angry but 'Philpy' particularly because he and Tassie had been quite friendly and he felt it very badly.

How did you handle that as a platoon commander; I mean you have a hostile sergeant, and an angry platoon?

I was more aware of (Sergeant K.D.) Philp than the others. I don't know if the soldiers were as aware of all that had happened as the section commanders and 'Philpy' were, but all I could do was sit down and talk with 'Philpy' and explain that he was not going to attack the Company Commander. It was not going to get him anywhere anyway and it wouldn't help 'Tassie' and all it would do was to get him into trouble and he was best to sit there quietly with the platoon and think about the enormity of what he was about to do. He was certainly very angry for a number of days. I don't know that the Company Commander was ever safe in his presence.

How did you handle the death of guys like (Private) James Duff with your platoon - how did you actually handle that situation as the platoon commander?

Because of the way it all happened he was killed very early in the contact and then his body was left in the area of the contact for most of the day. When I say most of the day, most of the period between the contact and when we did the next assault of the bunker system. So, he wasn't with us for all that time and I think the platoon were preoccupied with what was going on. I certainly was and because we didn't have Jim's (Private J. Duff) body with us, whilst people were concerned I guess and very much aware that we had lost him, it wasn't as bad as it would have been if we had had his body with us all that time.

(Tape ended because of sound quality)

This is Tape Two of three tapes of an interview with Graham Spinkston conducted by Gary McKay for Delta Four - Australian Infantrymen at War. Recorded on the 13th of November 1993 in Canberra, the A.C.T. The topics covered on this tape are casualties, battle, relationships, the enemy, the Allies and the aftermath.

Graham, is there any one person that most stands out in your memory, and if so, who and why?

There are probably a number of them. There are certainly some guys in the platoon. But if I had to choose one particular guy it is probably (Captain P.J.) Peter Schuman as opposed to (Major) Jerry Taylor because 'Shoos' had been with the company all the way through and he had an incredible capacity to get things done and he was able to do it with a sense of humour or sometimes even more of a sense of the ridiculous. If the company ever needed anything (Captain P.J.) Peter Schuman could get it, and you never, ever asked where it came from, it just appeared. I think he, more than anybody, was responsible to a large extent for the way the company performed over the whole tour, because he was a perfect foil for (Major F.J.) Kudnig when things were getting tough with Kudnig, although Peter Schuman was always loyal to him, you could always go and talk to 'Shoos' and he would help you sort it out. Even before we left Australia there were certainly incidents where it was good sitting down and having a talk with 'Shoos' about it would resolve a lot of the problems that I think we were having with the Company Commander.

So, I think he probably stands out as the major character I remember, I always had a soft spot for him at Portsea, because he would always tell the best 'warries', the most entertaining 'warries' and it has always been the same. He is a great soldier in my view and he stands out.

Certainly, (Major) Jerry Taylor, a great company commander. I think he was lucky in the sense that he inherited a very fit and competent company, if not necessarily a very happy one at that stage, although the platoons were happy. I think it was just a personality thing with the company commander, and he hit it at the right time. Within a week of taking over the company had some major successes and he was very lucky, but he was also a very, very good company commander and again I have a lot of time and respect for (Major) Jerry Taylor.

In the platoon, (Corporal C.W.) Charlie McKenzie always stands out for me. He was an old soldier. I had in fact two section commanders who were quite old. (Corporal A.C.F.) 'Tassie' Wilkinson was by far the oldest but Charlie was, I think, about 32 or 33 as a section commander, pushing sergeant, but probably he was not going to get there. Well, he certainly wasn't going to get there in the time we were in Vietnam unless a vacancy came up. But he could have taken over as platoon sergeant anytime. A very competent soldier who had a lot of service; a previous tour of South Vietnam, and he had been to Borneo with the battalion - long service with the battalion. He was a very good section commander.

It must have been a great help to you as a young platoon commander with these experienced heads in the platoon?

It was. In fact Charlie and 'Tassie' were by far the most experienced guys in the whole platoon. They had more experience than (Sergeant K.D. Philp) 'Philpy' and they were great. They were very good for the young soldiers because they were a couple of 'wise heads' and the other section commander was (Corporal M.P.) 'Harry' Duggan who was a young National Serviceman, but very talented and he had come through Charlie's section so he had learned a lot already when he got to be a section commander. I think (Corporal P.L.) Peter Foley was a very fine soldier, and again, quite entertaining, and meeting him now he is probably the one that has changed the least. He is just a little bit greyer and a bit bigger, but he is still Peter Foley. And (Lance Corporal J.A.) Johnny Bergmans was another who took over from 'Harry' Duggan in the first instance. He was also a very good soldier.

The other guy, I guess, was my batman, (Private R.J.) Dick Pacey, who was with me the whole time. He did everything that was required - he carried the extra radio. He never said much, but everything was always done and anything he had to do he did it well and you could always rely on him.

What incidents stick out most in your memory when you look back on your time in 4 RAR in war?

There are a whole bunch of them, if you can bear with me. The two major battles will, without question, always come back. There are a number of other things we did, in no particular order. The day (Major F.J) Franz Kudnig left the company I can remember that vividly, and I am fairly sure that a fair section of my platoon were cheering as he flew out, because it suddenly dawned on us. We had no idea that he was sick, and maybe he concealed that very well from the platoons - I don't know whether you knew, but I certainly had no idea and had never seen him in pain. I remember the day he left and him getting on the helicopter and a fair number of my platoon practically standing cheering, and since that wasn't that long after 'Tassie' had died, it probably explains why that happened.

The fire support that we got from the Americans and from the RAAF - there was just so much and so incredible the things (ordnance) that were available and what they were able to do.

We did a number of things - after (Second Lieutenant K.M.) Kevin Byrne's first contact, well the company's first contact, we discovered that bunker system, in fact 12 Platoon found the tunnel just by accident. We just happened to move up to the contact site and harbour around the

entrance and in fact (Corporal C.W.) Charlie McKenzie and I were actually the first to search and actually went in to it - something we should never have done in retrospect, certainly not me as the platoon commander I should never have gone into the tunnel. But it seemed like a good idea at the time, and Charlie and I went down the tunnel for probably 200 metres. It seemed like 200 metres with a torch and the pistol, and an M16. God knows what we were going to do if we hit someone. But we did it anyway. So, I remember that because it was quite fascinating and it was such a brilliant tunnel in the middle of the jungle that had been constructed. I certainly remember doing that.

I remember the time in hospital we all had together because, despite the fact that there were a whole bunch of guys wounded and a lot of guys in a lot of pain and all those things, it was an incredible funny time and the camaraderie between all the guys was amazing and we had a lot of fun. I will never forget that.

How many do you want?

Was that, being in hospital, the funniest event that you can remember?

Yes, I think it was. Early on, in the first, on Operation Overlord, after we had, you might recall, after we had done the cordon, we took off to check out an old bunker system that the SAS had found. We had a couple of SAS guides that took us in there, and as we were forming up to sweep through this bunker system, a couple of my guys ran into a nest of red ants and in the middle of an assault on a bunker system they dropped everything and ripped off all their clothes. That was hilarious, not for them at the time but that was just something funny.

(Private) Geoff Maple, one of my machine gunners who is in fact still in the Army, and is now a WO1, he used to talk in his sleep. Being a machine gunner he always slept behind the gun, anyway, on this particular night (Bombadier) Ross Pullen and his signaller were on the gun manning it and Geoff was talking in his sleep, and in the middle of the night this, 'Uc da loi, where are you?' came out of the darkness and they nearly shit themselves. That was funny.

On New Year's Eve we, at this stage Delta Company was at Vung Tau, had been invited to this party with all these American pilots. We were in this house in Vung Tau and someone had put balloons all over the ceiling and they had blown up all these balloons with helium, or what we thought was helium, and in fact it wasn't - it was natural gas - with all these strings hanging down from the roof. Late at night someone lit one of the strings and I could have sworn it was a machine gun and you have never seen 40 people in this one room disappear so quickly. And I was the the first guy under the table I'm sure of that. Afterwards someone said, because I had this pair of, this was the early 70's, reddy-purple long pants, and they can still remember these red pants disappearing under the table. That wasn't funny at the time, but afterwards it was. I could have sworn it was an M60 going off and someone was firing into the room.

There are a whole lot of other things. There were a lot of funny things and a lot of serious things.

Do you think a sense of humour is important?

Absolutely. I think Australian soldiers can see something funny in practically everything, even

the most serious situations. Not at the time but when they sit down and talk about it afterwards they can always drag out something that was funny about it. It is a good balance and it relieves the pressure on what they are doing and allows them to see the funny side of things, and almost enjoy some of the things.

Graham, what was the toughest time you think you had?

I think probably the 21st September. It was a whole day of pretty well non-stop.

When you said you were relieved to be going out, how much of that relief was mental as opposed to the physical wounding?

I think it was mental pressure. I wasn't badly wounded - it was a very small piece of shrapnel - it just happened to be in the wrong place and my leg had stiffened up during the day. I think it was just, if you like, a release of pressure after all day and suddenly I was out of it.

Did you ever have to fire your own rifle?

I fired it lots of times but I am not aware of actually killing anybody. It was more a way of covering fire.

Did you actually see anyone hit and go down?

No.

Did you ever have a mine incident?

No.

And we all thank our lucky stars.

Yes. I think that would have been, from people that I have spoken to, the most scary thing that could have happened to us.

What do you think was the saddest time that you can recall from your tour?

The deaths of two soldiers, for different reasons, but losing a soldier is probably the worst thing that can happen to you, and when I think back on it now I still recall those incidents and I always wonder if we had done something differently they might have survived. In fact I met (Private) Jim Duff's mum when they unveiled the Vietnam Memorial for the first time and to just sit there and talk to her was really good for me. I could actually talk to her about her son dying, and it was the first time I had really had a chance to talk to someone who had had a relationship with him other than his mates.

Did you ever go through the guilts?

I don't know that I ever felt guilty that I had done something wrong that had caused him to die,

but I always conscious that he was one of my soldiers that had been killed, and as a platoon commander I felt a degree of responsibility. But I never felt that I had done something wrong that had caused him to die, but I guess that is a degree of guilt. Maybe if I had done something differently he may not have died.

How did your Diggers react to the ferocity of fighting on the 21st?

I think equally ferociously. I was never aware of anyone that wasn't keen to get stuck into it from the very outset. In fact I think once we realised what was there one of the hardest things was to restrain them to some extent. It was obvious we had a major contact and from what you guys had been telling us over the last couple of days beforehand as to what you had seen, it wasn't just a couple of guys. And from the fire we got that was obvious. There was a very real risk that they were going to, just by sheer impudence, get themselves into something that we couldn't handle.

Reinforcements. You got a couple of reinforcements?

I think about three. I am not sure exactly of the numbers and they were there for so short a time that I really didn't get a chance to know them.

Did you ever get a chance to do any sort of assimilation, or was it always in the field?

Yes. I think, in fact, the only reinforcements I remember us getting were in the field.

Do you reckon it was the right way to go about it?

No. I think it would have been better if they waited until we came back off an operation. But, we were very glad to see them because when the strengths are getting down and people are getting tired, even three or four guys make a big difference to a platoon.

Speaking of tired, and R & C, did you ever take R & C?

R & R?

R & R sorry.

Yes. I went, after I got back out of hospital. I guess I was back in the battalion about a week and I went on R & R.

Where did you go?

Back to Australia. Back to Adelaide.

Did you think you needed a break by that stage?

No, because I had had a break in many respects just being in hospital. In fact at the end of our time in hospital we got I think three or four days off anyway. So I don't think I needed one really but it had been planned early in the tour when people were asked when they wanted to go on R &

R. That was when I said I wanted to go and it just happened that I was one of the last to go.

Were you in Vung Tau?

No. I was still in Nui Dat.

When you went back, was it hard to get back into the swing of it?

No, because I was only away from D Company for about three weeks. I guess it was longer than that with the time in hospital, but when I went back, I went back (to D Company) with a platoon of soldiers from Support Company; a section of Mortars, a section of Signallers and a section of Pioneers. So we formed a fourth platoon in the company which was a Support Platoon if you like for a company group. Things had changed in 12 Platoon even in that short period with a new platoon commander, (Lieutenant G.D.) Gary Bryant, and because I had my own platoon I felt it wasn't right, it was Gary's (Bryant's) platoon then, and whilst I maintained the relationship with the platoon, I kept my distance in some respects because I didn't want to be seen hanging around what was then his platoon.

What do you reckon you learned most from your time in Vietnam?

A lot about people I think. About how a whole range of people's reactions to things and how they do things; what they like and what they don't like, and how to approach them. I also learned a great deal more in terms of military experience and I can say that I have done those things that other people subsequently haven't had an opportunity to do, but it was of learning about people and what people can do if they set their mind to it.

What about Graham Spinkston? What did he learn about himself?

I think I learned a lot. I grew up. I was 23, well I turned 23 while we were in Vietnam, and I think the events of those five or six months we did actually on operations, I learned an awful lot about myself and what I could and couldn't do, and how I related to other people as well.

Did you ever do an APC operation?

Only briefly in that we spent, like everyone else, a degree of time sitting in them. Which I found noisy, dusty. When it wasn't rainy it was dusty, and if it was rainy it was muddy. I didn't like travelling in them; I didn't like using them because they were so noisy and you could never hear, you often couldn't see what was going on. You moved faster and you missed things and I was never happy in them, except that they meant that I didn't have to carry my pack.

That is probably the only good thing about it.

Yes.

I would like to go on to relationships now. I would like to talk about your personal relationship between several groups. The first one is you and your riflemen - what sort of relationship was it?

I think it was pretty good. Obviously I got on better with some of them than I did others, but I think, and I would be interested to hear their point of view, but I thought that the relationship was fairly good.

When you say good, are we talking that you had a good rapport with your men? What sort of style would you say you had - an informal style?

Yes. I always have been very informal, and have been happy to talk and have people come and approach me whenever. I am probably, if anything, a little too informal in many respects.

How was your relationship between you and your riflemen different from your junior NCOs?

I think I had a good relationship with soldiers because I was interested in them and as a platoon commander I was responsible for them and I had an interest in how they were getting on. My relationship with my section commanders was two things - there was a personal thing and a professional relationship. I think, again, I had a very good and close relationship with them. I haven't seen (Corporal M.P.) Harry Duggan since he left and I didn't see (Lance Corporal J.A.) John Bergmans until the Memorial Unveiling in Canberra, but I had a lot to do with (Corporal C.W.) Charlie McKenzie afterwards and in fact he came to Singapore not long after I got there. I think it was pretty good. I didn't have a real good relationship I don't think with (Sergeant K.D.) Kev Philp, and I think it would best be described as cordial. I always thought he was a bit lazy - he did what he had to do but reluctantly in many respects - and I think he thought that I got too involved in what was his business and that I was running around with the soldiers doing things that he probably ought to have been doing. And I know he felt that I got too far forward in contacts and should have been sitting back keeping an eye on what was going on as opposed to getting up and trying to find out what was going on myself. I remember on the 21st of September he told me to bloody well get out of the way and get back and watch what was going on, that was just my nature.

Whilst we never had any clashes and never got to the stage where ..I am the platoon commander and you do it, sergeant.' I wouldn't say it was a friendly relationship - certainly not like you and Daryl (Sergeant D.K. Jenkin) had, or Kevin (Second Lieutenant K.M. Byrne) and Butch (Sergeant B.K. Porter). I think of the three platoon commanders ours was probably the coolest of the relationships.

What about you and your company commander/s?

Franz Kudnig was our first company commander - I think he was responsible for, in many respects, some of the success of the company in the sense that he trained us very hard and we were very fit, and we had, I think, probably worked harder in preparation to come to Vietnam than any of the other companies. So I think the extent that I thought that Delta Company was the best I think he must get some credit for the way he trained us, but as a man, and as a company commander in the sense that I understand being a company commander is, he was an abject failure. He was completely unapproachable; he was arrogant; there was only ever one opinion and it was his. There were a number of things that he had laid down that if we weren't with

Company Headquarters we just didn't do them. You were aware of one - we didn't dig in because we couldn't see the point of digging in after creeping around the jungle all day trying to be quiet and sneak up on the enemy and then stopping at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and making an hour's racket while we try and dig in. Like you, 12 Platoon didn't dig in either, although I never had to spend time at Company Headquarters and didn't get caught.

But, I couldn't talk to him. I don't ever recall, as you do, ever being called by my first name. I am not even sure that even when we got to Vietnam that he ever did. So, I never had any time for him at all and never have.

Did you every feel that he trusted you?

No, I don't think he trusted any of us. I think he always had to check on what we were doing. We always did as best we could everything he asked of us, probably with the exception of digging in, and if he wanted us to be somewhere we did our best to get there and you never got any thanks for it or any recognition that you had done a good job. I think he just broke most of the rules of being a good company commander. I don't ever remember him visiting the soldiers while we were on operations, and I don't ever remember him walking around talking to my platoon. I think he sat in Company Headquarters and summoned people to him.

Almost like in his 'Ivory Tower'?

Yes.

That is a good point. No one has raised that one before about visiting the soldiers, and did you think that is an essential part of being a commander - out amongst the Diggers?

Absolutely. I don't think he would have known their names, and I am not even sure that he would have known the section commanders' names in some instances. Certainly after we got to Vietnam and there had been a few changes - when we were back in base camp he probably had it all in front of him and he would know, but if I asked him in the field who my section commanders were, I am sure he wouldn't have been able to tell me, because he just had no contact with them.

So, what was the main difference between him and his replacement, (Major J.H.) Jeremy Taylor?

(Major J.H.) Jerry Taylor was a soldier who could relate to people. He was approachable, he was always seen to be around. He could sit down and talk, it didn't matter who it was, he could sit down and he knew who they were and he took an interest and I think, besides the obvious success that he bought, the fact that he was approachable. He demanded excellence, there is no doubt about that, but people gave it because they wanted to, not because they had to.

Sounds like being approachable - you have mentioned it several times now as a pretty key factor as a leader?

Well, it is me. I have always tried, and I think that in other jobs I have had in the personnel field

I have probably been too approachable because I am always prepared to listen to people. Really I should probably say ...'No, that is what has got to happen and let's get on and do it..', but I am always prepared to listen and let them have their say. I may not necessarily take any notice of it or may not do what they want, but I am always prepared to listen and I think that is important for people. You can be, when the time comes, as hard as you need to be, and I know when I was a company commander there were times when you had to be hard because you wanted things done quickly and they had to be done right. But soldiers have also got to understand why you are doing it and when it is all over, they can still come and talk to you. Because if they don't trust you you are in trouble. There is no point getting to the top of the hill and you are on your own.

Why did (Major) Jeremy Taylor get your respect?

One, I guess he bought success to the company and that was important because we had worked harder, I think, than anyone else at that stage when he came to the company. We had walked further than anyone else, we had carried our bloody packs, we had done more things than anyone else, and we had not had any success. So, he bought success to the company. I had worked with him at Canungra, he was my company commander at Canungra, and I don't know whether he had anything to do with the report that he made on me at Canungra and whether it got me a rifle platoon. I suspect it might have had something to do with it. But I had seen him operate then and he was a very good company commander, albeit with a patched up rifle company, but he commanded that very well. And he told you what he wanted to know and he let you get on and do it and he didn't interfere unless he had to.

So, he trusted you?

Yes. He trusted us. We could sit down with him and he would say that '...this is what I want you to do - how are you doing to do it?'. You would go away and think about it and come back and talk to him about how you planned to carry out the day's search or whatever you were going to do, and unless you were going to do something radically wrong or different to the other platoons, he was happy to let you do it. He measured what you did, what success you had, and how things went. He trusted us to do our job.

You mentioned before (Captain P.J.) Peter Schuman - what was your relationship like with him?

I think it was always good, again. In the first instance, with (Major F.J.) Kudnig, I could always go and talk to (Captain) Peter Schuman and without being disloyal to his company commander, Peter Schuman could always put a different light on things and explain that we were doing it this way because that was the way to get it done. He always made you feel, despite your reservations about the company commander, that this is the way you were going to do it. He was an intermediary, if you like, that you could relate to, and I always had the greatest respect for Peter Schuman because I reckon he was a perfect company 2IC. He was loyal to his company commander, in both instances, and yet you could always go and talk to him and get good advice. He was always approachable.

What about you and the CSM - what sort of relationship was that like?

Again, under (Major F.J.) Kudnig, I didn't trust him. I would never say it was a close relationship. He was the CSM and he was an experienced soldier so I listened to him, but I never felt that I could warm to him. I don't think I ever liked him particularly. We called him 'Yosemite Sam' and I think you probably called him that too, but I think it was not a term of endearment, but that it was a somewhat derogatory term. I think he was better under Jerry because he had a better company commander to relate to and I think he was then a better CSM. But I remember your incident with the digging in and the way he dobbed you in to the company commander. I think that was unnecessary and that was an indication of him and his personality. There were better ways he could have handled the situation.

I served with him again when he was the RSM of 3 RAR, and in fact he was sacked because he physically couldn't cut it. He just could not keep up. Interestingly enough, with another battalion commander who was very similar to Franz Kudnig. Stan Krasnoff. Whilst Stan would have you believe that he was a soldiers' soldier he wasn't either. He could be irrational. But he sacked (Warrant Officer Class One) Noel Huish. He wasn't doing the job and he just couldn't keep up. But maybe it was at that stage of his life he was getting old and he wasn't young and fit that he needed to be in a battalion that Stan Krasnoff ran.

I don't think he was ever fit.

I think you are probably right.

What about you and the CQMS, (Staff Sergeant R.J.) Bob Hann?

Again, I think (Staff Sergeant R.J.) Bob Hann and (Captain P.J.) Peter Schuman together were a perfect combination. Bob wasn't the old 'I've got it you try and get it' CQ. It was 'you want it I'll try and get it and give it to you and we'll worry about the signatures later'. I think we were pretty lucky in the battalion - we had a good bunch of CQs: (Staff Sergeant C.A.) 'Toad' Fletcher was certainly a good one, and (Staff Sergeant P.R.) Peter Webber in Charlie Company was pretty good, and old (Staff Sergeant D.B.) Digby Lawrence in Admin Company was a good one. I think we probably had the best - he was certainly the youngest and I reckon he did a great job.

I would like to get onto leadership - what do you think are some of the important qualities a junior leader should have?

I wrote these down somewhere - I was thinking about them this morning. First is the old standard one: I think integrity is one of them. You have got to understand your soldiers and understand what their aspirations are and how they feel about things. I think you have got to have a degree of skill that is at least commensurate with the soldiers in the sense that you if can't do it yourself you shouldn't be asking them to do it. You don't have to be as good as they are at everything, but at least you have to understand how they do things, and I think the old classics 'fair, firm and friendly' are as valid as the day they were invented.

How do you think you were treated by Kudnig and then Taylor?

Well, I don't know that (Major) Franz Kudnig trusted any of us; he was always checking. I

couldn't say he treated me unfairly - he was just so distant and so arrogant. He never threatened me with sacking, but I never felt comfortable in his presence, despite the fact that with the exception of digging in, I always did as best I could what he demanded of us, and I did have some run-ins with him, particularly over (Corporal A.C.F.) 'Tassie' Wilkinson. I don't think he trusted me and I simply had no love for him. I have always thought that if he was in front of my platoon in a contact someone might shoot him, and it might be me, particularly after Tassie. There was a degree of feeling that I think that if the opportunity arose he might be the one to wear it. And I think one of the reasons when he moved the platoon commanders into a tent of their own, I think he was concerned that we would get fragged. I think that is the reason he moved us in together, and that was the last thing that I was ever concerned about. I think he might have thought he would get fragged, but I was never concerned about that.

Was there anything that made you detest certain men?

I think the only person I can say I was close to detesting was probably (Major) Franz Kudnig. I don't generally, it is not my nature to detest people, but it got the closest.

Because of the way he treated you?

Yes, the way he treated everybody, not me particularly. Just his attitude to everybody was unfortunate.

Was there anything that ever pissed you off when you were in Vietnam?

Yes. Being wet I think pissed me off more than anything. I didn't mind being hot and sweaty and dirty, but being wet and dirty and in the mud, that pissed me off.

What made you feel good?

When we went into an operation when everyone got through it and we had successfully completed it. Even at the end when we had had some casualties it was over and we had got cleaned up and being together - that was always good.

If you were put in charge would you have done anything differently?

I think I would probably have done things differently. Maybe not then, although my nature was quite different from Kudnig's so if I had been the company commander we would have done things differently. But in retrospect in the years I had been a company commander I certainly did things differently, and I would like to think I did them more like (Major) Jerry Taylor than anyone else, because I learned a lot from him and I ran my company much like Jerry Taylor ran Delta Company as best I could.

Good role model.

Yes.

Talking about Diggers now - what got Diggers into trouble the most?

Booze. No doubt about it. And everything that came from booze.

Is it right to have alcohol in a war zone?

I think so. I think it is good to have it because when you have the opportunity most people relax and have a beer together and we had a lot of good beers together and a lot of good fun. I think that was part of the company spirit that when we finished an operation we could sit down, all of us together, didn't matter who you were - soldiers, officers - and have a beer and talk about it and talk about good times and bad times.

Do you think that is one of the essential elements for the platoon commanders and platoon sergeants to share a 'messing' type arrangement, rather than have a Sergeants' Mess and an Officers' Mess?

Yes, in that situation. I think it was good to have the Officers' Mess and the Sergeants' Mess in the sense that we could go to the Battalion Officers' Mess and have a beer with the officers and get away from the soldiers and so on, but in the company I think it was important that as we lived together and worked together so closely, it was good that we could also sit together and have a beer together. It gave me a chance to get to know Daryl Jenkin, Butch, and Bob Hann a lot better than it would have if we had our Officers' and Sergeants' Mess in the company - that would have been a ridiculous situation.

Because there was also a lot of interchange of information going on in there wasn't there?

Course there was. You talk about things that you have been doing or you have learned, or improvements and what is going on around the place, the gossip from the battalion. Yes, it was important, and when we had end of operations beers and the other companies if they were in could come in and join in with us, again, we could talk to the officers and NCOs, and Battalion Headquarters. Anyone who was around who wanted to come. It was good.

You were not that much older than a lot of the men you commanded. Did you ever find that a problem?

No, I didn't because as I said earlier, by the time I had got to Delta Company I had about five years experience, so whilst I wasn't much older than them I had a fair degree of experience albeit some of it in the Reserve. It didn't hold much credit with the regular soldiers, or the soldiers of the regular battalion, but I had been commissioned 18 months by the time I got to my platoon so I wasn't a brand new officer.

Do you think men under 20 should go to war?

Yes, I don't see why not.

What is the key element then if it is not age?

One, physical strength - if they are big enough and strong enough; and maturity. I think our

National Servicemen, while they weren't the youngest, were mature enough to fight a war and most of the young Regulars were too, although there would have been some exceptions.

So, it really comes down to the training level?

Yes. If they are properly trained and prepared for it. (Private R.A.) Rod Hayward, was one I remember, he later became one of my platoon sergeants in 3 RAR, and he had to stay behind in the rear party so he could turn 19, but he was a lance corporal very quickly and has done very well. I think 19-20 is about the limit and I wouldn't suggest anyone less than that but I think the old standard of 19 for operational service is still valid.

Moving on to the Allies - did you ever work with any of our Allies?

The New Zealanders obviously in the battalion. I think they were good soldiers. I don't think they were as well trained as we were. Like all Kiwis they unnecessarily have a chip on their shoulder about working with Australians, but they were certainly good in the scrub and they liked to fight; often over a beer.

I had a lot of time for the American air support we got, in the sense that they had a 'can do' attitude, and whilst the RAAF were very professional and very good there were times when they wouldn't do things. Probably because they weren't allowed to and not in the sense that they were not prepared to do it for you and ultimately if your life was on the line they would do it. But the Americans would always have a go and they had less concern about equipment and things, so if they had to clear an LZ with the rotor blades they would because it didn't matter - they would just go away and get another helicopter - whereas the Australians couldn't do that. So I had a lot of time for them. I am not saying that they were particularly professional but they were always prepared to have a go.

I didn't actually have any dealings with the American infantry as you did, but from what I saw they were very slack, and I think they suffered from the way they reinforced their platoons or their units and the rapid turnover of platoon commanders. I don't think that is the sole reason that they were poor, but I had no time for them.

At the time I didn't have much respect for the ARVN - we didn't work with them on operations, and I never had any dealings with them even at the end. But thinking about it now after the event and talking to other people, when we got there they had been fighting the war for 20 years and they had to live with it, so I think that coloured the way they performed in many respects. They always had to have an eye on what might happen, and as it turned out what did happen. But I know from talking with people that some of their units were exceptionally good and some were quite bad, but that happens everywhere.

I never had anything to do with the Thais or Montangards. I had a little bit to do with the Koreans because when we went to Vung Tau the Korean R & R Centre was right next to 1 ALSG. They were there and we were always aware of them and were always told never to go in front of their position. I remember quite clearly one night coming home with the other platoon commanders, and one (Major) Jerry Taylor, and in fact led by Jerry Taylor. We were out after curfew after having numerous beers right at the end of the tour, and we crept along the beach in

front of the Korean position to get back into Vung Tau. But no professional dealing with them.

What about the enemy? What did you think about the enemy?

I don't think I ever underestimated them. They fought under incredibly difficult circumstances. They didn't have all the support we had. I think we probably always had their measure on an equal footing if we fought each other on equal footing - but it would have been touch and go. I think particularly the NVA and some of the better Viet Cong Regiments, were good but I think we always could have held our own against them. Given the difficulties and the hardships that they fought under, I have a fair degree of admiration for them because they could see no end to what they were doing. Many of them were a long way from home without all the good things we had.

Were they as you imagined them from all your training?

Basically, because again I had a chance to speak to people. What struck me is that until we had actually contacted them and we saw bodies - they weren't real. Once you saw them and when they were dead in front of you it was very real. There was a dead soldier and that they were actually just like us, and it could have been us lying there. I think that was the only difference - they became real once there were bodies in front of us.

Did you hate the enemy?

No, I don't think so. I wasn't one of these raving anti-communists who believed the the only good reds were dead ones. I think they were good soldiers and I respected them for what they were doing. They were doing what their Government told them to do as we were.

Did you feel sorry for them?

Yes. Because they were fighting under such difficult circumstances. I don't really think that at that stage they could see the end in sight. We knew that in 12 months time we were going home but they couldn't see the end in sight for them. So I did feel a little bit sorry for them.

And you reckon they were pretty good fighters?

Yes. I think the NVA certainly were pretty tough and professional and they proved that, and I think some of the VC units were good, but some of the local units. I don't think we had a great deal of respect for and I don't think they were very effective, but by the time we left the province they had disappeared anyway. D445 had practically ceased to exist by the time we had finished and it really was then an NVA war.

This is Tape Three of three tapes of an interview with Graham Spinkston conducted by Gary McKay for Delta Four - Australian Infantrymen at War. Recorded on the 13th of November 1993 in Canberra, the A.C.T. The topics covered on this tape are the aftermath

Graham, what did you think of the anti-Vietnam war protesters?

I was angry at them. I was angry then at their attitude to soldiers who were basically doing just what they had been sent there to do. Maybe they had an objection to the war but the way they took it out on the soldiers, particularly the way in which, and I can't remember which battalion it was now, they threw paint over the CO in Sydney. That was typical - it was a trendy thing to do and I think they were all basically misguided, a lot of them, and had other agendas other than protesting the war.

I am still angry but it is not anger like it was. I always thought they were a bit misguided and I had some heated discussions prior to going with a number of them who were friends of the family. I think a lot of them have realised now what they did was wrong, but I was very angry. Some of the things that happened like support to us, the *Jeparit* and the mail and other situations made me very angry. Particularly when we were up there doing a job and to find out these things were going on back in Australia.

Do you think we should have been in Vietnam?

(Pause.) At the time I wasn't aware of all the political things that were going on, but if nothing else I think we should have been. We at least gave the people of Phuoc Tuy Province a number of years of relative peace and safety and we did a good job in that province. Whilst it might have been all for nothing I wouldn't say it wasn't worth the effort. And, if for nothing else, we bred another generation of superb Australian soldiers who had operational experience and we learned a lot of things. The majority were good, some of the advances in aero-medical evacuation and things that will save a lot of soldiers' lives in the future.

What was the most important thing to you when you were in Vietnam?

I think that we were doing a job and that we were doing it to the best of our ability. We had a job to do and the Battalion was getting on and doing it.

When you were out on operations what was the important thing to you?

I am not sure. That we were successful without too much cost to us in terms that we did what we had to do without losing too many soldiers.

Keeping you men alive.

Yes, basically, and getting as many as I could home.

When you got back from Vietnam and you saw the communists achieve success in 1975, how did you feel?

A little disappointed that, even as we were pulling out in those last few months in the province, the North Vietnamese units were coming back. Towards the end of the time there it wasn't safe to go up the road beyond Baria, whereas before you could pretty well drive to the north of the province at any time with a fair chance that you were going to get there safely I guess. I was

disappointed that it was lost, but again as I said, I didn't feel as though our effort was completely wasted, because I always thought that what we were doing was right, and I guess that was the way I was brought up - my generation was taught that we had to fight communists. I think it has been proven, if you like, from events in the world that the communist system doesn't work, the way that the people are treated is not fair like it was supposed to have been. I think it was disappointing that it happened but it was probably inevitable, given the circumstances. Once the Americans pulled out there was no way that the South Vietnamese could hold out without support equal to that the North Vietnamese were getting from China and Russia. It was inevitable.

Looking back, do you have any regrets?

None at all. I would have to say personally none - the loss of life was sad and I think that is a regret, but in terms of going to war and the aftermath none at all. I think I learned a hell of a lot about myself and I don't have any hang-ups about it. We did what we had to do and I don't think it had had any adverse effect on me. I think it is all positive. I made a lot of friends that I have still got and have a great respect for Australian soldiers.

So, the protesters didn't affect you when you were there?

Only to the extent that I was angry when the '*Jeparit*' wasn't being loaded or we would hear about the postman who would not deliver our mail and things like that. We were insulated enough from it to not see all the nasty bits. I have probably never forgiven Jim Cairns and a few people like that, and I probably never will, but then he is a sad little old man who hangs around the Prahran market these days flogging his books that no one wants to buy.

When you came home did you have any sorts of incidents that upset you or changed your mind about anything?

No, not particularly. I never had anyone really come up to me and say, 'You silly bastards were there fighting the war', and those sorts of things. I found the people had a very poor understanding of the war which is not new to anybody. Anyone who was there appreciates that. I didn't have any unpleasant experiences once I got back. To some extent because I went straight to Singapore - I was only back in Australia five weeks and I was away.

So you missed it all.

Yes.

If you had the opportunity to have all the people in Australia as your particular audience, what sort of message would you try and get across to them about the Australian servicemen?

The Australian servicemen, doesn't matter whether Navy, Army or Air Force, I reckon they did a job that the Nation should be proud of. Despite all the problems that we had and the politics of it, they did a very good job, and as I have always said, the Australian soldiers in Vietnam and now are as good as they ever were. Sure the circumstances have changed and weapons have

changed and all those things, but I think they are as good as they ever were and just as capable.

Do you think Australia learned anything out of our time in Vietnam as people, and about the terrible division we had within society and the support of the soldiers in the war zone?

Yes, there are a couple of things. I think if we are going to do it again it has got to be with the support of the whole nation. The politicians have got to have the balls if they are going to commit us to support us. We certainly never got the whole-hearted support and half the political system was opposed to it, although I believe that when the commitment was made, they supported it. I think the ALP actually supported the involvement initially and for political reasons more than anything they adopted the opposite view.

I think that if we are going to do it we have got to do it properly and if we are going to fight a war we are going to fight a real war, not a half-hearted effort where you have one hand tied behind your back with what you can and cannot do.

Is there any question, Graham, that I haven't asked you or anything you would like to add to what we have covered today?

I don't think so; I think maybe we might think of something tonight after we have a few beers.

We can revisit in the morning.

I think we have covered all the things I can think of.