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GS This is Gavin Souter talking to Ian Scott about his wartime experiences in Timor with Sparrow Forces.
Ian, could you tell me very briefly where you grew up, was brought up and went to school.

IS I was born here in Sydney in Fivedock and grew up in Haberfield Avenue. I went to School at Newington College, over in Stanmore. When I finished school I went into my father's business, which was coal broking.

GS Perhaps you would now get very soon into when World War II starts and when you enlisted.

IS Yes, well I was in the coal broking business from '34 to '39, when the war broke out. I joined the Militia in January 1939, and followed on into the AIF in about 1940. I was with the Army Service Corps and I was commissioned as a Lieutenant in July 1941.

GS You trained for the Commission? For how long?

IS Ah yes, In the Militia, I started off in the Militia, by the time the war broke out (1939) I was a corporal or a seargeant.

GS Oh, you had been in the Militia before?

IS Ah yes, All 1939, from January 1939. So, in fact I was commissioned in July 1941.

GS And your Army number was?

IS Army Number was NX76230.

GS Registered to what group? The 2/2nd Independent Company hadn't been formed then?

IS At that stage you went up for selection at Barracks and they allocated you to wherever they wanted you to go, at that stage they were forming three small forces, with Bird names - Gull Force, which went to Ambon. Sparrow Force, which went to Timor, and Lark Force which went to Rabaul. My selection was into Sparrow Force. We went into The Sydney Showground for about a fortnight, then we moved to Darwin where The Force was assembled. And it was a composite Force of about 1500 men. The main body of the force was the 2/40th Infantry Battalion, a Tasmanian Battalion. We trained out at Noonamah, which was about 29 miles out of Darwin, for about six months. It was just bush, we created a camp. We were there until the Japs bombed Pearl Harbour, when they had the Westralia and Zealandia ships in Darwin and we were moved fairly quickly and we were boarded about the 9th December and sailed for Kupang, where we disembarked a couple of days later. The Dutch had already prepared a camp there.

GS Had you ever heard of Kupang before?

IS No, I don't think I had ever heard of Timor. Apart from the 2/40th Battalion who as I said comprised Sparrow Force numbering about 1500, we also had an Independent Company Unit (Commandos), the 2/2nd with us. But they never regarded themselves as being part of Sparrow Force. They were the Second Independent Company and somewhere in late December, they sailed up on the Government owned ship, the Canopus, to Dili. So we were not in Kupang very long, the day after Darwin was bombed we were attacked. That was the 20th February 1942. The Japs attacked both ends of the Island of Timor at the same time.

GS Dili and Kupang?

IS Yes. We survived for the Friday, Saturday, Sunday and on Monday Lt-Colonel Leggatt, who commanded the Battalion, and was Commander of the Force, was compelled to surrender.
I was in a village called Tjamplong.

GS Where was Brigadier Veal?

IS Brigadier Veal? Going back: We were going to be reinforced by the 2/3rd Pioneers, and the American Field Artillery. They were in a convoy which was being escorted by the American Cruiser, The Houston. They got within hours of Kupang when the Japs picked them up and bombed them heavily. They turned back and were in Darwin on the 19th, when Darwin was bombed. The Houston got out. That reinforcement would have brought our strength up to over 2000. Brigadier Veal had flown over. He was a Colonel. They made him Field Commander and promoted him to Brigadier. But we already had a Brigadier back in Darwin. Brigadier Lind, who commanded the 23rd Brigade which, as I've said, was spread over Timor, Ambon and Rabaul (one of the Brigade's three Battalions in each Force). So at this stage we now had two Brigadiers and one Brigade. So Brigadier Veal, arriving only a few weeks before the Japs landed, decided when the attack came, that he would move back into the mountains to a place called Soe and let Lt Colonel Leggatt, the Battalion Commander fight the battle. The Japs attacked with Paratroopers on the first morning and most of them were killed by our guys.

GS Do you recall anything of that?

IS No. I was in this village of Tjamplong, I only saw them dropping in a flat area between our village and Kupang.

GS Was it a night drop?

IS No, a day drop, and the Battalion accounted for most of the paratroopers. Then sometime on Saturday morning they landed over 20,000 Japanese troops against our 1,500. We had no airforce. They had complete control of the skies, so bombers used to fly in 27s - three flights of nine each and zeros just came in anytime they liked to support the bombers. So the odds were

stacked against us, and that's why, after three days, a naval bombardment and a landing, that it was virtually the end of Sparrow Force.

GS They all spent the rest of the war in Singapore or somewhere else?

IS Well, some of them went down on prison ships, being transported, and the Americans unknowingly got stuck into them and torpedoed them. The rest finished up, most of them up in the Burma Railroad and one thing or another. And I, being in this village of Tjamplong, the afternoon of the morning of the surrender, (We'd had some British Bofors gunners, they were destined for Singapore, and Singapore had fallen so they came on down and landed with about half a dozen Bofors guns) one of their Don Rs came through and told us the surrender had taken place and we were to pile (stack) our arms in the middle of the road, and wait for the Japs to come and pick us up.

GS Did the Don Rs (Dispatch Riders) have motor bikes?

IS Yes. They were motor cyclists attached to the British. There were two other officers and myself in Tjamplong, one was a Major Chisolm, from the 2/40th Battalion and the other was a Lieutenant Colonel from the Independent company, plus about 40 to 60 troops. And they had also created there a hospital, to which some wounded had been brought into, before the Japs cut them off.

GS How many of Sparrow Force would there then have been at Tjamplong and out in the bush?

IS After the surrender there could have been about 150 scattered all around, not necessarily in Tjamplong. And over the next two or three weeks the Japs picked up about 70 odd out of the 150. Those of us who got away that afternoon, we decided to make a go for it rather than wait and be taken prisoner so we had a couple of trucks and a ute and a Brengun Carrier, that everyone scrambled on and we took off. We left about 2pm that afternoon and about 2am in the morning we came to a place called Atambua, right on the Portuguese border. There we stopped. We didn't know where to go, didn't know where we were, not having been there before, so we settled in for a week. We caught up with the Brigadier. He had moved back from SOE with his Brigade staff. They were all now located in Atambua. The worst position you can get yourself in is lose contact with the enemy. We blew up a big bridge over the BENAIN Gorge when we were getting away which slowed the Jap's pursuit. They dropped some paratroops, we believe - everything was hearsay from now on.

GS How many would you have numbered then at Atambua?

IS Well originally roughly you could say there was about 150 there. But after a week a Dutch Sergeant Major and a Lieutenant Colonel who was in command of the Dutch troops in Dili, screamed into the town on a motorbike and sidecar and they weren't quite sure whether there were 4,000 Japs one hour out or 1,000 Japs four hours out, but I can assure you it was enough for us to take to the hills very smartly. At that stage the order was given by Brigadier Veal "Every man for himself".
Whether that command was ever given anywhere else in the War, I don't know. So having been given that order, you could go where you liked. So they split up into small parties and some went to the South Coast and some went to the North Coast and some went which ever way they felt inclined to go. And after about two to three weeks, news travelled around and occasionally you met Dutch personnel roaming around who had heard that the Allies had landed in Dili, and that the Japs were here and the Japs were there and so we moved back into Atambua where the Japs were supposed to be, and there were still no Japs. Regarding the Dutch Colonel and his Sergeant Major; the Dutch Colonel, I've heard, eventually got the Queen Wilhemma Cross for the gallant withdrawal of his troops from Dili, and the only two people who knew where they were, were himself and his Sergeant Major on the motor bike. They took off when the Japs fired the first Salvo into Dutch headquarters in Dili. Unreal. So we then moved up into the mountains. We had heard the Independent Company - the Commandos - had moved back into the mountains from Dili and they were still fighting. So in small parties they all came together again under the Command of Brigadier Veal, but actually the fighting in Portuguese Timor was run by Major Spence who commanded the 2/2 Independent Company. And once again Brigadier Veal was completely superfluous. He had a Brigade staff and only an Independent Company, plus the odds and sods who like myself had got away from Kupang. So they just trained the troops on commando tactics and took them into different platoons and they were thus absorbed into the Independent Company. And there we stayed.

GS The Independent Company under Major Spence?

IS Yes. Well he still had Veal.

GS So when you say "we" from now on that's really what it was?

IS Yes.

GS Numbers were what?

IS Well I suppose there was about 60 or 70 of us left out of the 150 or so that got away, plus the Independent Company, so I supposed the strength you could say was 350 - 360.

GS And nearly all Australians?

IS Yes, all Australians.

GS No Dutch there?

IS No

GS And the Americans, they weren't with you?

IS No

GS When you were moving, were you still using motor vehicles?

IS No, No, footslogging.

GS What did you have in the way of equipment?

IS We only had rifles. Just rifles.

GS No Owen guns?

IS Oh The Independent Company, they had more firepower than the 2/40th Battalion. They were L.HQ'S (LAND HEADQUARTERS, S.E. ASIA) new babies, these Independent Companies, they had Thomson sub-machine guns and Bren guns, where the Battalion only had the old fashioned Lewis guns. Brens were only shown to you in those days. They went to the Independent Companies. They had the firepower which they used in ambushes and one thing and another with close engagements with machine guns. And would be covered perhaps 100 yards back by a Bren gunner. So they would pick an ambush spot and cut loose with sub-machine guns. The ambush might only last a minute or something like that. And then they would get covering fire from snipers, they had a few Kangaroo shooters who were good snipers, plus a Bren gun, and they would give them covering fire while those in the ambush got away.

GS What did you have responsibility for as a Lieutenant?

IS Once in the mountains I was virtually without a job. I was with the transport of the Army Service Corp, and we had no vehicles. So I did all sorts of off jobs going out on reconnaissance and one thing or another. That was about the end of it, they didn't know what to do with me. I used to go where I was sent.

GS Did you go on that trip to Dili that Captain Laidlaw?

IS No, oh no. That was purely a Commando raid.

GS A fairly successful one apparently?

IS Yes, they got in and got out and they didn't lose anybody. Their heaviest loss was the day after the Japs landed and of course there was a breakdown in communications. It was very hard to keep contact in the mountains with a walkie talkie sets, or 10 1 sets they had.

They had one section on the aerodrome and the rest of the Independent Company had moved back a few miles into the hills and they didn't know the Japs had landed. And a lorry load of them went into Dili. Like for a day's leave and drove straight into the town and that was the end of them. They all got murdered. Yes, poor blokes. In they went and pssst. They lost one or two defending the drome on the night the Japs landed - the 19th - and there was a bloke, Jerry McKenzie, who later won an MC, who was a Lieutenant, he was in command of that section on the drome, - these were a couple of MC'S, there weren't many decorations.

GS How should we proceed now? It might be best if you can think of the sort of Milestone events in the weeks and months you were up in the mountains.

IS Well the greatest event that happened was for us to make contact with Australia again. We'd lost contact from the day of the surrender, which I think was the 22nd of February, until the 19th April. And that communications was made by a transmitter that was built, an amazing piece of work on the part of our signallers. It is now down in the Museum of Canberra - "Winnie, the War Winner". And these sigs made this thing, they used half a kerosene tin and they went back in patrols to Dili where they had buried some equipment when they were getting out, they got all the bits and pieces out. They got bits of solder out of old jam tins and put the set together. And somehow they got old car batteries, and built up something like a bicycle and got natives to pedal like fury to put a charge into the batteries. Then they tried to contact Australia. We had to speak in clear English as all the code books had been destroyed and not having heard from us from back in February to the 19th April, the night they transmitted the first message - I think it was something like "Sparrow Force still fighting". They were very suspicious back in Darwin and somebody used above normal I.Q., which you sometimes could in the Army, they asked for a certain officer's wife's name, which they were able to give straight away which identified it was a genuine call. And the following night they put all stations off the air in Darwin and they were all receiving. So once again we transmitted the message that we were still fighting and that we needed ammunitions, medical supplies and boots. A few days later a lone RAAF Hudson bomber came over and we identified ourselves and from there on they started a regular supply of what we required.

GS They dropped it?

IS Yes, drops. But they weren't sure of what speed to come in at or what height and in their first drop they dropped medical supplies by parachute, boots they threw out in palliasse bags, and when they hit the ground the heels went one way and the boots went the other way. They dropped some Bren guns to us wrapped in blankets and I believe the armourer managed to make one good Bren out of six,

barrels were bent and everything like that. Ammunition they dropped in (.45 ammunition for Thompson Sub-machine guns). They dropped in Peters Ice Cream Cans and they came down and drove most of the ammo back into the casing so there was a considerable loss. After that what we would do was get a rice field somewhere and light big smoke fires and they'd come over. They would still drop the medical supplies by parachute, then they would throw the palliasses out and they landed in the mud. Then we would put the natives in and the recovery rate was almost 100 per cent. And ammunition was also dropped by parachute. Well that went on for a little while. It was a pretty tough run for the Airforce, they had 800 miles of water to cover - 400 there and 400 back. And Timor is only about 80 miles wide, at the widest part up in Portuguese Timor. News travels very quickly especially with the natives and the Japs soon found out the drop was on. And they were always keeping the zeros, or a lose Zero on patrol any time they felt there might be a drop. Then the Navy started to come in. They used to slip in at night with very small craft and bring in just medical supplies, boots and ammo. There was never any rations brought in and a bit of mail started to trickle in. The Navy did a great job too.

GS How did they have co-ordinates as to your position?

IS Oh yes, they knew where we were. Occasionally they used to get things screwed up. Portuguese Timor is very mountainous.

GS I was going to ask you. Could you just describe the general appearance of the country. There were some rice paddies?

IS Yes, down near the coast. Once you moved back in again a few miles from the coast your started to get into high ground, which ran into mountains.

GS Unbroken forest?

IS Yes. The Navy eventually came in. The Japs knew that run was on too. They were only small ships and sometimes they only had a top speed of 10 or 12 knots. They used to stand off the coast until dusk. They couldn't afford to stand out more than about 20 miles at the speed they had. They would have to come in and be well clear by first light. If they left with three in four hours cover of darkness they would be only 30 or 40 miles off the coast when the Nips used to make an air sweep every morning to pick them up. They picked the Armidale up one day and they bombed her all day and eventually sank her. She was a Corvette. There was one little craft called the KURU and another called the Vigilant and after they started the Navy run somewhere near the end of July. They started to evacuate some of the personnel. I got out somewhere about the 10th August on the Vigilant which took 40 hours to get back to Darwin. We were lucky when we got out. The first morning there was a heavy rain storm which gave us cover and we could hear the Zeros up above looking for us but they couldn't see us through the cover of the rainstorm.

IS After 8 or 10 hours we felt reasonably safe. We also felt terribly sea sick. Having lived off the land on mostly rice, sweet potatoes and bananas or something like that. Well the night we got on board they gave us bread, butter and jam, pies and milk so we would have been sick in any case, plus the motion of the ship.

GS We are getting ahead of ourselves, What did you live in, tents?

IS Oh no no. We just lived in .....

GS Huts?

IS Well occasionally if you were in a village you might get into a native hut, and get all the body lice in the world that went with sleeping there. Otherwise just out in the open, or if you were in a township that I was in for a fair while called Ainara, that were the Governor's summer residence which gave reasonable accommodation. You slept on the stone floor, there were no beds, naturally.

GS Was Ainara a township?

IS Ah well, you could call it a town. They had a Church there and the Governor's Summer residence and residence of a Portuguese official who lived there.

GS And the Japs didn't come up to have a look there?

IS OK well, it was well back in our territory. See we occupied a few hundred square miles. We had control of the areas so long as the Japs didn't come out in big numbers. If they came out in a big push we had no alternative but to pull back. They would often come out so far they'd stop and go back, and as they'd move back, the troops of the 2/2nd company would follow them in. The 2/2nd used to get pretty close to DILI. Well LAIDLAW'S raid was indicative of those days. It was all sort of ambushes and guerilla fighting in those days. That was the plan. Sometimes we'd occupy a village for a week and if the Japs came out in sufficient numbers, well we'd have to retreat and the Japs would move into the area.

GS So you were out on the move all the time.

IS Yes. All the time. And natives would always let us know when the Japs were coming because they treated the natives pretty badly, especially their women. So the natives were generally sympathetic. The Japs eventually got a fair number of the natives on side, no doubt with promises or I don't know what they did with them, so they created a split amongst the natives. So there was real fighting between the Timorese which happened just after I got off the island. so when that happened our troops did not know which natives were friendly and which were not. Even

when I was there some native would come and point out another one who he said was working for the Japs. Well you didn't know whether it was a personal grudge he had against him and he wanted us to shoot this bloke. Well we weren't prepared to shoot anybody. We might have shot the wrong one and turned more of them against us. Of course later on the natives did fight one another. The Japs had armed them and one thing or another. So that all happened after I got off in August.

GS How did you get on with language with the Timorese?

IS Well they had a language called TETUM. And there was no grammar. We count up to five in it and you picked up odd words like "BAGUS" meant good and "TIDA BAGUS" was no good, "BUNYA BAGUS" very good, PIGGI was to go, and "PIGGI LACASS" was to go quickly.

GS It sounds like Malay doesn't it?

IS Yes. And "bastard" came into the language quite quickly. If you called someone a stupid bastard they got the message. We got on all right "BESOK PAGI" was tomorrow morning and horse was "KOODA" so if you wanted to go somewhere tomorrow morning you'd start off with 'TV' and that meant you and one, two, three, four, five "KOODAS" and pointed to the native Timorese, at this stage everything was "BAGUS", then you'd say "BESOK PAGI" WE PIGGI from here to wherever it was. Everybody always knew and shook their heads very wisely. If there was any stuff up it was the next morning when you wanted 10 horses and you got three, and they had great sores down their backs which we could never use as packhorses. They could never work that out, why we would reject horses that were not in our opinion healthy enough.

GS Were they the little Timorese ponies?

IS Yes. Little Timor ponies.

GS Are they native or bought in by the Dutch originally?

IS I don't know.

GS I don't think they were indigenous.

IS No. They might not be. Well we only experienced them up in Portuguese Timor. He had no reason to seek alternative transport when we were in Dutch Timor. In Kupang we had trucks.

GS The ponies are sort of shetland size aren't they?

IS Yes, they are very sturdy little animals.

GS Do the Timorese ride them?

IS No. They use them as pack animals. We used to used them

occasionally to ride. But that was quite an experience. We didn't have any bridles or any equipment. What we used to do was tie a cushion on the horse's back, and then for stirrups take two spades handles and these would be tied together with about five feet of rope that would be put over the cushion and for the bridle just a bit of rope down through the horse's mouth and back again. So you had to get alongside a rock so you could get on the horse and then you had to put through the stirrups and if you put too much weight on one side it would come up to other side. It was just somewhere to put your feet. And away you'd go and if the rope fell out of the horse's mouth, you'd had it. You had to get off the horse and once you got off the horse you couldn't get on again, unless you had a native to hold it up alongside a rock for you.

GS Did the stirrups have the shovel handle or the shafts still attached.

IS Oh no. Just the handle cut off. Or if they didn't have shovels they just made the stirrups out of a bit of wood, cut them out of wood.

GS Did the ponies take to a rider all right?

IS Oh yes. They were all right. They were very docile, They would just plod along hour in and hour out. You'd be doing it the hard way, sitting down on the thing, and you couldn't get off. And once you were off that was it. If you were going somewhere you might only have one native with you, and he used to buzz off and leave you for a few hours. There was no where else you could go but on the track you were on, so he would pick you up somewhere else. Everybody seemed to know everybody in Timor. All the natives were individual kids that used to follow us everywhere. Each soldier had their own personal native, like a batman. They'd be about nine or ten years of age. They used to be away for days from their village and no one seemed to worry about them. They'd all find their way back eventually.

GS It must have been a bit uncertain if you had to follow a track as to whether suddenly encounter anything.

IS That's right. The Japs were always out looking for us and we were out looking for them. Going from here (Mosman) to Cammeray (about 3 kms) you could easily run into the Japs. You were just lucky if you didn't run into them, Particularly if you were on your own.

GS Did you travel on your own much?

IS No, a couple of times I got sent off on my own, spent all day going from here to Crows Nest (about 5kms) or up to Killara (about 12kms) on the back on one of these animals all day and then come back.

GS Why so long?

IS It was the only way you would get there, it was the distance you'd have to follow the track staying on the ridges. It was very mountainous. There was one Peak that was over 9000 feet (3,000M). That was up in the middle of Portuguese Timor.

GS What about tobacco?

IS Tobacco? I don't know how many months after we remade contact with Australia they brought in one night some cases of cigarettes. They were State Express. There was one packet to each two blokes. So there were nine cigarettes in a pocket so you either got four or five cigarettes. And you got a box of Vesta wax matches in which there were 100 matches. So you got four or five cigarettes and 100 matches.... And that was the only comfort we ever got from Australia. That caused more trouble than enough. For blokes up at the front near Dili, I know stories always got exaggerated, and they reckoned that there were boxes and boxes of cigarettes brought over and they only got a few up at the front. All the base wallahs down on the coast had clouted down on the cigarettes. I hardly smoked when we went to Timor, but there were a few guys that were hooked on cigarettes. What they used to get for cigarettes was the inside of a corn cobb leaf and they'd get some of the native's tobacco, which was fine cut, about a quarter of an inch wide, fill up the leaf of the corn cobb with the tobacco, then you'd have to go to a native and get a little bit of a vine they used to use to tie it up in the middle, and then they'd have to walk nearly all over Timor to get someone to light it. The natives used to carry little bags of fluff, or some of them did, and a bit of flint. The cigarette looked more like a cigar tied in the middle. The native could strike away with the flint until they go a spark into the fluff and it was glowing. So they would get the cigarette alight from this. Then one draw and you'd think the top of your head had gone off. So you'd imagine how desperate you were for a smoke when you'd go to all that trouble. But that was the only way you'd get a smoke.

GS But you had matches there for lighting fires and so on?

IS Oh no, no. The only time we got matches was when we got the four or five cigarettes each, and a tin of wax vestas each. Before then we didn't have any matches.

GS So you had to go with the fluff and the flint thing?

IS No, the natives would light fires, we'd never get a fire going - never ever.

GS You certainly relied on them.

IS Oh we did, Without the natives, I wouldn't be sitting here now. I can assure you of that. They provided us with all the food. They were ordered by the Portuguese to bring it in.

They owned everything that walked and crawled. If they had wanted to take all their goats and pigs and water buffalo into the mountains away from us with them we would have never found them.

GS Did the Portuguese continue to exercise control as the proprietors?

IS No way. No the Japs didn't allow them. The Governor of Portuguese Timor was in Dili. He was trapped there. He had communication with a party telephone that ran out all over the different provinces. But everybody used the party telephone line, so the Japs used to use it too. I don't know whether you know much about it. There were a whole lot of wires coming in and people would disconnect wires, otherwise you'd get on the phone and you'd hear the Japs talking, so you would undo that wire and do another one up. We spoke in code.

GS The Japs could hear you?

IS Oh yeah and we could hear them. I have got one of our codes here. I had a patrol down on the coast we were stationed down there and it was our job to keep an eye on any shipping or anything we saw and we had to encode it.

GS That's the coast near Dili?

IS No this is on the south coast, down near BECO on the South Coast, and if we saw anything our job was to encode it and ring through to headquarters. They were operating in the BECO area at the time.

GS How were they connected, by landline?

IS Oh yes, by landline. They ran for miles and miles and miles.

GS You had all that with you when you left ATAMBUA.

IS The land line. Yes. The Portuguese had the whole place wired up from village to village.

GS Ah, it was the infrastructure that was already there?

IS Oh yes, it was already there.

GS Pre war?

IS Yes. Our communication was all walkie-talkie sets and things like that.

GS That's short range?

IS Yes. But we could use this telephone network using coded messages.

GS Where was Spence's headquarters?

IS Well, headquarters moved around. Headquarters was at MAPI for some considerable time. The Independent companies were back around Dili scattered all over the place. We never knew where the Japs were. They were out looking for us and we were out looking for them. We had this bit of Coast.

GS What did the Japs look like as a general rule? Was it a fairly consistent dress?

IS I never got close to anyone of them up in the Mountains. They were dressed in the greens with caps. SUAI is where I got out. BETANO is along the coast a bit. That's where the HMAS Voyager ran aground. They brought the 2/4 Independent Company over. And unfortunately they took the Voyager in too close. And that's where they left the Voyager. She was picked up first thing next morning. There was a sweep of Jap bombers that came along the coast. The bombers only had to come from a fairly close airport base. So the Navy blew it up, she is still there. The reinforcement of the 2/4 came in so we hade two independent companies.

GS Ian, could you pick up the story from when you were in ATAMBUA?

IS When we arrived in ATAMBUA we had lost all contact with the enemy and we didn't know where the 2/2nd Independent Company was, whether they were still fighting or what had happened to them. So we stayed there for about five days and we then heard that the Japs were closing in on ATAMBUA so the Brigadier gave the order. "Every man for himself". So we split up into small parties and everybody went in different directions. the party that I was with headed down to the North Coast to a place called ATAPOEPOE. The reason we went there was that while we were in ATAMBUA we had a wireless set on which we sent out a message asking to be evacuated, and it was acknowledged by the allied force at Bandung, in Java. so we headed down to this beach hoping that a ship would come in there and pick us up. We stayed there for about 18 days and that's when we were almost eaten alive by mosquitoes.

GS Did you have any mosquito netting at all?

IS No, not really, I had a little piece that I used to erect over the sand with four sticks.

GS A sort of micro tent?

IS Yes, and I put socks on my hands and put sand all round the mosquito netting I had the long trousers I made by lengthening the legs of my shorts, tucked in, like the shirt. That had added long sleeves too. Then after you had been there a few minutes you'd find about 10 mosquitoes in there with you. So you'd pull

it all to pieces and start again. After a while at this you'd get up and walk up and down the beach for a while. And after about 18 days word had got around that the Independent Company were fighting. They were still intact up in the mountains in Portuguese Timor. This all came through by "bush wireless". so we moved back again to ATAMBUA where there were still no Japs.

GS By "bush wireless" you mean word of mouth.

IS Yes. Word of mouth by Timorese, and various troops that were roaming around and had made contact. Some then moved back through ATAMBUA and over the border to Portuguese Timor. There we started to gather again as an organised body, and in a matter of days we got in touch with the 2/2nd Independent Company and all the odds and sods that constituted the crowd that had got away from KUPANG.

Well then we reorganised ourselves into the Independent Company, into their various platoons. Some then became part of an organised fighting force again. They moved us around and sent us to where they thought we would fit in best in the organisation.

GS How many would there have been in the group that you were in for most of the time?

IS When we moved out of ATAMBUA we were a party of about 12, and then when we moved into Portuguese Timor I was in an area basically around AINARA, where the Governor from DILI had his summer residence, that was always a floating strength of troops either stationed there or passing through. They had a small what would you call a hospital there. There was only one doctor there. For some time he was using AINARA as a base.

GS Most of the doctor's activity would be concerned with sickness.

IS Well both sickness and wounded.

GS How often would an engagement take place that would produce wounded?

IS I wouldn't know accurately as all the patrols were spread over a large area - hundreds of square miles at least, and the would send small parties that might be four or six strong out on patrols creating ambushes and one thing or another or just observing the Japs as they were building up a small force in an area. The patrols would set up an OP (observation post) and watch to see whether they would attack them or just keep watching them, depending on the moves of the Japs. If the Japs came out in large numbers then we would have to move back. And then for some reason the Japs would all move back towards Dili, and in

that case we would follow them so as not to lose contact with them. If you lost contact, then you didn't know where they were. But we used to roam all over the mountains and so did they, so you never knew when you moved you'd run into them. There was no plot.

GS Did the Japanese use horses the same as you.

IS Yes - Timor ponies, that was the only form of transport.

GS When did the air drops of supplies to you start?

IS Well we contacted Australia, I think it was on the 20th April. They had heard nothing of us since we had surrendered around the 22nd February or something like that.

GS And you were in Portuguese Timor when you made contact

IS Yes, It would be about a week after contact was made that they came over with the first air drops.

GS Did they get in touch with you straight off?

IS Yes. We were lighting smoky fires. In the first drop there was a fair percentage of loss as they were not to sure of height and speed, plus the fact they only used parachutes for medical supplies so when boots came down in bags and when they hit the ground the heels went one way and the boots went the other way. We solved that problem over the next few weeks by getting them to come over and drop them over a rice field, where they went into the mud. Then we put that natives in to collect the goods and the recovery rate went up almost 100 per cent.
Footwear was always a problem as was ammunition and medical supplies. That's what we needed all the time.

GS Did everyone have boots?

IS Ah yes. yes.

GS Medical Supplies? I suppose Malaria was the main worry.

IS Yes. The Doc had very limited supplies. M & B Tablets were the anti-biotic in those days.

GS That was for malaria was it?

IS Oh No. Quinine in those days. There were no sophisticated anti malarial drugs then, all those came later. Atebrin came later, all we had when we first went to Timor was Quinine tablets, and very few of those. When we all got malaria, we didn't have QUININE TABLETS or anything.

GS You just had to put up with the fever. How long did it knock you out?

IS Well for about four days it would flatten you, You'd shiver and perspire, and you wouldn't feel too crash hot for about a week. Once you got over an actual attack you were OK until you got the next one, which you wouldn't know when it would hit you. It depended on how badly infected you were.

GS I had DENGUE Fever in Queensland as a child, that would be like having a half or a quarter of an attack of malaria I suppose.

IS Yes. I had Dengue too in Darwin. And from what I remember you don't get a repeat of Dengue unless you are reinfected; Malaria comes back again and again. With Dengue, the first day you think you're going to die, the second day you are sure your going to die and the third day you wish you had died. I was in hospital for a few days in Darwin with it so thank God I didn't get it again in Timor. All I got up there was a bit of AMOEBIC DYSENTERY and once again there was nothing you could do about that. If you had it, you had it. I was lucky I ran into a Dutch Doctor, just after I got it and he gave me an injection of something that seemed to help.

GS Was any Scrub Typhus there?

IS Not to my knowledge. No, I don't think anybody got that. There was hookworm and malaria. They seemed and I think they only found out about the hookworm after we got back, and that they gave the pathologists access to us and one thing and another.

GS So you spent a lot of your time doing communications and making trips from place to place and keeping your eyes peeled.
IS Yes. I wasn't in actual combat.

GS No. You mightn't be here today if you were.

IS Well, being an officer, they couldn't draft me into a platoon where a corporal was in charge, an independent company corporal. So I was just given the jobs and sent wherever they thought I could be of some use.

GS Did you ever do any radio communication?

IS No.

GS Who would do that?

IS Oh the sigs. They had a signal section in the Independent company. They were the ones who built "Winnie the War Winner" The radio set, which was the one we contacted Australia with.

GS Contacted Darwin?

IS Yes. That set. Now in Canberra.

GS All your normal communications had completely closed down by then?

IS Yes, well they only ever acknowledged our big set in ATAMBUA. "Winnie the War Winner" was the one they made from bits and pieces.

GS And could it get through quite easily? Or was it a battle each time?

IS Well, I wasn't with them at the point where they made it. They had to collect old car batteries and charge them up somehow. Then they had to speak in the clear (plain English) because all code books had been destroyed. And after a period of radio silence from February to 20th April they were suspicious in Darwin. The first night they got the message saying that Sparrow Force was still fighting. the second night they put all other stations off the air and everybody was on listening duty and checked they asked for identification of a certain officer's wife's name, which fortunately they could give them straight away and that proved it was Sparrow Force.

GS The wife's name wasn't "Winnie" was it?

IS No. Winnie the War Winner was named after Churchill, so I read. I often wondered how the name came about and I did a little research the other night with a letter I'd received from the 8th Division Association, and they had it in there that "Winnie the War Winner" was named after Winston Churchill, so the first time I found out was the other night.

GS A friend of mine who is now dead was a war Correspondent -- Bill Marien.

IS Ah yes, he came over to Timor.

GS He wrote an article that was widely reprinted called "Winnie the War Winner"

IS Yes. He and Damien Parer and a third guy - an Englishman -came over to Timor, that was after I got out of Timor.

GS During the re-occupation.

IS When the Japs were there they came over about September.

GS Oh I see.

IS Oh yes, Oh yes.

GS Were there any in Sparrow Force still there?

IS Oh yes, yes. Well sparrow was the original force. The Main force, which was virtually all taken prisoner in Kupang. The

Independent Company (Commandos) never regarded themselves as part of Sparrow Force - they were the 2nd Independent Company and liked to maintain their identity. So all the stragglers me being one of them, who got away from Kupang all joined up with them. But they always had to refer to Sparrow Force when they spoke to Darwin. And then in late September they reinforced the force, or the 2nd Independent Company with the 2/4th Independent Company. They came over on the Australian Destroyer, Voyager, which ran aground while discharging the personnel. They found there was no way of refloating it so the Voyager was lost. They destroyed it.

GS They all got off?

IS Everybody got off. The 2/4th got off. The Navy Personnel got off. The Japs had picked it up. They came over the next day. They dropped 100 bombs and they only hit it once. The Navy blew the engine room up. A few days later the Navy sent over two Corvettes and they took off all the Navy personnel. The 2/4th merged in with the 2/2nd and the 2/2nd was evacuated about the middle of December, and the 2/4th came out early in 1943. At that stage a lot of the native Timorese had been coerced to go on side with the japs and there was fighting amongst the natives. We relied on the natives for a hell of a lot of support so once that a percentage of them had gone to the Japs side it made it very difficult for those who were still there with the 2/4th.

GS You wouldn't know who was who.

IS Yes. That was the trouble. Even earlier in our time there one native would come to you and point out another native and tell you he was Pro-Jap. He might have only had a personal grudge against him, but all he wanted us to do was shoot him. This we did not do. You could get a lot of people off side that way.
But if it wasn't for the natives, I wouldn't be sitting here today - I can tell you that.

GS Have you ever been back to Timor?

IS No. I was often going to go back, I wasn't terribly keen on the Mickey Mouse airline that flies out of Darwin to Dili or one of those places. I'd be pushing my luck. A few have gone back.

GS I suppose Garuda fly there now, does it?

IS Yes. I don't know whether it was Garuda or some other airline that flies to Dili. I'm not exactly a Garuda fan either.

GS Should we get on to your evacuation?

IS Well my evacuation was pretty elementary. It was just a case of one night, your turn came. If you were going to be sent back to Australia, you would be notified the day before the ship

IS Just rice, maize, sweet potatoes, banana, coconut. Sometimes you got a bit of old goat.

GS That was about the only meat you got, was it?

IS Yes. Well the natives owned everything and we depended on them.

GS You didn't want to get them excited?

IS No we didn't commandeer anything. We gave them (promissory notes) we didn't have any money for a long time - until we contacted Australia and the navy brought silver coins in - and we could pay them. We worked through the Portuguese and they would instruct the natives. They knew how many goats, water buffalo and livestock each native owned. Because they had a very good system of going around once a year and taking a census. So that in an area where there were about 60 of us, they would instruct the natives to bring in one goat or two goats a day, so we couldn't denude them of all their food.

GS Right. What sort of communication did you have with the Portuguese?

IS Oh they were very co-operative.

GS Would they visit you in the hills.

IS No we would always go to them. There was one Portuguese in charge of each province and each of these chiefs was responsible to the Governor, in Dili, who was being held by the Japanese. He wasn't allowed to go out.

GS So they dealt even handedly with both sides.

IS Yes. They didn't have any option. You know the Japs. Towards the end, I believe after we got out any Portuguese that were left were all murdered by the Japs, and all Catholic priests, and one thing and another that had helped us, were all murdered too.

GS Did you feel any confidence that the Portuguese wouldn't be passing out your whereabouts to the Japanese.

IS Oh yes. Quite confident. They were very much on our side.

GS Were they?

IS Yes. All the fifth column work took place in Kupang, before the Japs arrived. It didn't matter what we did in Kupang - you could do it at 9 o'clock at night and the Japs would be over next morning with their aircraft spot on.

GS If there was a target?

IS If there was a target, they knew about.

GS Was it a Dutch fifth column or what?

IS No it would be Indians, they were very crossbred, Chinese, Indians, Timorese, a hell of a mixture. They'd been in Kupang for donkey's years.

GS Well after Darwin did you go south?

IS Yes, to Adelaide and then Sydney and we got extended leave. then when we were all medically fit, we didn't have any units so we were just drafted back into the Army.

GS Where did you go?

IS I was sent down to training depot in Goulburn for a few months then up into Queensland, first to Esk then to Brisbane. And then we were sent up and held the line at Townsville very strongly until the end of the war. I was very conscious that I had to earn my pay up there.

GS Well, you'd had your share. Townsville's not a bad place really.

IS Oh yes. The Yanks were moving out when we got there which made life more bearable. We couldn't compete with them.

GS No. Buchanan's Hotel was theirs.

IS They had everything. They had dance bands and Saturday nights they sent a team of buses into town and park them there and all the birds would climb into the buses and they'd go out to the American Camps. They'd have the latest band unit out there and they had a slightly better rate of pay too.

GS And were they all Air Force?

IS In Townsville?

GS Yes.

IS No, when we were there they had a division in Armstrong paddock and they were moving out. I don't know how long they had been there. It might have been just an American staging camp. There were a lot of Airforce personnel operating out of Darwin. I was up in Townsville in late '43 and that's when they started to move out.

GS I was living in Mackay at that time. There was a lot from the US Fifth Air Force and there were more Americans there than Australians.

IS They sure did well. They had a totally different approach. It was total war as far as they were concerned, and all equipment when it was issued was written off. In the Australian Army when you got a scrubbing brush, you could only get a new scrubbing brush when you returned what was left of the old one. That was taking it to the extremes, but thats what The Australian Army was like. As far as the Yanks were concerned, once a Jeep was taken on strength, it was written off and you didn't have to account for it after that. Look at the stuff they left in New Guinea. God our blokes would have been bringing it back forever, as it was still on strength. They approached the war with the right attitudes. Everything was expendable. And they were generous. They would give you anything.

GS After the war, did you participate in Anzac Day marches.

IS I did, yes. Right from the first Anzac Day until about 1990. That's the last one I was in. I went to Gallipoli on that occasion for the 75th anniversary. Since then I've had a bit of leg trouble and I haven't marched since. I always go into town on Anzac Day and meet a few of the Timor blokes.

GS Is it still a fairly big turnout for Timor.

IS No, very small. Well the Sparrow Force came from all over Australia, and the Battalion, which as the main body of the force came from Tasmania, and reinforcements for the Battalion came from Victoria, and the 2/2 Independent Company came from Western Australia, and the anti-tank group came from Queensland, and the rest and a few small segments came from New South Wales, so it was never a big crowd even from the early Anzac Day. So now they would be lucky if they got 20 to 30, and it diminishes every year.

GS Did the Japs have any tanks there?

IS I believe they did land some in the main landing. There were 1500 of us all told, and they landed we estimate about 20,000 against us plus dropping the paratroops on the first morning and second morning. And I think after a couple of days they had tanks ashore, but I don't think they played any part, as the surrender took place on the Monday morning.

GS And would the tanks have stayed.

IS I doubt it, they would take them off. You know 20,000 was a big force. They made sure they cleaned it up in a couple of days. We had no airforce in any case.

GS Well I think, unless you can think of anything we haven't covered, we've probably -

IS I think we have just about covered it all, Gavin, thankyou.