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TRANSCRIPT
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Warren Maxwell Hind as a second lieutenant troop leader, C squadron 1st Armoured Regiment, South Vietnam, 1971.

Recorded
at: Brisbane
on: 11 February 1999
by: Gary McKay

Description

Transcribed by: Christopher Soames, November 2004

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Identification: This is Side A of Tape 1 of an interview with Warren Hind, recorded in Brisbane on 11 February 1999, for *Jungle Tracks, Australian Armour in Vietnam*.

Warren, the first question is pretty easy: Why did you join the army?

Because the government asked me to. In fact, the only lottery I ever won in my life was the national service one.

How old were you - twenty?

Yeah, when my birthday came out of the barrel; however, I was deferred for a couple of years and I didn't go into the army until I was twenty-two.

For what reason?

I was study accountancy at Swanbourne Tech through my employee who was the Country Roads Board in Victoria at the time.

When and where did you enlist?

Because I was a Victorian, Gary, I went in to the army through Melbourne, through the Swan Street depot on 2 October 1968. That was my call-up day, that's when I had to report for processing, then going to recruit training at Puckapunyal.

In fact, I'd had an introduction to the army prior to that because I was in the supplementary reserve for four years whilst I was a member of the Country Roads Board. The supplementary reserve wasn't unlike the CMF, only did a two-week camp each year and an occasional weekend. Being an engineer unit they used to go and blow up bridges - build bridges, and blow them up again. It was all good fun.

So I had a fair idea of what the army was going to be like because their recruit training was pretty good actually.

So when you went to Scheyville, did you graduate into armoured corps?

Yes, I did. The interesting part about it was, when I was selected to go to Scheyville, because of the intake at Scheyville at that time, if I had have graduated after the six months training I wouldn't have gone to Armoured Corps because it didn't coincide with the Armoured Corps intakes. I was very keen to go to Armour, and there's a background story to that too, and that was through my supplementary reserve service.

We did a camp at Puckapunyal one year and we had to build a Bailey bridge. Part of the try-out for this Bailey bridge, to see how good we were, was that thee Centurions appeared from over the hill, these gigantic pieces of equipment, and I thought, my goodness. Anyway, the guys were so good they let us have a look around the tanks, and they gave us a brew and everything, and I thought, if I ever join the army that's what I want to do.

Now, let's go back to Scheyville. If I had graduated at the right time I couldn't have gone to Armoured Corps, as I said. Through all sorts of reasons I was given a repeat senor term at Scheyville, and I think a few people had a hand in that because there were a couple of instructors there that I got to know, Armoured Corps guys, to whom I expressed the thought that I was pretty keen to go to armour. So I did a repeat term and that then coincided with an intake into Armoured Corps. So I eventually graduated from Scheyville in June 1969, so I basically did nine months there.

My intake didn't have an Armoured Corps graduate.

Yes, because it didn't coincide ...

Because they graduated in October '68.

Yes.

Okay, so that's how you got into Armoured Corps. So when and where did you do all this armour training?

I went to Puckapunyal, to Armoured Centre, in - in fact, I think we graduated about 29 June '69 from Scheyville, and we had to report for duty and start our armour training on 2 July, so we didn't have much of a break.

So I started in July '69 where, along with other graduates from - in fact, there were only Portsea graduates, plus the OTU guys, the Scheyville guys - and we commenced our training, armour officer training, in July '69. That ran right through until the end of November.

You said the officer training. What's the difference between the officer training and the trooper training?

Well, the troop would go there for specific training, like either tank driver, or armoured personnel carrier driver, or tank gunner, and radio operator courses, whereas the officers did all of them. And we not only did the tanks, but we did the APCs. So we started off with radio - we did the full radio course for tanks and APCs; then we did the driver training on both tanks and armoured personnel carriers; then we did gunnery, tank and APC gunnery - the heavy gun plus the smaller ones; and then we went to Tactics Wing where we did basically a crew commanders' course which was aimed at the troop-leader level. I must admit, the fellows - the instructors, the staff, and everybody at Armoured Centre - were excellent. A lot of them, of course, had had Vietnam service.

That must have taken a while.

Yeah, well, the course ran from July '69 through to the end of November '69. It was nearly a six months course.

So how many guys do you think started your training with you that were officers in that little course?

From memory I think there were twelve of us.

Did they all pass?

Oh, yes, everybody got through it.

Did guys ever get chucked off?

No. There was one New Zealander who came under a cloud for a number of reasons, but he eventually finished up in Vietnam with the Australians. But he went back to New Zealand at the end of the course and got posted to Vietnam. In fact, I caught up with him in Vietnam.

So let's run through the courses that you would have completed before going to Vietnam.

Okay. In 1970 - well, at the end of '69 those of us who went to the tanks were posted to 1st Armoured Regiment.

How was that decided?

Well, that was basically decided by the staff. You were given a choice whether you wanted to go to armoured personnel carriers or to tanks. I must admit, I thought the easiest way, and the best way, to get to Vietnam was to go with the armoured personnel carriers because they had a lot more people, a lot more soldiers, a lot more officers.

However, whilst we were doing our tactics phase, and near the end of our tactics phase at Armoured Centre, I was called aside by the OC of the Technics Wing, a Major Allan Vickers - in fact, he drove out and called me down from the tank and he said, 'What's this I see, that you want to go to armoured personnel carriers?' - am I allowed to swear?

Whatever you like.

He said, 'You are not fucking going there; you are going to tanks, Hind.' And I said, 'Oh, really, sir?' He said, 'Yes, you are too good a troop leader to go to tanks' - which I was quite chuffed about. He said that I'd topped the gunnery course, and also I topped the tactics course, so he was pretty keen for me to go to tanks. I said, 'Well, I'll have to sign on to do that, sir.' He said, 'Well, you'd better bloody sign on, hadn't you?'

So you didn't have any problems with signing on?

Not at all, not at all.

Had you thought much about Vietnam at that stage?

Yes, I think most of us had because after all that training - and there's another twelve months of training before we got to Vietnam - but having done all that training I must admit there was some militancy in me because once I got off to the tanks, and then through Major Allan Vickers, convincing him that I was

going nowhere except tanks, I thought, yeah, this is good.

So no regrets about leaving your civilian employment and all that. But the Armoured Corps were tanking a lot of casualties at that time. We had a lot of mine incidents, especially with units like 9 RAR ...

Yes.

... and 8 RAR, and all that, and we'd had a lot of mine casualties with armoured personnel carriers. I mean, you must have been hearing about it through the Armoured Corps network while you were at Pucka; was that putting you off?

No, not at all because - and please, that's not sounding flippant, or in hindsight - at twenty-two years old, of course, we were all six foot tall and bullet proof. But honestly, you never thought about it, and really, you didn't hear a lot about the casualties, it didn't come through to you whilst you were training, I think they probably kept that from us. Sure, we read newspapers and saw things on television, but I think it was the old story, it would never happen to me.

The thing about tanks, Gary, that there were only ever two crewmen killed in Vietnam in the tanks, and they were both drivers. So I thought my chances of wearing my fifty-two ton shirt (were good).

A good description.

That's how it really was. I flippantly regarded it as wearing a fifty-two ton shirt here, and only two drivers have been killed since 1968 when the tanks went over there. So I thought my chances of survival were probably pretty good. Now, I did discover, of course, that a few crewmen were wounded, but none of them were ever killed.

So going back to the courses you did. After you did this - what do they call it, the regimental officers' course?

It was called the YOs' course - the young officers' course.

So after the YOs' course what courses did you do then?

Okay. Then I went to 1st Armoured Regiment and we started to form the nucleus of C Squadron, of course, got everybody together prior to going to Vietnam. We knew that we could be going at the end of 1970, early 1971.

The other course I did, I went and did a mine warfare instructors' course at the School of Military Engineering at Casula. That occurred whilst we were doing our pre-Vietnam training with 1st Armoured Regiment. That was the only course that I did from memory.

Did you go to Canungra?

Yes, I did, the BE course - battle efficiency course.

So did you do that with your crew or with your squadron, or as an individual?

As an individual. There were some of my troop, or some of my crew there - none of the NCOs were there. The way it worked in Armoured Corps, it was like a trickly system in some respects, because of the national service guys coming home, some of our troops would be over there before we arrived. So we didn't go as a block, the squadron didn't go as a block, it sort of dribble fed into ...

Was it a took-week course?

Yes, it was, from memory - it felt more like two years.

Yeah, the short one.

Was there any reason why you did the mine warfare course, or was it just because you were armour?

Mine warfare, as you will appreciate, Gary, is an all arms things. I know, especially in Armoured Corps, because of the mine threat in Vietnam they liked to have people trained in mine warfare.

The mine warfare course, I think, went for about three or four weeks from memory. I finished up being a mine warfare instructor. Now, what I was able to do was, we were given a certificate and we could blow up claymores, we could blow up small explosives, we knew how to work the claymore mine, which I then had to teach the guys in the troop how to use.

I think at least two or three weeks long because they actually took that package and put it with the pioneer course for the infantry.

Yes.

And that included demolitions, improvised explosives, UXBs, claymore ticket ...

Minefields.

... laying and recording a minefield, that sort of stuff.

Exactly.

You said it was the longest two weeks of your life at Canungra. What was so special about Canungra for you as an Armoured Corps guy?

Well, the interesting thing was, having been through Scheyville, which was basically infantry orientated - and I didn't have a problem with that, I believe it was there for all the right reasons - well, the battle efficiency course at Canungra, of course, was really a continuation of that training at Scheyville. They made us platoon commanders and away we

went. But the think I was a bit whiffed about, of course, we weren't allowed to wear our black hats, we had to wear the 'giggle' hats.

There were a couple of incidents that really stick in my mind. The first one was - I think it was on day one or day two - all the officers were called out - and there weren't many of us on that BE course, only about four or five of us for some reason - we were called out by some of the staff. There's one person who sticks in my mind and that was Major Mike Jeffries who was there on the staff - and I'm pretty sure it was him, he had an SAS beret on. They basically laid the law down to us and told us that we weren't officers, we were just there as soldiers. Because it was all new to me I didn't have a problem with that because I'd been a soldier in the supplementary reserve anyway, and we played the game. It was against our grain a bit, not being able to wear our black berets.

> That's because you would have had to get a crowbar to get them off.

That's right.

> Was that BE course relevant to you?

Yes, it was. A lot of it wasn't because it was infantry minor tactics, a lot of it, but what had helped foster, or helped us learn, was the man-management skills, getting along with guys, living in the field with guys, and being part of a team, which I found to be very important later on in Vietnam. But it just helped weld it all together, even though we would never serve with those fellows again - we might, we might see some of them in Vietnam, we didn't know that at the time. But yeah, it was character building, it taught you a lot about your own self control, fitness, of course - we all came out of there with muscles on our muscles, in a lot of respects.

> If you look back on that two-week course, what are the things that you did that you remember the most? - if you can just run through a list of them.

Well, the first one was being told that we were no longer officers and we were soldiers, that always stuck in my mind, but I don't have any ill feeling about that.

The other one was, one of the instructors, who was an infantry sergeant, always stuck in my mind. He was very hard, but he taught me a lot because quite often at night we'd go off and sit down and have a little yak - he'd been to Vietnam as a corporal - and he taught me a lot, and he talked me through a lot of things that were happening in Vietnam, how to react, how operations went, and all that sort of thing. So I think, other than anybody else, that really stuck in my mind.

The other thing was the old Vickers machine gun firing over your head because I'd never heard an incoming round before. That was interesting. Doing that, the battle efficiency, through the minefield, through the wire.

The other thing I remember is losing my watch when I jumped off the tower in to the great bloody river ...

Into the creek.

My watch disappeared for some reason.

The other thing I remember is the lousy food.

On Battle Ridge?

Yeah.

Now, what type of exercise? When you went back, after the BE course, I take it you then went into work-up mode?

Yeah, actually, we were halfway through that.

So was the squadron going to go as a squadron, or were you trickled into a squadron for tanks?

Basically the idea was that the squadron would go as a squadron but, as I mentioned, Gary, because of national service and coming home, guys getting wounded, that sort of thing, there was always this trickle of fellows back to the operational squadron in Vietnam, or to the operational squadron in Vietnam. But the change over occurred pretty well *en masse* in December-January - December '70, January '71.

Is that the catalyst for the name or the designation change when the squadron commander goes?

Basically yes.

And your squadron commander was?

Major Peter Bourke, affectionately known at 'Punchy' Bourke. Where he ever got that nickname, I'm not too sure, but I think it stems back from his rugby union days.

So what sort of exercises did the squadron do - which was C Squadron?

Yes.

1 Armoured - what sort of exercises did you do before going to Vietnam?

What 1st Armoured Regiment did out in the rolling plains of the 'Pucka Punjab', they established what they called Nui Dat 2, which was 'Tent City'. The tanks - I can recall going out there in January 1970, and we went out and we lived in the field. They had field kitchens set up, we had tents like they had in Vietnam, the old A-frame tents, and we slept on stretchers, and we basically lived in the field. In fact, there were guys going on seven-days pre-embarkation leave and then to Vietnam, straight from the field. At the time it didn't worry me because

I was single and, as I said, six foot tall and bullet proof, and life was just one grand opera, sort of thing.

Now, we lived out there and we did many things. We did a number of infantry tank exercises with 3 RAR - must have been 4 RAR also, they must have come down for that; we did exercises with the armoured personnel carriers, of course, with the infantry; we did, well, full blown exercises based on the model - well, based on Vietnam, I suppose, the old cordon and search, the pre-dawn start, or the night-before start, the whole gambit of it.

Were you using those maps that had all the Vietnamese, that had been re-grided for Vietnam?

Yes, we did.

In Vietnamese - because you guys can drive down without using your map.

Yes.

Which I found out. I did an 'Iron Maiden' exercise ...

Yes, yes.

... with 9 RAR.

In fact, 'Iron' was just a similar one.

Well, to go back, I don't think 4 RAR did go down ...

I know it was 3 RAR.

... because when we were in Vietnam in '71 most of my soldiers had never seen a tank. I was one of the few people in the company, in my company, who had actually done an Armoured Corps exercise ...

Right.

... and worked with tanks. But I digress.

I remember seeing maps that had been re-grided and renamed, the features had been renamed with Vietnamese names. Did you use those?

Yes, we did. They built a mock village on the rolling plains of the 'Pucka Punjab' and stuck some palm trees around it - which died immediately - just to give it that flavour of Vietnam. In fact, I think somebody even found a couple of pieces of bamboo, or something like that, that they shoved in the ground; that didn't grow either. That village was called Duc Tan from memory, off the map. All the hills - there was the Nui Thi Vais, there was Nui Dat - where were we living out in the field in these tents? - 'Tent City', of course, was called Nui Dat. [Whitelaw] Hills, which were just behind this camp I think were renamed the Warburton Mountains or something - I can't remember

the name.

I would be interested to try and get one of those maps.

There would be one at Armoured Centre, in the museum, they've got them there.

I'll get 'Ratsoe' on to it. So you did some of these exercises with infantry battalions. Was it confined to the Pucka range?

Yes, we didn't move off the Puckapunyal range at all. We even had the helicopters come down from 5 Squadron with the trainee pilots - and there's some interesting stories there that I can tell you about.

You were doing things like maintenance in the field ...

Yes.

... and resupplies?

Yes.

So you are using your echelons to practise doing this sort of stuff?

Correct, yeah - the track load carriers. I know it's always good in hindsight - and, of course, I've got perfect hindsight ...

I might strike that out. Go on.

We had very few people, other than some of our NCOs, who'd been to Vietnam with the tanks previously. For example, my troop sergeant at the time had been over to Vietnam as a corporal - on the tanks as a corporal crew commander - but they didn't talk about it very much. Well, we just didn't have time because we were always on exercises.

When you went back, what percentage of the squadron were going for a second tour?

Um ... probably about ten per cent.

Pretty low.

Yeah, probably about ten per cent.

Do you consider yourself well prepared for it?

No, not at all.

Why?

We were prepared technically, not tactically, from the respect that unfortunately we couldn't take the rolling plains of the 'Pucka Punjab' to Vietnam, nor could they bring Vietnam to

Australia. Unless you'd been there you can't imagine what jungle is like; I'd never seen primary jungle anywhere like that in Australia. Canungra is pretty close in some respects.

Secondly, it didn't prepare you for the people, for the climate, for the food. It didn't prepare you for what appeared to be an endless supply of anything; by that I mean, the maintenance of the vehicles, spare parts, which were pretty hard to get in Australia, but they seemed to have a plethora of them in Vietnam.

Nobody really told you, or showed you photographs, of life in Vietnam. Some of the guys just wouldn't open up, they wouldn't talk about it either, the guys that had already done a tour of Vietnam. As I said, we didn't really have time, but I found that difficult when I arrived in Vietnam - which we'll probably talk about later.

The tactical and the technical training, yeah, was very good, we became very proficient in the operation of the Centurion tank. And also it helped weld the crews together, you got a good working relationship with your crews, and that held us in good stead once we got to Vietnam. So yeah, there were benefits in that.

> How much notice did the troopers and the troops *per se* get? How much notice did they get that they were actually going to deploy to Vietnam?

Really, nearly twelve months overall but, of course, with injuries, guys getting wounded, some of the guys went at very short notice, but not a lot of them - probably, out of the squadron, at the most ten.

> So for the bulk of the time your troop stayed in tact?

Yes, it did, yes, especially the crew commanders, which was very good. When I got to Vietnam, in fact, my troop sergeant, the troop corporal - the other three crew commanders - beat me to Vietnam by about two weeks.

> Well, we'll get onto deployment. How did you get to Vietnam?

Oh, courtesy of a big silver bird called Qantas.

> So you leave your tanks behind?

Yes.

> And you arrive in Vietnam and you get the tanks that are there?

That's right.

> Any unusual incidents about your deployment or posting?

Well, there is a coincidence that actually turned out to be

tremendous. As I said, we did some training with the helicopters from 5 Squadron, and one of the guys - in fact, I became great friends with one of the pilots, a fellow called Rhys James. In fact, oh, we had a bit of a break, Rhys and I, because, as I said, I wasn't married and I was young and single. So Rhys and I went down on the [ramtam] to Melbourne one night and had a great time. In fact, he knew a couple of young ladies down there.

But coincidentally, when I arrived to get on the Qantas flight at Mascot, lo and behold, who should be across the darkened room, among 150 guys getting ready to go to Vietnam, was Rhys James, the helicopter pilot. There are some funny stories that will come out later on about things that happened in Vietnam.

In fact, I just want to relate something. The first time I ever heard a helicopter pilot, when they called me on the radio - and this was in Puckapunyal - they will sort of come up and say, 'Tango 3, Tango 3, this is Red Legs 7-4', and I always thought well, gee, these guys talk funny; but then I worked out it was the rotor blades. Until they actually shot down one of the helicopters and this fellow Rhys James came over, he said, 'Hello, my name is Rhys James', and I thought, oh, no, he's got something wrong with him, it's not the rotor blades. All helicopter pilots tend to talk like a vibrator.

> So you weren't a reinforcement replacement, you are actually part of a squadron deployment?

Yes.

> Right-oh. So in to Saigon, then down to Vung Tau, or down to Nui Dat?

Straight to Nui Dat - but can I tell you a little story about Saigon?

You'd always like to be there a week before with the guy you are going to replace. Now, we got off this lovely big Boeing 707 Qantas aircraft, and had a jolly time on the way over, and one of the things that always stuck in my memory is that they gave us this boxed lunch as we got off the aircraft in the morning - because we had breakfast in Singapore. In fact, that's an interesting story.

Singapore wouldn't allow Australian forces to transit through Singapore, so what we had to do, we had to take a civilian shirt with us. Here are 150 bright-eyed, bushy-tailed guys, short hair, some with moustaches, wearing GP boots, polyester trousers, and a civilian shirt. But we weren't soldiers, see. So we were herded into this little cafeteria, fed plastic eggs and what somebody thought was bacon - but, as it turned out later on - we all thought it was lovely and crispy until we discovered that they were beer coasters we were eating by mistake - anyway, then back on to the aircraft.

But no, there was never any Australian soldiers transited through Singapore, we were civilians.

So you get into Saigon, given that boxed lunch, and then you went on a Caribou to ...

No, we had to sit around in Saigon for a couple of hours until the Caribous arrived, or until they were slotted in to take us to Nui Dat. But there are just a couple of things I want to relate.

As I got off the aircraft to get on to the American bus system that took us down to where the Wallaby flights left from, who should get off the bus but the guy I'm replacing, Gordon Jones. So all his crew were going home and my crew were arriving. I said, 'Oh, g'day, Gordon, how's things?' He said, 'Have a good time, mate, I'll see you, I'm off.' So that was our hand-over.

Yeah, it's a bit strange, isn't it?

Unusual, unusual, but that's the way it happened.

As I said, the first thing that hit me was the heat because I'd never experienced heat like that in my life - the humidity! But the other thing that struck me as being very odd was, firstly, the noise of Saigon; but most of us, because of the heat, weren't hungry.

(break in interview)

You said you weren't hungry. If I can just back-track one step; what was the atmosphere like amongst the people on the plane?

Pretty good actually because there was a mixture, we weren't all army. There was air force guys and, in fact, there were a couple of navy guys. And I didn't discover until, oh, about five years after Vietnam, where the navy guys went to, but that's another story, completely another story.

Yeah, it was pretty relaxed. I think some of the guys had already been to Vietnam, some of them had done tours, and they were smart enough to pack their hip flasks to lessen the pain because on the way over it was two cans before you got to Darwin to refuel, and that was it. A lot of guys were pretty tired.

You said you weren't hungry.

Yeah. We were well fed on the aircraft, and when they gave us this boxed lunch - I think it was the humidity that was so stifling, and I think it was also adrenalin pumping too. Here we were, in a war zone, so we were all busting out of our skin to get at it.

But there was this wait at Tan Son Nhut for about two hours, I think, from memory - it was about two hours. Anyway, what most of us did, we drank the fruit juice and ate the fruit out of these boxed lunches - which were very nice, they were packed like Qantas, sandwiches and all sorts of things - but we didn't

feel like eating it. I remember, most of us put them in these big rubbish bins that were near where the Australian Air Force came in with their Caribou flights. Then, within seconds, there was like a swarm of locusts arrived, and I thought, what's going on here? All the locals; I don't know where they came from, but they ratted through all our boxed lunches that we'd thrown out, and they were separating the plastic knifes and forks into various things. I thought, what's going on here?

Now, one of the thing we weren't prepared for was the poverty that existed in places like Saigon and various other places in Vietnam. So that was a bit of an eye opener and I just sort of sat there with my mouth agog thinking, why are they doing this? why are they taking our leftovers? Of course, it became painfully obvious to me, within days, as to what was going on.

So you get to Nui Dat, you go down to the squadron lines; was there an advance party?

Yes, the OC was already there, most of my troops were already there - my troop sergeant, he'd been there a couple of weeks, in fact, maybe even a month. I inherited quite a lot of troopers from the fellow that I replaced - Gordon Jones, a nice bloke - so I sort of took over some of the guys who had been there for nearly twelve months - I think they'd been there about ten months so some of them were pretty old hands.

There was a little bit of friction, I think, initially because I didn't know them, they didn't know me, we hadn't trained together - because my guys were still coming, they'd dribble in over the next couple of weeks. I remember the first conversation I had with my troop sergeant and the two corporals. They were a bit miffed about some of these fellows because they were the old hands, they were the old warriors, they'd been there for about ten or eleven months and all they wanted to do was go home. They didn't want to go to war any more, they want to go out on operations any more. There was a fair bit of bad blood there.

Well, it is probably understandable because they didn't know who was going to be leading them.

That's right, yes, they didn't know me; they knew of me, but they didn't know me.

Strange system.

It certainly was. In fact, there were a couple of nasty incidents, which were only personality things, personality clashes. In fact, one of the fellows pulled a knife on somebody in the boozer one night and, oh, it wasn't very pleasant. We didn't know it had happened until the guy was hauled over to the MPs.

So what was your initial job on arriving in country?

I was a tank troop leader; I remained in that position for my whole tour of Vietnam. The first thing to do was really to get

round to meet people, have a look at the Nui Dat base, find out the layout, find out where all the sentry spots were, where the entrances and exits to the Nui Dat base were, where the tanks could go in, where they could go out, that sort of thing.

And also the technical officer, Captain Dave Watts, took the new troop leaders - I think there was basically two of us, myself and Bruce Cameron - took us on a cook's tour of the southern part of all around Nui Dat. We went up as far as Ngai Giao, up Route 2; we went down to the Horseshoe.

In Phuoc Tuy Province?

Yeah, in an armoured personnel carrier, without escort. I thought, oh, this is just like a Sunday drive; it reminded me of driving around the Dandenongs in Melbourne.

So what time is this?

This was early February '71.

Most of the roads were 'green' by day anyway.

Yes, that's right. North of Ngai Giao, I think they were 'red'.

At night they were.

Yeah. Well, you needed escort ...

You needed escort during the day. I think they were 'yellow' if you had to have an escort, and 'red' was, don't be nuts without air cover.

Yeah.

So how long was it after you arrived before you actually got in a Centurion and went outside the wire?

From memory, I think it was about three days.

What did you do then?

We went to the Hoa Long dance - or was it the Dat Do dogs? - I'm not too sure - well, just south of Nui Dat was Hoa Long, wasn't it?

Yeah.

The tanks used to go out and do what they called the 'Hoa Long ambush' which, I think, was devised by tank squadron commanders to get the troops out of their hair for the night. What we used to do, we'd go out at sunset, set up a small defensive position with the four tanks, and pretend that we were set up in an ambush position around Hoa Long - or in the side of Hoa Long - it was normally on the north-western side.

So the troop comprised four tanks?

Four tanks, sixteen people - four per tank - sixteen soldiers - troopers.

So the troop organisation was troop leader, troop sergeant ...

Yes - a senior troop corporal.

Both of you are tank commanders?

Yes. The troop leader, the troop sergeant, the troop corporal, and the next corporal, were all crew commanders. Then you had, obviously, three other crewmen within the tank.

One of the things that the training in Australia was good for was, even as an officer, or a sergeant, or a corporal crew commander, if you didn't get along with the other three crew members in your tank life could be pretty miserable. But part of the training and part of the - I think the in-word is these days is 'bonding' - but getting to know the guys. One of the challenges that I always found a lot of satisfaction in when it happened was getting people to work with you, not for you. I think my training, and probably part of my civilian life prior to going into the military, stood me in very good stead.

It's almost like SAS, I guess, it really comes down to small team dynamics, doesn't it?

It does indeed, yeah, it really does, Gary. And that's what I found very satisfying, was getting this group of sixteen guys to work with you, and to be able to react to any situation, in a lot of respects without being told what to do. But they always had a high regard for me.

I don't know about other corps, but in Armoured Corps, when the guys eventually called you 'boss' - called you 'boss' or 'skipper' - in Armoured Corps it was normally 'boss', that means you were accepted.

You no longer became 'sir'.

Correct.

It's interesting, isn't it?

And if they didn't salute you, and they said, 'G'day, mate', well, you were really in then.

Describe the task of the tanks in Vietnam.

The tanks had a number of tasks, as I saw it. They were there primarily to support the infantry operations, which none of us had a problem about. Now, that was fine. We were also there to provide defence for the artillery fire support bases - and I'll relate about that later on - convoy escorts. I think the tanks surprised a lot of the pundits who said that they would never perform in Vietnam.

The old Centurion tank, although it had a very high - well, it's rather interesting, a Centurion tank has lower ground pressure than what we are exerting sitting in this chair - it is 12.7 psi. I think we exert around about 17.4 sitting on a chair. The tanks operated in a lot of areas that people just didn't think that they could. In fact, I think they were a bloody good scare tactic too.

Definitely.

Especially when you carry big guns with big bullets.

What was your first impression of the task that confronted you in Vietnam?

Well, my first task, of course, was the Hoa Long ambush. I must admit, as I said to you, we went out with searchlights blazing, just on dusk, and came in just on dawn, with searchlights blazing, making a lot of noise. I think it was the second night, or the second time I went out. What we used to do, we used to back the tanks into each other so we formed this perimeter of steel looking outwards. I think it was the second one I was on.

Being south of the main base at Nui Dat the artillery used to, quite often, fire harassment and interdiction, H&I, at night, and they had some American 155s at Nui Dat, which I'd never seen before, and had never seen a gun that big. I'll never forget, I was sitting on the lid of my tank, talking to the other crew members and the other crew commanders, and the first thing I knew was crack! crack! crack! over the top of my head. The next thing I knew was that I was looking up, out of the tank, with my other crew members peering down at me, saying, 'What are you doing down there, boss?' because I'd never heard artillery fire over the top of us. You hear the crack! crack! crack! of the round going over, and a second later you hear the thump! thump! thump! of the gun. Well, I was down inside the tank, closed down, smoking my first nervous cigarette, with the gun ready to fire. I reckon it all happened in about 0.5 seconds.

What did you have to do in Vietnam different from in Australia, apart from the obvious one of vegetation?

It was more relaxed. Sure, discipline was still there, but it was a more relaxed atmosphere with the guys in the troop because - and I think that was brought about by the natural Australian character of everything's alright, mate, we are all going to look after each other, so the strict saluting at anything that moved, and painting all the rocks white, that sort of thing, it just wasn't there. Your dress standards relaxed to an extent that - we had clothing in Vietnam that just wasn't available in Australia - I think they called them the 'pixie greens' or something, 'pixie' shirts, where you could actually wear your shirt hanging out. Nobody told us that was going to happen when bang, you arrive there.

Well, you know, (you maintain) your personal hygiene, your

weapons were always ready, they were always cleaned. We all made sure our own personal weapons were always clean and ready to go because the humidity in Vietnam, of course, made things rust.

What is the personal weapon that a tanker carries?

The crew commanders always carried pistols, it was the Browning 9 millimetre, and that was the FN 9 millimetre pistol. The other crewmen actually carried - well, they all liked to carry pistols because they were easier to handle, they were easier to wear, as a tank crewman. Some of the guys had the F1, but I must admit, I think nearly every tank had a SLR on it because they were a good pig weapon.

You mentioned the 'pixie' shirts. You didn't wear tank suits?

No, they were just too hot, too heavy. In fact, I don't think anybody had any tank suits in Vietnam; they were probably available, but nobody wore them.

So you wore those lightweight greens with 'pixie' shirts. Headdress?

Yeah, it varied. A number of the guys wore their berets; the drivers rarely wore anything; the gunners, sitting inside the tank, normally didn't wear any headdress. I, in fact, wore an American style baseball cap, I found that very comfortable to wear, especially with the head sets.

Because the beret was too hot?

Yes, it was, and you had to wash it all the time because of the dust. A lot of crewmen tended not to wear any headdress if it was possible.

Because of head sets?

Yeah, wearing the head sets all the time, you had them on all the time.

So you are the troop leader and you've got these guys, and you are also a crew commander. As the troop leader what is the most important part of your job?

Well, the most important part, of course, was keeping the guys informed of what was going on. Every day we used to have briefings on - in fact, quite often I used to attend the briefings held by the battalion commanders, especially getting the intelligence briefings, were always very good, and that information was always readily made available to the tank squadron.

One of the tasks as a troop leader, if you were back in Nui Dat base, on behalf of the squadron commander you used to go on ten-days' briefing - and the morning prayers.

Did you used to go to prayers as an LO, more or less?

Basically as an LO.

Just to pick up the guts?

Yeah. Well, as an LO that'd always keep the tank squadron informed of what was going on, the operations they were involved in, any intelligence. I used to enjoy the intelligence briefings over at 4 RAR because their intelligence officer was a very clever guy. I can always remember going over - but I was always made welcome too. And it was mixing with the other parts of the Australian Army.

As a crew commander what's the most important part of your job?

Well, the most important part of your job was to make sure you tank was properly maintained and operating, and it was always operationally ready. But along with that, and not second to it, was always to make sure your crew were okay, that they were in high spirits and always ready to go.

I must admit, even to today, of the twenty-one guys that I had in my tank troop in the time I was in Vietnam, I still keep in touch with sixteen of them. One has subsequently died, but I'll talk about that later on.

You mentioned the most important part about your job. Now, this is a slightly different angle; what was important about your job as a troop leader? What was important about your job?

Mm.

I'll give you another angle. It will probably come out as we talk about operations, and I think it really has to do with being the link - because you mentioned communications - what types of operations did your troop conduct, and with whom?

Well, the first big operation that I went on was a convoy escort from Nui Dat nearly up to the base of the May Taos, up through Xuan Loc - and I think it was Route 52 from memory - and that was a combined escort. We had armoured personnel carriers, had my tank troop plus a tank dozer and a bridge layer - tank bridge layer. It wasn't quite a troop of armoured personnel (carriers) - it might have been a troop of armoured personnel carriers - they had an armoured command vehicle.

We were taking some infantry up to secure a road junction just south of the May Taos, that was going to be established as a fire support base. We went through all the briefings and all that sort of thing, and then issuing orders. The tanks basically led the convoy up, basically.

Now, just before I left I spoke to one of the other tank troop leaders who had been up that same route about two or three

months previously, and that was Chris [Prickett], and he said to me, 'Watch that track' - it was suppose to be a road, but it was a track, a dirt track, up through to the May Taos. He said, 'When I went up there I straddled the track.' In other words, what he did with his tanks was, he had, say, his right-hand tank track on the edge of the road, and his left-hand tank track on the verge, basically beside the road.

I thought, well, if Chris has done that, what I'm going to do is travel straight up the middle of the road because he didn't come back down the same route, he went out through another way and came back in to Xuan Moc from another area. So I deduced that if that road had been mined after he went through, they would have planted the mines in the tracks on the verge of the road rather than in the centre of the road, thinking that he would come back the same way. So therefore I'll just barrel up the middle of the road.

And, as it turned out, it was the right decision because although we had a mine incident - which I'll relate to you shortly - we got to a bridge that had been blown out many, many months previously. That's where we used the tank dozer and the bridge layer to get this convoy across.

Anyway, we got all the convoy across the bridge, which was put down by the bridge layer. He picked the bridge up and was just ... To get the convoy back into the right order we had to back a couple of the tanks off the road, which then put the rear of the tanks into the tracks that Chris had used previously, some months before. Lo and behold, just as one of the tanks is coming back out on the road there's this huge explosion. I thought, hello - probably a bit like the mayor of Hiroshima - 'What the fuck was that?'

Anyway, as it happened, one of the tanks had just clipped the edge of a - not a command-detonated mine, but a pressure-release mine. It caused a lot of damage.

An anti-tank mine?

No ... it could have been an anti-tank mine, but what it consisted of we were never too sure. There's this huge explosion, this enormous dust cloud went up, and the tank disappeared. I thought, oh, no, I don't need this.

We are a long way from Nui Dat by this time, we area nearly up to the base of the May Taos when this occurred. I thought, oh, no, here we go; week one, lost four crew members, lost a tank. Anyway, when the dust settled I was relieved to see the four crew members standing on the back of the tank looking at the damage - and there was quite a fair bit of damage to the tank actually.

What it did was break the track, blew the final drive off the back - that just all disappeared, basically vaporised. The crewmen were more concerned about the sledge hammer that was sitting on the back of the tank, that completely disappeared, than what had happened to their tank.

The fireball that occurred went up through the engine, blew off a plate inside the tank, and went out through the crew commander's hatch and the operator's hatch, and blew the beret and the headphones off the crew commander.

Now, this all sounds very funny because (it is) after the event, and (this occurred) some years previously, but at the time the most hilarious thing, the thing that relieved me, was when the dust settled, here were the four guys standing on the back of the tank, looking at the damage. So I felt very relieved.

So no-one got wounded?

Nobody was hurt.

Would have been shaken and stirred.

Oh, yeah, they sure were. I think a few packets of cigarettes and a couple of cups of coffee later they were alright.

So you did convoy escort. What other types of task did you do?

Well, as I mentioned previously, the Hoa Long ambushes, which never achieved anything - I think because of the noise of the tanks and just the fact the tanks were there.

They'd have to be nuts.

Yeah, that's right; who'd take them on?

SAS insertion we did one day, that was an interesting little exercise actually.

You carried them on the tanks?

No, they were carried in APCs. We went out on the pretence of - it was nearly a troop of APC which was - what? - thirteen-odd vehicles, but it was less than an APC troop so there were probably about ten APCs.

Inside the APCs somewhere was an SAS patrol that had about five guys. I only saw them briefly when they were dropped off. Now, on the pretence of these armoured personnel carriers carrying a whole lot of infantry, my tank troop was asked to escort them up the - I've forgotten the name of the fire trail - goes in behind the Warbiton Mountains.

Firestone.

Firestone trail. I'd never been up there. Again, I sought some local knowledge of some troop leaders that had been through there, and spoke to the APC guys, and they said, now, tread carefully. I think it was that time that actually fifty-two tons of Centurion tank was travelling approximately two inches above the ground all the way because we knew that was a pretty

volatile area.

We escorted the armoured personnel carriers in there, and at some stage - of which I'm not too sure - the SAS guys disappeared.

Just got out?

Got out.

A rolling deployment?

Correct. That night we deployed the armoured personnel carriers and the tanks into an ambush position. What we were intending doing - in fact, what was intended - the operation was in intended that we come back out around the top of the Warbiton Mountains and come back in through ... near Binh Ba - at Ngai Giao, is it? - no; what was that little village just north of Nui Dat, on the left-hand side?

There's a couple at Ngai Giao, but Ngai Giao is north of Nui Dat.

There was one on the left-hand side, just north or Nui Dat. I had that bloody map I'd be able to remember the names. But anyway, it was intended that we do a full circle and come back out, but because one of the creeks or rivers up behind the Warbiton Mountains was flooded we couldn't come out there. So what we had to do was, we put in an ambush on the northern end of the Firestone Trail that night, and we spent the night in behind the Warbiton Mountains in ambush.

Now, an armoured ambush at night time, creaks and groans carry on because as the vehicles cool down in the cool of the night the metal contracts and they make all sorts of noises.

I know. I did one with Denzil Bourne once, the noise was incredible.

So what was the normal duration of an operation for you guys?

It's a bit hard to put a figure, put a time frame, on that, Gary. That one was a couple of days' operation; the one up to the base of the May Taos, the convoy escort there, turned out to be three days because we had to get that Centurion tank that hit the mine, we had to get that repaired, all that parts were flown into it by Chinook.

I'd just like to go back there; there is an interesting little story about ... that was basically my first time out in the jungle, in the thick primary jungle. Now, one thing they never told us was about fireflies. I'd never seen a firefly before in my life. Being my first operation - I'd been in country about a week - I went on piquet duty at six o'clock that night because it gets dark at six o'clock at night. I was still on piquet duty, wide awake, bright eyed and bushy tailed at six o'clock the next morning when the sun came up because I'd never seen

fireflies.

Not only that, nobody told me they had elephants in Vietnam, or tigers. And as true as I sit here, an elephant trumpeted what I imagined to be right beside my tank, about ten o'clock at night. It stood everybody to instantly. And you could hear it crashing through the jungle - it was probably 200 metres away. But that, combined with the fireflies - and honestly, I didn't know that the Viet Cong or the enemy were so small and carried so many torches, until I worked out what they were, especially when one landed on my 30 calibre machine gun, right in front of me. I thought, what is that thing blinking at me? See, nobody taught us that, nobody even thought to mention it - especially the elephant.

So your time out really varied with the task?

Yes, it did. You couldn't say you'd go out for a week because I had to go and provide support and protection for a fire support base called Lindy, which was up off Route 2, just on the southern end of the Cam My rubber complex. It was on the western side of Route 2, north of Ngai Giao. And lo and behold, when I arrived - do you want to hear the story of why I went there?

Keep going.

There was an incident - wrong; first I knew I was going to be deployed, and I think I'd then been in country about a month - this was towards the end of February. Our AC came down to see me, Major Peter Bourke. Dear old Peter Bourke had an unusual characteristic, you could always see that he was very deep in thought and it took a while for him to get out what he wanted to say to you. A very thoughtful man, but I've also a lot of respect for the man too, and there's a number of reasons for that.

He came down to see me, a man of very few words, and he said, 'How quickly can you move?' I said - and this was about five-thirty one afternoon - I said, 'Ready to go now, sir.' He said, 'Good', and away he went. And I thought, well, now, hang on, is that an invitation for me to go and do something or is that a warning order, to get ready to move?

Then early next morning he came down to the troop lines and saw me again. He said, 'Do you know where Call Sign 2 is?' and I said, 'Yes, sir' - because I had all the other troops out deployed, you always had them on your operational battle map, you always had their locations. And he said, 'Move now.' I said, 'Yes, sir.' So I roused the troop out and away we went - we were always ready to go.

You mean to say you were always ready to go? If you had a troop out and you had two troops back - I presume there were two troops in the squadron, or three?

There were four troops. In fact, in Vietnam, towards the latter half of 1971, they created a fifth troop which was unusual, but

it became an operational necessity because of the things that were going on around in June, July, August.

So what degree of notice would you be on normally?

Normally an hour. Now, let's say there were two tank troops back in Nui Dat and there were two out on operations, one of the tank troops back in Nui Dat is probably doing a bit of R&C, a lot of them - most of them - but there was always one tank troop basically on - what did we used to call them?

Ready reaction.

Ready reaction force - they were always part of the ready reaction force.

Are you saying (inaudible) notice?

Yeah - and the fifteen minutes might have meant a troop of bloggs might have been out cultivating his marijuana behind the tank and you just had to get him ready, or something like that - 'Come on Bloggsey, let's go. You can leave the tilling till later on.' So yeah, I was probably, at that stage, the ready reaction troop and I was ready to go.

So anyway, next morning - I think it was pretty early, it was about five-thirty, six o'clock, in the morning - down came the OC and he said, 'Go', and I said, Yes, sir.' I wasn't sure where I was going. So we got ready and we set off. 'I'll give you orders on the radio.' So we started to drive out. All the guys, the tanks, I couldn't tell the guys very much. They said, 'Where are we going, boss?' and I said, 'I don't know. It's not back to Australia, but we are going somewhere.'

I thought, seeing he'd said the night before we had Call Sign 2 - I knew where Call Sign 2 was, so luckily I went out the right gate, I went out the 'pearly gates' on to Route 2 and started heading north. Sure enough, I was to go up there and replace Call Sign 2. I didn't know why I was going to replace Call Sign 2 because I knew he was up there supporting, providing protection for the fire support base.

When I arrived I thought, hello, something has happened here because half the wire entanglements around the fire support base had disappeared. I thought, goodness, something odd has happened, and I wasn't sure (what it was).

Anyway, I got off my tank because 3 Troop, in their inevitable 'silence' - probably a bit like Kelly's Heroes in some ways - we arrived with drums beating and flags waving. I got off to talk to the other troop leader, and he was standing there like a very forlorn puppy with a hang-dog look. I said, 'Oh, g'day mate. What's going on? What the hell's happened here?' because I could see there'd been some damage somehow. He just looked at me and went, 'We had a UD with a canister round.' I said, 'Really? What have you done?' Well, the fire support base shower block was no longer in existence, the 5,000 gallon water bladder was like somebody had stuck it like porcupine quills,

and it was empty, of course, and the ground was all very wet around it. I said, 'Oh, dear. Who did that?' - 'I did.' I said, 'You had something to do with the canister round?'

Just to explain, a canister round is like buckshot except it comes out of an 84 millimetre cannon, or 82 millimetre cannon; 700 pieces of mild steel get blown out of there, just like a scatter gun, like a shotgun.

So he was asked to go back to Nui Dat?

Yes. I didn't know all this at the time, of course; I wondered why we had been sent out to replace Call Sign 2. Call Sign 2, holus-bolus, of course, disappeared as Call Sign 3. Then I spoke to the fire support base commander, who happened to be a guy that I went through Scheyville with, Peter Kilpatrick. 'Killer' and I were good mates so we settled into the routine of looking after each other - minus the shower block which actually was rebuilt later on.

What sort of operations did you like or not like, or didn't it matter?

It honestly didn't matter. One of the hardest operations I found was when we got into contact with the infantry. Now, the problem was that the radios in the tanks weren't compatible with the 25 set, so as tank crew commanders we had to carry a 25 set strapped on top of the tank so that we could at least talk to the local infantry commander or the one that you were supporting - and the helicopters.

I didn't dislike working with the infantry, don't get me wrong, it was the hardest task because of this. The bloody problems we had trying to talk to the guys. It was tremendous to support the infantry, but in primary jungle the difficult part was keeping that liaison with where the forward troops on the ground were because as the infantry, and all the other corps, realised the tank, with its canister rounds, and some of the other rounds, was good at clearing jungle and making things visible. If four tanks fired canister all at once, mate, you cleared a bloody rugby field, strip the trees, strip everything. In fact, that worked to our benefit in a number of cases, especially being able to expose bunker systems so the infantry could get in there, or the tanks could even get closer to them, to either blast them out or support the infantry into those bunker systems. But the command and control was always difficult, only because of the terrain.

What made you apprehensive on operations?

Not being able to see, probably, eye to eye the enemy, it was difficult to see. That was probably the hardest thing, that made me apprehensive.

Was that because you are closed down, or did you prefer not to go closed down?

Preferred not to go closed down because then your vision was so

restricted, and in some cases to our detriment actually. We used to keep the drivers opened up also, even though they'd drop their seats down and drop their heads down. It an RPG hit a tank, especially if it hit in the front, the drivers used to wear some of the splash. It depended on the circumstances again and how heavy the contact was. But as crew commanders were preferred to stay opened up.

And there was a funny incident one day on Operation Overlord up in Long Tan Province, where we were supporting you guys, I think. We got into a very big fire fight. Bruce Cameron, in fact - the infantry triggered the bottom of that huge camp complex where the NVA were - I think it was 24 Regiment were encamped. Eventually, as I found out, it was just like something we had at Canungra, like a jungle training camp. They had rope, bloody walkways set up, and cargo net things - an incredible camp, incredible system, a bunker system.

Anyway, as I eventually got in there to help support Bruce Cameron we came in guns blazing. And I must admit, all you could see of me were two big eyes looking out, plus probably my headset. I thought discretion is the better part of valour so I got down inside the tank.

Anyway, at one stage, when we got heavily into the fire fight, my operator and I were leaning over the back of the tank, pulling - because we had a rack on the back of it with 30 calibre and 50 calibre machine gun containers - and we are pulling these things in. And I just looked up, and the thing that struck me was very odd: what the heavens above is a big black bird doing flying through the jungle? Then it hit a tree and exploded and I thought, good lord! that bird blew up. As it was, it was an RPG round that went off just above my head. I saw it coming - I did - my first reaction was that it was a bird flying through the jungle in amongst all this fire fight.

Anyway, I suppose it was about twenty feet above me, this thing went whack into a tree, and ka-boom! part of the tree fell down - it didn't hurt us. Then I looked at my operator loader, a fellow called Russ Bird, and he is bleeding from his ear to his chin. I thought, bloody hell. In fact, he said, 'Something bit me', and I said, 'No, Russ, something didn't bite you. Just wipe your face', and he wiped his face and his hand was covered in blood, and he said, 'Good heavens, what's that?'

As it turned out it was only a very small piece of shrapnel which had gone into his cheek bone, up near his ear. Being very thin the blood just ran out of it and was dripping off his chin. I thought he had been cut from his chin to his ear, that was my initial reaction.
Anyway, as it turned out, we just stuck a bandaid on it and it eventually stopped bleeding. When the fire fight finished one of the medics came along with a piece of tweezers and pulled this little piece of metal out of his cheek bone - didn't even need stitching.

You didn't get hit?

No, I didn't.

Bloody amazing.

How, I don't know.

When we are talking about apprehension, what about anything that scared you when you were out there?

Yeah, well, I previously mentioned the incident with the elephant, week one, when the mine went off that blew ... yeah, that scared me. And the bloody fireflies.

What else did I get scared about? Oh, one day, when I was up at this fire support base Lindy with Peter Kilpatrick, during the daytime we used to just rumble out as a tank troop with arrangements with Peter, who really was the OC of the fire support base, even though we were both second lieutenants - he was the boss, he was in charge, and that was fine, we did cooperate. We'd get little AOs and go out and just run around, not in primary jungle; we'd run into the Cam My rubber to have a look.

One of the things that, in some respects, scared me was that one day we went down to Ngai Giao to get some ice to keep the [goffers] cold, and also the artillery guys wanted some ice. So we'd go down to Ngai Giao and get ice. One day I went in there with the tank troop, four Centurion tanks, and I was just uneasy about being there this particular day because there weren't many people around. Ngai Giao wasn't a big village, but it had a school and there were no kids around. There were some young guys in the black pyjamas that I've never seen before - because we used to rumble in and out of Ngai Giao reasonably often - and they looked pretty fit. Anyway, I asked them for their ID cards, which they had, of course - I think everybody had an ID card, whether it was made in the local shop or whether it was an official one - didn't matter.

I must admit, that day I was a little bit scared. I thought, hello - because the villagers weren't there, and there weren't many people about. I just had the impression that people were watching us from behind the closed doors or something.

You get a sixth sense.

Yeah. Anyway, I said to Phil Reeves, my troop sergeant, I said, 'Phil, how do you feel?' he said, 'I don't know.' I said, 'Let's get out of here.' If that's being scared - yeah, I was apprehensive, I was.

I know what you mean.

Just didn't want to be there that day.

What was the main difference between operating in the wet and the dry season for you?

Probably a lot. During the dry season you were exactly that,

and during the wet season, of course, the difficulty with the wet season was - you could set your watch by when the rains were on, it was always four o'clock in the afternoon from memory.

It all depends where you were in relation to the coast.

Yeah. I can never remember being in the wet during the daytime, it was always at night. That made things difficult. You could never completely seal the Centurion tank up. Firstly, you didn't want to because if you were inside and all sealed up, and you had no other protection, well, that was crazy because you became a bloody moving coffin, in some respects, if somebody wanted to have a go at you.

We always found that it was best to try and get out into an open area at night time, during the wet season, rather than be in primary jungle; you'd try and get out into a clearing somewhere, if you were on your own.

Because you can't hear anything.

Correct - and you can't see anything. At least if you are in a bit of an opening you might have a bit of warning that somebody is sloshing through the jungle or through the rain. That's what I found difficult about it.

The other thing about the wet season, it tended to restrict the tanks on where they could go, you always had to use the formed tracks. I know a lot of the creek lines used to get a lot of water in them. You were restricted on the areas that you could go into. The ground became very boggy.

I must admit, luckily, or fortunately, my tank troop never got into a situation where it got bogged and needed assistance to get out. I know it happened to some of the other troops where they got into areas - and, of course, you could never pick it, because we didn't know what was underneath the grass or underneath the jungle. They'd get in and they'd get bogged, but we had the means, of course, to extract them with the recovery vehicles - the armoured recovery vehicles, that sort of thing.

You went with the Australian infantry and the SAS. You mention you only saw them briefly, but what was your impression of the Australian infantry?

I had a tremendous respect for them, namely because my basic training was infantry. One of the things Scheyville taught me ...

We'll just stop.

(break in interview)

Did you ever work with the ARVN?

I don't recall that we did. No. The only time I had any contact with the ARVN or the regional forces was up in Duc Thanh, which

was basically - I think it was an ARVN base, wasn't it, just before you got to Ngai Giao.

A big RF outpost.

Yeah. A couple of times I just went in there to say hello. Actually we had a tank liaison officer at Duc Thanh for quite some time, and in fact, Ian [Farren], one of the troop leaders, went up there as the LO. Whether he was a task force LO or a tank squadron LO, I'm not too sure, but I know Ian was up there for a time. And I think there was an Armoured Corps warrant officer there. But that's the only time.

But that was relatively rare.

When you went out on an operation what sort of support would you expect as a tank troop leader - artillery support?

Yes, especially when I was - artillery support was pretty well on call, although obviously dedicated to the battalions out on operations. At one stage, when I was working in Fire Support Base Lindy, and I was out during the daytime with the tank troop, in fact, we saw a number of interesting things. But my troop sergeant - we were up on a little escarpment, just sort of north-west of Fire Support Base Lindy, and I suppose we were about - oh, gee, if I had that map - I think we were probably two kilometres away, 2,000 metres - or 2,000 yards in those days, of course - away from it. He spotted somebody dressed in black, with a weapon, watching us. Because of the position his tank was in, on this little escarpment thing - it was pretty hairy - he couldn't quite manoeuvre his tank, or even his commander's machine gun, to have a go at this fellow. He was obviously observing us, but he disappeared pretty quickly when he obviously realised he was seen.

Now, we reported that, then some months later, in fact, it turned out - we also found some tracks through some long grass which we reported - then some months later on - and it was during Operation Overlord - where an APC was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. It was hit at the back of it, and I think they had a box of claymores, or something, on the back that blew up.

Are you talking about the D and E Platoon?

Yes.

That got decimated.

Correct.

I had to go to that.

Well, I was on stand-by to go down there with my tank troop. In fact, I remember during Overlord that evening, after the big contact that we had, and we head that report that came through - I think it was late in the afternoon when that happened. The

OC said to me, he actually called me on the radio, he said, '3, this is 9; are you ready to move?' and I said, 'Instantly', and he said, 'Well done.' But we didn't get called down. But it was in that area, in fact, that we found the tracks through the wet grass.

When you went out on these operations, how long would you have to rest and refit before going out on another one?

Again, it varied on what tasks were coming up or what we were doing. Well, when I was up in Fire Support Base Lindy I was out for nearly three months before I went back into Nui Dat.

Okay.

But that was of no concern because we enjoyed being out of the main base, it was great to be out, namely because you didn't have to - well, you did your own piquet duties within the tank troop, in conjunction with the artillery guys. But one tank was always manned twenty-four hours a day.

You'd call that a guard tank?

Yes, or a piquet tank.

You are away from all the bullshit, aren't you?

Correct.

So is the Armoured Corps expression, a 'piquet tank'?

Yeah, we used to call it the 'piquet tank'.

And that's manned all the time?

All the time.

And all the crewmen in the troop, including yourself, all take turn on that?

Yes.

And it is manned with how many people?

Normally two; normally the crew commander and an operator. There was always two people on the tank.

If we were out in an area the other thing we used to do, of course was providing protection for the mine-clearing teams, the engineers' mine-clearing teams, for the dozers.

Oh, you did that too?

Yeah, did that too, down on - I've forgotten now - is it the route that ran basically out from Ba Ria out to Xuyen Moc?

(Route) 15.

Yeah. (We) did that for about two weeks. And again, at night-time, the engineers had set up a NDP - night defensive position. Well, the tanks used to go back into that at night. Then again, in conjunction with the engineers, we would provide the defensive position at night-time, again with one tank manned.

Now, during the daytime, while we were out basically providing protection for the mine-clearing teams, we'd position ourselves sort of like at four points with the mine-clearing teams in the centre. And during the daytime, because it was mostly in open ground - one particular spot where I spent a couple of weeks was down on the Song Rai River where it crossed ...

You said mine clearing; you mean land clearing?

Land clearing and mine clearing.

Okay.

I wasn't involved really with the land-clearing teams, it was mainly the mine-clearing teams. We were out there basically just clearing a grid square. We'd position ourselves on the four points of that grid square, so you tank was manned all the time.

We had little [kalpies] set up, you used to put your hootchie up over the top of them.

I also saw some rather unique umbrellas that had been spray painted.

Well, I must admit, we never had any umbrellas in my time.

The sort of umbrella that had been spray painted.

How hard is it for you to manoeuvre and control your tanks when you are doing things like working with the infantry and all that? I mean, what happens if you can't see them, or is it always the case that you can see them?

No, you couldn't always see the infantry, and that was difficult. You could always see your tanks, and because of the radio system that we had in the tanks we could always talk to each other; I could always talk to the other crew commanders. And you are normally in sight of each other; in fact, in some cases you could walk from one tank to another, you were that close. But it depended on what the situation was, how far spread out the tanks were, but the crew commanders could always talk to each other. So if you lost sight of one of the tanks you'd just talk to him. More often that not you'd either hear him, either through his engine noise or through the busting of the jungle.

It must be hard when you've got your headphones on, and all that sort of stuff.

It is.

Is that the hardest part about fighting a tank, is all of the peripheral noise?

No. To be honest, Gary, you weren't very aware of it, weren't very aware of it because you are concentrating on - well, as a troop leader - you are concentrating on what the other vehicles are doing, but you are also concentrating heavily on what your own vehicle is doing. Going in to primary jungle, with tanks, was difficult; and what we used to do, if we had to get in to a certain area, and we were going in to primary jungle, you'd drive a tank in until it became embedded in the canopy, the jungle would just fall on top of it. He'd back out, more often that not he's got to clear all the vines off it, all the leaves, all that sort of thing. The next tank would drive in, he'd push in a big further, he'd back out. Then you'd push the third tank in until he got enveloped in jungle and then he'd back out. And of course, then you would drive a fourth one in. Now, by the time the fourth one is finished the first and second one have cleared all the overhang off them, then they start again. More often than not, that's how you had to get in to areas.

One of the other things that we found that was of benefit to us was if a helicopter was available, we basically had another set of eyes in the sky. The Australian guys, the guys from 161 Recce Flight, were bloody marvellous, and they had a great understanding of all sorts of operations, and they'd try and guide you to what appeared to be the easiest route to take - as I discovered when I went up in a helicopter, in a Kiowa, just after they got the Kiowas - the Jet Rangers. When I went up there and I was directing Bruce Cameron in to an area - because when you get in the sky the whole jungle opens up, and I couldn't work out why it was taking him so long. That was initially, but then I thought, hang on a minute, I realised straight away that the jungle disappeared when you get about two or three hundred feet up in the sky. Luckily, having had that appreciation of having been in a tank on the ground I was able to guide him in the right direction.

Did you ever do any operations where you just had armour, like it was just all armour going out? Or did you have operations where there would always be someone with either an APC or infantry there? - the only time, apart from those Hoa Long ambushes.

Yeah - and also I remember working with 4 RAR up on Courtenay hill, I had my troop up there, again, during the daytime. They'd give us a little AO, an area of operations, where we could run the tanks out.

Did you ever have splinter teams on tanks?

Pretty well, yeah, pretty well. I can always remember having the mini teams, I think we used to call them.

Mini teams was three, a splinter team was two.

Yeah, well, splinter team. We always had two engineers with us, and more often than not they were young guys. In fact, two of them we had at one stage, when we were at Fire Support Base Lindy, we went out and found an old bunker system. And, of course, being engineers they loved to blow up things. Now, people build things, engineers blow them up.

We found this bunker system that had probably been found before but hadn't been completely destroyed. So I just radioed through, got permission for the engineers to go into it, and they packed this thing with explosives. The tanks carried huge amounts of PE, we used to carry them in our track wheels, satchels of it. Oh, yeah, it was great for - the best thing to make a brew is a chunk of plastic explosive.

It's a wonder you don't burn the arse out of your cup.

Correct.

So you went out and did that, okay.

So the vehicle you used most of the time was the tank?

Yes; in fact, all of the time.

Security pistol most of the time. What changes in vehicles or equipment were made during your tour? Were there any?

No. The tanks had been modified for operations in Vietnam prior to us getting there. What they found, the Centurion that we had in Australia, albeit the same one as in Vietnam, but they'd made some modifications to it that strengthened what we called the track bins - the bins along the shroud on the top of the track - they'd been strengthened. We didn't have any extra armour on it.

They'd taken off what we called the track guards, or the track shrouds, and they were big steel plates that hung down the side of the track. Now, in Australia, of course, we had them on all the time, but in Vietnam, of course, they took those off because they found that they clogged up with mud, they clogged up with chunks of tree, and all sorts of things, and caused all sorts of problems. So they were gone.

They were built for rolling plains but not for jungle.

Oh, they made great barbecue plates, they really did.

What about the reserve tank on the back of the tank? Was that always there?

Yeah - the hundred gallon?

That great big rectangular box on the back - it was on an angle.

Yes, it had an angle.

Was that always there?

Always, yeah, as I can remember.

How long could you actually go out and not have to refuel? I guess it depended on what you were doing.

Yeah, of course it did, but on average - well, you carried - that was 100 gallon, and there were 90 gallons inside - 190 gallons of high-octane petrol.

Petrol?

Petrol, not diesel.

Were they petrol engines?

They were petrol engines, 80 octane fuel.

We've learned something today.

Yeah. And I'll tell you why; you were always concerned, in fact, that you didn't get hit in the 100 gallon fuel tank on the back because ...

I thought it was diesel.

No, high octane petrol.

Good grief.

In fact, I had about 180 gallons of high octane fuel emptied itself into the bowels of my tank one night. The venturis on the carburettor, the huge carburettors.

Just quickly. The engine was the Rolls-Royce Meteor engine, the V-12 engine, which drove the Spitfire, which drove the Lancaster bombers, which drove the Mosquito, drove all sorts of things - magnificent engine, but it was petrol.

One morning, out at Fire Support Base Lindy, my driver got into - and luckily my tank wasn't the piquet tank that night - got into his driver's compartment and disappeared nearly up to his knees in what he thought was water. And, as it turned out, it was 180 gallons of high octane fuel. Luckily, he hadn't turned on the electrics in the tank because if he had he wouldn't be here, and probably neither would the fire support base.

It would have been just a big bomb.

That's all it was, Gary. Not only that, it was full of ammunition.

Can we get onto the combat load. You said the vehicles were modified. Were there any other modifications apart from the shrouds and the bins?

There was another modification they made - I think I mentioned

earlier - was where they put a rack, a steel sort of bracket type rack, across the back of them where we carried liners of 30 calibre and 50 calibre machine gun ammunition. No, I can't really recall any other modifications to them.

If you do, when you get the transcript you can add them in.

Let's talk about combat load. How much ammunition did you carry on the vehicles, and what types? Can you remember?

Yeah. The main armoured ammunition, from memory, was fifty-four rounds, and it varied in types. We carried a lot of canister, the shotgun, buckshot, round. We didn't carry very much high explosive rounds because - you use high explosive for long distance contacts.

Not a lot of that in Vietnam.

No, there wasn't a lot of that in Vietnam. It was always sort of right at the front of the tank, or right behind it, or right beside it.

We carried a round called ACBC, which is armoured cap, ballistic cap, and that was a solid shot round, it was a great bunker buster. It also used to poke holes in clouds too if you could fire it high enough. But that was basically our load.

We had a coaxially mounted machine gun, 30 calibre machine gun. The bin beside that hole held 200 rounds, from memory. We had a 50 calibre spotting machine gun which was a short-barrelled 50 calibre machine gun, and a short-feed 50 cal. But you never used that in Vietnam.

That would be normally for ranging your main armour.

Correct, yeah.

What did the crew commander have?

He had a turret-mounted, or pintle-mounted, 30 calibre machine gun.

So you've got two 30s and a 50 ranging?

Yeah. The 50 calibre machine gun we found very effective in close fighting because if you held the solenoid open - and you could do that manually - you could use it just like a normal 50 calibre machine gun.

Yes?

Oh, yes, sir. It wasn't good for it because it was a short feed, although we never, ever had a problem with ours - well, in fact, there were two occasions where it was used as a machine gun rather than the three rounds it used to fire, then stop, and then fire another three rounds.

So you carried a 9 mil yourself with a couple of mags?

Oh, we had boxes of ammunition inside the tank in containers. It would be nothing to have three or four hundred rounds of 9 millimetre ammunition. The crew commander had a pistol, the gunner had a pistol, the operator, your loader, normally an F1, and the driver either a pistol or an F1. So you had ...

Did you have grenades?

Yeah, we used to carry grenades, although I never used them, never used them. I know some tank troop leaders did.

How much water would you carry on a tank?

In those days a jerry can was twenty litres, and we carried sixteen jerry cans of water on the back of the tank - was it sixteen or thirty-two? - some carried thirty-two, some carried sixteen.

Why did you carry that much water?

Well, firstly, because it was a water-cooled tank - the radiators held something like, from memory, I think about thirty gallons of water. And if you had a problem - and quite often you could suck a stick in through there or something, and it would puncture a radiator, and then the thing would empty. Sometimes even the water hoses would break, just perforate, just through wear.

So 120 litres just to fill up the radiator?

Correct, sir.

Gees.

And the other thing we found too is that - and I want to relate a little story here where some infantry tank cooperation really came to the fore.

I was driving around in the Cam My rubber one day just with a troop - as I said before, when we were out providing defence for Fire Support Base Lindy - and through the Cam My rubber - and it was on the southern end of the Cam My rubber - we could see these people, obviously soldiers. We thought, hello, who are these?

We weren't close enough to recognise them, but obviously we would engage them because they weren't doing anything to us, but we assume that they were just watching us. It seemed that as they didn't run away we thought, oh well, we'll drive over and see these guys. As it turned out, it was an Australian platoon who were doing ambushes and that - of course, they'd come into the rubber to rest.

These guys - I think they'd been out there for about a week - because the tank carries a lot of rations, it carries a lot of water. Of course, we compromised their position, but they

weren't upset about that, I think they were just glad to see somebody. As it turned out, we rigged our shower buckets up - because every tank carried a shower bucket - and we also carried a huge couple of postal bags full of greens, so they were quite delighted to see us. We set our showers up, they all had a shower, changed their greens, and we took all the rotten stuff and buried it - in fact, I think we burnt it actually, the poor guys - and we gave them some food and some water, they all filled their jerry cans up.

What sort of rations, when you are out in the field on operations, does a tank troop or a tank crew consume?

Well, they were all the American C-rations, I think they were called, and they come in individual boxes, so each crew member had an individual box of rations, and they were replenished while we had room in the tanks to carry, say, a week's rations for each member of the crew.

Now, one of the things the Australians tried to do was, at least once a day, get a hot meal. I don't know whether that was SOP or not. When we were out at the fire support base ...

Fire support base is a different again.

Four o'clock every afternoon the pie cart, you could hear it coming. The fellows from the air force would say, 'Tango 3, Tango 3, this is Bushranger 7-2' - you could set your watch by it. I think it was four o'clock every day at Lindy, out came the pie cart. We called it a pie cart because it arrived with the evening meal. Whilst you were in that sort of mode, in operations, yeah, you got a fresh meal.

I guess they needed that because they were out for so long.

Correct. Well, as I said, from memory, I was there for nearly two months with Peter Kilpatrick at that fire support base.

The types of radios that you carried in a tank - and let's talk about the troop commander's tank - what did you have?

We had two radio sets which were operated on the old valves and steam, and mirrors and string, I think.

What were they for?

They were basically for inter-tank communication. One was called a C-42 and the other was a B-47, and they were the old Second World War or early post World War II radio sets. They were Brit, and as I said, they operated on valves - they were steam driven I'm sure. They were VHF radios, but they weren't compatible with any other radios that were being used by Australian or other forces in Vietnam, so therefore that's why each tank had a 25 set - which was a pain because in some respects, if you wanted to talk to a helicopter, you wanted to talk to the infantry commander on the ground, it was nothing to see a tank crew commander, with his headset on, with one stuck

on his ear and the hand piece from the 25 set stuck in the other ear.

I remember Bruce Cameron doing that.

So you had the 25 set; what else did you have?

That was all. We had the two radio sets in the tank, and the 27 set.

One for internal comms (communications) and one for intra comms?

Correct.

Talk about taskings now. How and when did you get briefed for an operation?

Well, to go out on an initial operation - in fact, we only ever did one squadron operation and that was Operation Overlord which, I still believe, was a great operation to go on - from a personal point of view, from a professional point of view.

It was huge.

Yeah, it was huge. I felt very fortunate to have been part of that. The briefing for that, of course, was done by the squadron commander. More often than not, if you were going out to support the infantry on a task, like an ambush or a convoy, the orders for that were given by either the battalion CO or the company OC. I don't ever recall going to a company OC's orders group, I really don't, because most of it was done at battalion level.

We very rarely had tanks in support of companies.

That's right.

They were usually in support of battalions.

Yeah.

So you go to the infantry orders group?

Yes.

Did you ever get briefed by task force for an operation?

I don't recall. One incident was when I was ready reaction force, or ready-reaction troop - a tank troop - there ready reaction force was activated one night and it all came about from a pilot. I don't know whether it was one of our guys, or somebody, overflying the Nui Dat base.

Earlier that day I'd been out around the Nui Dat base with my tank troop, just pottering around, probably providing some local protection or something, and there was a whole lot of villagers. I don't know where they were from, but they'd

cleared a whole lot of land just to the west of the Nui Dat base. Because they were clearing the land - which wasn't even primary jungle, it had already been cultivated once before and they were just clearing it - they set up all these little burn-off spots where they racked up all the grass and all the twigs and everything into it. Of course, around about eight o'clock at night they are still smouldering and somebody overflew Nui Dat, or flew into Nui Dat, and thought that these were markers for a rocket attack.

Now, when they gave the grid reference to where these lights were, these smouldering, burning bushes, I thought, I was out there today and that's what they are. I told the OC that and he said, 'Well, yeah, but we've been reacted.'

Now, the OC of the tank squadron became the ready reaction force commander that night. I remember, we went out and we searched up and down for these bloody lights, sweeping around - there was an infantry platoon out there with us, and the APCs, and it wasn't nice, it was a miserable night, because I knew what we were chasing; we were chasing little bushfires, but people better than I knew they were markers for a rocket attack on Nui Dat.

So did you mainly operate with infantry out on your operations?

Yes, we did, although the only time that I can really remember operating with the infantry was on Operation Overlord. I wasn't there for the next big one that occurred in ...

July?

... July.

Up on the [Song Ka]?

Yeah - I was on R&R.

Yeah, that was Cameron, Bruce Cameron.

Yeah, and also the remainder of my troop. When I went on R&R, because they didn't have any spare officers, if a tank troop leader went on R&R the tank troop sergeant took over the running of the troop and they sent out another crew commander, be it a corporal or a lance corporal.

'Tracks Turner' was there, but he was with APCs.

Did you have to do rehearsals?

No, I can't say that we did; I can't say that we did.

I just thought there might have been a specific operation that you might have had to do a rehearsal for.

Where did you zero or test fire your weapons?

At the Nui Dat base.

Just trundle down to the ...

Yeah, outside the back gate.

Facing towards Long Tan?

Yeah, facing towards Nui Dat 2 which was east.

Yeah, that's near Long Tan.

Right. At that time, of course, I didn't know that. I knew where the Long Tan village was.

Nui Dat 2 was east.

Yeah, straight out the back gate.

And if you went sort of east-sou'-east ...

That was Long Tan.

That was Long Tan, yeah.

Actually, I travelled through, going down to the Horseshoe feature, that back road, I think you basically went through Long Tan village, didn't you, or just to the west of it.

West of it, yeah.

That's right. There's a shrine down there somewhere on that road.

Did you ever go up onto the Horseshoe with your tanks?

No, I didn't.

I never set foot on it.

I only did once and that was on my visit.

I set foot on it in 1994.

Is that right?

Yeah. Let's talk about battle now; contact with the enemy, where you know the enemy are - not a mine incident. What was your first contact like? Tell me what happened.

Okay. That was really Operation Overlord. Well, we'd been briefed on the operation, of course, both by the battalion commanders and also by our own OC about what was happening. The whole tank squadron went out on - I think [basic hunting] with the whole tank squadron because I know they deployed the squadron headquarters to - well, they called it NDP Clifton from memory - yes, it was.

We were there; we knew that the Americans flew in as the cut-off group; we knew that the Australian were going to come in from the west - I think they were going to push in. We had a pretty good idea what was going on because the intelligence, I think, at that time was pretty good, there was something in there.

My first reaction. Well, Bruce Cameron, who had 5 Troop, I think it was called at that time, he got into a very heavy contact at the northern end of the bunker system. I was around to the east of Bruce where the squadron headquarters had their night position set up, their squadron headquarters position. But anyway, they started taking incoming rounds in the squadron headquarters area and the OC ...

Small arms?

Small arms, yeah, only small arms - probably overs and unders, or something. Anyway, the squadron commander called me - I could hear on the squadron radio what was going on - I could hear that Bruce was in a pretty heavy fire fight, then the reports came in that the squadron headquarters started taking incoming small arms fire. So the OC called me around, called 3 Troop around, to do a sweep past the squadron headquarters area, basically with guns blazing, firing canister and that to push these people, whom they couldn't see, back out of the way. So I did that, swept through. We fired a lot of canister rounds, a lot of machine gun, 30 calibre coaxial rounds, which seemed to quieten things down.

Now, that was my first real big contact. Of course, as drove basically around the edge of the jungle, or around the edge of the jungle into the clearing where the squadron headquarters was, I thought, where is everybody? You could see where I am, sitting up on top of my tank, off to a football match. Where are they all? And then it took me a while to work out that they are all inside their vehicles and all you could see was the whites of their eyes. I thought, oh, something is happening here. Again, (I thought I was) six foot tall and bullet proof.

What was the hardest part about going through with your troop, doing that?

Well, luckily it was all open so there wasn't anything difficult about that. Control was easy, I could see the guys - all we did was spread out in a line abreast.

Are you saying open or relatively open?

Oh, relatively open.

Trees in that area and all that?

No, it was all cleared, but the grass was pretty high - the grass - what? - four or five feet high, I suppose - but around the night position where the squadron headquarters was, that was all pretty cleared because they'd had bulldozers in there and cleared it all up. All their vehicles were hiding behind

earth walls.

Then the OC directed me around to assist Bruce Cameron, and I must admit I thought, I might just keep my head down here. Again, all you could see of me is the whites of my eyes. When I drove in to where Bruce was I thought, hello, something is going on here, because he was basically all guns blazing.

Anyway, I was able to talk to Bruce on the radio and told him that I was coming in. He knew my troop was coming, and he told me how he was deployed. He had three tanks plus the armoured recovery vehicle, and the first thing I saw was the armoured recovery vehicle as we followed Bruce's tracks into the jungle. Those guys were hiding behind bins and anything, and I thought, whoops, there's something really happening.

An armoured recovery vehicle doesn't have a main gun?

No, it doesn't, it only has a couple of 30 calibre machine guns. But those guys weren't up there firing them, they were down, in behind the bins at the back of the thing.

Anyway, because I had been able to talk to Bruce I just deployed my troop to the right-hand side of him, and so basically we had eight tanks sort of beside each other.

Where were 3 RAR at that stage? Where were the infantry?

They were ... I think they were about 500 or 1,000 metres to the south of us, they were down - it was like a valley - they were down the end of a spur line. I think they'd bumped the bottom end of this huge - as it turned out, it was an ARVN 274 Regiment, basically camped, a holed-up area - they'd bumped the bottom end of that and the tanks had driven in - Bruce had driven in to try and drive down this spur line to get down to the infantry.

Of course, what he did was drive into the top end of this bunker system, and of course, he started taking incoming (fire) and very close. Somebody stitched the front of Bruce's tank with a machine gun, from out of the ground, and broke the jacket or the covering around his 30 calibre machine gun on the top of the tank, and bits of it embedded in his face. He was okay, but there were little bits of hot metal in his face, he was very lucky.

One thing that struck me also when I had a good look around, when I got to Bruce, there was an arm hanging out of one of the tracks on his tank.

Is that right?

Yeah. Bruce got a bit angry, I understand, at the fellow that shot at him so he ran over him, and silenced him.

So now you've got two troops trying to fight their way down towards the infantry?

We were busting to get down to the infantry because the poor guys were getting a pretty hard time. In fact, there were a lot of heavy machine guns down there - they had heavy machine guns down there. Then what had happened, between where Bruce and I were and the infantry was about, in today's talk, probably 500 or 600, maybe 1,000 metres at the most, from the top of this spur line down into the valley area where they were. I'd need the map again, but it seemed probably 500 metres.

Then what happened, the gunships were called in to basically blast the area between where the tanks were and where the infantry were down the bottom. Sadly, what had occurred was that - as I said, the infantry were in quite a big fire fight - a helicopter came out to resupply them with ammunition and we hit by an RPG and crashed. Then the Australian gunships, and the American gunships, were then firing in between that area. As it turned out, it was a huge bunker system - we didn't know that at the time.

Now, from memory that went on for about an hour. One of the things that frustrated me - and I couldn't do anything about it - was that the gunships held us up getting down to the infantry. I think if we had been able to get down there earlier, or even if Bruce had've been able to get down there earlier - but Bruce, of course, got held up by the fire fight that was going on around him. It might have panned out a little differently, it might have, but at least ... I think what would have happened, the enemy would have bugged out, probably quicker, because the tanks were in there.

I think the majority of 274 Regiment got away, but they left stay-behind parties, and they, honestly, Gary, were suicide parties.

> Well, they bumped into us in the middle of the night. They were also taking out wounded.

Yes, yes.

> So how long did that engagement last where you tank was actually fighting?

Well, we fired our full bomb load at main armament. It is only at one stage that I can recall - it wasn't a problem because it was part of your training - the main armament ammunition was stowed in floor bins - most of it was stored in floor bins under the tank. You had like little trapdoors that you could open up. I can remember, at one stage, that the main armament on my tank was pointing backwards across the back of the tank because we were getting main armament ammunition out. See, you had to rotate the turret to get the bloody stuff out, which was a bit of a pain. But anyway, that's part of tank business.

Yeah, we fired our full bomb load; in fact, we cleared, I estimate, an area probably the size of the MCG, just firing canister rounds. We basically stripped the jungle.

Now that seemed to go on, (it appeared) to me, for about three

hours. Now, there was a fair bit of joking. As I said, the thing that held us up - and I don't blame them because their task was the gunships coming in between us and the infantry - but at one stage we had, I seem to recall, we popped balloons up through the jungle because the gunships were unsure of where we were or where the infantry were.

There was an interesting incident. I mentioned earlier about Rhys James, this RAAF pilot. Now, Rhys and I became quite good friends, and he eventually became - well, he was a very highly qualified pilot (then) - but he eventually became a Bushranger captain, he was on Bushranger 71. And whose dulcet tones should I hear across the airways - because I was listening to the infantry and that also was Bushranger 71 - and I said, 'Hello, that's Rhys James, that's my mate.'

And luckily, after the whole contact had finished and we got back to Nui Dat - which was what? - a week or so later, I went round and I saw him. I was having a chat to him; they'd lost the helicopter and, of course, they were pretty good mates, as we all are. They were a bit sad, I think they lost two crewmen, or four crewmen, or something. I know an Australian warrant officer was killed also. I was just chatting to the guys and they were interested to know what it looked like from the ground and how effective their fire was - and it was very effective. However, I made one remark; I said, 'You guys would never imagine what a mini gun stitch mark across the ground looks like.' They said, 'Well, how do you know?' I said, 'Because about ten feet out in front of my tank went this whoosh!' - and have you ever seen leaves dance like that? - incredible. That's how close they were.

What would you describe as your most successful contact?

I would describe that one, Operation Overlord. I wasn't involved in a lot of contacts; Bruce Cameron seemed to get quite a few because Bruce was always out on operations. I missed the next incident because I was on R&R. But that was probably ... that was one of the most satisfying operations, Overlord, because although a number of Australians were killed, and that's very sad, when we eventually got down to the infantry ...

I didn't wear any rank; in fact, none of us wore any rank, we just wore shirts, there was no indication of who we were. We eventually got down there. In fact, the OC, Major Bourke, came in behind us and basically talked us through because the infantry came - there was an infantry platoon, I think, came in - the engineers came in, and as the tanks were pushing down towards - once the gunships had gone away - pushed down towards the infantry. The engineers were doing all the bunker searches and the infantry were also looking around the bunkers and all that, clearing them.

I remember, 'Punchy' Bourke walked behind the tanks, talking to us and guiding us, because it was bloody hard to navigate and keep a straight line. He walked all the way down.

When we got down there to the infantry, one of the first things I did was, I got off the tank, and some of the infantry guys started to come out and we were able to give them some water and that sort of thing, and a bit of ammunition. I was leaning on the front of my tank, having a cigarette and talking to my troop sergeant and some of the crew members - of course, by that time everything was pretty quiet, the enemy had bugged out - and this fellow came over and he said, 'G'day, mate; who's the boss here?' and my driver just looked at him and said, 'He is.' He said, 'Oh, sorry, sir', I said, 'Oh, no, mate's fine by me', and he was a sergeant from one of the platoons. And he said - and I'll never forget his words - he said, 'It's bloody great to see you.'

It feels good, eh?

It did. But he said, 'Sorry, sir', and I said, 'No, mate's fine.'

Would that have been your most memorable fire fight?

Yes, it was, for a number of reasons. And there was another one too.

Well, tell me about the number of reasons.

It was the whole gambit of what we had trained for, the inf-tank cooperation, the air force guys. And as I've related, I got to know quite a few of the helicopter pilots because we did training with them in Australia, and I got to know them over there. It had all the elements of - and the artillery - so it had all the elements of a big operation, an all-arms operation.

It was really a battle, not a contact.

Correct, sir.

Who is the person who most stands out in your memory, and why?

Well, I've always maintained it was really our OC, Major Peter Bourke. He, because we'd trained with him in Australia before we went there, we got to know him, although he was the three 'Fs': he was firm, fair and friendly. I always had a lot of respect for him, he taught me a lot, not so much in tank tactics, and that sort of thing, but he taught me a lot about things military. I suppose, in some respects, he helped me grow up.

So he was your role model?

Yes, he was; and still, to this day, I've got a lot of time for the man. There was an incident in Vietnam that I'm not proud of. It didn't turn out all that nasty, it was just a bit of a misunderstanding between myself and the 2IC at the time.

One of the things that saddened all of us, all of the troops. Right throughout our training in 1970 we had a fellow called -

brake!

This tape is going to have to be changed.

So 'Tubby' [Dellarue].

Yeah, Neil Dellarue was 2IC of the squadron, right throughout our whole training in 1970. And then, when we got to Vietnam he didn't appear. Now, I don't recall ever being told why he didn't get there. He was like a father to us, he was a terrific guy, he was a friendly, jovial little fellow, and we'd do anything for him - as we would the OC too. But to me, personally, I was quite taken aback why he wasn't there, and I don't think I was ever told why Neil Dellarue never went there.

Then, what they did, they pulled a captain out of the armoured personnel carrier squadron - now, whether he was a troop leader or what he was, I don't know - by the name of John Scales, and he was there as the 2IC. I thought, what's going on here? and nobody really explained to me. It was only three years ago, when I was talking to Neil Dellarue, I found out the real reason he didn't go. He got promoted.

Jesus!

Neil didn't know that I didn't know that, and it was. I was talking to him in Anzac Square.

Anyway, John Scales, affectionately known as 'Scabby' Scales ...

Charming.

... was not well liked. He came on pretty strong and I think the APC squadron did a job on the tank squadron.

Got rid of him?

Got rid of him.

That's a shame.

Yeah, and that caused a bit of friction, even to the extent that a very good friend of mine, John [Bendi] - who was Armoured Corps, but he went over there with the map teams - we had a big party in Nui Dat one night, it was run in the officers' mess. The helicopter pilots came up from Vung Tau, they flew up on the dustoff helicopter, and it was a great night - lots of beer and lots of merriment, and all sorts of things.

As I said, I unfortunately never liked John Scales, we had a bit of conflict there. Anyway, at one particular stage I remember John Bendi went to the bar to get a drink and he bumped into John Scales, and John Scales thought I'd set him up to go and give him a bump in the back. And the next thing I knew I was being offered to go outside and I thought, oh, I don't need this, and there was nothing ever in it other than

John Bendi, who was a second lieutenant, just happened to accidentally bump John Scales. As I said, Scales would probably maintain to this day that I'd set up Bendi to go and bump him. I thought, how childish.

Anyway, when he came over, full of beer and bad manners he said, 'Come on, I'll take you outside', and I said, 'Go away.' And of course, with my frustration later on, I took them out on Peter [Goldman].

Peter?

Peter Goldman.

Oh, Goldman, yeah.

'Goldie'.

What was the toughest time you experienced on operations?

Well, again, we've got to go back to Overlord because that was tough. And later on that night, when we were doing piquet, I found that bloody tough, it was tough to stay awake, because we'd done a lot of jungle bashing. In fact, we even eventually had to go back into primary jungle to set up a night position for the tanks as a cut-off, and then we had to clear a huge area so we could get a Chinook in to refuel the tanks.

Did tanks often get the job of doing that, clearing LZs or LPs?

I don't recall doing a lot - we had the tank dozer with the big blade on it, that was great for clearing the jungle too, a very powerful vehicle.

What was the saddest time you can remember?

Yeah, and I remember it very well. I went on R&R - I could look the dates up, but it doesn't matter - just before ... In fact, what happened, let me go back a little bit.

About four o'clock one afternoon - I knew I was going on R&R - and they flew out ...

Hang on, we'll stop; we'll stop now and restart on the saddest time you can remember.

(break in interview)

Identification: This is Tape 2 of two tapes of an interview with Warren Hind, recorded in Brisbane on 11 February 1999, for *Jungle Tracks, Australian Armour in Vietnam*.

Warren, we were talking about the saddest time that you can remember, and it was just before that you went on R&R.

Actually, I'll go back to Operation Overlord because I've just

thought of another one which saddened me immensely.

After the fire fight and after the battle that finished that day, as I said earlier, we eventually got down to the infantry. After speaking with a great platoon sergeant the OC, Major Bourke, eventually came down and he was just chatting to us - I was leaning on the front of the tank again, having a talk to him - in fact, he smoked also, I think, and we were sharing a cigarette, or having a cigarette. Some of the infantry guys came out through the clearing where the tanks were carrying body bags. I just said to Major Bourke at the time, 'Oh, enemy, eh?' and he said, 'No, ours.' Honestly, I think it was probably the whole emotion of the day, but I just turned around and said, 'Excuse me, sir', and I vomited - I did. Again, it was probably the release from the whole thing that had happened that day. That saddened me, it really did, because we helped the infantry guys carry the body bags and put them in the back of an APC. It was sad to see, all we could do is throw them in on top of each other - because we only had one armoured personnel carrier there which, I think, was the OC's.

And the other time was before the Battle of Song Ka?

Yes. I flew out. A helicopter came in to where the tanks were - in fact, we were with some artillery, but it wasn't a prepared artillery position, they just plonked them on the ground. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon that the helicopter brought out a couple of replacement crew commanders and crewmen because some of us were going on R&R. The guy who came in to replace me was Corporal Andy Anderson - who was an ex-infantry fellow actually, he'd transferred across to Armoured Corps - and Andy was a nice bloke. And the troop sergeant, Phil Reeves, then took over control of the troop because we didn't have officers to replace officers, we just didn't have that luxury in the tank squadron - and the APC squadron didn't have that luxury either.

I then flew back to Nui Dat about four or five in the afternoon, and the next morning I flew to Tan Son Nhut by Caribou to Camp Alpha, the American Camp Alpha, to get through their system to go on R&R. I was going to Hong Kong on R&R.

What, seven days later I got back to Nui Dat and I was met by Captain Dave Watts at Luscombe Field, and he briefed me that there'd been a terrible incident involving the tanks and the infantry, and that incident had occurred the next day, after I went on R&R, and I was still in Saigon, at Camp Alpha - because I think we spent twenty-four hours there before we flew out. He told me what had happened.

My tank that Andy Anderson had gone out to replace me on - Corporal Anderson had gone out to replace me on - had been hit by an RPG. There was quite a big battle ensued and a number of the tanks were quite badly damaged and quite a few crewmen were injured. My operator, Russ Bird, also went on R&R at the same time so there was a new ...

What we used to do, when the operator went on R&R we'd take the

gunner - would come out of the gunner's seat because he was always inside the tank - he'd go across as the operator, and his replacement - the operator's replacement - would go in as the gunner. Phil Barwick, who was my gunner at the time - a fabulous guy, very good sportsman, a good rugby player; he, in fact, probably would have made the New South Wales cricket team - and he was from Tamworth in New South Wales.

Anyway, the story that was related to me was that a number of crewmen had been injured and Phil had been very seriously wounded - Phil Barwick. And what had happened, an RPG - in fact, Andy Anderson, the corporal, was very, very seriously injured also, or wounded - and RPG had hit the top of the tank and had hit the crew commander's 30 calibre machine gun, and basically exploded in front of Andy Anderson's face. The splash that occurs after an RPG hits something had gone across and hit Phil Barwick in the head.

Luckily, a medevac helicopter was in the sky because one of the drivers - oh, little 'Darkie' Jones, I think his name was - a tree trunk had come up over the front of a tank and had hit him in the head, so there was a medevac helicopter on the way to get 'Darkie' Jones out when this incident occurred.

Now, as I understand the story - because this has all been related to me, this is second-hand to me - Peter Goldman, bless his cotton-pickin' socks, jumped up on top of my tank and was met by the gunner, the new guy, pointing a 9 millimetre pistol at him because he went to water. The driver didn't know what had happened - Phil Giles, who was my driver, a fabulous guy actually, one of the best tank drivers I ever, ever had - Phil didn't know what had happened because the crew commander was knocked out; Phil Barwick is lying inside the tank with half his head missing and the gunner went to pieces. Of course, as soon as a head appeared at the crew commander's hatch he is ready to blow it off because he didn't know who it was. Anyway, Peter Goldman got them out, with some assistance from other guys. In fact 'Goldie', to this day, I am forever indebted to him for doing what he did.

Now, when I got back from R&R the guys in the troop were pretty down because of what had happened to their mates. Andy Anderson lost half an arm plus the flash from the explosion basically blinded him, blew his pupil in one eye, and the other one was very badly damaged also. His arm just vaporised because he was hanging on to the machine gun. And Phil Barwick survived, but with terrible, terrible injuries. He was blinded for life; in fact, the front half of his head is a metal plate. Other than having some terrible holes in him around his shoulders and around his neck he survived it.

And there's an interesting story about it. When they were evacuated - I thought, initially, to Bien Hoa, and that may have been so.

They had a neurosurgical hospital in Bien Hoa.

Okay, well that's probably where Phil went because of his head

injuries, and that's where they would have taken Andy Anderson.

There was a New Zealand nursing sister there. When they unloaded Phil and Andy, Andy went straight in to the operating theatre - of course, they prioritised them - and for all intents and purposes Phil Barwick was dead. So they basically left him on the stretcher in the corridor, and a New Zealand nursing sister walked past and Phil coughed, or breathed, or something. So she rang the alarm bells and said that he was still alive, so they whistled him in to another operating theatre and saved his life.

Now, I saw Phil - well, what is it? - seven or eight days later. Peter Bourke, the OC, came and got me, he said, 'Would you like to go and see Phil?' and I said, 'Of course I would.'

(break in interview)

So Peter asked if you wanted to go down to the hospital.

Yes, he did. And Phil had been transferred to the Australian Field Hospital at Vung Tau. Anyway, it was beaut of Peter Bourke to go with me, I've always respected him for that. He took me down with his driver, we went down in a Land Rover. What he basically did was left me on my own when I went to see Phil. Phil was still in a very critically injured state and his hands were tied to the edge of the bed, which shocked me, and his head is all bandaged, and he's got two big sort of round patches over his eyes. He was right next to the nurses' station, right where they could keep a twenty-four hour watch on him. Has probably pretty highly drugged, but anyway, I was able to talk to him. Some of the words that stick in your mind - I can't remember what we spoke about, I just remember talking to him and saying, 'G'day, mate, how are you?' and he said, 'I wish they'd get these bandages off my hands, my eyes are so itchy' - he wanted to scratch them and he wanted to take the bandages off his eyes. It was then that I knew that he was blind, that he'd lost his eyes. They were so badly damaged that they couldn't even replace them - his injuries were horrific.

And anyway, we just chatted for a while and I said, 'Well, mate, I'll see you back in Australia', and his words were, 'Thanks, mate; thanks for coming to see me.' I don't recall much of the rest of the day actually, I really don't. I don't even remember driving back to Nui Dat with Peter Bourke.

I didn't see Andy Anderson. I have a feeling that Andy may have already been evacuated back to Australia.

With injuries like Phil Barwick's there was probably at least a two- to three-week stabilisation time required before they could even put him on a plane.

Yeah.

Same thing happened to me. I was there for two weeks at least, and then I spent another overnight in Butterworth.

I think they did the same to Phil too because he was very critically injured.

Then the next thing that really hit us - well, firstly, when I got back to the troop and they were all forlorn and everything, Phil Giles, my driver, said to me that they knew where I was, and they knew I was still at Camp Alpha. After the horrific incident, and after that battle, they went and spoke to Phil Reeves; the guys, the troops, the rest of the soldiers in the troop, got together and said to Phil - who was probably sitting around having a cigarette, or having a brew, or something - said, 'We want to get Warren back; we need to get him back because the guys are on a real downer', and Phil said, 'Well, I'll go and see the OC - because he'll still be at Camp Alpha in Saigon - see if they'll get him back.' They wanted the support, they wanted their troop leader there, which I felt very proud about. And the OC - and I completely agree with him - refused to go and get me, to bring me home, to bring me back to Nui Dat, and I'll always respect that.

You see, he was right, he knew you needed a break otherwise you probably would not have got one after that.

He knew that, yeah, he knew that.

How long did it take the group to get themselves back together?

Once - and I'm not putting tickets on myself - but once I was back on the ground, probably two or three days.

Normality was resumed.

Yeah. Because one of the other things we had to do, although they'd cleaned the tank up reasonably well - Russ Bird, my operator, who was on R&R at the same time - I don't know where Russ went, he might have gone to Taiwan or somewhere, or Singapore, or something, or Bangkok - when we got back we had to clean the inside of the tank out, and that wasn't pretty. In fact, the tank stunk, it was, it was quite putrid. We had to pull the radios out because they were damaged, we found bits of shrapnel. And the other thing that saddened me, we found Phil Barwick's notebook, it was peppered with bloody shrapnel, and pieces of slag and stuff.

I can't believe it.

Yeah, well, sadly he died some years later, but that's another story. Whether it's going to form part of this or not, I can relate it to you.

I think you should tell me now. What happened to Phil?

Well, Phil ... the grieving went on for some time within the troop because there were a number of things that then happened. When Phil eventually got back to Australia and started to recover we got word - and I've forgotten the name of the organisation at the Gold Coast.

The Wounded Servicemen's Convalescent Scheme.

Correct - who was run by that marvellous fellow, whose name I've forgotten.

Kim Bromley.

That's it, Kim Bromley. We got word that Kim Bromley and his organisation had arranged for a guide dog for Phil, and the OC came down to tell us, in his lovely style. As I said, Peter Bourke was a very quite, and in some cases shy, man. But anyway, he told us.

I bought a twelve-string guitar in Hong Kong when I was on R&R so I went and got my guitar out. And actually, we were having a barbecue in the troop lines, which the squadron allowed us to do, and the cooks used to come over and cook our barbecue and everything; it was great. And we'd adopted one of the cooks actually into our troop, and he always used to look after 3 Troop. So he came across and cooked a barbecue, and I got my twelve-string guitar out and started singing, all the guys got in the mood and everything. Actually that helped with the bonding again, and we got back into the swing of things.

But I will quite unashamedly admit that that night, when I went back into the tent, Phil Reeves and I - my troop sergeant and I - shared the same tent. We sat there drinking a can of beer and crying our eyes out because of what had happened, and that was the relief, that was the grief, and it was good to do that. I have not qualms about saying that.

One of the things that Australians are very good at, I believe - and it's been one of the finest characteristics that we have - is that mateship and that ability to get along with each other; even when the times are tough, we all pull together. I don't believe there are too many armies in the world have that.

What happened to Barwick later?

Okay. Phil went through a whole rehabilitation system through the Blind Association of New South Wales.

Eventually - well, after Vietnam - I went back to Puckapunyal. Anyway, I eventually became the adjutant of the 12th/16th Hunter River Lancers in Tamworth. And I don't know how he found out - Phil was a telephone operator with the Tamworth City Council - well, it was called the Peal Shire Council, I think - and he rang me up in Victoria and said, 'Hey, g'day, boss, it's Phil Barwick here. I here you are coming to Tamworth.' I said, 'Phil, trust you to find out' - but we had been in touch with each other anyway. He said, 'Listen, mate, it will be great to see you', and I said, 'Yeah' - and luckily, I'd been briefed about (the fact) that blind people will say that, and you don't even blink, you say, 'Mate, it's great to see you too.'

Anyway, Margaret, my wife, and I eventually arrived in Tamworth and one of the first people, of course, who has got to touch me

is Phil Barwick. He said, 'Let's get together', and I said, 'That would be great.'

So Phil had been through the whole rehabilitation, he was marvellous. I went and saw him in the office and you should have seen this guy operating a switchboard, it was incredible, it was all done by sound - he had like a little pen light pencil that he'd run across it, it was all rigged up to his earphone - he had an earphone because he was pretty well deaf too. But the glasses that he wore had special earphones.

So Phil said, 'When are you going to invite me around?' and I said, 'Well, any time.' So he said, 'Well, you come and pick me up' - of course, he had his seeing-eye dog with him, and she was an absolutely beautiful animal. So we invited him around for dinner and he came around, and we sat there yakking our heads off all night, and it was absolutely incredible. He told a wonderful story about a part of his rehabilitation training, getting used to using the stick, before he got his guide-dog. His trainer used to take him, I think, from Concord area in Sydney in to Central Station by train, to get him used to crowds again, get him used to travelling on public transport.

Anyway, Phil told the story and it was absolutely hilarious. One particular morning the instructor said to him, 'I am not going to say anything. You are going to go in to Sydney, by train, on your own.' He said, 'I'll be there, but I won't speak to you until you arrive at Central Station.' And Phil said, 'Okay', because Phil was starting to feel pretty confident.

So away he goes, down to the ticket office, buys his ticket, gets on the train, and as the train pulled in to Central Station Phil said, 'Well, where are you, Bob? - Bob? - Bob, where are you?' and there's no answer. Anyway, as it turned out, whether it was done deliberately or not, Phil just said to people around him, he said, 'Look, folks, would you mind helping me just get to the station. My trainer should be here with me, but I don't know where he is.' Phil said people helped him get out onto the platform and set him down, and about five minutes later he could hear (puffing sounds), running up the platform is Bob. He said, 'Phil, you are alright. You were that bloody quick I missed you.'

I thought that was a very good story, and the way Phil related it, of course, was absolutely hilarious. He beat the trainer in to Sydney.

You said he died?

Yeah. I've got to try and think of the year, and it was very, very sad.

Phil suffered all his life since Vietnam, and with the horrific injuries, and one of his kidney's collapsed. One of his sisters donated a kidney to him, and every so often he used to have to go and - and again, probably through the medication he was taking, and all sorts of drugs that he was taking, because of his injuries, they were keeping him going.

He married a lady called Cathie, and they had a son - an absolutely lovely family - but Phil got to the stage where he used to have to go down to Sydney every so often to get on a dialysis machine. And I've recently spoken to somebody else who has been through that and they absolutely detest it. Phil got to the stage where he'd had enough, he said, 'No more.' And of course, he knew that it was going to kill him if he didn't get back onto the dialyses machine.

I got a phone call from Kerry Slaven - I was in Canberra at the time - and I got a phone call from Kerry Slaven to say that Phil was critically ill because he was refusing to go back on the dialysis machine. I don't know anything about it, but I believe it's quite painful or something. Phil had given up. Kerry was with him, trying to talk him out of it, and he said, 'Mate, I can't do it any more; I've had enough.' I think, within twenty-four hours, he'd died, still a young man.

Phil was cremated in Sydney and the only person who was there was Kerry Slaven and the family, because that's the way Phil wanted it. But the family then held a memorial service and it just happened to be on 11 November - I think it was about a week after Phil had died - in Tamworth. The word went out that the memorial service was on. Because I was still in the Regular Army I missed the big reunion in Sydney, for all the wrong reasons - you and I know because we were off to bloody ...

Cooktown.

Correct. Even though we had that weekend off, after we'd loaded the armoured vehicles - because the navy wanted to spent the weekend in Brisbane - I couldn't beg, borrow or steal a seat to Sydney on anything.

But anyway, because I'd kept in touch with most of the troop, and then, when Phil died and his parents put on this memorial service, of the twenty-one guys that I had in the troop in Vietnam, twenty of us were in Tamworth. Even dear old 'Punchy' Bourke came down for the memorial service, which was amazing.

So there was a whole lot of release, but it was great to get together again with the guys - and some of them I hadn't seen since Vietnam. They were all there in Tamworth. 3 Troop all sat together in the church, down near the front, behind the immediate family. They'd got to know Phil's family over the years and I had too. Anyway, Phil was the youngest in the family of about five, I think. Luckily I didn't have to do the eulogy or speak, that was done by another guy who grew up with Phil, who happened to be in the Army also, he was a major, a lovely fellow. Of course, he thanked 3 Troop for being there - we were all there, we were all there; guys even came from New South Wales and Western Australia.

Anyway, that afternoon - one of the things that Phil wanted to do - in fact, I think that was February - but we'd all planned to go to Tamworth for Anzac Day anyway that year because we were going to be there with Phil, and sadly he'd passed on.

One of the thing he wanted to do - he spoke to me on the phone about this not long before he died - he wanted all the troop to get there and to go to a certain pub in Tamworth, and sit on the verandah and watch the sun go down, and get drunk.

So what we did, we got second prize; we had the wake at this pub. Peter Bourke was there, and a couple of other fellows who weren't in the troop, but who know Phil anyway, so there was about twenty-five of us. There was a fellow called Ron [Bakie] who wasn't in my troop, but he was in (my troop in) Australia - Ron had to go off to another troop. Ron, as it turned out, was a bloody nice bloke.

Unbeknown to us - there was no lunch provided or anything, and of course, the more you drink the hungrier you get - unbeknown to me, but known to the other guys, Ron organised a whole lot of food. In fact, I think the hotel even called somebody in to cook it for us. I don't know how much money was spent that afternoon, but Cathie, Phil's widow, came around to the hotel, late in the afternoon, to see us, because we wanted to see her. The guys had all pitched in and go a lovely little card and everything, and we all signed it. In fact, even one of the fellows stuck an Armoured Corps badge on it. They got me to say a few words and present this card to Cathie. It was an honour to do it, it was emotionally difficult, but it was great to do it.

So we all got blind drunk - no, we didn't get blind drunk, we drank a lot of beer for all the right reasons, and we farewelled Phil, or mate. And late on in the afternoon, when we were all getting ready to leave and go off and get changed - because we were all dressed in our dinner suits - not dinner suits, suits, all the guys were wearing their medals and everything - I went in to thank the hotel staff because they opened up a special little bar for us - it was just us. I went in to thank the girls, the bar staff, and I thanked the manager for getting all the food ready and providing food for us. And I said to the lass behind the bar, I said, 'Look, I'd just like to say thanks for looking after us', and she looked at me and she said, 'Who are you guys?' I said, 'Well, I don't want to tell you the story.' She said, 'I have never seen a group of guys like that who are such good friends' - isn't that fantastic?

And the manager came out and I said, 'Look, how much do we owe you?' - the guys were going to take the hat around because I don't know how many kegs of beer we drank - probably only one, but it was a lot of beer that was drunk. He came out and I said, 'Listen, we are going to pass the hat around', and he said, 'It's all paid for.' And I said, 'Pardon?' and he said, 'All the food it paid for, everything.' I said, 'You didn't put this on?' He said, 'No, it's all paid for.' I said, 'Who paid for it?' He said, 'Well, the fellow wants to remain anonymous.' And I said, 'Well, was it one of these guys here?' and he said, 'Yes.' As it turned out, it was Ron Bakie who's either a millionaire or very close to it.

I want to ask you just a couple of last questions. What do you think is the most important thing about working with a tank crew?

The most important thing is that you operate as a team and that you get along. I'll coin the phrase again: you've got to be mates. You've got to win the respect of the guys, as an officer, but they soon nut you out. The greatest thing, I reckon, was just getting a group of guys to work with you. But you are part of a team also, as an officer, and if you don't get your bloody hands dirty, and get in the bowels of the tank and change spark plugs, and clean the air cleaners out - which are oil air cleaners, they are like oil filters ...

So share the load?

Correct. And I had no qualms about doing that.

What did you learn the most from your time in Vietnam?

A number of things. I learnt a lot about human nature; I learnt a lot about how the army operates on operations; I learnt a lot about myself, I think I grew up - very quickly; I learnt a lot about how to operate with people, how to live in close confines with people; I learnt a lot about another part of the world; I learnt a lot about the Vietnamese. And the thing that struck me is that basically the Vietnamese people are very, very friendly. We never had any problems in the villages, going to help them, or anything like that.

In fact, there was a rather funny incident up in the Courtenay rubber one day. The Courtenay rubber plantation was still owned by the Michelin Rubber and Tyre Company as I understand, and one of the bloody French workers had bogged his tractor. He didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any French, but I could see that his tractor was bogged. So we drove a tank in, hooked up one of the towing ropes and pulled his tractor out. He said, 'Merci', and I said, 'It's alright, mate, buzz off, get out of my life.'

Yeah, you learnt a lot about a whole lot of things. But I think, probably, seeing the way a task force operated. Vietnam helped me grow up militarily from the point of view of working out the hierarchical system. Because I must admit, the training at Scheyville, although there was a hierarchical military system there, you didn't pay much notice to it because you are too bloody busy training. You didn't have a great deal of time to learn about that in Australia prior to going to Vietnam either. You certainly learn about it over there.

Tell me how a tank navigates. I mean, how do you actually navigate around all this scrub?

With a lot of difficulty. What we did, I always had my maps with me, all the crew commanders, we always had maps, and if we had to get into a certain area it was really dead reckoning was the way to do it, unless - and in a lot of cases we did, we had an airborne person directing us, be it the chopper pilot - it

might be the pilot himself, or somebody like myself, at one stage, in the helicopter pushing you through. More often than not, if we had to get from point A to point B, there was always a way around the primary jungle, around the primary growth, you could always find a way around it.

Maybe it was just me but I never had any problem navigating in Vietnam, mainly because you either travelled on tracks, or you travelled on the roads, or you had somebody assisting you.

When you mentioned convoy escort earlier, do the tanks form a vanguard?

Yes. In the big one that I did up to the May Taos, yes, we did. We had the tank dozer with us so we basically had five tanks, and I think he was down the back.

Did you ever do a cordon and search?

No, no, Gary, I can never remember doing one.

I've just got some last questions on the enemy. Did you ever think about the enemy? Well, what did you think about them?

I must admit - I related earlier about Ngai Giao - I must admit, every time I went into an area that I knew nothing about I was all eyes. I didn't personally think of the enemy as a human being, I knew that they were there to try and inflict some pain on us.

So you never felt sorry for them?

No; except Operation Overlord, the battle of Overlord - there was a funny incident. In fact, one of the engineers pulled out, when they were rummaging through the bunker system, they pulled out some packs. Anyway, there was an NVA flag there, or a North Vietnamese flag, or something, and lo and behold, in a very neat pack, a tube of toothpaste. I don't know what brand it was, it was probably NVA toothpaste available at your local pharmacy. It looked as if it had one squeeze out of it and I jokingly said to the ASE who was there - we'd pulled all this stuff out of the pack - I said, 'Good lord, one squeeze and your dead' - probably one clean of the teeth. That was probably a bit (inaudible).

Did you ever see their battle drills? Did you ever get to see the enemy's battle drills?

No, or hear them. The thing, again, about Overlord was that it was definitely stay-behind parties, they were suicide parties. They'd stay there and try and inflict some casualties on the Australians, and then die.

If you were going along and you had a contact with your tanks, what was your contact drill?

First IA was - and we'd do it all the time when we were

travelling on our own - the lead tank would have his gun pointed forward, the second tank would have his gun pointed to the left, the third tank would have his gun pointed to the right, and the rear tank would either have his gun across the back, pointing back down the way you were coming from, or he'd have his gun out to one of the sides. The lead tank was always traversing left and right.

If you got a contact and you were on your own travelling down a road, the immediate IA was fire canister, the four tanks would fire straight away. And I'll tell you what, if there was anybody in the area it would take their mind of sex for a little while, if you could get amongst them.

I've never seen devastation like it, from those canisters.

It's incredible.

Well, I'm going to wrap this up now because I don't think there's anything else I want to cover at this stage. If there is I'd like to be able to come back to you.

Any time, Gary.

Thank you very much.

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