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TRANSCRIPT
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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S02125

Joseph Thomas O'Reilly as the sergeant, section commander 1st Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron, later A and B Squadrons 3rd Cavalry Regiment, South Vietnam, 1966-1967 and 1969-1970.

Recorded
at: Brisbane
on: 21 May 1999
by: Lieutenant Colonel Gary McKay MC (Rtd)

Description

Transcribed by: Christopher Soames, November 2004

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Transcript methodology

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Identification: This is Tape 1 of two tapes of an interview with Pat (Blue) O'Reilly, recorded in Brisbane on 21 May 1999 for *Jungle Tracks, Australian Armour in Vietnam*.

Blue, the first question is real easy: Why did you join the army?

Well, I was that generation that had been brought up, born at the end of the Second World War and brought up with the traditions of public service where you were either priests, soldiers or policemen - typical Irish family.

Whereabouts and when did you enlist?

I enlisted in Brisbane, I think, 30 May 1962.

In Brisbane?

In Brisbane, yeah.

And apart from being from a typical Irish family, were there any other factors that influenced you in going into the military, into the army?

No, I don't think so, it was just something that came up at the time. My brother was in the police force and I went into the army. I suspect that they were starting to recruit and produce a lot more enlistment documentation around the place at that stage.

Because we had ...

The army had been in decline in the late '50s, up until '60, and suddenly I suspect they knew what was going to happen in Vietnam and they were actually out recruiting lots of people in '62, '63, '64. The army was expanding and that was the theme, certainly, when I got to Puckapunyal as well.

So you went to Kapooka?

Went to Kapooka, yes.

And what decided that you were go into Armoured Corps?

Well, I think I'd always liked explosions, I liked big bullets, artillery, but I was also basically lazy and I wanted to drive and shoot, and I wanted to see what I could shoot at and see the explosion at the other end, and artillery didn't do that for me.

I think I was a reasonable sort of soldier, although I was only seventeen, and the platoon commander and the platoon sergeant took that into account and basically I got my first preference, given that most other people were going into infantry.

So you go to Puckapunyal?

Yes.

And then you would have done a whole range of courses I imagine.

Yes.

What were they?

First of all we did an indoctrination course, which was very good in those days, run by Percy White. He instilled into everyone a sense, and indeed, anyone that did any good in the corps was one of what we used to call 'Percy's boys'. He'd enlisted at fourteen and grown up in the army basically, and had a great sense of basic soldiering and a tremendous sense of self discipline, and he related to a lot of people.

I was also one of the first people to do both a driving course and a radio operators' course. Prior to that they went to 1st Armoured Regiment, did some time there, and then came back and did the course. But I eventually went to Armoured Regiment, I was basically what they called 'fully qualified', which was unusual.

What decided you that you would actually go to the Armoured Regiment and not to an APC?

Well, there were no APCs in those days. There was wheeled vehicles, and there was track vehicles - that is, the Saladins, Saracens, and Ferrets. 4th/19th was at Puckapunyal in those days. There were some recoilless rifle units round the place, but basically they were Integrated/Army Reserve units in those days, but 4th/19th was just the other side of the road, the Kapyong Barracks, and Armoured Regiment was starting to build up. The only other people that went to - you either selected slightly older, because of the [B] vehicle element, or the wheeled element, because you drove on roads for the wheeled units. And then sole troopers, of course, were generally people who had failed courses - and, of course, the 76 gunnery - normally they were twenty pounder gunnery - did well on that, and then did a 76 gunnery and went to the Saladins.

But Armoured Regiment was certainly taking the majority because they were a regiment, 4th/19th was only 1 RAR Squadron and the rest of the Army Reserve - it was an integrated squadron too - was in Melbourne and, I think, one other area in Victoria.

They were a reconnaissance squadron.

Yes, that's right.

So you did some time in 1st Armoured?

Yes.

What happened then?

I did a couple of years in 1st Armoured Regiment. We did Tin

Can Bay, also did an extensive period up in High Range with a troop of tanks up there, blasting away through jungle, trying out canister rounds and stuff like that. And then I was about to be promoted because in the meantime I'd done twenty pounder gunnery and my subjects for promotion, although I was only nineteen, twenty, at that stage. So I was fully qualified all around.

And then they had the trials on the APCs in Australia, the various types. At this stage of the game 4th/19th had left Pucka and gone to Sydney in preparation for going overseas, and they decided to raise the 1 APC Squadron. And as I indicated a desire to go there I was not promoted and taken on a trip to New Zealand as I was considered a traitor to the regiment. Yes, that's how deep they were.

In those days I can remember a vote quite seriously being taken - this is how close they were - whether I'd go to the troop party because I hadn't been in the troop long enough, and they were not joking, that's how deep they were. Good in some reasons (respects) - I'll explain later why that tunnel vision works against them. I was one of the first seven people in 1 APC Squadron.

Okay, so that was raised in ...

In the same building that 4th/19th had left at Kapyong (Barracks) ...

At Pucka.

At Pucka.

So this is nineteen-sixty?

Five.

So 4th/19th go off to war with the brand-new APCs?

With brand-new APCs.

But no turrets, just shields?

Yes. They did not have shields, they adopted the shields - the shield hadn't been invented in Australia, we didn't know that. They went across with just the pintles - and I'll explain; my section still had pintles at Long Tanh, and I'll explain why they suddenly decided, because up until then the squadron commander had been going to take them off. They went to shields because that's what the Americans had.

Okay.

They soon realised, for obvious reasons, standing up behind a machine gun is not good business.

It tends to draw the (inaudible).

It did, yes.

So you go back to the now newly being raised 1 APC Squadron?

Yes.

What sort of preparation did you do before going to Vietnam?

Okay. Well, there weren't many regular soldiers. There was a selection that came from Armoured Regiment and we ran basic APC drivers' courses; we did crew commanders' courses. The national servicemen - this is for both regular and ARA - were probably lucky because we had the first couple of intakes with national service. A lot of them were university students, they were all keen to go because they were the same age as I was, if not a little bit older, and it brought up the same ethos with their fathers who had all been Second World War veterans as well, or Korea, or done something. They were absolutely motivated, there was an excellent attitude, and it still is in that group - they still travel around Australia today. They were identified as being crew commanders or drivers when they were doing their drivers' course because you'll soon pick it up if the fellows have got a bit of mechanical aptitude on a course, they soon stand out. They were actually stamped on their records as being crew commander potential.

So we actually had friends - and I'll tell you about 'Woolly' and Mitch - we grew up together, went to pre-school together, school together, and eventually became driver and commander on the same vehicle together, and that conflict (Vietnam War) later caused both their deaths - had a mine incident. But that was extreme, they were identified.

So we did basic crew commanders' courses, and it was a very good one actually, run by the squadron commander, who was a very 'smicked' up fellow by the name of [Haggerty], who is down the Gold Coast - and drivers' courses, the machine gun courses, all those sort of things were involved in that - Canungra.

You did Canungra as well?

Yes, we all did Canungra.

Just on that, was it relevant to you guys?

I think it is because I spent a couple of years there - I came back in '69 too, as an instructor. I think it's good because it establishes a fitness regime that everyone going, no matter whether they were doctors, whatever, basically are fit once again. It also endures (*sic*) into them, whether they are doctors or whatever, a sense of what they can achieve if they push themselves. And I think that's important to develop the mental toughness and learn once again to know your limits. They are quite often not established when they are young, as a seventeen year old going through Kapooka, because you are still growing. Basically you are like a bloody big pup; I think you

eat, you exercise, you fall over and sleep, and that's about it. But at Canungra you are a little bit older - at least nineteen to go overseas - you've been around a bit, you are a bit tougher, as well as you are going overseas with people. And we trained - and this is important - the APC Squadron, the APC Troop, and the squadron commanders, trained as a complete squadron. It was very interesting to see the development of those who were given a role to do, and it allowed people to establish that command structure which we really didn't have given that I was there as a trooper at this stage of the game, commanding a section - that's an APC section - just a senior trooper. There were corporals getting around doing troop sergeants' jobs, and very few sergeants, a lot of them were promoted in, as I was later on and in Vietnam.

So we were basically all the same rank structure - national service, crew commanders - and it was interesting working together and developing that sense of unit identity which we didn't have, unlike a battalion that served together for some time and had already established. So it's important, I found it terribly important.

So the group went to Canungra as a sub-unit?

Yes.

And were converted into a rifle company and away you went?

Yes, basically.

Now, what sort of exercises did you do before you went to Vietnam?

That was it.

Okay. Because of the short amount of time to prepare?

Yes. I found exercises later on that we did at, say, Shoalwater Bay pretty hopeless.

Because?

If you do a crew commanders' course and the sort of stuff that we did, and the tests that our commander - a major, by the way - established, they were far better. And exercise for armoured, run by infantry, is bloody hopeless; an exercise run by armour, where we did forty times as much as we did when we were with the infantry, tends also to be pretty hopeless because we are not slowing down to realise we've got to work with infantry and that it takes some time for the walkers ...

You've just got to slow down.

Yeah. We can gallop around Shoalwater Bay.

So you can do a lot more drills and practices?

Yes; and we don't normally stop, we continue to go at night

because of training requirements and of safety. You know, it's alright to drive all over the place, but if infantry are lying on the ground they don't like to ... because we drive ... although there's infra-red on those vehicles, it was hopeless, it was really early, basic infra-red, and I, personally, could not use it because of the way it was fixed on the spotlights. Therefore every blade of grass threw a shadow and you didn't know whether the dips were this high or a thousand feet, because it wasn't flexible, you just couldn't lower it and say dust, the whole lot. We didn't use it in Vietnam. In those days I had outstanding night vision, I was renowned for my night vision, and I could drive a vehicle flat-chat even in the middle of the night. Can't do that now, but we drove black out all the time.

So do you think you were well prepared for your first tour of Vietnam?

I was because the exercises I've done with tanks, and in reality there's no difference; there is no difference between infantry tactics, APC tactics, tank tactics. It's just that you can't hide a tank behind a log, it moves faster, but the theory of tactics, with mutual support, fire and power, fire and movement, are exactly the same, and I was able to relate reasonably easy because I was a private soldier trooper, a young one, still flexibly minded, and interested and believed everything I was told and learnt to develop that.

So it was much the same?

It really is, don't believe anything else.

So when you guys deployed in your group, were you trickling in then or were you going in as groups?

There was a group went across in April - yeah, early April - we went up to Bien Hoa, we spent a month there with them. There was Penny Roberts, a couple of sergeants, and basically a sprinkling of section commanders, crew commanders, to take over the 1 APC Troop vehicles and operate with them for a month with the Americans and 1 Battalion.

Why didn't you go as a troop?

Well, they wanted a sprinkling from the squadron that would eventually get there to get a bit of experience in all the troops.

So it was more like a squadron advance party.

Basically, yes.

How did you get up there?

We flew in Boeing 707s - 7 flight.

What do you remember about that?

It was great. What I remember, I think the most spontaneous reaction was, we were going out from, I think, Holsworthy - we'd been at North Head - we went by bus to Holsworthy, picked up some infantry fellows, and we were going out to Richmond - I think it is, the airport there, or wherever it was. I was in a bus with our fellows, I was sitting in the back seat, right along the isle, and I had gone to sleep. I hear some yelling and shouting, and a thump and a crunch, and I wake up. I wondered, what are all these piquets going past me? and I realised the bus had come to a halt and I was flashing up the highway, still in a sitting position; all the seats were thrown forward and there'd been a prang.

Apparently, I looked out the window and looked down on a driver who was bleeding and dying right in front of me. I said to someone, 'This doesn't serve our troop too well; we've just had our first kill and we haven't left Australia.' Apparently a drunk had come down the wrong side of the road between the Commonwealth busses, weaved in and out of a couple, side-swiped the one in front, and come in and hit ours and killed himself - actually died in front of me as I looked out the window.

Great start!

Yeah, well, I thought so - this is not good, Bluey.

[Human].

Yeah. I think the only person who injured himself was the medic who sprained a finger.

So you guys were really replacements, you weren't reinforcements?

That's right.

So you get on the plane?

Yes.

What do you remember about that?

It was a beautiful aircraft, we were well looked after, it was a civvy flight, and we flew to Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut.

Did you go Darwin or Manila?

I think we did stop down at Darwin for a little time, and then we went to Singapore, I think, and we weren't allowed too far off the aircraft out there. It might have been Manila, but I don't think so. We went Singapore, other flights went to Manila. We weren't allowed too far off the plane because we were in uniform.

Arrive at Tan Son Nhut?

Yes. Coming into Bien Hoa and w were a low flight, and Tan Son Nhut, and it just went on, and on, and on. We were only 100

feet above the ground and there were storm clouds scudding around, and there were fighters and planes going left, right and centre, and we seemed to be flying - because I was a bit of an observer and taking note of this - just seemed to be mile upon mile, upon mile, upon mile of warehouses and storage facilities. I was looking down - you know how you come into Sydney - it was a long fly over houses and you could see the swimming pools and those things, only this seemed like 100 miles of just storage area. We seemed to be coming over it and there were just piles of warehouses, and boxes, and [conixes], and stuff like that, and I thought, yes, the Americans are here. It was everything that I'd been brought up to believe about the 'scummos'.

So you get in to Tan Son Nhut; you went from there to Bien Hoa?

Yes.

And you arrived in ...

Whatever it was - 2nd/14th APC Troop by that stage of the game, although they still wore the 2nd/14th badge.

What was the reception you got like?

We weren't really give a good brief, certainly not down at our level. We were shuffled into tents. A lot of the fellows we knew from our days in throwing rocks at them, or punches, or having gone through Armoured Centre. I mean, it was a pretty small corps in those days. Basically we were allocated a tent, which normally meant a section, to look after, to infiltrate that way.

So you were integrated into that fairly well?

We were. When we went on operations - and there were a couple of operations - we just sat in the back with a radio headset on, just to see how they did things.

What was your initial job getting into country?

My initial job - well, I was going to be a section commander - was just with 1 APC Troop, just standing in the back, looking after cars, observing what went on, until we got down to Phuoc Tuy Province.

Now, in an APC section there are three vehicles?

Three vehicles.

With six blokes?

Six blokes.

And that's it?

That's it. But all the vehicles on that move, and once we got

there, had another two in them.

How long did it take before you actually got into being a section commander?

About a month. Ah, wait, in to being a section commander?

Yeah.

About a month when the rest of the squadron arrived.

By that stage you had moved down to Nui Dat?

We'd done an operation with the Americans, 173rd, up around whatever.

To the north?

To the north, yes; and then we did the operation down to clear Phuoc Tuy, spent a lot of time at the French fort there, until we actually moved - I was the second person into the Nui Dat area actually.

Where was the French fort?

Where they used to fill up the sandbags just north of Ba Ria.

Okay, right-oh.

There was a big complex there, there was artillery, 173rd American artillery, APCs, tanks, helicopters.

So when did the squadron arrive?

About a month after; the exact date is beyond me.

Not exact date, but we are probably looking at around ...

May.

... May '66?

Yes.

So from May '66 onwards you were a section commander?

Yes.

Were you a section commander the whole time in that first tour?

For the whole time in that first tour until after Long Tan - my section was 2 Troop, and because the vehicles - 3 Troop took over the vehicles that were in Bien Hoa, and they were in a bad state of repair because they simply didn't have the back-up maintenance that a squadron gets, they only had a troop, which is only a couple of 'crafties' and a little bit other, and they certainly don't have workshops. They had different radios in

them to us, you had to work a different squelch system, we had everything brand-new, the latest that money could buy - understand?

They had a lot of stuff that had been in wheeled vehicles and it was just archaic by comparison. You had to work a different squelch system, and the new radios, the 46s and the 77 set variety, you had to have noise on all the time to talk to them, and all sorts of things. Mechanically they were in bad shape. They'd work continually in Bien Hoa, the period we were down (there), and then up until August they'd been out in the bush because the Italians had arrived and we were out pretty well all the time. We didn't have a great lot of APCs to look after everything that was going on in the brigade.

> So you are standing in the back of this APC, being a run-around by your predecessors?

Yep.

> What was your initial impression of what you had to do in Vietnam?

I was in a state of shock because the first operation we went on with the Americans - and I was overawed by the amount of firepower and equipment, and stuff like that. There were helicopter gunships coming in over the top of us, and I thought, yeah, this is good, until I saw a helicopter right above us shoot down a helicopter in front, and I thought, this is not good.

We were with 173rd Airborne, and there was a fellow there - and I was baby-faced in those days, and there were younger baby-faced fellows squatting beside my APC. So I stuck my head out the back and had a talk to them. He had medals on him, and he had parachutes - and I was pissed out for having never gone to SAS, of course - and I said, 'How long have you been in?' - really impressed by the way the Americans train their people; he'd been in their army three months and he'd never done a parachute jump. By this stage of the game I'd been in four years and done a lot of training, so I felt rather quite prepared.

Also, once we moved into our area in Phuoc Tuy, into the area just north - Ap An (Phu) - where the top end of the brigade eventually put their wire across. There was a little outpost there, basically that's where we were. And slowly but surely some of the 4th/19th fellows started to leave and we started then - those that were across there in the early stages integrated pretty well. Although there might have been three section commanders in a section at that stage of the game we acted as Alpha and Bravo, waiting for our vehicles to come back up. We'd done a lot of clearing of Long Tan originally, the original village, and moved people out of there, and they were starting to shuffle around, so we'd done a fair bit of work.

> That was my next question: What sort of jobs did you do when you first arrived?

When we first arrived there, cordon and searches, driving up and down, clearing, just by ourselves - land clearances, road clearances, and just galloping around the whole paddock area, basically looking for contacts.

While we were at Ap An (Phu) there we had sniper fire coming in on a few occasions. They went looking for the sniper and found great wagon loads of bloody cache rice - it must have been going to fill the cache. So we basically did everything - dropped American infantry off - you name it, we did it - blocking forces ...

Because a lot of that initial deployment there was to clear the area and secure it, wasn't it?

Yeah. We went everywhere, and I can remember Americans - because we were only three vehicles, and the Americans don't operate that way, they operate with vast amounts of vehicles, and they are controlled - because they don't have the radios we have, lots of them don't have a map, lots of them don't have a radio, lots of them have only got a receiver and not a transmitter. Where in the basic vehicle there was at least three radios, basically two radios - and there might be a 77 set - and the section commanders will have three radios and a 77 set floating around. They used to see our antennas, we were like porcupines moving around by comparison. Therefore with a section we also did practical fire support, that is, calling in artillery while we were out there. So we were pretty well trained by comparison with the American Army.

I can remember the CO of the 173rd saying that we'd just been everywhere, there wasn't a nook and a cranny that an APC hadn't been - obviously from the air, from the tracks - we just went everywhere, simply everywhere, just in three vehicles, whereas they'd go as thirty or forty in vehicles, controlled sometimes from a helicopter above them to give them guidance.

They tended to do troop operations where we tended to do search operations.

Yeah, that's right, and their sections were far bigger than ours and they tended to have four or five men in a vehicle.

They'd call them platoons and companies.

And platoons and companies, yeah. But their control, they don't have the same degree of ...

Initiative.

... initiative ...

Flexibility.

... flexibility, down at the lower level.

Just talk about being a section commander now. What do you

think it the most important part of your job as a section commander?

Well, knowing your soldiers because that's important, because if you know your soldiers and know their strengths and weaknesses, it gives you the flexibility to do the things - everything else - because you've only got six fellows, three vehicles, and the world expects you to achieve miracles. No-one ever realised just how few people were on.

Would the normal rank structure in a section be a corporal ...

It's the sergeant, a corporal, lance corporal and three troopers. But quite often it would be, in my case, a corporal, a corporal, and the rest troopers. My first section commander, when my troop finally got there - 2 Troop finally got there - there were two ARA fellows, an Alpha corporal - I was a corporal but getting HDA for sergeant - and four troopers.

Did you get made up while you were there?

Yes, I did.

When did that happen?

The exact date I can't remember.

Before or after Long Tan?

After Long Tan because a whole bunch of us made up ...

What do you think was the major difference between training for war in Australia and virtually being in war?

Live firing, the flexibility - over-control, of course, with big bullets, especially on tanks and stuff like that - but at that stage of the game I don't think I had been corrupted by the over sensitivity, as it is today, of safety.

I was wondering if it was ... I've got the feeling that when we went to Vietnam, as junior leaders, whether you be a sergeant, a corporal or a young lieutenant, you were given a lot more responsibility and it was accepted that you would do the job without being over controlled by an umpire or a (inaudible).

I think we were pretty lucky, and I was lucky, because I was still a fresh soldier, still keen, still being trained, hadn't been corrupted by time, the army was building up - there was no doubt about it, it was. I mean, we had people in Vietnam, in '64, we had people dead - some of my old troop sergeants from Armoured Regiment - dead in '65. We knew we were going and so we were motivated.

The other thing is, I think it's a *fait accompli* as far as commanders go. They know you are going, they can't be there to control you and run around all over the bloody range area like

in Australia, so they've got to invest some time in training you and letting you get on and do it. If that causes casualties, so be it. Whereas in Australia, at the moment, I mean, it's a bit like a football team, isn't it? - play as you train.

Did all these jobs that you went around and did - like if you were going to pick up grunts you tended to operate as a troop, I would imagine.

No.

No?

In the first period, when we first got there, we were still operating all over the place because the infantry were also out all over the place. So we were going from one ... we operated for a very, very long time as section commanders. I mean, it was road convoys, it was escorts, it was going out blocking force, it was going out dropping grunts off and then going somewhere else. For a long time we operated with companies, just a section, because we were spread out all over the place.

Okay, so this is big saturation?

Big saturation all over the place.

So how were you being briefed for your jobs?

We were told, because we all had the codes, we all had everything else - if we were in camp there was an O Group every night, but once we deployed with the infantry companies we sat in with the company commander's briefing for his company as a general rule. And I got on very well with the company commanders; I don't know whether it was my training, or whatever - and because I was flexible, I was willing to try anything, with a can-do attitude, supporting the grunt that was in front of me or whatever, where possible. If it couldn't be done, I'd tell them it couldn't be done and that would be it.

It sounded like you really liked your job as a section commander.

Oh, there's no doubt about it, I mean, Jesus! I was a god.

But you also had your own little world.

We had our own little world and it was our responsibility to look after the troops. We were out there by ourselves, we could call in artillery if need be, we weren't told 'left stick, right stick', it was all new country. I'm a bit of a naturalist and I'm interested in plants, trees, wildlife. That actually saved my life because I grew up in western Queensland, I could see a kangaroo move at a thousand paces, and that also, I could see the difference in scrub. I could see the mine marking on trees that the (Viet) Cong had.

How often would you have seen your troop commander?

Well, the squadron commander actually had to have an exercise to get his troop leaders out at one stage of the game, and that's no bullshit - that was on the first tour, the first trip. They were operating from base, as a general rule, except on cordon and searches - and we did a lot of cordon and searches of Binh Ba when that first opened up, and, of course, Ba Ria and Hoa Long. When they were organised we went as a troop because the area we scattered out into, we really were looking after areas as a section.

Were the troop leaders doing fire support bases then?

No.

So Nui Dat was the major base and you would just zip out?

We'd zip out, stay out, or come back in.

Did you do section ambushes with your APCs?

In those days, no, not initially.

Not initially?

No. It was just work, work, work, jobs, jobs, jobs.

Really just basically driving and bloody ...

Driving - we were out a long time with it. When the infantry were out, in their sort of company areas - but not fire support bases by any stretch of the imagination like later on - we were with them. For example, I can remember - I forget the name of a lot of the operations - I think Duck was one, round at Lang Cat, they did a cordon and search for that when I was working with the battalion around there, all over the place. I was round there by myself.

Did you ever do sweeps, like as a recce type sweep, go out and sweep an area to see if there's anyone there?

Basically that's the only we'd quite often be called out. For example, the idea of convoy escort in Australia, where everyone stops and gets great convoy orders, et cetera, et cetera, and its planned to a great degree. I can remember being sent out up around Route 2 to meet American convoys. Unfortunately, their trucks do 120 'Ks' (kilometres) an hour, my APC does 30 miles and hour; they have literally hundreds of vehicles in the convoy, they had commando wheeled vehicles - which we should have had and we were going to buy at one stage of the game; the Australian Army was going to buy these at one stage of the game, up until we lost the first APCs and they brought a whole bunch of APCs instead of the wheeled vehicles - big mistake because we could have used wheeled vehicles in Vietnam.

And, of course, I can remember reporting to an RV waiting to have a brief with the convoy commander and realising, after the first fifty trucks flashed past me at a million miles an hour,

that this was not going to occur, and that the only way that I could protect the area was, I just drove my section up and down, left and right, of the road - not on the road because driving along the road proves nothing. I mean, when I first drove up to Binh Ba - I did night patrols up there with the infantry actually, before it was opened up - and I can remember the remains of the French armoured convoy that got blown up driving along the road. So if you beat the bush and get off the road you are far more successful.

That was the reason why the (Viet) Cong tended to stay away from the APCs; they'd learnt early in the piece - because you understand that Australian APCs were different to the American APCs. They were petrol, ours were diesel. We trialled the petrol vehicle, there was a lot of people going for it because the tanks were petrol. We were lucky because the trial vehicles went by Germany, and Germany insisted on a diesel vehicle, and because it drove up the Autobahn it had to have two means of stopping, and so the Germans would put on pivot steer, and so we got pivot steer.

It used to be a technique of the (Viet) Cong to entice the APCs into rubber plantations, and of course, with normal lateral steering you've got to have the speed up to turn. And they used to get them in there and, of course, they'd burn quite well because the petrol tank was also on the other side, above where our batteries are on the diesel vehicle. And, of course, the first time they contacted 4th/19th in rubber they were like hitting a hornets' nest because there were APCs just going everywhere - left, right - because of the pivot steering you just go choo-choo-choo, and the (Viet) Cong did not realise what was going on. Also they suddenly realised that by hitting the APC with the RPG in the area of the U2, which is the petrol APC, you didn't burn and normally hit the water jerrycans. Of course, null and void, a big explosion on the outside, it just ruptured your bloody water can. So they hadn't quite worked out ... I think also the attitude of the Australians was, 'yee-hah'.

Let's hook in.

That's right. I mean, that's the basis of any ambush drill - 'yee-hah', hook in, and do it. Pakistani officers I've spoken to in the years after the Pakistani-Indian war don't underestimate - and tanks always say - the shock action of the vehicle. Well, in the period in Vietnam we ran over 10,000 people in Australia without trying, so don't tell me the shock action of running over some bastard, in an APC or a tank, doesn't have an effect. It had the effect at Long Tan, that's the only thing that made people get up and run away from us.

Well, we'll go on to that. Just on cordon and search, how were the APCs used in the cordon and search operations?

Okay. First of all I did a couple of patrols - foot patrols; I was the only armoured person to do that, once again because hopefully someone had identified they had a few 'smicks' - I would like to find that person now.

Yeah, I did two all-night patrols around Binh Ba. In those days the (Viet) Cong had it pretty well organised and we hadn't been up there, so this was to open up the road to Binh Ba because it was mined, it was trenched, and the (Viet) Cong were there permanently basically. So I did a couple of night patrols there in preparation for the first cordon and search; got lost on one, or the infantry got lost - the fellow was a Rhodes Scholar, he was leading us, and we kept coming back to the same hut, and I'm at the end of the platoon thinking, this is not good, Bluey. I knew, because I was watching the stars, we went around in a circle; I can remember a fellow falling into a shit pit - and, of course, phosphorous, he was just covered in this phosphorous and they all ran up trying to pat this stuff out, and the next thing they were bloody patrols in phosphorous and it was glowing like shit - it was glowing in this dark, and I'm thinking, Blue, this is not good.

(They) also put me on an M60 machine gun; I'd never seen a M60 machine gun, the Armoured Corps simply don't have them. They took all the infantry away and put me on the M60 on piquet; I didn't know what it was like in a waterhole. I'm thinking, this is not good - the grunts all went off to sleep - and then they didn't tell me about the other platoon that was coming in. They were from here to there and I said, 'Halt.' I can remember, there was a glow, and a little short platoon commander started to walk backwards because he didn't recognise my voice - that was the other thing. Everyone is trying to concertina, and he's trying to get back, and they are going smack, smack, because they'd been walking on ahead on shoulder, it was that dark. Lucky the platoon commander I was with woke up and come galloping out.

How did the APCs get used in a cordon?

The next night I went out and we were going through the rubber plantation, couldn't see, and we come across a little track and there'd be that sort of indentation - iron sides - can an APC go across this? - and I thought, what am I fucking doing here?

So it was my job on that occasion to lead the APCs in, split up rapidly with the infantry on board, to certain points, and then allow them to complete the circle. So we had APCs doing a massive outflank, left and right, as well as dropping infantry off instead of them patrolling around all night, letting them know, because they knew we were about and I can remember going past huts supposedly silent, and you could hear them gibbering inside, little lights coming on, et cetera, et cetera.

So you were really there to rapidly insert and cordon?

Yep; and then act as ready reaction forces.

Okay, so drop the grunts off, pull back?

No, no, stay there.

Stay there.

Because quite often you choose the same thing: you can either sit there and be quiet, or you can drive around and confuse.

Plus you've got the added advantage of being up high.

Especially in that area because Binh Ba is a lot of small rubber, some of it's certainly mowed in that occasion, some of it had the undergrowth in the big rubber, and there was some jungle there too.

Right-oh. After the initial settling in to Phuoc Tuy, what was the normal duration of an operation, or did it just task roll into task roll?

Task roll into task roll into task, and when there was a plan, like a brigade cordon and search, they'd last a couple of days and then it would be back into task and task.

How was your maintenance done in those early days?

If we were out for any length of time we all had parts books, and for a lot of stuff we could do it ourselves. We could also tow vehicles back into camp, and quite often we did, and the RAEME really did perform exceptionally well. They'd work all night to get vehicles going; they had learnt how to lift not only the engine out, but the whole power pack and replace it; but we were also pretty well trained and our self servicing was pretty good.

How much maintenance do you reckon you would have allocated per day to look after your track?

Our APCs, when we first got there, the new ones, you could basically just run a bit of a check on them because they'd go on and on and on, but suddenly they'd need track replacements and that sort of stuff. But basically engines and all the equipment was pretty good.

Yeah, because it was all new.

That's right. The only things we were really doing were torsion bars, which were breaking, certainly in the dry, going over millions of paddy-fields. First thirteen mines we hit only broke torsion bars and blew rubber of the road wheels off - they'd break the track sort of thing. The thirteenth mine did a little bit more.

When you say mines, these are really improvised explosive devices, aren't they?

A lot of them were command detonated mines - and I've got photographs of mortar rounds with [lec-dets] in them. There were some Japanese anti-tank mines when we first got there, Japanese grenades we'd find.

I can remember being told in an O Group - and everyone laughed at this stage of the game - that an infra-red senor had picked

up a submarine at the mouth of the Song Rai and that heavy drag marks and boxes were seen on the beach, and heavy drag marks into the sea, up the sand, and away; and everyone laughed. However, from that moment on recoilless rifles were used frequently, and we started to hit heavy mines - big mines.

Interesting, isn't it?

Yes.

Now you mentioned paddy bunds and going over them. What is the big difference between operating in the wet and in the dry?

It's much better in the wet, on occasions, the ride is a lot smoother.

And lest dust.

And less dust.

Is that the biggest problem in the dry?

Um ... yeah, dust and the shock. Torsion bars work perfectly well when the vehicle is going fast and you get the snap action. The idler wheels are in the back of the APC; there's no give in the idler wheels, other than they are static and will swing out to adjust the track. Going over paddy bunds, no matter what you do, if you've got to go ten 'Ks' and it's over paddy bunds, there would be a paddy bund every twenty feet. As you come over the APC - and it's sort of top heavy - a very successful, very basic vehicle - the back idler keeps hitting the bund and you just get shock through your leg and up your back.

When we had the pintle and no turret we just got up behind the 50 cal, when we went long distances, because the vibration was cracking the fuel cell in the APC, so we were getting fuel leaks - because it was a built-in fuel tank, that is, a partition just built in - and we were all suffering varicose veins of the nuts.

Really?

Really, because that's where the sonic vibration boom went.

Christ!

We were all going down to get - and I mean, we all had sore scrotums. There was a fellow by the name of Zack [Tinsen] who was reasonably well hung, although he's only about four foot high sort of thing - I mean, he had a very big scrotum and he decided to go and get it done because it was painful. Unfortunately, when they operating on the varicose veins - and we were only young, see, twenty four - Zack might have been twenty-five, I was only twenty-two, in the later stages of that first tour - they took out one of his scrotums *per se* and he had his ball-bag safety pinned to his stomach. And so we all

decided we'd tolerate this.

I wonder why.

Yes - but that's fair-dinkum. About the same time they took the pintles out and started to put turrets in - the wrong turrets, very small turret - I couldn't actually get through the hatch.

You are a big guy.

Most people couldn't. They were designed for little Asians, there was no trial, they just put them in. They thought turrets were good, they trailed the T-50 turret which had electric feed, electric traverse, of course, bought the basic crap and they were hopeless. I couldn't get in, even in those days, and I was as skinny as a rake, if I was coming in from the top, my knees, and certainly couldn't get my head in. They were hopeless with twin 50s in, very small, noggy type.

How does the dust affect the operation of the APC, in the dry?

It doesn't affect the APC so much, it affects the crew. Your ears fill up. I suffered a fair bit with tropical ear - I didn't wear the helmet because I used to take my headset off to dry - most drivers did. Some people either took to the helmet and loved it, or they didn't; I simply did not like it, I felt it sort of put me in a bit of a tunnel because they'd come around, these things - I didn't wear dark glasses because of that as well. I didn't like the dark glasses because people tended to only look ahead, they didn't look peripheral vision, so I didn't like them. I liked to see things as I saw it, and I saw more than other people that wore dark glasses. So I developed - and I did it even as a tank driver - if the dust was really bad, sort of blow that way and just look out the corner of my eye here, stuff like that.

But people ended up with eye problems, they ended up with ear problems, and certainly chest problems. At certain times, when the wind was blowing in a certain direction, the exhaust fumes would come up and hit you straight in the face and you'd be breathing diesel exhaust fumes.

And it's hot.

Oh, and it's hot, it's hot. There is no doubt it can make you crook.

Yeah, I know. I mean, being stuck in the back there.

The back's worse; the back is worse because it acts like a suction valve. I've been on exercises where the infantry commanders have insisted on the back door being open. Well, you don't drive you Holden station wagon with the back door open because it sucks the fumes in, and the dust! You do it once and you think, those poor bastards, but he's the fool that said this - sitting on top, up in front.

In the clean air.

In the clean air - he said, 'Open the back door' - and you see the poor grunts there and they've got an inch thick of dust and you think, oh, there's no reason for this.

It stupefied me one day. I went to sleep moving along in an APC, and I had never done that before.

No, you are very crook if you ride in the back.

Oh, dreadful. But a thirty minute dusty, dirty, smelly ride in an APC is better than ...

A second-class ride is better than a first-class walk any day.

Yeah, especially when you are absolutely knackered and you have got a full house on your back.

Rain, on the other hand, would upset the fittings of your radio, the headsets mainly. Mud is a pain in the arse because if you've got to change a road wheel and that, it means getting underneath the APC - and, of course, you are wet, sitting up there.

And you get a bit cold from ...

There is no doubt, you get cold, you get cold. You are sitting on a piquet on top of an APC, you get cold. Many a night I've thrown the old flap jacket over, but I had a big woolly jumper - from my girlfriend, who is now my wife - and I had a couple of big woolly jumpers. And there is no doubt about it, if you get used to a certain temperature and it drops ten degrees overnight, you freeze, no matter what the temperature is. And I had a big woolly jumper and you certainly get cold.

Were the APCs restricted much by the wet?

No. If it was really wet you floated, and you could learn to pick. If it was getting a bit dry and it was a real wet area, you stayed away from it because that was very, very muddy. If it was in the wet and it was wet you could drive through it and you tended to float.

There were occasions where we had daisy chains - we had a big two-inch nylon rope. It was quite surprising what you could do to de-bog yourself.

Your biggest threat, I guess, was bellying out.

Bellying out, or getting to a spot where there was just ... yes, it would support the vehicle and the tracks would go. But by joining tow rope together it was quite surprising how you could get out.

Just a few more nitty-gritties on vehicles and equipment. Now, you used the APC, the 113 variant, that had initially just a gun on a pintle?

A 50 cal machine gun on a pintle, Second World War aircraft machine gun.

Okay, a Browning.

Browning.

Now, what changes happened while you were there in the first tour?

The squadron commander, Major Haggerty, didn't like the shields, and at that stage of the game only 3 Troop had shields, they were the fixed (ones).

And the shields came from the Yanks?

The idea of the shields came from the Yanks. My section at Long Tan only had pintles. My Alpha was hit in the chest - we were on the left flank because I led the way out, because at this stage of the game 'Poonie's' troop was in getting repaired, the first opportunity (he had). They worked all the time with 6 Battalion. 2 Troop tended to work with 5 (Battalion) because of personalities, and then we did other sort of section jobs with whoever.

So 'Poonie' went with 6 Battalion that day. He didn't have enough vehicles so my section went from 2 Troop - initially I was only going to be an escort, driving along behind sort of thing, dropping of a bunch of grunts. But I knew the way, I knew the crossing over the Soui Da Bang, I knew the last unclosed outlet in that side of the wire, and so I took over the lead and ended up on the left flank.

We went through row, upon row, upon row of 'congies' (Viet Cong) kneeling down, waiting to do a final assault. And it crossed my mind, why are we out here, there's lots of grunts? They are actually hardcore, in greens, webbing, slouch hats - well, their hat, but in the rain they looked like our fellows. They were almost shoulder-to-shoulder, rows of them, and they stood up and ran.

One of the last things I remember, in that final assault, was why is that bush smoking? Next thing, crack, crack, crack, pop, bang! and down I went. Unbeknownst to me that smoking I first saw was shooting from point-blank range, straight up the front of the trim vein, and getting the crew commander in the chest, and shot up the angle for me, from down there, up the side - and the bullets were passing left and right of me, hitting the cupola lid behind me, and whipping around and coming out this way. I had some shell dressings - because field dressings were just too bloody small - field dressings or the shell dressings? - the bigger one.

Shell dressing is the bigger one.

Yep. I had them taped to the pintle, they were actually shot to pieces and the bullets - at this stage of the game, with the

artillery, the rain, moving through, I was not aware, and they were actually shot to bits until a bullet come up and hit me in the face and dropped me like a maggot, and cut the headsets off the top of my head - very lucky hombre. Then Haggerty realised that perhaps we should be putting shields on, so we all went to shields initially.

I just can't imagine ...

You are just standing up.

I just can't imagine that they would put you in something as big as an armoured personnel carrier, up high, above the ground, you are a big target.

If you've got the 50 cal up there you can't get down in the turret to fire it like that.

But, I mean, also, if they give you a lot of firepower, you are going to draw the crabs.

Yes.

And it just seems amazing to me that they could produce a weapon system that didn't have protection for the operator.

That's right.

It just doesn't make sense to me.

So after Long Tan your group ... But when do they get the turrets?

Um ... some time later.

After Long Tan?

Oh, yes; it took some time for that to come through. They decided to get turrets that could only handle twin 30s, and then they realised that they still needed the 50 cal because although you've got twin 30s, no matter what the turret is - and it's good to have all those extra rounds because there's only 100 in the 50 cal belt and 250 in a 30 cal, which is good. So twin 30s, that's 500 rounds, there's a lot of bangers coming up. But you can go twack-twack-twack all day with a 30 calibre into a big rubber tree, and it will go balloomp! with a 50 calibre ...

And knock it down.

It would go through. And they found that with the 50 cal. So the section commander stayed with the 50 cal, thank Christ.

I mean, it's that hitting power.

Oh, yes.

Now, what about personal weapons, what sort of personal weapons did they carry in your first tour?

We had a pistol; initially we had OMCs (Owen machine carbines) and some SLRs (self-loading rifles, 7.62 mm) - OMCs - most people went to - drivers tried to get the SLR.

And you just stowed it in the back of the vehicle somewhere?

No, no, carried a pistol all the time.

Apart from the small sidearm, did you wear it on the shoulder holsters, or webbing?

It was webbing initially, but of course, in the turret it was hopeless so we all went to shoulder holsters. Drivers normally had a rifle for obvious reasons, or OMC, but later on a rifle because they could often see things at their level, surprisingly enough, and certainly the OMC that the driver had saved the day at Long Tan too for one of the vehicles.

Now, you said the driver would have an SLR for obvious reasons. People reading this book may not know what the obvious reasons are. Is it because you've got to get out and do a lot of work?

No. If a machine gun stuffs up, or the crew commander's stuffed ...

You need something to cover you?

Yeah. A pistol is good in the right hands, but it's not as good as a rifle. And I'm a great believer in the 7.62, not the 223.

So it really does give you that back-up.

It's gives good hitting power. We also had ARs; there was a large number of ARs, and we had an AR. We also carried things like [Carl-Gustovs]; there was the odd 60 mil mortar; there was also the odd M79s we had; we also had 66 LAWs (light anti-tank weapons); any amount of grenades - and I mean any amount of grenades, from white phos(horous), white phos frag, thermal grenades, any vast amount of coloured smoke, of course, and odd gas one getting around - CS gas.

And, of course, you carried smoke grenades.

Oh, yeah, normal grenades, smoke grenades, all various colours.

Now, who set down the ammo loads?

The SAP, the standard SAP, which ...

Everyone then exceeded.

Yes, of course.

How much ammunition would you carry for a 30 and a 50 in your cars?

Basically as much as you could get on without being stupid. Now, the American APCs, they were filled up, say, halfway up the inside of the APC was just ammunition in boxes. We had a standard load which we had to carry for infantry, that is, we had to carry some stuff for infantry - that's 7.62 ...

And that was basically a platoon first line?

That's right. We carried that under the seat near where the driver's seat was. The first box in was normally a 50 cal box with a med kit in it, with shell dressings and a bit of the med kit. The next one was normally the sugar tin.

This is a standard load, isn't it?

Standard load - infantry. On the other side, under the seat, we went to 50 and 30 cal, and then on top we had racks made that went down each side, on top, and we stored 50 and 30 there in what we called ready-round racks, to reach across and grab.

So in hundreds of rounds, how many belts do you reckon?

Well, my section commander's vehicle there was just a 50 cal, so I didn't carry a 30 cal the first trip, it was just 50, and there would probably be about 3,000 rounds.

And, of course, you always carried water.

Yeah, about five jerrycans of water, or more.

And that was also a bit of spare water?

Initially we used to carry a lot for the infantry because they were still on the two water bottles per person. That didn't prove all that successful. Quite often we'd have to go out and pick up infantry that had head exhaustion in the long elephant grass because that's what we'd been taught. They had salt tablets that they had to put in their water bottles in those days, that exacerbated the problem, of course. So it was not uncommon for us to give, certainly the fellows that you knew and the section you worked with, water because we had to carry it for the vehicles, just in case; we certainly carried as much as we liked. Certainly, in the wet we didn't worry about washing as much as we did in the dry, but that was pretty important because with oils, greases, you've got to wash it off otherwise you end up with dermatitis, and dermatitis is a big thing.

Is there a radiator in the M-113?

Yes.

Water-cooled type?

Yeah, water-cooled.

Would you have to keep that topped up?

My word.

Did it take much?

It depended on whether it had a leak.

So you had to carry water for that?

You've got to carry it; if you lose all your water you've got to have water there to fill it up.

Now, what sort of clothing did your section wear?

Generally greens, the Australian greens. We were lucky we got a couple of connixes of American greens. The reason we liked them was because they were lighter, they tended to dry out in the wet, easier to wash. They also hung outside your pants and it stopped the heat built-up around your waist because that's basically where, if you wore you shirt tucked in, and a belt around that, as the infantry found, that's where the sweat tended to heat up and you cooked your flesh there, and you got bloody dermatitis. Having the shirt hanging out tended to allow a bit of air flow.

At night we had flying suits. Some people wore the flying suits during the day. I found that as they were nylon once they got hot they got hotter, and I never wore my flying suit during the day.

Shorts around camp, and no shirts.

Yeah, we had to wear our hat ...

Boots and shorts.

Pistol belt, shorts, socks and boots.

Yes.

Though I had some grots, I didn't wear socks.

Right-oh. Now, when you went out on these operations did you ever do rehearsals?

Nope.

But you did do test-firings?

Normally test-fired in the bush.

So just go along, find a bit of scrub somewhere?

Yes. Initially we test-fired over the wire at different times. But there was not a test-firing pit built in the initial stages and so we'd normally fire the claymores after a certain period

of time, of a morning, and do a bit of a test-fire in the same spot.

> Right-oh, we are just talking about normal operations now, we won't talk about Long Tan yet. Were there any operations that you didn't like going out on, ones that you preferred not to do, but you had to do them anyway?

No, I rather liked them all actually.

> Was there anything that ever made you apprehensive when you went out on operations?

Certainly in the latter stages ... In the second trip, mines. Things had changed dramatically, the (Viet) Cong had purloined all the M16s.

> Out of the minefields?

Out of the minefields. And there were big mines around. My section was 'Woolly' and Mitch on the first trip. They had started to use big mines on us at the end of the first trip, command detonated, and they stuffed up a few. That is, let the mine go off just before the APC and didn't get the APC, except there was an operation that I wasn't on, but my section commander, a fellow by the name of Allan Buckingham, who'd missed this big command detonated mine on one other occasion, down around south of Dat Do, on the causeway road - looked up, saw this mushroom cloud going up, got there, and it took out the whole of the causeway road. It went off just before he got to it and he rode over the whole ... by the blast, but not enough to turn over. If he had've been going and hit the hole he would have damaged it. He now suffers; the top of his iris is flat where he come forward and hit the thing. It was a command detonated mine.

The next big mine we hit was this one with 'Woolly' and Mitch, two South Australians. I wasn't there but 'Buck' was telling me that it was in February 17, somewhere about then. They were down the Long Hais, taking a bunch of grunts down there - I think it was 5 Battalion. 'Woolly' was only a slight little fellow and apparently he was starting to rebel against Mitch a little bit, albeit he didn't know, and apparently on this occasion Mitch was leaning over, telling him to stop - because normally a driver would roll to a stop. They were having a conversation, and they suspect it was a big stick sticking up in the track; they hit it and that was a 250 pound bomb - (they were) loaded with infantry. Mitch disappeared, the only thing they found was an arm with no bone in it. It blew the APC up, came down on the infantry's bodies, still alive, from the chest down; a whole bunch of fellows wounded. It blew the actual track back over 'Buck's' vehicle, who was in my section, and just clipped the back of his - he saw it coming like a big snake, like a rubber band coming at him - it just went choo! very quickly. The infantry section commanders, platoon commanders, all hopped off the APC in column, ran up the front, and they hit an M16 mine - killed seventeen. That was the first time they'd set up big mines and little mines.

Jesus!

That's the only APC they didn't bother repairing. They Chinooked it out to the sea and dropped it in. All others, even if the front was blown off, they repaired.

The only other mine ... no, that was it. We lost another APC through RPGs on Operation [Ribey], I think it was.

Was there anything that scared you when you were out on ops?

Scared - scared - scared. First trip, no; (I was) single, stupid, and I was. I tried to volunteer to extend, but obviously the powers that be knew that I was quite mad. On one occasion I took my section off, we'd gallop around doing foot patrols. We actually found a big cache of rubber and a couple of bunker systems, three or four fellows with machine guns.

The second trip, mines were the big thing, no doubt about it. I was working, at one stage of the game, between the Long Hais with land clearing team, and in a month the APCs or the dozers hit twenty-two mines. On one occasion - I've got photographs - on one occasion - and I've got photographs of this (*sic*) - it was pretty hairy. I was running an independent section at this stage of the game under rooks.

The first tour I was either in 2 Troop or 3 Troop. The only reason I went to 3 Troop was because 'Poonie' wanted to get all his Long Tan boys together, and the troops told me they'd kill me if I took that section - I was entitled to take that section with me to 3 Troop and I said no, if anyone is going to be sacrificed it'll be me' - because I didn't like 'Poonie' all that much, I thought he was a poon - that's F A Roberts - because he'd been a troop leader in Armoured Regiment and he was a poon then. I told him he was a poon when we were in Vietnam, when we first got there. He said, 'I want you in my troop', and I said, 'Poonie, I'll never be in your troop as long as my arse points groundwards', but he proved me wrong, so I eventually ended up in that troop.

In the second time I went, I went across and they really didn't need me. I just sort of took myself on the plane because I wanted to go. And 'Long John' Coates, he had a bit of time for me and he was about to go, so he sent me ahead anyway. So I arrived there and there was really not spot. Lucky a couple of people, section commanders, got injured as we arrived, (so I) went out and took their spot. And then 'Rooksy' used me - there were a few problems around in the troops.

Rooks was?

The squadron commander. I got on right well with Ron Rooks, albeit he is a liar, a cheat, a dunce.

I might not put this in. Go on.

He as a fool. He was only a major, and majors are down with the troops, if you know what I mean. He went and organised his own hot water shower, only for the major. The first night it was there they blew it up, put a slab in it, as they should.

He used to have O Groups at night, on the air - and in those days we were just out by ourselves, all over the place, and we were out there on ambush sort of thing. He'd have at nine that's fine talk, and it was Captain [Clegg], straight out of the thing.

Someone knocked off his mint jelly off the officers' mess table and this went on for a fortnight - 'Who stole my mint jelly?' - which was only rations, any stuff anyway.

I can remember, on my trip back to Australia, I brought back a stereo for him and I spoke to his brother. He said, 'How is he going?' and I said, 'Well ...' He said, 'Don't worry, the family knows.' But 'Rooksy' liked me, 'Rooksy' was a fool.

We arrived back there - because in the first trip Haggerty was two cans a man per person - but you get those two cans a man even if you are in the field; he'd give you some extra cans if it was your birthday. And a helicopter would come in ... and he believed in that - he was the CO of 2 Cav Regiment when I was a squadron commander then - we quite often spoke. In fact, he tried to get me to go back to tanks into Vietnam, just to sort of balance the (inaudible) out. I like two fellows in a vehicle, not four fellows. He believed that that's why we were so good, there was two cans a man and we didn't have a drug problem.

So they'd bring the grog out into the field?

Mate, in a bloody trunk.

Eh?

If he could get it in, he'd get it in - two cans a man. He knew who was in the squadron, he knew who was in the troop, they knew who the drinkers were, and it would be two ice cold cans of beer - just two. Mind you, I had an esky in my APC that had cognac, whisky, from when we were working with the Americans or photographers, or something - they'd give it to us - never drink. The only time I ever opened a bottle was to give some fellows in the back at Long Tan a drink, and to recover Smith's troop, section, platoon, company - but it didn't interest me.

Second trip they were buying cartons of spirits. Being a monster - and you can talk to Bob who is exactly the same - we walked around smashing bottles and confronting people, and saying, 'Clean this mess up', because 'Rooksy' was a weak personality in a lot of ways. You'd be out in the bush for six weeks and he'd say - you'd get a talk call from the SSM; your hair is long, get a haircut - after having been (in the field) - come back and mow your lawns! - why are the lawns around your hut long? - there is rubbish around your building - and you'd been out for a month and a half. You are thinking, God, stuff

me.

Right-oh. We'll get on to battle now and we'll talk about this probably for about twenty minutes - may be only fifteen - then we'll have to have a break.

That's alright, we'll need a break then.

And I'll change tapes.

Tell me about your first contact.

First contact. I think the first contact was Long Tan when the Americans were there; the first contact was probably before then, being sniped at by snipers; the first contact actually was at the French village; but no, the first contact was with 173rd at the other thing. They'd roll on, most of them would just be getting fired at.

I started to understand a few things, say, at the French fort. The (Viet) Cong were coming around every night firing. Our APCs had two men per vehicle, and that means two as on six people don't divide into the whole night process all that well. The Americans, there were lots of them, they had at least a 50 cal and two other machine guns, one each side, behind little shields. They had five to seven fellows because they were mechanised inf. They had M79s, everyone had a rifle, and the (Viet) Cong would come past us and go and attack them; it just never sat well with me. I was just often amazed that we could get around, lobbing around, in some really hairy positions, where I knew that we were being looked at - because I've got a great sixth sense - I'll tell you more about that - and I just knew that we were being looked at, my three little APCs, and we were probably at the end of our tether and really should pull back from here because people were actually siting us.

I don't know whether you've experienced when someone is actually looking at you down a sight, and that's something I experienced even in tanks. You can tell when someone is looking at you from a long way away, you are targeted. Make the wrong move and you are targeted. I've been in those positions. But they would go around, searching out the Americans, and staying away from us.

I wonder why.

Don't know - don't know. I often wonder whether it was because of the political affiliations of some of our Labor Party with North Vietnamese, like Burchett and that.

I don't know.

Because he was pretty close to the North Vietnamese.

The next question I was going to ask was, What's your most memorable fire fight or contact? and that's probably got to be Long Tan.

It was over so quick for us, and I fired bugger-all rounds.

> Just tell us exactly what your involvement was. You were in the Nui Dat base?

We were in the Nui Dat base; I can remember sitting in front of Little Pattie, it was the first show I'd been (to), I was right in front and they are there, and the speakers are going off, and there's low H&I - I didn't know what was going on, neither did anyone, and this had been going on for some time. But I could see they were scared and I'm thinking, you gutless bastards, it's only a bit of H&I and I thought it was being put on for them because it was coming swish-swish-swish.

Knowing now, they'd already been briefed, the rest of the soldiers in the brigade had not been (briefed), so that went on. I walked back to camp, back to where we were from, and I just get into the ORs' mess because that was also our stand-down, it was a brigade stand-down, and people have got to realise that - it was a brigade stand-down. I'm not being derogatory of A Company who had been out on operations, they had come back for the brigade stand-down - this was my first stand-down too, first day off basically - do you know what I mean?

> And you'd been there for about four months?

Oh, yes. When they had other parties, or concert parties, I was out in the bush - I tended not to like them anyway, they were pretty bloody hopeless.

But anyway, Little Pattie and Col Joye, and they were twanging away. I get back to the tent and a fellow by the name of Ross [Gymer] - who was a Portsea graduate, who had been in Armoured Regiment - photographic memory, red hair - he stuck his head in and said, 'Here's all my codes, the latest things. You are going out with 3 Troop.' And I said, '3 Troop! shit.'

Okay. So I went and got my section - lucky none of them had been on the grog because they were all pretty good national servicemen - I probably had a problem with Peter Clements. We drove down to 'Poonie' who said, 'Get on the back', over the radio just as they were pulling out. We went up to A Company and he said, 'We are going out to do a drop-off of grunts' - I don't think he'd been briefed.

Okay. 2 Section - O'Reilly, you just follow along the back - okay - and troops were going out doing a grunt drop-off. That's it. We proceeded to have something to eat and [bruise] while I watched the tents and punch-ups and fights as they are trying to get them out of the boozer. And that went on for a considerable time, enough time for us to have a bit of a conference, go back and talk to the troops, sit around, have something to eat, make a brew, sit there, finish the brew, and they are still punching and fighting. I don't think they'd been told either.

And eventually they come up, jam them in - and at this stage of

the game we've got the cargo hatches down. There was a platoon sergeant, I think, sitting on my APC, sitting on the back with the cargo hatch down. He leaned over the back, and he had hit hands up, and the driver put his thing up. He said, 'I've got my hands caught in the back', and I said, 'Don't be fucking stupid.' At that stage of the game I still had a bit of tunnel vision, and blue grunts were good for corduroy but not much else. I said, 'No, no - driver, release the ramp.' Lucky it just clamped it on to the rubber, but it was still pretty crampy - both hands, would you believe.

So off we got, we try and go out through the wire and the brigade units had closed up all their wire exits, rewired it without ... There was no control for ready reaction; we'd all been told that these things - gaps in the wire and gates - units had blocked them off.

I'd been going out to a fire support base of artillery, which was out through the rubber, a bit, so I knew there was one down towards brigade headquarters. So I said, 'I know one; go', and off we go - there was no great discussion.

So at this stage you still don't know about Delta Company?

Nope.

Okay.

Okay. I lead off, down - I knew where there was a crossing across the Soui Da Bang, I think it's called - because the Soui Da Bang, the water normally runs pretty level with the ground, but I've actually had to dive in and recover a vehicle that went in there and, of course, couldn't get out. Unfortunately the driver had left the bung out and it sank - radios work under water too! His name was [Hucking], quite often referred to as 'Fucking Hucking'. I now know he was a bit strange, but I now know he was an orphan at [Neacol], and we had a few of them - all my vintage, see, all my age.

What time of the night is this?

In the afternoon.

Still in the afternoon?

Yeah. It was raining, getting very, very dark. I got across with my section - new section - pivot steer - able to get across - and you need pivot steer because if one track, you start to float and get on that point of balance, if one track is free, it will tend to take off, just like ... it doesn't have limited differential sort of thing, limited slip. So you tend to lock that up - because they actually lost a track and guy just through the water. All our seals were good, but the rest of 3 Troop, not so good and their pivot steering was worn out, that's why they were in for repair - well worn out. And so there was a few problems in getting them across.

We'd been called to stop on the odd occasion, just on a track,

before we got to the river, and through the communications, rain, squelchy noise - which I was on to 'Poonie's' troop, but I kept the rest of my section off because otherwise we got this screaming noise - and I used to flick because I could monitor. I was telling them that they've got to send some vehicles back to pick up the battalion commander - we've got to send some vehicles back. So 'Poonie' is organising a vehicle, and we've got to stop, we've got to go, that sort of stuff.

We get across; I move across the line-up. That took them some time, and that's the only real time that I can remember waiting for them to line up because it's just across the river - the creek - and up there.

How big is this water obstacle?

In the rain, with the volume of water going down, a reasonable obstacle, if you know what I mean. It would be swimming deep, the vehicles would swim - oh, yeah - and in the wet season ...

Flowing fast.

It's flowing fast, yeah. The only reason I followed that pretty basic observation, watch where the bullock carts go through. Having dived, on another occasion, with 2 Troop, when the vehicles sort of went in, because it's level with the ground, there's a lot of grass in it, but the banks are sheer - they are sheer, they don't angle in, it's a sheer bank, almost like a dug causeway. So you could go in, but you couldn't get out the other side because you are down well below the bank, and you've got to recover the vehicle out.

We formed up there once they got across - and I can't remember whether the other vehicles joined us. We then moved up, I was in big rubber, and they we formed up line abreast. I could just see one vehicle which happened to be the medic vehicle with Carver in it, just at the edge of the low rubber, and I was in the big rubber.

Have you found out about Delta Company yet?

I think we'd just been told that we were going out to take A Company out and that there was a bit of a shit fight out there with D Company. We weren't told the extent.

You had no idea of the magnitude of all this?

No, no.

Jesus! And there were no other indications going on around you?

At that stage of the game, rain, artillery - we knew they were forming artillery, but that was pretty standard in a contact. As there had been no flap in brigade area - I'm sure 'Poonie' didn't know the extent it was going on at this stage of the game. The acting company commander may have, but I somehow doubt that. Indeed, we had a test fire and I hear a couple of

crumps, and I look across and the APC is like that in long grass, and rubber coming down, obscuring the driver's head sort of thing - I could see the front side of the vehicle. And I see some people squat down in front and I thought, they've let the grunts out. No, wrong again - wrong grunts.

Right-oh, we'll stop there, where you were basically lined up, while I change tapes, and then we'll come back and discuss what happened then.

Okay.

(break in interview)

Identification: This is Tape 2 of two tapes of an interview with Pat (Blue) O'Reilly, recorded in Brisbane on 21 May 1999 for *Jungle Tracks, Australian Armour in Vietnam*.

You thought they'd let the grunts out.

Yeah. I looked across - because as we were driving up to the rubber plantation a big, rolling, tropical storm cloud - and I mean, it was just so obvious, just rolling, just over the top of the trees. The splatters of rain were actually hurting my face, it was so heavy and so violent, and there was lightning coming down from points just above the trees - bang! bang! How it wasn't hitting the antennas, I don't know, but we went through there. All the radios - the speakers, microphones - just filled up full of water and you get a high pitched squeal through. One of the techniques is, you just suck the water out and drink it, and keep talking. All this is on top of the artillery, the thunder, the lightning.

I squelch on to talk to 'Poonie's' troop. And to prove the point that we hadn't been briefed, my driver wasn't my normal driver; he was on R&R, one of the first R&Rs to go. My driver was someone I saw in the tent, because it was only a normal drop-off. He was going back home to Australia the next day. He'd never driven an APC before; he was down from Saigon as a beer vehicle driver. As I was a good instructor I taught him how to drive, how to do a water crossing, and took him into battle - (he) got his crew commander knocked out, blood all over the place, shit fight all the way. I've never seen him since.

I wonder why.

Of all the other drivers I could have got, he was just someone there - I didn't have a driver.

Just unlucky enough.

'Hop in' - yeah, yeah, going up for a drop-off - 'I'll show you how to drive.'

Oh, God!

And that's a fact.

So you are lined up now?

We are lined up and I look across, I hear a bang.

What formation are you in?

Line abreast, from what I can see, but apparently 'Poonie' might have been behind the APCs on the right-hand side, back a little bit. But as far as I was concerned, line abreast.

I had my Alpha on the left - because that was the normal way, that was the exposed flank, he was the most senior fellow with a lot of experience. In fact, he'd been in Armoured Regiment before I got there - he was slightly older than I was. And I had my Bravo, which was just two national servicemen from Western Australian - boss Bill Smith and Frank [Casteldy] - 'Boss Bill' was a farmer, a big, solid dairy farmer sort of fellow. Frank Casteldy was a skinny little runt of a chap - great personality.

I look across and I could see the APC, I hear this loud explosion - and that's what attracted my attention. I saw some people look at me and squat down - point-blank range, APC there, then there, that far away.

Unbeknownst to me that was a long line of (Viet) Cong, a lot with weapons shouldered, marching past the battle, and we ran into the side of them.

Now, you haven't got your lights on or anything?

This is broad daylight, given the rain and late afternoon.

It's dark and raining?

It's dark and raining.

What it was, they'd fired an RPG that had taken off the antennas - it must have been RPG-2 because it didn't have far to arm. I mean, from here to the case would have been the furthest it went, that's how close the APC was - even closer.

You are talking about a couple of metres.

A metre. When I say the front of the APC is there and what I thought were grunts were there, that's how close.

Six inches.

Yeah. They look across at me and squat down, and they were in green. The Cong that I had seen in the past had been in black - I mean, we were told when we hopped off the 707 to shoot everything in black pants, and they were basically right.

They were in greens, and they had webbing, and packs on. I'm thinking, what's going on 'Poonie'? We are letting the grunts

out? I had a bit of shit fire there, I had contact. What it was, they fired the RPG and knocked the antennas, so Carter couldn't talk - Carter was a regular soldier, DCM.

He was?

Medic vehicle crew commander.

This is Jack Carter?

Jack Carter - 'Dickhead' Carter - had the bolt switch on the 50 cal in the wrong way. He had been caught and told on a number of occasions - because left and right feed on a 50 cal, you can change over - and on top it's like a railway switch, a little round device, you pick up, and it has two grooves for left and right feet. He kept putting it in the wrong way. Some indication is, he came from 4th/19th, assault trooper. Need I say anything more? He was a regular soldier crew commanding the medic vehicle when there was crew commanders in the sections, national servicemen. But he couldn't fire his 50 cal.

Now, his driver was a fellow who later became one of my commanders and my driver; he had no fear, no fear, nothing worried him. He was an absolute perfect artist, he worked for - he was an artist for the TV studios. We had a lot of TV production fellows - singers, all that sort of stuff. He passed up his - I think he fired some OMC and he passed up - have you ever seen an OMC magazine-carrying pouch?

Yeah.

There are 10,000 mags. Well, they probably had 2,000 mags sort of thing. He passed them up and Carter shot these fellows, pistol and OMC between them. The Cong stand up, do an about turn, and march off into the distance - *march* off into the distance, still with their rifles over their shoulders.

They've often been called, as a blocking force, 'crap'. Blocking force would have been in there and they would have done us. They were a mob that were bypassing the fight to attack the camp.

So this is a formed column?

These were formed columns.

Don't you think a blocking force might have also dug in?

Oh, yes. They were Cong - Cong - they had all day - I mean, hours upon hours - to be in there. They'd just arrived; they were going down in the lateness of the afternoon to attack the camp.

One of the things that all these fellows are writing books about fail to realise - and I'll tell you some more - they still got thirteen people on the wire that night, cutting the wire. No-one had turned them off. They got thirteen people on the wire that night. These people weren't a blocking force,

they were marching down to meet the wire cutters. They thought they'd won the fight, they finally thought they'd won the fight, and they were coming in reserve ...

> They always thought that Delta Company was a bigger force than it was.

The reason (is that) they thought Delta Company was a bigger force and it was the talk of conversation. Prior to the submarine incident the Cong used to run, there were no big forces around, they were finding out what these Australians were about.

An older company commander, by the name of Smith, who'd been in Malaya and Borneo - and what did they have to do there to make sure they got the contact? - it was run and chase. His mob were renowned, we knew it was a point of conversation. When he got into the contact they ran and chased them; it wasn't an ambush. I mean, the Cong hadn't dug weapon pits. We found them in the days after Long Tan, as we drove around - I was out there for a further ten days - still with the shovels in their hands, killed by artillery as they were digging shell scrapes. And you know, Cong aren't like that.

So it wasn't an ambush. Smith's mob - and it's the only thing that saved them - they ran and got spread out. The Cong today still won't have it that that area was covered by a small company; they believe there were five battalions out there - bullshit! - they were still forming up.

Now, the other reason - and why it occurred and why it went stuffed up - twenty-four hours beforehand a SAS patrol coming up over Nui Dat 2, led by Lieutenant Peter Shoeman, came across a group of fellows with barber poles, taking bearings and sights on the camp, and they killed them and left them. The patrol then reported it; no-one took any notice. They mortared us that night.

I was lying in my bed, asleep, looking back, as I now know, towards camp, and the crump, crump, crump, and the whole tent ... A fellow by the name of 'Clicker' Cleary, who was a troop sergeant - one of the best troop sergeants over there, an older fellow - and the rest of us were only young fellows - Wally Myers, Frank Graham and myself were in our tent on the only slight rise that the cav had - which later became the officers' mess, they took over that good spot, but that was 2 Troop's deployed rear part from the section.

We must have all woken up the same time and I might have said, as we all woke up, 'That H&I's close!' and someone said, 'Yeah.' Then I realised, mate, you are facing back into camp, and you are over the slight rise - because in those days it was all the thickets and stuff before we cut it - and you are seeing the flashes. No, they've got to be incoming - 'Incoming!' erupted sort of thing. I was watching the flashes land down in that area where the post office at the back of Nui Dat Hill was, and down along that, towards the rubber plantations and, I think, Possum, one of the helicopter spots,

was, back beside our squadron headquarters - which is the other side of the road sort of thing - and so they mortared us on the wrong night.

But they knew the group was there because my next-door neighbour - my wife's next-door neighbour in Gympie, where she grew up - and we didn't get to meet, but he was a sergeant in SAS in Vietnam. We tried to meet and we were always too-ing and fro-ing - and I've spoken to him since, I spoke to him at Christmas, they were over there - who happens to be a good friend of Peter Shoeman - the small circles we move in - by the name of Davies - he lost an eye in Vietnam - he was on a SAS patrol and had just come back in. They had just had time for a shower, and he was told to kit up again because they'd got word - this is twenty-four hours beforehand, by the way - they got a hot word that there was 5,000 Cong coming down from the May Taos and they were to go out and see what it was about. They were about the hop on a helicopter and brigade headquarters downgraded it and said it couldn't be right, there was just too many people.

So here you are, you are lined up. Did you guys then sweep? What did you do then?

We had a test fire - two people fell out of the tree in front of my Bravo vehicle - test fire - because it was old ammunition, 1942, 50 cal stuff. After that quick test fire they had to change the barrel, after those two fellows fell out of that tree. Of course, that meant the driver reaches up, twists the barrel off, and replaces the barrel. The spare barrel was kept by the driver - that's where it was meant to be kept, by the way. So they test fired; killed two; changed barrel. We assaulted three shortly thereafter.

In extended line?

Extended line - gallop, gallop, gallop.

Did you know where Delta Company was?

Nope. We knew it was somewhere there.

So how are you being guided?

By the trees, in line.

But I mean, is the troop commander in the middle?

He's over in the small rubber - we advanced, line abreast.

So not very fast?

Pretty fast.

Yeah?

Yeah; it was a cavalry gallop.

So you charged in?

Charged in.

And it was still daylight - getting darker?

Getting darker, still raining, still ...

It must have been a hell of a storm.

Oh, it was, you've got no idea. When I say ... it was hurting your face and you'd go, 'Oh, shit!' - boof, boof, boof, you feel - because you think, shit, that's got to cut - especially when you get cold, the skin ...

It's like ice.

Oh, shit. There was no hail, but it was hurting.

So you are going through; are you in contact as you go through?

No, no, we are assaulting through. The artillery is still coming. A fellow by the name of 'Tiny' O'Shea - who's the first fellow who ever called me 'Paddy' - belongs to the O'Shea family of judges and accountants - he is now a paraplegic, unfortunately - lost an eye on his second tour.

But anyway, for some reason he and his driver just stopped in the assault and a tree disappeared in front of them, hit by a shell - boof! - off they go again. They don't know why they stopped, they simply don't know why they stopped.

We assault through, and I come across lines of people, they are going like that in lines, kneeling down; they up and go. I am thinking, what's the problem? - lots of grunts out here. I look across, a lone man gets up and runs. I fired at him and hit him. At this stage of the game I am thinking, hello, hello, hello, wrong mob, and anyone who is running suddenly, stuff it, I didn't like grunts anyway - I'll tell you another story about that fellow squatting down.

The last thing was, why is that bush smoking? and obviously I'm looking straight down the barrel and watching the smoke coming out of it. Unbeknownst to me, my crew commander in the Alpha vehicle, Peter Clements, gets hit in the chest. They stitched the front of the vehicle up and just ...

Does that kill him?

He died nine days later and I'll tell you why.

The next thing I hear, crack-crack-crack-pop - bang! - down I go.

Were you out for long?

Couldn't have been. I'm at the bottom and I look up, and I'm

thinking, oh, shit, what's going on? What's that torch doing up there? - the driver is still driving, he'd never driven before - seeing what went on over the other side - a grunt got up behind and he got hit too.

I saw what I thought was a torch and it was the hatch rocking back and forth. I thought, come around, look at this grunt, just there sort of thing, and his eyes are like that. I think, oh, fuck, I've lost my head, I can't see - see, I couldn't see out of one eye, I'm blind. So I thought, oh, shit, I don't mind dying but I'm not going to be a coward - I'm not a coward - so I got back up and took a 'grease gun' - I had a 45 cal 'grease gun' and started firing at anything that moved. By then, dark, can't see - one eye - what's going on?

Then the driver of Bravo says - and then 'Poonie' was obviously trying to talk to me for some time. I was concussed for ten days and didn't realise it, still soldiering on. I know now that I was concussed, but I didn't realise it at the time, I was soldiering on. He said, 'Move to the right', so I eventually get on, we did a right turn and sort of joined up with him. I was hoping the drivers knew what was going on because I really didn't. By this (stage) it was getting very dark.

The driver, a fellow named Paul Mcpherson contacted me - very mature sort of lad - and said that Peter Clements was injured in the back, and a grunt, so I let 'Poonie' know. I was going to send him back. 'Poonie' takes the blame for sending him back - I made that decision because there was a couple of wounded in there, there was also a couple of grunts that, in the assault, had 50 cal ammo boxes fall on their heads, so it was a wagon full of wounded, if you know what I mean. It was no good to bloody me, mate, and it was only just back to camp.

I've spoken to Cleary and the others and said, 'Look, there's a bigger fight out here that's going on and they didn't tell us.' They reacted to the troop, made it to the wire and they called them back. If they had've come out we could have rolled out a whole bunch more; but they were called back. I said, 'Hey, get out here, we need help' - because we only had seven vehicles out there, there wasn't troops of vehicles, there wasn't thirteen vehicles.

So 'Poonie' decided to send one of his section sergeants - who'd gone out with some extra people for the ride - across to command a vehicle. Now, his name was Noel Lowes, he came back and suicided.

He was a short, dark, swarthy fellow and he was in his desert boots and flying suit. So he had to run 100 yards this way, with a pistol with no magazine in it, through Cong-looking fellows running the other way.

He was going to pistol-whip them, was he?

Well, they both thought the opposite, he thought they were our and they thought he was theirs because he looked that way. And

he gets up in the back of my vehicle. Of course, I hear someone get up on the back of my vehicle, hear the clunk, and I swing around with the 'grease gun', and I recognised him. He said, 'Is this the vehicle?' and I said, 'No, it's over there', and he goes, 'Ahhhh!' and he had to go across there.

So he was going to take over ...

But of course, Clements was drowning in his blood. They revived him and saved him a couple of times to get him back to camp, and I said, 'Go', and 'Poonie' said, 'Oh, go' - but he wasn't in communication with them, I was - understand? - we were not on the same frequency so he can't say he sent them back, I sent them back - he tried to stop it; I said, 'It's going back. Go!'

I was talking to the driver, because Noel is inside it, at this stage of the game, on the way back - I mean, it's only 100 yards down to the creek crossing, not much more, if you know what I mean, in driving time.

It's bugger all.

It's shit. So yes.

So you do this initial assault; then what happens after that?

The Cong up and left, we stuffed them, they didn't know what was there. You talk to the fellows there, they said the Cong just got up and ran through them too - the infantry - just ran. They headed north-east.

East-nor'-east, yeah.

Yeah, east-nor'-east, because the rubber trees went north-south, they went that way. They were lined up east-nor'-east. Camp here, Cong lined up that way, we assault through that way. They are the ones I saw. Other Cong coming this way to attack camp.

They must have been going down not far from where your crossing was.

Exactly. The crossing is there, the end of the brigade comes up here, the gap's there - the crossing is just south of the gap that runs up to Nui Dat 2 and Nui Dat Hill. They were coming down - it's a bit steep up there - steep as the contour line, up a contour line sort of thing, which is steep in that country - and they were coming up to go through the gap, no doubt about it.

After you'd done this, how did you then hook up with Delta Company?

Well, apparently we were on Delta Company. We did a few slight movements and basically we were there in amongst the wounded.

It must have been hard not to run over people.

Oh, how we didn't, I don't know, because at that stage of the game - in rain, at night, in cloud, you can't see the hand in front of you.

Are you using light?

When we started picking up the grunts, and the wounded, we had lights on the back - the red light - and we walked around with hand-held torches. When we drive out - and 'Poonie' Roberts - and I've chastised him recently because I heard there's a painting out, 'Break-out at Long Tanh', or whatever it is, and the lights are on the APCs - the lights were on the APCs, we'd never have got out of the bloody rubber without them.

That's coming back out?

Coming back out.

When you did the initial sweep, the initial assault?

No lights.

Do you reckon that there were enemy underneath the vehicles?

There is no doubt, my driver, and Peter's driver, saved us by running over machine gunners and other people, no doubt about that.

So you must have caught the flank of that bloody column.

We caught not the flank, we caught - when I say there were rows of them, there were rows of them, on parade, kneeling down, like this ...

Well, that's basically almost in an FUP type thing.

They were in the FUP, and when we come up they were arse at an angle.

Okay, for the tape, Blue is kneeling on one knee ...

And the rifle is down like that.

... holding his rifle.

It was just an unreal situation, if you know what I mean, and there were lots of them.

Rows of them.

Rows of them.

Jesus!

But there was a real smart one amongst them manning a machine gun.

Who then became gristle for a bloody final drive.

Yeah, the driver definitely got him.

Okay. So this was basically 'here comes the cavalry', wasn't it?

Yes, a typical assault charge - fired some rounds - I don't think I fired a belt - didn't fire 100 rounds.

So it was the sheer presence of the vehicles?

Sheer presence of the vehicle, noise, gallop, and grey ghosts slipping everywhere.

You are then in amongst Delta Company and your next task is then to recover ...

Recovered.

So you disgorge J Company?

Yes.

Who then protect Delta?

Yes.

And your next task is battlefield clearance?

That's right.

How are you travelling at this stage because you'd been knocked silly?

Well, yeah, not all that well. I gathered my thoughts because one of my principles of soldiering, if I was going to be a commander I was going to try and be the best commander - you know what I mean? - if I was going to be the corporal, I was going to be the best corporal. I could see other scum around and I was smart enough to observe who was good, who was bad; but if I wanted to do something I was going to try and be the best that I possibly could, irrespective (*sic*), I was going to attempt to do it.

So you've got to understand, the reason I got up was (that) I didn't want to be a coward. I didn't mind being dead, dead's alright; I worked that principle in a lot of things. This is what guided me when my heart was hanging out on numerous occasions: I'm going to do it or die in the attempt. Either way I've achieved, I've done the best I can - I'm not going to give up. I mightn't succeed, but I'm going to either do it, and it's over, or I'm going to die in the attempt.

It's hard to understand that a young fellow - that's brought himself up, by the way, I left home and went out working when I was fifteen - had decided that it was his ethos of life.

Now you are back in amongst Delta (Company).

Yeah.

You've got the red tail light on?

Red tail light on.

The ramps are down?

Ramps are own.

And guys are going around ...

Inside red light is on, walking around, and people being dragged in, wounded, giving them cigarettes, holding hands, talking to fellows, putting some more in, put them on stretchers, sitting them up. I had two on the floor, on stretchers, and I had a lot of wounded sitting up on the seats.

So when did you guys head back to Nui Dat?

Me - ten days later.

But what about the wounded?

We took them out to an area - the infantry walked before us, and around us, and after us - we drove out, we set up, turned our internal lights on, and they brought in helicopters.

Okay, so they were dusted off?

That night.

So back, establish a secure pad?

Yep.

Winch them out, then you go back to the company?

The company was there; we had everyone that we could possibly get out there with us.

Oh, I've got you, so it's a moving operation, it's a whole gaggle?

Yes, a gaggle.

So you have basically got an infantry protection element around you?

I can't remember whether they went out, they come out, or we went out and they followed us, but the idea was to get out there. And eventually we were there, the company was around in protection, out there somewhere, and helicopters came in and started to pull people out.

Okay.

And they were still coming in - yeah, we got all that we had out that night.

Right-oh. So how did you spend the rest of the night?

Uncomfortable. I had - what was the sergeant's name that was out there?

Bob [Bewick]?

Bob Bewick and another fellow, myself and my driver in the back of the APC, at night, after everything had settled down. He often says, 'I was a troop sergeant' - he was in mine. We had a brew, but it was cold - Christ knows what time it was, I simply don't know - and it was cold and we sort of slept in various corners of the APC, leaning up against things.

And the, come first light?

Come first light we loaded - because one of the APCs was full of dead and the bottom was just full of blood - that was a troop officer's vehicle, by the name of Savage.

Is that Pat Savage?

See, he's got no teeth in - Lieutenant Savage.

Now, what's his first name?

Ian Savage, is it?

He went and served at Singleton.

Yep.

He used to have nightmares.

He does - he vomited up and his false teeth ended up in this blood and water in the bottom of the APC, swilling back and forward.

Now, who was the troop officer?

He was the 3 Troop troop officer.

Okay, as opposed to the troop leader.

Yep.

Now, what was your reaction, Blue, when you woke up in the morning and you looked around? It must have looked like a charnel house.

Not where we were, it was outside. But certainly, when we went back in - because next morning we'd line up and go in - and the artillery won the day. We drove in and the first people we came

across, they were lying down behind their rifles. And that's one of the things I can remember, the radio operator back like this; they looked as if they were sleeping. That was the thing that went through my mind, they are alright, they are only sleeping. But they weren't, they'd died holding on to their rifles or doing their job, every one of them. And that was in contrast to the Cong which I will describe (later). They bled to death doing their job.

I can remember some fool walked up to grab a rifle from a fellow, flying down just over it - I was hoping he was alive - he pulled the rifle and it fired, he still had his finger around the trigger and it was still loaded. He'd just died from lack of blood.

But the Viet Cong?

There were some wounded, which didn't stay wounded for long - there was a few people shot initially, by some fools.

Now, I can remember piles of vitamin K, the phials they inject into them to stop them bleeding - because that's the difference between us, we bleed quite freely because we are thick - one would argue that we should go (inaudible) for that reason, because we bleed - swish! - that's me, forgot to stop the hydraulics. They don't. On my second trip I saw a fellow disembowelled by a 66 LAW and he made 200 yards. The only other animal that does that, from my memory - you shoot them in the heart - is a kangaroo.

Or a feral pig.

But anyway, I walked around the battlefield over the next couple of days, observing, observing. The trees were cut off left, right and centre, there were branches down all over the place, there wasn't a tree that didn't have a fucking nick or cut in it. I saw Cong split straight down the middle, I saw Cong in all sorts of dissection. I followed blood trails from the trees and found fellows over there.

So they'd been blown apart?

Blown a fucking part - blown apart. The artillery was so good, and the forward observation fellows don't get due credit, and the artillery don't. 6 Battalion pisses me off, they never pay due credit. Certainly the company did good, you can't take anything away from it. The only reason they did good was because Smith ran and got the contact. They don't pay attention to the old horseshoe-and-the-nail bit, they don't understand. They all say it was an ambush and they got out of an ambush - bullshit. They ran into the middle of the Cong, they were spread out in formation, moving in over a large area - they hadn't dug a pit.

They said they were coming out of some bunkers. Those bunkers had always been there, they were there before the battalions ever got there.

Probably around when the French were.

I know they were because I drove all over that area when we cleared Long Tan township, I'd driven all over the place, I knew the are, if you know what I mean - they were there.

They said they got rifle fire from behind them after they got to a certain spot. Of course they did, they ran right into the middle of the bastards. And that's what saved them.

They talk about firing back to get back. No-one asks the question, Why was the company spread out? They said in formation - crap - they ran. Smithy was a Malay veteran - run and get your contact to make sure you get the kill - you had to count ammo in those days so it didn't get lost.

Well, [M] Platoon had spread out into an extended line - because you know what it's like in rubber, it's not good being in single file, you've got to spread out.

And they ran when they got into contact. The Cong hadn't dug in, mate; if it was an ambush no-one ... I mean, they planned some ambushes for us in that first tour, and Haggerty wouldn't let us go in the middle of the night, and they were something like three kilometres long, mate, on a number of occasions.

So you stayed out there basically supporting ...

We stayed out there for - I think it was ten days before I got back in. I think 3 Troop may have gone back in after a while and then 2 Troop might have come out and relieved. It's a little bit confused, but I was out there. We tried to force up a track which went out to - I was in a good contact on top of this bunker system they all ran to, what were called the 'Twin Tits', in my second tour.

I know, if you talk to Peter Shoeman, for the next ten days he followed up twenty-two wagon loads of wounded, going back to the May Taos with the SAS, calling in artillery on them, getting so close he could hear the screams from the wagons. At one stage of the game they tied some wounded to a tree as an ambush for him because they knew they were being followed by the SAS. That went on for two weeks.

So for all the ones - you know, they say two hundred and something. I'm telling you now, there was more because every time we found someone we had to search it.

I'll tell you now, mate, after five fucking days in the tropics, we were driving past bastards, we weren't bothering finding anyone because they'd say, 'Dig a hole and burry them.' Well, it doesn't take too long for an Australian soldier to realise that if you don't find anyone you don't have to dig a hole. The rot started to set in.

I was certainly out there for nine days, I think, or a number of days - I'll come back from ten days (retract my statement about ten days), but I was out there for quite a long time

because Clements died - I think it was the ninth day.

What happened to Clements?

Well, they got him into hospital and everything should have been going well, but unfortunately, two days before Long Tan, he got a 'dear John' letter from his engaged girlfriend and she'd decided to marry someone else. The doctors admit they should have been able to save him; he turned off the switches and decided to die.

Shit.

Interesting bit. Both he and I had a dream that we were in contact - this is before - both of us (them) were in cloud. We told people - I said, 'I dreamt about you last night, Clements' - 'I dreamed about you, O'Reilly, you bastard', sort of thing. I said, 'I dreamt that you got wounded', and he said, 'I dreamt that you got wounded' - and this is twenty-four hours before Long Tan.

None of this spooky stuff, Blue.

And it happened, it was Long Tan.

Amazing.

And we both - and there's people there as part of the conversation, we both had the dream and we were dead serious - we were joking about it, but it was dead serious. We both had had the dream, and we both had seen the other fellow get wounded.

So Clements passed away. You go back to the task force base?

Yes.

What was it like back there? The cav lost a guy.

Yeah; and I was concussed, didn't understand, did not understand, I thought I was soldiering on, but obviously people around were sort of keeping a bit of an eye on me - but I thought I was soldiering on.

I can remember sitting in a bed this day - and I don't know why I was there - and it was like a veil lifting, it was like blinds going up, and I could actually see things better. I hadn't been to the RAP or done anything, just put a bit of bandage on. I'll tell you, this is normal Armoured Corps way.

And for some reason or other I said, 'I feel better now.' Two seconds beforehand I didn't know that I felt crook. But I remember, it was like, roll, roll, roll - oh, shit, wow, I feel better now. I was in the section commander's tent and everyone said, 'Thank stuffing Christ', and I didn't know that I'd been crook, but no-one had thought, shall we wave a light in front of his eyes to see how this boy's going?

Was there a change in how you operated after Long Tan? When I say 'how you operated' I mean, did they change the SOPs for section operations?

No, no. What changed was, we all got shields because they realised that what a pain in the arse ...

The shields weren't that great, but they were better than nothing.

If you can't see the actual target - it gives a person confidence to get up as well - but if you can't see the actual target you can't aim at that target, if you know what I mean; it's just a blob, you can't identify one particular ... You aim at the centre of the sea mass, don't you? That's the Armoured Corps way of saying you aim at the big bit. Well, the big bit's not me. But if you are looking at me and you are aiming at the middle of me, well ...

You are going to get hit.

So post Long Tan - operations continue?

Yes.

You get promoted?

Eventually, yeah.

And basically the tour ...

Attitudes changed. Initially we were the greatest thing since canned beer, and then one night 'Tiny' O'Shea comes back to my troop and says, 'They are talking about charging 'Poonie'.' And I think in the aftermath, when the battalion started to do the 'why did they do this, and why did they do that?' with the brigade commander and the battalion commander, they had to find scape goats for why things took so long to get out - because I think questions were being asked. That's the weakness in our whole plan.

The rest was, the cavalry galloped in, we could have been out there a lot earlier. If A Company had've been warned out, and hadn't been on the piss - because it was a stand-down day - we could have been out a lot earlier. If the battalion commander and the brigade commander had've got off their arses and done something - and I just had the flash, I wonder whether Smith was letting on just to how bad things were, or say we are soldiering on and doing the right thing - you know what I mean? - because of the sort of mentality he is. An older fellow; does the company commander want to say that he's not handling the situation?

I don't know, it's one thing we'll never know.

No. But all these are time delays. We could have been out there a lot sooner. In hindsight the Cong would have had another go

at us because the battle wouldn't have been as devastating for him as well. But the fact that it went on for so long, and there were lots of stuff-ups, but we muddled through to victory, and we wiped so many of them off the face of the earth.

The artillery was just incredible.

Oh, it was. And it's point (blank), I mean, they could have hucked the shells it was so close. I think the charge was one matchstick, you could almost see the bastards - certainly hear them cutting through the thick air and the cloud. But certainly artillery made the day - devastated a little bit later, we had to go out and pick that mob up too; we were out there.

So what I'd like to do now is now do some comparisons between your first and second tour. What do you think were the main differences in the way that the cav operated?

The operations were far more prolonged in the second tour because the tanks had got there. They were operating over bigger areas, and the thoughts of mines, there was great emphasis placed on that.

I think the troop leaders were out a bit more because the time and space. They mightn't have been right up the hammer, but they were out in the bush more, and you might have been operating remotely from them, but they were in a central point. The battalions were moving out, and the battalion headquarters would go out there, and then the troop leader would be with them. There might be some half-troop operations, or the sections would be out with the companies in the various areas, or they'd be acting as ambushes - noisy ambushes - in some other area.

Yeah, that's a real paradox in terms that, noisy ambushes. But I understand what you mean.

And also fire support bases were dragging people out further, weren't they?

Yes, they were, yes.

Now, just some questions here. What is the scariest time you can remember of either tour?

Er ... probably, when I first got there, at night, with the Americans at the French fort.

You were more scared about what the Americans were doing probably.

Oh, yes. There were only thirteen little vehicles and we weren't aware of the capabilities of the Cong and how they were going to react - do you know what I mean?

Yeah. So it's almost an unknown, isn't it?

Yes, that's right. And they were coming around every night, and it was raining every night, lightning flashes.

This fellow, Ken [Banister], down the coast, he did his washing one day and hung it on these little briar bushes in front of his APC. And in the middle of the night, and of course, in the flashes, he sees it so he hangs over the front and pumps it full of pistol.

Shoots his own washing.

Shoots his own washing, because he'd laid the shirt out. And he's on piquet, it's raining - pissing down rain - lightning flashes, mortars, a little fire fight over there - blam! blam! blam! - shit. But Ken, he was also a bit pistol happy bashing through some bamboo this day - because it comes down and it's bloody terrible in an APC and you've sort of got to fight your way through because you can't knock the bushes out - I mean, even a tank can't knock them - getting in there, ducking and weaving. And of course, a little krait lobs on the grill next to the driver's head. He goes blam! blam! The driver is ducking and weaving and there's bullets landing - the driver's head is here and he's shooting - blam! blam! - shooting this snake. (He was) a little bit pistol happy.

What do you reckon was the toughest time that you experienced?

Toughest time, toughest time - certainly second trip. Probably the way that I was used by 'Rooksy' to go to various troops and get them in to shape, kick arse, because there was a bit of a weakness in the command structure, shall we say.

So you were doing troop sergeant jobs, were you?

Yeah, kicking and ... A troop sergeant's job is good, but the squadron was getting sort of bashed back into shape, it had gone astray somewhat.

Does it go astray because of the trickle reinforcement system?

It certainly did, and that was the problem. Trickle reinforcement; the first two squadrons were trained as squadrons and went across as squadrons, and then had trickle replacement. So the officers really worried about themselves once again and not about the whole system.

And we were starting to squeeze people; I mean, we had people back for the second and third time at this stage of the game, so we were only a little corps and, dare I say it, people weren't being trained in Australia, they weren't being picked.

I mean, in the army we always rattle on about teamwork and cohesion, and yet in one of the principal combat arms ...

Yes.

I mean, the engineers suffered it, and the bloody ...

I know, I know. So basically, in Australia, they were going to 3 Cav Australia, which is really a forward delivery troop for the squadron, and people are going over in trickle replacement. I can't remember the number of drivers I had in the second tour. I was working with 2 Troop when I went back there, and then I think I was sent to 1 Troop because they had problems - and I was really welcomed there because 'Rooksy' said, 'Will you go there. You go down there and I'll bloody ... you can take your section there', and I said, 'Get stuffed, I'm not going there.' So I said, 'No, I'll go by myself. These troops will shoot me if I take them to that shit outfit' - kick arse, check passes. And then he said, 'I'll give you an independent section.'

And that independent section did what sort of jobs?

Worked with the - basically we were never in camp. We might be working with land clearing engineers, out on ambushes by ourselves, going out to work with the ARVN by ourselves.

Drag the D and E (Platoon) around?

Yeah, D and E Platoon, any of the long jobs that they could trust someone (with).

Did you ever do an SAS insertion?

Yes, lots of them - lots and lots. Actually got photographs of picking up a SAS insertion after they jumped from parachutes and got blown all over the place.

That sounds like Reg Beasley - yeah, it would have been, Reg Beasley's time.

They were out to a tick and the wind come up, and boof!

What do you reckon was the saddest time you can remember?

Oh, there were a lot of sad times actually.

And what did those sad times revolve around?

Normally the death of someone, normally the death of someone.

Do you think that the Armoured Corps took more casualties on a pro rata basis?

I think they did, yes.

Because of mines?

Because of mines and there wasn't many of us, yeah.

I've got Graham Nicholas, who is our co-author, trying to get the figures on the casualties.

The wounded? - you won't find all the wounded.

No, because you guys remained on duty.

But even the other wounded ...

I'm trying to put it on a KIA basis; it's got to be fairly high on pro rata.

Oh, I think you'll find that it is, yeah, for the number of people that we had there.

So the saddest time you think? What affected you the most, do you reckon?

Deaths, any sort of death, because they are normally catastrophic, because we were a close organisation and you got to know fellows. For example, the first death we had was an accident in camp. A fellow by the name of Tony Holland, he was a national serviceman and an excellent soldier. He would have stayed on, he was regimented, and a bloody intelligent fellow. His best mate was a fellow by the name of [Scammell].

Now, the draw with the pistol that we used to do in Armoured Regiment guards is empty magazine, inspection, mag in, forward slide, fire. Our sergeants - fools - used to give us ...

Full magazines.

... full magazine inspections. The number of H&I fired from a pistol ... At that stage of the game the word had been, take your magazines off, or a number of things.

Now, on this day 3 Troop had a weapon inspection and Scammell had an OMC - apparently taken off someone. Holland did the inspection of the OMC with the magazine on, the slide not across. He looked down the barrel, took the bolt back enough to engage a bullet without locking, and let it go.

Oh, shit.

He was dead before he hit the ground, fair between the eyes, in front of everyone. He was dead. He knew what he'd done and was dead, and he was still standing up, and then fell forward.

Must have been devastating.

Oh, yeah. And then Clements. Clements was an Armoured Regiment fellow that I'd gone through training with, and it was in the troop that spoke on my behalf for me to go to the troop party.

Tired organisations, eh?

Mm.

To get approval to go to the troop party, I like that.

And so there was those sort of effects. And then 'Woolly' and

Mitch, other ones of mine - 250 pound bomb - whoosh! - gone.

That would just vaporise things.

Oh, shit, mate.

And, as you say, those sort of things are ... I mean, they are catastrophic, it's just massive trauma to everything.

Oh, yeah.

There's nothing pretty about it.

No. There's nothing pretty about a mine explosion on an APC.

No. Did they have the belly armour in when you were there?

On the second trip they did.

Did that save much?

It certainly did, certainly did. There were APCs blown in the air, every track, road wheel, blown off and then set them back flat on the ground.

On one occasion, on my second tour, down the Long Hais, I'd had to put all the mini team on one vehicle. There was a dozer going back to the other end of Long Hais, and the Cong were around us, checking us out. And so I said, 'Check the crossing' - we had to check that. Went across with the dozer - because we had to split the mini teams up because we were blowing them up all the time, every time we blew an APC up, see. We did quite a few down at the Long Hais on my second tour.

The dozer then went back to our little night NDP (night defensive position), cutting a track that deep, the APC following along. Went over around the hill, around the Long Hais, and boom! big smoke stack. Get up and there's this APC, two private soldiers, troopers, one fellow by the name of Dunhill-Martin - later went to RAEME and changed to Martin - because I used to say, 'Trooper Dunghill-Martin, come here.' It had been 'niners' vehicle, sat in camp for a long time, and I'd got it out. They'd worked like shit on this for ten days, put in everything new, changed the track, changed the torsion bars, put all the bits on - because it had been cannibalised basically. They'd finished the night before, working late, two little private soldiers working away. The next day they blew it up. There was a flash up there, and I'm thinking, oh, shit.

There's the mini team - and I've got photographs in the hole left by the mine, three of them lying around in the hole, APC over on its side, and of course a lot of M16s. I hop off the vehicle, tell my Bravo officer to call in the dustoff. I walk along the tracks hoping that I don't jump into an M16, climb up the track side, reach across, and said, 'Trooper Martin, what did you do?' He said, 'Oh, sorry, Sergeant.' This is a fact. 'What did you do to my APC?' - and I reached in and turned the engine off, oil and shit, and then organised a dustoff.

What was the effect on a section when you took a casualty?

Oh, well, that was real bad. The dozer had been hitting twenty-two mines in a month.

On another occasion I had been flown into camp to do the brigade subject promotion for warrant officer, because I'd studied them in the field - I was doing my senior in the field at that stage of the game - that's a separate thing.

Anyway, they flew me in, sat the exam, they walked up and said, 'You've got to go out and dustoff your crew.' I walked out - I was the only bastard that passed in the brigade - went out. While I was away an APC had gone over a mine. The engineer sergeant, by the name of Smith, was on the back wearing a flap jacket. The blast come up the back of the APC and, of course - (inaudible) who was acting as section commander - didn't damage the vehicle - an unbelievable big explosion, so it must have been offset a bit. The driver said, 'I'm alright, I'm alright', and the crew commander was saying ...

There was a bit of confusion, but the blast had come up the back of the APC, hadn't done any damage. The engineer sergeant, a big lanky fellow, was sitting on a box of claymores, blown in the air, landed on his feet. He was standing there like this, apparently, and they said, 'Come in, come in', and he said, 'No, come out and get me.' So they plodded out and found an M16 right in front of him.

Oh, Jesus!

He stood there, burnt - because he didn't have a shirt on, just a flap jacket - and the blast got him and burnt him. He was just standing there - 'No, no, I won't.' So they plodded out and found an M16 right in front of him; if he had taken a step he would have hit it.

Oh, yeah.

And that would have got them.

Mind you, the reason I was down in that section was, an M16 had come up the back of the mine, when it was covered in ARVN, and wiped out nine of them, and the section commander couldn't handle any more. By the time I got there the blood was that thick all over the top of the APC, congealed, and for the next fortnight I got red dew on me as I woke up of a morning, and I chipped away during the day to get this congealed blood (off the APC). Lucky hepatitis hadn't been invented then, but I'd wake up and it would be running on us, red dew.

Oh, God!

I couldn't see the tools on top, they were just covered in blood - nine people wiped out.

Did you ever conduct an ambush?

Ambushes every night, every night we weren't in an NDP, yes.

What sort of formation did you adopt?

Three vehicles. The most successful ambush I did in the first trip was out - we were put there because Ray [Devere] wanted the good spot - because I was Ray Devere's driver when he was a corporal - I won't tell you about him, but anyway ... He was not full course, I think, and he was over there as troop leader. He took a good spot and so I had a ...

There was a New Zealander by the name of 'Snow' [Vallence], very brilliant Kiwi - they are either brilliant or hopeless; he was brilliant - he worked with Black Horse in America after the war and organised moves for them all over the world. Went back to New Zealand on holidays and was killed in a car accident - bloody brilliant fellow, 'Snow' Vallence.

Anyway, there was a road that just went into a part of the swamp, into a bit of a trickle, and so it was just wide enough. So we put two APCs right there - causeway - creek - went along like this, around, and away into the distance. And then the other two - because it was real thick scrub, you couldn't walk through it without ... they'd looked after the entrance sort of thing. Claymores in the water - I mean, the water just drops straight down. We knew that no-one was going to come here because that's why Devere gave it to us.

Low and behold, 'Snow' and I are sitting on the decks of the APC in our chairs - millionaires - watching the sun go down, having some of my fruitcake my wife had sent me, having a cup of coffee. I had an M16 with a belt and metal magazine, and we had the M79s and all the useful sort of shit. It is dusk, dark, and we hear swizzle, swizzle, swizzle. Low and behold, we look through this peninsula or bloody mangroves - he's a Cong - four Cong in a boat going like the shit. We go, 'Oh, shit, what do we do now?'

Up they come, around the corner, and they still hadn't looked up, they are down looking around - they forgot to look up - the tide is out, see, and it's about a twenty-foot drop. We are sitting right there and we are looking in. Well, we can't move, we are sitting forward like this. I go [dung lai] and then all hell erupted - gave them the stop sign! - ta! ta! ta! ta! Of course, that was just on dusk, just after curfew time. Devere said, 'Oh, you are bloody getting nothing, you bastards', in spite of the fact that he had his troop officer there.

They eventually found - we certainly got some - one got away, I know, I could hear him running through the bloody mangroves for hours later, I think, and we got the boat and a few other things. Low and behold, ten o'clock that night, big sampan, a whole convoy of the bastards, and Devere opens up on them. The first bullets - they could hear them - first bullet hits a fuel tank on a couple (*sic*) of the boats out there - he is alight. So they didn't take any notice of what went on earlier on. It turned out quite brilliant.

But generally we tried to back into the scrub, or come in very close so the backs of the APCs ...

Sort of like a fish tail.

Fish tail, right in close - clear a little patch out so there's no doors locked back, or doors open and swinging, so there's no opening doors - the cargo hatch is open normally - lots of claymores, because we carried lots of claymores - we carried lots of det cord. At times I'd set up seventeen claymores on one 'clacker' because we carried them. I used to Araldite stuff on the front and all sorts of things.

That's good.

Det cord painted green.

We had to cover ours - we had white stuff so we covered it in pitch.

It is easier to run it through green paint.

Yeah. The other thing is, we eventually got brown det cord ...

All ours was white.

... or FI.

Or back into some scrub so you just couldn't ... It was quite surprising, when you are going along, you could pick good ambush spots.

On another occasion we went into - east of Dat Do on my second tour - organised a half troop ambush there with P J Murphy, but I organised it because I reckon it was a good one. There was an old quarry, and when the APCs moved into it they were just level with the ground and the road. And so we split up and put groups all around the place, and organised our own little piquets - because it was always a problem with only six fellows doing all those nights.

Basically, what I used to do, to try and give the drivers and the crew a sleep, I'd stay on till ten or twelve at night, and then let them start doing the piquets, because I was generally up till that time. But I could sleep - certainly sleep deprivation was a problem. It wasn't uncommon to take a section into the rubber and just go to sleep, you just couldn't go on night, after night, after night. I'd reached the stage - and I can do it even now - where I could be asleep but I'd answer every radio call.

Sleep with your ears open.

Yeah. And you don't really sleep, but just ... the brain is ticking over.

You are catnapping.

Alright, I'd like to ask you some things on leadership and stuff now. But before I do that I've got some (other questions). What do you think you learnt most from your time in Vietnam?

That most Viet Cong were Catholics, they were well versed, well educated, they wrote beautifully, they were into poetry, they kept diaries. I had a lot of time for the North Vietnamese, not so much for the South Vietnamese.

Well, while you are on the enemy, were the enemy as you imagined them, or like you'd been told before you left Australia?

Um ... I don't think we were given a good brief on the enemy at all.

From what I remember, they were sort of like a subspecies, they weren't intelligent, they were easy meat ...

Um, well ...

... and I don't think that was true.

No, I didn't. I don't think we - certainly, people called them slopes, I don't think with the venom that I'd seen, say, the engineers or infantry use them. I'd read all the books about [De Minh Fu], and it was a stage that I was well aware of. It didn't worry me, one way or the other; I was a professional soldier, I believed if the country decided to send me, I didn't question that. If I didn't like the idea I voted the government out, but I was going because I was told. If I didn't want to go ... That was my job, that's what I'd been trained for.

How did you regard the enemy?

I did not regard them as ... I did not have a lot of regard for them, personally.

But I mean, when I say regard them, did you hate them?

No.

Did you detest them?

No, did not detest them at all. I had a fair bit of time for them because I was a country boy, I respected their aptitude and their ability to live in the field, and when you live in the field you get to know the field, and they got to know it.

I thought Vietnam was a lovely country because I'm into animals, bush, orchids, and I shot one of everything - and I mean it. I shot scrub birds, I shot monkeys, I shot pigs, I shot deer.

Did you ever feel sorry for the enemy?

I quite often did. I quite often thought that I could live in the country, I quite often thought that we could have been doing a lot for them because I knew what CSIRO was doing, I couldn't see why we couldn't establish it. I was certainly anti-communist, (but) I didn't hate them though - see what I mean? That was my job.

Your job was to destroy the enemy.

Yeah, yeah, that's right. If someone said, 'Go and shoot the people in Toowoomba', and I was in the army, I'd go and shoot the people in Toowoomba.

Okay. Who do you think were the toughest enemy to take on?

Certainly North Vietnamese. They were mentally and physically tough. I saw that on a couple of occasions, certainly on the second tour, on a good bunker system - which we haven't discussed, but it's so far down the track there's a lot of other things to cover.

I saw a fellow there shot in the leg, after he'd got them out of the bunkers - good assault on top - Gray, who was probably the best commander across there - John Gray, ex-Armoured Corps infantry bloke, by the way - as [Chitham] was too.

But anyway, it was a classic - and Gray was all for it - a classic - didn't call in artillery because at this stage of the game it was taking too long - he used helicopters, tanks assault back in, APCs right up their arse, loaded with grunts, drop them on top of the bunker system, run around, grenades in, shooting up the bunker system, pulling live people out, and dead people. And there was a North Vietnamese there, and we got the headquarters of D442, or whatever it was - D445 - and there was one fellow there, he had legs on him like a grasshopper's - muscly, super fit, good athletes, good genetics. I used to remark about quite a lot of them because they were super fit. This fellow had a bullet in the top of his thigh. And I can remember a women getting carried out from a hootchie, and she was most grateful - she had about seven bullets in her - and she was a bit of jelly basically, but quite a good-looking bird actually. This fellow, he walked from the bunker to the back of the APC, with his broken leg, and wouldn't let anyone help him, and you could see it in his whole demeanour. I thought, now, that's one tough hombre, and he believes in what he believes.

I think there was some very, very brave people there.

There is no doubt about it. I wouldn't like to say that he's still alive.

You mentioned bunker systems; were they the hardest thing to crack?

Oh, there's no doubt about it. In the second trip - first trip with the bunkers - we kept on finding lots of bunkers in the first trip, and I found washing in bunkers in the first trip -

this is my Blue-walks-around-by-himself tour, or taking two other fellows, in the first tour. But generally (inaudible) scared them out.

We followed up people from a bunker system once, and we were moving through, we'd moved with the grunts, and after a day we'd move into their bunker system and they'd move out of it, and leave us messages. And that went on for some time.

Their attitude at that stage of the game was - I think Long Tan had knocked them about a bit, and until I left in the Tet Offensive and they brought some more people down, and basically the bunker system was pretty well occupied all the time from then on.

> It must be fairly frightening, I think, to be in an armoured personnel carrier when you are in a bunker system ...

They find the bunker system.

> ... because you are vulnerable from ...

Oh, shit yeah, oh, yes, there's no doubt about that. But the best thing is, it's good if you are ...

What we'd find is, if they found a bunker system, the tanks would go in, the APCs would go in, and the Cong would run out in that period while you are waiting, and come around the back - they'd run out the track we made in.

On this occasion, in the second tour, Gray brought in - there was a half a troop of APCs and a troop of tanks went out. The half troop went out with their troop officer, who was a lazy ... I think his name was [Shalom] - 'hello, goodbye' - he was a lazy bastard. But anyway, P J Murphy used to kick is arse. They were with Gray who was getting around in his little helicopter. This Cong was in a bunker system, up where they went to from Long Tan - and was called the 'Twin Tits' - due east of Long Tan, up the track - we tried to bash our way up - up the track that P J Shoeman went up.

And low and behold - same bunker system that they went to - this fellow is sitting on top of his bunker - you know how they used to put up a little hootchie? - and Gray's going along the top of the bamboo and this fellow decided to fire some rounds at Gray - wrong move.

Unbeknownst to the Cong there was a troop of tanks and a half a troop of APCs not far away and, of course, a shit fight developed - big shit fight, blow for blow - canister, 90 mil, RPGs, blow for blow, hitting tanks, hitting APCs. And so they pulled out and, of course, they had to recover ...

No, it was Smith - the troop officer's name was Smith - he's a salesman for Mercedes-Benz still in Melbourne. An APC (is) hit right in front, stuffs up the engine, driver wounded in the head. They'd fire, an APG would fire - tch! tch! tch! - trade

blow for blow with the tanks and APCs, weren't giving up at all, weren't running away. They were waiting for the withdrawal to call in artillery - and that twenty men disappear, that used to go on - Gray wouldn't have it. He brought in the helicopters.

Meantime we were working with Gray full-time, our troop, at that stage of the game, and so we were out at Nui Dat 2. I knew the way because I've got a photographic memory for land and maps - I can still take you there now, I could draw the map. And so I took the troop up, they followed me - bop! bop! bop! - I'm a great believer in the 'picto' maps because I could interpret them down to the last tree, if you know what I mean - an air photograph. I can look at them and I can see them in stereoscopic vision, I can just adjust the eyes - can't see as well as I used to as a result of that. I could do picto maps, I used to just sit there and peruse them, if you know what I mean, how to get there, understand what the different coloured shades were.

And I'd come in this way as the helicopters were doing the last flight over without ammunition. We formed up and assaulted through - bom! bom! bom! - tanks going, APCs on top. I said to my driver, 'Anyone in that bunker system?' - 'No' - look at the back and there's bastard coming out like rats, and I was right behind the tank. So we assault right back in and we caught them on top.

Gray got into a lot of shit over that because he was a forceful sort of character. He turned on a - found another bunker system in what they used to call the 'Twin Tits', up along the Song Rai, up north, and they pulled in every artillery piece within a thousand miles - we had a cordon and search around it - and they whopped it for hours on end, they whopped it with aircraft, every sort of aircraft around, and they went in and not one bunker system was damaged.

However, a grunt running on top of a bunker with an M60 gun - natter! natter! natter! - tank clearing with canister action as they drive forward, opening the place up, APCs on top having a little pecker! pecker! pecker! - where thou want - does a lot more damage, as he was able to prove. And they flew in - he flew in - Americans - they walked in, cleared it after the grunts - nothing - and they'd hammered it for bloody hours on end - there was shrapnel coming out. We had to close down - we were out, and there was shrapnel coming in, we had to close down the APCs, that's how much it was coming in.

And that is a classic, none of this dropping the grunts off short of the target unless you can't get any further. The idea is, where possible you drop them on top, they don't have to run anywhere other than all around. It was a classic tank-fire-support-APC-grunt contact - brilliant.

Meanwhile, recover that vehicle back that afternoon. Out of the mist the next morning, same APC, driver with bandage around his head, flapping in the breeze, still with the hole in. The vehicle had been steam-cleaned out, a whole new power pack,

test driven, everything cleaned out, crew showered and shaved, done their washing, and back out - not even first light, by itself. When I say the bandage flapping, flapping in the breeze, wasn't going anywhere.

Wasn't going to miss out on the shit fight.

Yeah, coming out, because we didn't have any spares - there were no spares.

I'd like to talk about leadership, and teamwork and that. What do you think are the main elements that are required for crews to work together?

Knowledge, open mind, flexibility.

Knowledge of your task?

As much knowledge as they can; knowledge gives you confidence when the going gets tough; and knowledge is not learning one thing once, it's constant revision - the human is meant to revise.

So you are talking about good battle drills?

Yeah, if that's what you want to call it.

Drill, drill, drill, drill.

Tactics for tiny tots, because with us, that is, the nail and the shoe - you know, for the sake of a nail a shoe was lost, for the sake of a shoe a horse was lost, for the sake of a horse a rider was lost, for the sake of that rider a battle was lost. That's the nail in the shoe; you will know.

One of the machine gunners out at Long Tan stripped his machine gun, licked the parts clean - because the machine gun was so muddy, all the M60 stuffed up, they were shit-house because they were open belts - the Cong didn't have any problems because they were all in magazines. He licked the parts clean, put them back together and went on firing.

Now, he may not ever be a brain surgeon, but his basic drills - he knew the bits, he did not panic under all sorts of shit and fire, where he could have dropped the machine gun and picked up a rifle - there was any amount of them around - of all sorts of description, I might had - and he could have left the machine gun. But he did it because he'd been trained, blindfolded, to do it. And that's what it is, and it gives you confidence to go on. When all other things are going you'll remember your basic drills, you can't not do it.

Now, within a section, what makes a good section?

Closeness, personalities ...

Did you have to mix and match your crews?

Not necessarily with me, I'll work with anyone as long as they can make a good brew. I had a cook there, he was brilliant, he used to make me omelettes. I'd do all the piquets and he would cook up powdered egg, and cook up in a little frypan of a morning, and make me an omelette with American cheese. I'd kill for a fellow like that.

Do the housekeeping tasks tend to come down to the blokes that are best at it?

Nope, it's got to be shared.

Got to be shared regardless of rank?

It depends on who's doing what at that time. There are two people on an APC, you get to know them really well, you just can't afford to have conflict. It's not a case of, I can't afford to have conflict. Conflict has got to be resolved, and you need to work at it because there are no replacements. If there's a problem with that fellow ...

It's not as if you've got a huge organisation.

No. And what are you going to do with him? - swap him? - send him to another section? - it needs to be sorted out there.

So you just don't transfer the problem?

You cannot transfer the problem. Unfortunately, officers today are taught, oh, that's a problem, we've got to do something about it, get rid of it, and don't do anything about it. And it's a bit of kindness too, if you know what I mean, it's looking after ...

When you were a senior NCO how would you have described you leadership style?

I was one of those that was taught that to train people - I was always younger than the average in all rank structures - I mean, I was a warrant officer at twenty-five, I was an RSM at thirty - and certainly I was fully qualified where other people used to take corporals of ten or twelve years. I observed they were up at the other end of the bar having a go at me, but they had done nothing and they weren't keen on telling me anything. So as far as I was concerned - and it was part of my upbringing - it was training. Everyone said, 'We are training you to replace us and more', and that was it, so I was an upward curve all away along the line, I could see no other way about it - training, training, you are meant to train - training my driver, training my crew to take over when I was crook, because you are not healthy 365 days of the year. A lot of these times I was suffering terribly badly with tropical ear. I mean, (the) pain at night was incredible.

So is the key to success in armoured operations having a lot of cross training and redundancy?

It is - lots of cross training, it's really important. We

started to lose a bit towards the end. The reason our corps was able to expand at that stage was because we were so cross trained, and that's what saved us. We'd done tactics for tiny tots everywhere, and they'd done a fair bit of cross training - multiple training - in tanks - and it was tactics for tiny tots all the time because you are constantly replacing troop leaders - tactics for tiny tots, tactics for tiny tots, and you've just got to know the drills so well - the troop officer mightn't - but, I mean, I went through a lot of officers over the years.

What's the most important part of a section commander's job?

Um ... depends on any given day. It's just knowing your soldiers, being prepared, being organised, knowing what you are going to do in any given situation, and being in control - that is, you own personal life; don't be an alcoholic, don't be a drunk. If you want something done you tell them to do it, and they know it's got to be done. And yet, don't knock back the fellow who is arguing - why is this man arguing? - I'm about to break his (inaudible).

How do you do it when you are living in a vehicle so closely with one other bloke, and you've only got five other guys? I mean, the relationships must be very close.

They are.

How do you maintain this separation of power, if you like?

Well, it comes. If you've got to do this, and you are doing that, and you are attending conferences, and you are kicking arse, and you are talking to battalion commanders, and you are talking to company commanders, and you are out there, and you are map reading, and you are looking after them, and you are being forceful and firm, that respect comes, it does. I never had to tell one of my drivers - and when you've got an opportunity you get under the APC - if he's driving it forward and you've got to jack up the thing.

You want him to be your mate.

Yes. And you take over and you say, 'Go and do your clothes', or 'Go and have a rest', or 'You go and write a letter, I'll do your piquet.' It's just one of those things. At times your dead.

On my first trip I had two drivers - other than the fellow at Long Tan, and he was ever so pleased I got him out of it, in fact, I think he probably got me out of it. But I had a fellow who was a bank manager later on, and I had a fellow that's a wharfie, by the name of 'Boots' Turner - and 'Boots would quite often know that I was just dead tired and would do the piquet for me. When you are in camp there's only two people who services a vehicle.

The fools want us to do kitchen duties, they'd want us to do the piquet on the front gate. You've got to service your

vehicle, attend conferences, someone's on leave, who's going to the RAP? - (this is) out of six fellows - and be ready to move before Armoured Corps - if you've got to be there at twelve we'll be there at five in the morning.

Did you get R&R?

First trip, yeah, they sent me - on both tours.

Did you get R&C?

Yeah. In the second tour I tended to take the time by myself in camp and have a rest.

What about the diggers, did they get down to Vung Tau?

On occasion, not as frequently as what you'd expect; but yeah, on occasion. It's hard to say, but there were probably three occasions in that year.

Okay. They are the end of my formal questions. We are putting a book together here for tomorrow's trooper, and also to show people how we fought in the vehicles. What things haven't I covered that you would like to talk about?

Well, pulling the stuff out of my mind from so long ago, when I've suppressed it, and it's nota thing that you remember - I'm remembering more here today, talking about it, because you are asking questions. I think that's probably the best way to go actually.

There are humours sides.

Have you got any funny sides you want to talk about?

Yeah - I've actually got photographs of this. On my second tour I had [Zev Banarvy]. Zev's a fool; Zev was given to me because I can look people in the face, I let them talk, and I say, 'Bullshit, this is what you are doing.' Zev made a good cup of coffee in the field - I didn't give a stuff - it was percolate coffee, once again. If you've got an aptitude like that I'll make accommodation for you, but he's still going to do as I want. I don't give a stuff whether you wear a turban because, believe me, with the sort of skin I'm in, red hair and a beret, in Vietnam, in the dry, down near the beach, I reckon a [keepie] - and that's why Armoured Corps have gone to those sort of things in the field - but it was there. And believe me, they work, they are cooler. So Zev - couldn't give a stuff - he gets in the vehicle, he's going to do as I say.

We'd dropped off Colonel Carne's mob. Up Thua Tich, we'd had to go up there and do something, and we were coming back, and we are coming back along that big open - it goes for kilometres and kilometres and kilometres. And we sort of come around a bend, and there was a wire for this NDP, old fire support base - Christ knows what it was. We are sort of line abreast sort of - I'm not going to say we were racing, but we were moving fast,

line abreast ...

Advancing to contact.

We are having a good old time, free as the breeze, away from the fools. And low and behold, in the middle of this NDP, up steps a Cong and goes, 'Chieu - hey, chieu' (surrendering). So we mmm! and he doesn't.

He probably thought they were all coming after him.

It's been my experience, while we were down at the Long Hais, I had a group of Cong creep past my APCs, on tippie-toes, and crawl up a gully, to attack a troop of tanks, and then creep back past my APCs because they knew if they farted they'd get stomped on. And that was their attitude, they weren't dumb.

I've not a lot of regard for the crews in the tanks in some cases in Vietnam, but the APCs, because of the attitude - and the vehicle develops attitude, if you know what I mean. The APC can go anywhere, you can do anything, therefore you do, whereas a troop of tanks run by a second lieutenant, he will withdraw things back into his mind, close to him, because he hasn't got the confidence to do what an aggressive dimwit sergeant on his second tour will do. And the Cong observe, and that's a fact.

So here we are - brrr! - out by ourselves, line abreast. A bloody chieu stands up. Right-oh, I'm in command, let's do - Alpha Bravo, bloody, yeah - right-oh driver, this fellow is giving up. So I get out on the deck - and, of course, the driver's blood's up a bit, of course, and I'm standing on the deck holding onto the barrel so, 'Okay driver, slow down and halt' - ptt! chnk! - Bluey keeps going. Slow down and halt means roll to a stop and gentle clutch; the driver goes snap! Blue keep going in the air, rolls at the feet of this Cong thinking, what's this fool thinking? God, stuff me, and he's looking down - 'Chieu - chieu' - the driver propels himself at him, sort of thing, the crew commander propels himself in mid air.

'God, stuff me. Driver, you are next. Get up. Give me that gun. Okay, come across here. Get up on top. Come across here.' He's still got the gun - 'Chieu, chieu' - 'Okay, up on top' - because what are you going to do, put them in the back? Had to help him up on top - little fellow - 'Get up on top.' 'Driver, I'm going to kill you, you bastard', sort of thing. 'Okay, gun' - got a grip, because we had an AK-47 in the section, see. Mag off - I'll show you how to fucking do this, you Cong - cock, cock, cock - the round is still on the face (inaudible) - cock, cock, cock - bastard. Get back to the Cong, he gives me a soldier's five minutes on an AK-47 - 'You do this, do that' - oh, this is good - puts it back in the magazine and gives it back.

And I notice that the AK-47 had a hole in it and had been tapped back through the slide on top, the slide cover, it had a hole in, he'd tapped it back and repaired it himself. There was dried blood on the base of the thing.

He was an engineer sergeant setting up mines around the place. They'd been out from this NDP - fire support base - he'd been by himself for about a fortnight, and the blood was where he'd crept up on a deer and hit it because he didn't want to fire a shot - because he was hungry.

He was the most unlucky bastard - and this is true - they'd been firing H&I around the place from this fire support base, and they'd started a fire. When the fire started one of the parachute flares hadn't gone off and lobbed in the back of a Cong. Here he was, burnt out, with a parachute flare in his back - fair dinkum.

Bad luck.

Dead right. And he'd apparently been in this group and they thought they were right onto us, and he'd set some mines up there and blown a few of our crew to death. Anyway, I've got photographs of him, we took him back - Carne immediately snaffles him - because I was halfway back to camp - Carn says, 'Back', and Carne claimed him as their battalion, but I wasn't even working with them. But our OC was there working the brigade fire support base for them. 'Here you are', and he took the AK-47 as well, the bastard.

But yeah, that was comical - 'Driver, stop!' - ping!

I'll stop now because I've had you for about three hours, and I'll thank you for your interview.

11/04