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TRANSCRIPT
OF
ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S02126

Phillip James Reeves as a corporal , crew commander, later sergeant, troop sergeant C Squadron 1st Armoured Regiment, South Vietnam, 1968-1969 and 1971.

Recorded
at: Caboolture, QLD
on: 27 June 1999
by: Lieutenant Colonel Gary McKay MC (Rtd)

Description

Transcribed by: Christopher Soames, December 2004

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MCKAY: This is Tape 1 of two tapes of an interview with Phillip Reeves, recorded at Caboolture, Brisbane, on Sunday 27 June 1999 for *Jungle Tracks, Australian Armour in Vietnam*.

Well, the first question is a real easy one: Why did you join the army?

REEVES: Oh, mainly to get out of Toowoomba - I was about nineteen at the time, I suppose, I was with the Main Roads, and I just wanted something different, and it was basically a dare. The army had a caravan sitting in Toowoomba up there, at the Carnival of Flowers, and other blokes dared me to go in and join up; so I did. That was basically it.

MCKAY: Did your family have any involvement with the army?

REEVES: No, no, none at all. I had an older brother in the navy and that was it.

MCKAY: So you enlisted in upper Toowoomba?

REEVES: Carnival of Flowers in Toowoomba in 1961.

MCKAY: And then you went down to ...?

REEVES: From there we went to Kapooka, done the three months at Kapooka, the basic training.

MCKAY: And what were the reasons you went into armour?

REEVES: Probably because the corporal, our instructor corporal down there, was a tankie, a fellow named Reggie [Steer] and they said, 'Right-oh, the first three guys out of the platoon, one, two, three, gets whatever corps they want.' The first three of us picked armoured so we got armoured and the rest went to infantry. They were rebuilding one of the battalions at that stage, I can't think which one it was.

MCKAY: They were probably raising 4 RAR.

REEVES: Might have been raising 4 RAR in South Australia.

MCKAY: Was it 1961?

REEVES: No, it wasn't 4, 4 was after.

MCKAY: 4 was raised in 1964.

MCKAY: Yeah, it was after Nutcracker and Icebreaker exercises. I don't know what they were doing, but they were raising a battalion and they wanted all infantry. The first three of us got what we wanted and the rest got infantry.

MCKAY: So you go into Armoured Corps; you went to Puckapunyal?

REEVES: Right, yes, into Pucka - typical driver, as you said,

short and thick.

MCKAY: I didn't say that.

REEVES: Oh, didn't you - anyway. Went down and learnt how to drive tanks. I go down there for about four years, I suppose.

MCKAY: Did you have a choice about going in to either the reconnaissance side or the tank side?

REEVES: No, no, then they only had 4th/19th Prince of Wales Light Horse which was Ferrets, Saladins, Saracens, that sort of stuff, and 1st Armoured. It wasn't until 1964 or something they formed the cavalry. But no, you didn't have much choice; you joined armoured and wherever they wanted to send you, that's where you went. I specifically joined to be a tankie.

MCKAY: So what are the courses you did beside D and S.

REEVES: The way they used to work it then, you'd do whatever field you are going to go in, that's the course you done (*sic*).

MCKAY: Oh, okay.

REEVES: You become a tank driver, you sat there for four years, or whatever - depends on how long you sign on for. Sort of three and a half years after you got in the seat they say, 'Right-oh, well, we'll give you another course - a gunner.' With a bit of luck it was like the structure; you start as a driver, you went as a gunner, you went as an operator, and then you went as a commander.

MCKAY: It must have meant that the skill levels of drivers was pretty high.

REEVES: Er ... yeah - probably not as much as the gunner, he was the sort of king-pin of the whole show. Without the good gunner you had nothing, you just had a machine that floated along the country.

MCKAY: So you did that for about four years?

REEVES: Yeah, probably four years. Went into the gunner seat for about six months, then they give me a stipe, and once you got one stripe you had to become an operator then. So I went over to the operator's side. So about five years after you join up you become a corporal and went up into the turret as a commander. That was the normal sort of thing then, in those days.

MCKAY: But you didn't get to Vietnam until 1968.

REEVES: Yeah, '68 I went.

MCKAY: And you spent all that time in 1st Armoured, or did you have any other army postings?

REEVES: No, all 1st Armoured.

MCKAY: You were well and truly black-hatted by then.

REEVES: Oh, gees, yeah. I knew what was going on.

MCKAY: And you would have been a full corporal?

REEVES: Yeah, corporal when I went to Vietnam, yeah - commander.

MCKAY: Did you ever think that the tanks would never go to Vietnam?

REEVES: Oh, we all did, I don't think anybody thought they'd ever go to Vietnam. They weren't made for Vietnam, they were sort of for desert and the plains.

MCKAY: For the rolling plains of Salisbury, I think.

REEVES: Yeah, they weren't really made for jungle. Actually, I don't think that anybody in the whole of Australia thought they'd play in the jungle, and we weren't trained for that sort of stuff. Well, it was the normal thing, you trained for the open plains, savanna type country, wherever the hell we were going to have the next war.

MCKAY: Were you married when you went to Vietnam?

REEVES: Yeah, I got married in '65.

MCKAY: 6 February.

REEVES: Something like that, yeah - I had to ask my wife that.

MCKAY: Oh, golly. So what was your bride's reaction to going to Vietnam?

REEVES: Not much, it was just one of those things. Well, being a regular it just had to happen, you were told you were going. And that's why I probably done a second tour; they say you are going so that's it, you are off.

MCKAY: Did you ever think that you'd go with cav?

REEVES: No, I could have went (*sic*) into cav, I could have went to cav when they formed, when they started up, but I didn't have any interest in going into cav then, no. Once you are in your tank crew that's where you sat.

MCKAY: Did you think that the tanks would be able to operate in Vietnam?

REEVES: No, no, not in the role they were meant to play. Well, you know, I don't think anybody thought they'd operate in Vietnam - as well as they did. Oh, they can operate, but they had different opinions on what they were going to do there. Like the first month we were there all we were doing was lining up the squadron and firing five miles away over the hills, with

a bloke in the copper spotting for us. That was what we were going to do for the whole tour until they found out we were going to do a few other things.

MCKAY: So who was the squadron commander?

REEVES: The first one was Peter Badman, I think.

MCKAY: So this is when the first squadron went over?

REEVES: Yeah, he took C Squadron.

MCKAY: That was done at fairly short notice.

REEVES: Ah, yeah, we didn't have a lot of time.

MCKAY: You didn't do any sort of work-up training for jungle, did you?

REEVES: No, no, no.

MCKAY: Did you guys go to Canungra?

REEVES: Yeah, we went to Canungra, that was ... oh, I don't know why, but yeah, we did go to Canungra.

MCKAY: That was my next question: Was this battle efficiency course at JTC Canungra, was that relevant to you?

REEVES: No, not at all, no. Oh, it was done in case we were taken off our tanks and we had to play in the jungle; the tank blew up and you are relegated to the foot, that was the only reason we done it, sort of train us to be able to handle the jungle out of our vehicles, which never happened.

MCKAY: Did you go up as a squadron?

REEVES: Yeah, as a squadron.

MCKAY: So you would have had to run around as a section commander or something, I suppose.

REEVES: Yeah, I think so - I'm not quite sure, I can't remember.

MCKAY: Anything stick out in your memory about Canungra?

REEVES: No, not really. I found it a breeze, I didn't complain.

MCKAY: Did you go there a second time, before you went back for your second tour?

REEVES: No, no, didn't bother, no. We could have if we'd wanted to, but no, didn't, didn't really want to go back, I give (*sic*) that a big miss.

MCKAY: When you look at what you did in Vietnam, and before you went, and with the benefit of hindsight, were you and your crew

well prepared for what you had to face in Vietnam?

REEVES: No, we didn't know, we didn't really know what was there anyway. They didn't tell us a hell of a lot about what was ... we saw it on the TV, but they didn't tell us what the country was going to be like. We probably thought then that we were going to be fighting battles. We knew there wasn't any armour down the south side, but we weren't real sure whether we were going to head north or not, we didn't really know about it.

MCKAY: So you went over on a Qantas plane?

REEVES: Yeah, Qantas flight, yeah.

MCKAY: And in to Tan Son Nhut?

REEVES: In to Tan Son Nhut.

MCKAY: And then you go down to Nui Dat?

REEVES: Yeah, headed straight off to Nui Dat - spent a night in Tan Son Nhut or something.

MCKAY: What was your reaction when you got into Nui Dat, what do you remember about that?

REEVES: Very little - we had to set our own camp up, there wasn't any camp for us so they give us a bit of jungle and said, 'Right-oh, there you go, that's where you are going to live, do your own thing.' There wasn't a hell of a lot there.

I can't remember who was next to us; there was an infantry battalion next to us, but anyway, there wasn't a hell of a lot of ground. They give us a bit of country and said, 'That's it, set your camp up.'

MCKAY: So the tanks must have gone over on the HMAS *Sydney*.

REEVES: Yeah, they went on the *Sydney*, yeah.

MCKAY: So you must have been separated from your vehicles for quite a while.

REEVES: It wasn't long, probably only a month. We went down and grabbed them from ...

MCKAY: Vung Tau?

REEVES: ... Vung Tau, yeah.

MCKAY: And drove them up?

REEVES: Drove them up the road, scaring hell out of the locals.

MCKAY: I was going to say, that must have been quite impressive, to see the squadron coming up Route 2.

REEVES: Yeah, there was a bloody lot of Vietnamese heading into rice paddies, I can tell you, they didn't know what the hell they were.

MCKAY: So you spent that first period of time settling in?

REEVES: Building camp, digging holes and just building the camp up, yeah - putting up with the scrub ticks.

MCKAY: How long before you went out in the scrub?

REEVES: Well, as soon as the tanks got there actually. We got them bombed up; we weren't sure what sort of 'bombage' we'd use, but we bombed them up as per Australia, which was the APC BC, and all that stuff, and the armour-piercing. We threw the lot in and then we headed out to the Long Hais, they wanted to do a shoot on the Long Hais, mainly to see what effect the ammo would have on the caves and that up there. But that didn't work out too good.

They took the bridge layers with them, and the enemy thought they were giant bloody launchers because they pointed them at the Long Hais when they parked them, just accidentally. We found out later that they all cleared out of the mountains because they thought these thing were launchers for rockets. So they cleared off and we didn't get any kills. But oh, it was just an experiment.

MCKAY: So it must have been a huge learning period for everybody.

REEVES: Oh, gees, learning curve, oh, unreal. It wasn't only the learning, it was how to drive, we'd never driven in that sort of country before - bloody sand. One you got a shower of rain that was it, you were stuck there.

MCKAY: The first time you went out on operations, what was that like?

REEVES: Er ... the first time, I think, was down around the Long Hais, clearing what they called the Long Green, just to see what they'd go like in the jungle, I think. We sort of were a bit green so we didn't do much bloody good down there. The bamboo stopped them, it would jam up the tracks.

MCKAY: You are talking about the big thorny bamboo?

REEVES: Yeah, the real ...

MCKAY: With great big long spikes on it?

REEVES: Yeah, yeah, but all that would do is just jam the tracks up. Your tracks would be going and you would be sitting there. But no, that never really worked. We found out a way later on, but at that stage we weren't allowed to use too much ammo. But that was the first operation, I think. Actually, I think that was the one where - I was acting sergeant then - my corporal dropped the end of my barrel off, shot the bastard

off.

MCKAY: How do you do that?

REEVES: Well, we were firing on the Long Hais. We'd come out of the Long Green and we were blowing on the Long Hais - again! Actually, we found that we could use armour piercing (shells) - because we didn't know the Long Hais were all concrete then. We found out later that where they were living was all concrete. We'd put armour piercing in it which would shatter the concrete and do damage inside.

We were troop firing, we had a troop lined up, and one tank would fire. And then we had, I think, the SSM - Peter Simpson, I think his name was - he was behind us saying, 'We'll take them by surprise. So you fire there, then I'll give you the order. As soon as I give you the order you traverse forty degrees right and fire' - and this is confusing the enemy, see. So we've got one there, we'll drop one there.

And, of course, I'm sitting there leaning on the basket of my turret. The next thing I am bloody thrown to the ground. I thought, what the hell's wrong? He'd actually swung his tank and shot about that much off the end of my barrel, so I had a short barrel from then on for a little while, till they changed it. That was a bit of a shock.

MCKAY: Now, you arrive there not long before Tet.

REEVES: Tet started, that's when they actually sent us in to Ba Ria - that was the worst job I ever had - to guard the bloody intelligence. There were about four little secret organisations in Ba Ria at that stage and we sort of had to guard them. So they put us in the showgrounds and if anything happened we were reacted from the showgrounds in Ba Ria.

MCKAY: That was a troop task, was it?

REEVES: That was strictly troop, yeah.

MCKAY: I imagine that most of the tasks you went out troop tasks.

REEVES: Nearly all troop, very rarely went ... Actually, the only squadron task was Coral, the big one north of Saigon - when we were doing a long-range shoot.

MCKAY: So you are down in Ba Ria; how did you actually get involved in Coral?

REEVES: They sent the whole squadron to ... They had the Yanks on one side, Koreans on the other side, but they had a sort of a - what would you call it? - ravine through the guts - I'm talking miles - where the enemy could come in - and that's exactly where they all did come. So they put us in there with three battalions, I think. Yeah, well, that was later on, I'm not sure when that was - May.

MCKAY: Had they had the first attack on Coral when you guys arrived?

REEVES: When we got in, yeah.

MCKAY: That night, the first night?

REEVES: The day we got in they were just filling in their trenches that they'd dug for themselves. They buried all the bodies in there and moved the camp back.

MCKAY: And tightened their perimeter up?

REEVES: Yep.

MCKAY: And then you guys arrived?

REEVES: They put us on the northern side and they sent 1 Troop to Balmoral, which was about six, seven, clicks away.

MCKAY: And what was the role of your troop at Coral?

REEVES: Just to protect the northern side from any ground attacks that come in.

MCKAY: And how did you do that - were you bunded in?

REEVES: Yeah, we'd dug ourselves - oh, no, the tanks weren't, no, they just left them on top of the deck. Now, I come to think of it, why the hell had they done that? Probably didn't have enough time. But wherever you dug a bund - it was the wet season too - we dug bunds ourselves for sleeping quarters underground, but the next day, before the waters - yeah, that's probably why.

MCKAY: The soil up there was reasonably loamy, wasn't it?

REEVES: Sticky, sandy loam stuff - like I've got here actually. Sandy loam; once you wet it, oh ...

MCKAY: It sticks to you.

REEVES: But we had grunts that used to sleep under the tanks. They'd wake up in the morning and the bloody tank would be on top of them, it would sink overnight. That's probably why we didn't dig them in, yeah, come to think of it. We used a lot of iron, sheets of tin, for rockets. We used to put them on star pickets around them, but that was the only protection.

MCKAY: What was the greatest threat to the tanks at Coral?

REEVES: Well, at that stage the enemy didn't know what we could hit them with, they never had a clue, so they never really fired at us. They used to fire at the commanders; any head they saw, they'd fire at that. They didn't know the RPGs would go through the tanks at Coral, they didn't find that out till Binh Ba, a lot later on than this. But at that stage, no, they'd just fire at your head.

MCKAY: Did you guys know that the RPGs would go through?

REEVES: No - we didn't think they would, no. We found out later they went through pretty easy.

MCKAY: I got quite a shock when I found out that in that area, behind the road wheels, in the actual hull itself, an RPG-7 would go in there ...

REEVES: Straight through ...

MCKAY: ... and almost out the other side.

REEVES: ...out the other side, oh, Jesus. In fact, they'd go through the turret - yeah, we got one through the turret - Lenny Swarbrick got blasted.

MCKAY: I mean, it's quite amazing.

REEVES: But the amount they fired at us at Coral, they fired thousands and they never once aimed at the tanks, always the driver's head or the commander's head. You've heard of ducking RPGs, but ... If they had known then, gee, they'd have annihilated us.

MCKAY: Did you stay inside the fire support base during the day?

REEVES: No, most days we'd head out. Days we'd head out, trying to get a battalion out of the shit or something.

MCKAY: Was that with grunts and APCs, or just out by yourselves?

REEVES: We used to go out on our own.

MCKAY: So just do a sweep sort of operation?

REEVES: Yes.

MCKAY: Clear and search, I think they called it.

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: So the first night you had in Coral you probably saw some action.

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: What sort of stuff?

REEVES: The normal stuff.

MCKAY: 'Normal stuff' - most people wonder what 'normal stuff' is.

REEVES: About twelve they sent the rockets through - what do

they call them? - dropping bloody - mortars, sorry, they sent the mortars in, and they walked them through the camp, and at two they sent the ground wave through.

MCKAY: They practice mortars like clockwork.

REEVES: Yeah, used to time them, yeah, you could time them.

The first night wasn't too good, I had a troop leader that was sort of a bit green. He got in the tank and locked us out.

MCKAY: That's a bit untidy.

REEVES: The second night it was a bit different.

MCKAY: I can imagine.

REEVES: But then I was on a charge of bloody mutiny, smashing an officer up and all this sort of stuff.

MCKAY: Did that come to anything?

REEVES: No. The next day we went out and saved the infantry, so yeah ...

MCKAY: What were the tanks doing while these ground assaults were coming in?

REEVES: Just firing - canister.

MCKAY: Mainly canister?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: You mentioned that you'd been in your own crew for a while. How long had the guys in your crew been together?

REEVES: From when we got there probably till after Coral. They had a re-group after Coral, mainly because I got promoted so I had to get into another troop, take my own troop. I think that's when I moved down to 4 Troop. A young fellow named Owens - Bob Owens - was troop leader, a really nice bloke.

MCKAY: Was that a reluctant move on your part, to have to leave the crew?

REEVES: Oh, it always was, to leave your crewmen, but you were there to train another crew.

MCKAY: Of course, by this time you've got a fair bit of experience.

REEVES: Yeah - after then, yeah.

MCKAY: You mentioned before, when you talked about Coral, that you went out during the day to help the infantry get out of the shit.

REEVES: Yeah, that was ...

MCKAY: What were the infantry doing at that time.

REEVES: Well, they were mostly advancing to contact, wherever they'd find a contact - with cavalry, I must admit. Cavalry sort of went with them, but cavalry were restricted in their carriers to where they could go. Prior to this we'd found out that if we blasted enough canister round we could go anywhere. And that's what I said before, we didn't know that we'd got there.

MCKAY: Mainly just by clearing the vegetation?

REEVES: That's all it done - it certainly cleared the bamboo. One canister round would open a six foot wide path, two would open it enough for your tank to go through for about thirty metres. So we found out that we could clear the ground, the only problem we had, of course, is that we had our own people in there. We'd go in, they'd get the message to go to ground, and we'd clear as much as we could, keeping the shots high, and then run over the rest of it. We found that way we could go in and extract bodies and whatever, get them out of there; but they were really stuffed, because of the scrub - of course, Charlie were all underground.

MCKAY: Yeah, they were all dug in, weren't they?

REEVES: They'd had it underground for years.

MCKAY: When you look back on why Coral was there, I mean, they were put there deliberately to plug ...

MCKAY: Oh, no, that was put there to hit Saigon.

MCKAY: Yeah?

REEVES: Yeah. The Australians, you mean?

MCKAY: Yeah.

REEVES: No, we were put there - the worst bloody thing that ever happened because the Yanks didn't want to go there - they knew that the North was going to come down there anyway, it was the straightest bloody trail, straight to Saigon. They shoved us in there, and I don't think they thought we could hold it anyway. We finished up sending the bastards back north again.

MCKAY: So how long did you stay in Coral?

REEVES: Oh, hell, I don't know ... I don't know, I don't really know, probably a month maybe.

MCKAY: A fair bit of time.

REEVES: Yeah - there was a lot of fighting and contacts - yeah, probably a month.

MCKAY: And then Balmoral had their day.

REEVES: Oh, yeah, the poor buggers at Balmoral, they had to get out of there to be able to fight. Well, they won that one too. That was a blue there, they put the bloody thing on top of a hospital; you don't put a fire base on top of a hospital, especially a 500-bed hospital. That's why they got into so much shit, but anyway, they done well in there - Lenny Allen's troop.

MCKAY: So after Coral you come back down to Nui Dat?

REEVES: Yep.

MCKAY: And what sort of changes were being made to the way you did business by that time?

REEVES: Well, we learnt on the way up how to move armoured in a hurry, because it was a big hurry - a bloody three-day trip or something - and on the way back we sort of learnt, with a lot of effort, how to avoid bloody mines because they planted them all along the middle of the road - so we lost a hell of a lot of tracks on the way back.

Yeah, eventually we got back into ...

MCKAY: You lost a lot of tracks, you said.

REEVES: Yeah, to mines.

MCKAY: Was there much other damage apart from blowing tracks off?

REEVES: No - plenty of bullet holes, but not a lot of ... As I said, they didn't realise then that they could fire an RPG at us and ...

MCKAY: I didn't even know that when I was a platoon commander in Vietnam, I thought the tanks were impervious to RPGs. I was always sheltering behind one of these bloody things.

REEVES: Well, actually, the worst thing that happened was bloody old - a fellow name Gus Valentine - fired a bloody machine gun bullet into one of our rear fuel tanks and, of course, it caught fire.

MCKAY: Did you always have the external tanks on?

REEVES: No, they were put on for Vietnam.

MCKAY: For Vietnam?

REEVES: Yeah. They shouldn't have been, but they were. Oh, yeah, I suppose they weren't that bad. They had a special rubber bladder inside that supposedly closed over on the bullet hole and sealed it up.

MCKAY: Allegedly.

REEVES: But that didn't work.

MCKAY: Did that make much difference to the way you actually operated the vehicle, with that tank on the back?

REEVES: No, not really.

MCKAY: Probably only going in and out of creeks.

REEVES: Yeah - I was just going to say, a lot of ...

MCKAY: Just clearing.

REEVES: We used to get a few left on the other side. Other than that it wasn't ...

MCKAY: Now, you experienced the wet and the dry.

REEVES: Yep.

MCKAY: Just run through what you consider to be the major dramas in the wet, and then we'll compare it with the dry.

REEVES: Oh, just boggy. As I said, that country is sandy loam, something like this, and it was like bloody Tin Can Bay, when we took them up there early in the '60s. As soon as you turned on it your tank disappeared. Recovering a vehicle is the biggest pain in the butt we ever had because of the time. If you had an urgent job somewhere you are restricted by where you could go. If there were not roads you forgot about it. Yeah, that was the biggest hassle.

MCKAY: When the troop went out in the wet season did you usually take an ARV (armoured recovery vehicle) vehicle with you?

MCKAY: Yeah, most troops took an ARV.

MCKAY: You'd have the ARV with you all the time?

REEVES: Just about, yeah.

MCKAY: And in the dry season what were the biggest dramas?

REEVES: Dry wasn't very much - land mines mostly; the harder the ground the better the mine worked, naturally, under the track, so we used to split a lot of tracks. No - dust didn't worry us, they knew we were coming anyway because they could hear us. Funny thing about a tank, you could hear them in the jungle but you wouldn't know where it was.

MCKAY: I could never tell.

REEVES: You can't tell. You think it's fifty metres over there and it's ten foot over this way. Yeah, that was the strange part about it.

MCKAY: When you went out on Coral, of course, you were away from Nui Dat for thirty days or whatever?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: Did you spend much other time outside Nui Dat?

REEVES: Oh, most of our time was outside Nui Dat, yeah.

MCKAY: What, in fire support bases?

REEVES: Mostly fire support bases, ambushes, and on the Song Rai or something. Done a lot of ambushes, but there wasn't a lot of advance-to-contact as we were sort of trained in eaarlier where you found your camp and you went into attack it. We didn't do a lot of that, that was infantry type stuff.

MCKAY: You mentioned ambushing; just run through the layout of an ambush that you would have adopted.

REEVES: A tank ambush, you mean?

MCKAY: Yes.

REEVES: Most of our ambushes were either on the river, firing into sampans of a night-time - of course, we used the light once we hear a sampan.

MCKAY: That's that great big bloody searchlight.

REEVES: Yeah, one million candle power - take the filter off the front and you've got white light. So we'd hear a sampan all of a sudden - four tanks lying along the beach. We'd have an ARV recovery vehicle plus their little fitter's track, they'd cover our backside, sort of away from the river. If we sat there for more than a couple of days we'd take a bloody platoon of grunts with us, they'd do a bit of a dig-in around to cover our backside again.

Started out, we were firing HE (high explosive) at them, but that didn't work. It's got to hit the target to sort of blow the bloody thing away, or get rid of the guy. But we found AP (armour piercing shells), if you hit the water about eight foot your side of the sampan there was no more sampan, with armour piercing, yeah.

MCKAY: Because it would just skip along.

REEVES: No, it was the shock or something - yeah, it would skip through the boat, but the shock waves, or some damned thing, would just disintegrate the sampans.

MCKAY: It's fairly flat along the Song Rai.

REEVES: High ground, you always took the high ground.

MCKAY: Did you?

REEVES: High banks.

MCKAY: To try and get a bit of elevation?

REEVES: Couple of pitches in there - yeah - where we used to sit. Yeah, always get elevation. No, there in the [slide].

MCKAY: So this is basically the Song Rai ...

REEVES: The Song Rai we used ambush, yeah.

MCKAY: Big enough to take sampans.

REEVES: Yeah, there was plenty of them. But the other sort was tracks. you'd find a track that the grunts (inaudible) had been used pretty well. The same sort of thing; if we could we'd get four tanks up, if not, three up and one back covering the rear - get a platoon around - that's if we could get a platoon, sometimes they were a bit hard to get - recovery vehicle would cover the arse end. They'd all fill with canister, that'd be the main ... machine guns and canister - blast away with your canister once you get a sight - you can't go on noise. We tried that once at a place called Avenger - Fire (Support) Base Avenger - blasted away at this noise. It was two bloody elephants, they'd brought them down, full of gear, from the north and then let them go. These elephants were trying to attack us and we finished up wasting a hundred bloody canister rounds on two elephants. It didn't work too well, so after that it was strictly sight. If you were sure you had something you hit your white light and then blasted the hell out of the area with canister and machine gun fire.

MCKAY: Does canister have much of a spread?

REEVES: Yeah,well, at ten foot out of the barrel it'll blow open, which is your solid container, then at about fifty metres out of the barrel you get about a ten foot front. So everything is sort of hit within a ten foot arc. Yeah, good for getting guys on the track and good for blowing trees out of the way so you could see what the hell is going on.

MCKAY: When you'd do these ambushes would you be putting claymores out as well for local protection?

REEVES: No, we never used claymores - oh, the infantry would, the platoon would, yeah. We had a bit of trouble with claymores. Actually, when we first went there they used to give us the task of taking the companies, with the new battalions, out to the Long Hais or some other mountain range, and seeing how they went. I went on an overnight camp and for one night they put all the claymores in back to front. I don't know what happened, but somebody latched onto it, just before they went to fire them. So they got out and turned them all round again. We didn't believe in claymores.

MCKAY: I think that was because the infantry had such little exposure to them.

REEVES: In fact, half of them had never seen a claymore.

MCKAY: Never seen one fired either.

REEVES: No; that's why they had to paint them, then paint the back, and then put 'This Side Towards the Enemy'. No, they'd never seen them before then - they were strictly American.

MCKAY: Just as an aside, I rarely operated in an open area, I was always in the 'weeds' as a grunt. We used to dig around and get the phosphorous off the bottom of the leaves and stick that on the back, and that way, if you could see your (inaudible) you'd know it was still pointing that way, in case someone was trying to be a smart-arse.

REEVES: I'm sorry referring to you as 'grunts'.

MCKAY: No, no, we love being called 'grunts', it's the noise we used to make.

REEVES: It's just the way it went, I think.

MCKAY: I don't think infantry take exception to it, those that do shouldn't even be infantry, they are a bit think-skinned, I think.

REEVES: No, we couldn't do without the buggers.

MCKAY: When you went to 4 Troop on promotion, what was your role then - you were a troop sergeant?

REEVES: Troop sergeant, a mediator, and fighter. 4 Troop was a bad troop, they used to pull knives in the canteen and they carved every bastard up. I was sort of told to go down and sort them out, which I did. I built a ring down there so that if any bastard wanted to fight, fight me. It worked out all right, quietened them all down. But they were a good mob, just a bit wild.

MCKAY: Is that the normal role of a troop sergeant, he's there to look after the diggers.

REEVES: Mother, mediator. You've got a lot of them, especially the young fellows, they've only done three months bloody training and they sent them over there. I never believed in that. They cry of a night and all this sort of crap.

MCKAY: But you are also a trainer, aren't you, as troop sergeant?

REEVES: Well, it was training all the way, yeah.

MCKAY: Are you also training the troop leader ...

REEVES: Yep.

MCKAY: ... to an extent?

REEVES: That was the most important part, I suppose.

MCKAY: That was going to be my next question: What's the most important part of a troop sergeant's job?

REEVES: Oh, well, training the troop leader, and then training your diggers to take notice of him, whatever he said. It's a strange thing in bloody war, but the soldier sort of goes to the sergeant - supposedly you go along the line. Until that troop leader proves himself, it's pretty hard on a young soldier, he doesn't know what the hell to do. I had young soldiers take fits and that, spit their tongues out and all this sort of stuff; it was just pressure.

MCKAY: Now, you would have had national servicemen in your troop.

REEVES: There were, that was the biggest problem, yeah. It wasn't a problem, but they weren't trained. They were only there for six months and they were in bloody Vietnam.

MCKAY: How did they fit into the troop, the nashos?

REEVES: Oh, there was no difference - I knew the difference because you could tell the guys that's been in for six months and the guy that's been in for twelve months, but no, they just fitted in with the rest of them, yeah.

MCKAY: How di you think they performed overall?

REEVES: Oh, great, excellent. Some didn't want to be there, but you put up with them anyway. That's the bastard I had in 4 Troop, there were about five of them didn't want to be there and wanted to kill all their mates, but anyway, they worked it out - we worked it out.

MCKAY: You mentioned mines; what sort of techniques did the enemy use for attacking the tanks with mines?

REEVES: Oh, they were strictly bloody anti-tank mines, but on the roads, they'd dig them into the road, or they'd dig them into a spot where they thought you were going to go around, like a culvert; they used to stack them under the culverts when we first started. Then they found there was too much earth in the culvert so it didn't do much damage. Then we started going around the culverts and then they'd put them out on the side. (It was a case of) whatever happened on the day, and whoever laid the mine, where it was.

MCKAY: Were they either pressure, or pressure-release activated, or were they command detonated?

REEVES: No, most ... the ones on the road were command detonated, but anything off the road was pressure. Yeah, the majority of them on the roads were command detonated.

MCKAY: What was your SOP on hitting a mine?

REEVES: All round protection for the vehicle that's been hit, so you'd fan out. Any suspect area where the guy might be sitting, blast that out with a canister or machine gun, and you'd often fix the bloody thing and get out of there.

Prior to us getting there the Yankee Cavalry moved into what they called Black Horse, a base just north of Nui Dat. They moved up that Route 2, which was the road running past Nui Dat. So the first vehicle until the last one at nine at night, that was their convoy, and they got attacked about eight times, so that scared the shit out of us - they hit mines, all sorts of stuff. And from then on we'd run it with a troop of four tanks and we never, ever once got hit. So I think the enemy thought that we were different to the Yanks. They used to hit the Yanks wherever they went - the armoured cav mob would get hit ever day, but they'd never attack us. So why I don't really know, probably because of our SOPs.

MCKAY: And I'd say also because every bastard and his dog would know when the Yanks were moving.

REEVES: Oh, Christ.

MCKAY: Because they had all those civilians in their camps.

REEVES: Well, not only that, but they'd tell everybody - well, naturally they'd tell everybody - but by the time we got there the Yanks wouldn't travel in an armoured vehicle, and the driver would be sitting up on the barrel with two sticks on his lap, and all the crew would be on top because they reckon they'd get hurt if they were inside. And that's how they used to do their convoys. Old Charlie thought, shit, this is good, we'll mop the lot off. They used to plant claymores, big drum claymores, and then blow the whole lot of the crews off the top of the tank. They thought that was great, but they never, ever - whether it was our SOPs or not, I can't tell you, but they never, ever attacked us when we were doing our clearing patrols. (We encountered) the odd mine, but I think the majority of them were meant for carriers or trucks, that sort of stuff, on the road.

MCKAY: When you say 'mine', we are really talking about improvised explosive devices.

REEVES: Oh, yeah, they were all homemade, yeah. Actually, they were made out of the American bombs that didn't go off. You used to find these 500 pound bombs all over country with the bloody end screwed out of them, they'd be everywhere.

MCKAY: What sort of operations didn't you like going on?

REEVES: Oh ... I didn't like land clearing a lot.

MCKAY: I was going to say, I bet land clearing comes up here.

REEVES: Yeah, land clearing was one of them.

MCKAY: That was pretty boring, wasn't it?

REEVES: Boring as hell; not only boring, you always got the chance of them taking you out - they sort of hit my bloody operator on land clearing - oh, that was my second tour. Young Warren [Hind] had gone on R&R or something, so they made me the troop leader and when you become the troop leader you've got to get another corporal out to become sergeant. He wasn't switched on enough and he drove past a bloody fire lane, and Charlie hit the ... That's the first time I think they hit a tank with an RPG, hit the machine gun on top - he was aiming at the commander's head again, of course.

MCKAY: Oh, that's the one that Phil Barwick was in.

REEVES: Yeah, young Phil.

MCKAY: And Andy Anderson.

MCKAY: Yeah, well Phil was my operator, he got his eyes taken out and his arm off. But that's just one of those things, he wasn't switched on enough to check it out. It was only the first day he'd come out, worst luck.

MCKAY: So how big a threat - I mean, how did you guys approach the threat of mines, I mean, as tankers?

REEVES: No, it didn't worry us, we knew they weren't getting anything big enough to worry us.

MCKAY: It was just that you put your faith in the way you did business?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: The way you approached obstacles?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: Plus you had engineers all the time, didn't you?

REEVES: If it was a bad area we'd call them up - ground clearance. But actually we probably done the wrong thing, we sort of got so lethargic about it, we knew they'd only knock a track off. It just meant we'd be five hours late to where the hell we were going. No, we didn't worry about them too much.

When we first got there we had trouble. In fact, when I first got there I spent a fortnight on Special Equipment Troop. One of the drivers got done in, he screwed his drain plugs in the wrong way around. See, in those days we used to spent three days closed down; you'd get out the jungle and everything is closed down. Thank Christ they cancelled that.

MCKAY: God, that would have been impossible.

REEVES: Well, I lost a gunner. I sort of sat back and my gunner come out, and he'd been there for about eighteen hours. He saw three dead Australians on the back and he just went troppo, bit

his tongue out and wanted to shoot me, all sorts of shit. It's just too long - young - what's his name? - [Brackenry] - he screwed his bung in so that he could tip his pee out. He could undo the bung and tip his pee out through the hole instead of sort of opening up - because you've got to pee - we used to pee in jam tins. He hit the mine and, of course, it blew the bloody bung straight through him.

After that the only thing we were worried about, probably, is the ammo under the floor. We'd tried sandbagging the floor, that didn't work too good because your bloody sandbags would get jammed up in the turret gear when you are traversing, plus one of cavalry sandbagged their bloody floor and killed the guys, it sandblasted them when they hit the mines - that was your Malone.

MCKAY: Now, when you are going through all this scrub and stuff, and you are getting stuff caught up in your tracks and all that, what sort of modifications did you have to start thinking about to (A) the vehicles, and (B) the way you did business?

REEVES: There wasn't much. Well, the worst was the bamboo, that used to get caught up. Probably the only hassle is, other than backing off and having another go, and then backing off, is everything would catch fire. Half the time you had flames licking off the bloody tanks, everywhere, because all under the exhaust was on fire. You didn't worry about that too much - the spiders were worse than the fire - and the bloody defoliated trees, we lost a lot of guys to defoliation.

MCKAY: Dead-fall coming down.

REEVES: Dead-fall smacking on their head, that sort of shit.

But no, just back off, and if you couldn't get through, blast it away with a bloody canister round. I know it was a waste of money, but anyway, we seemed to have plenty of them. That was it, it was the only way we could get through, either that or find another track.

MCKAY: What did you do to the vehicles? When they first arrived, what did you do to them to make them ...

REEVES: Modifications?

MCKAY: Yeah.

REEVES: Oh, not a hell of a lot - well, the scrub done most of it, it wiped all the front of the mudguards off - you get a bamboo tree, shit they are strong, that would just tear the mudguards off and, of course, on purpose we used to try and leave them off. Well, in those days we didn't have the RPG plates because no-one fired an RPG at us, not like later on. No, very little actually, very little.

Some guys took the basket off the back of the turret, but that was if you were going through the bush and you had to traverse

sort of contact, the first thing to go would be the basket, that would be wiped off. (We) took the searchlights off, found they were a waste of time, unless you went out on an ambush. But that's about it.

MCKAY: When you took them off did you stow them, or would you just leave them behind?

REEVES: Stowed them back in camp. Oh, you get a few surprise ones, but you had a fair idea what you were going to do for the next ... sometimes.

MCKAY: What's your job when a resupply has to take place?

REEVES: Bring the choppers in, place it where you want it, and that as about it - just make sure you crew has got what they want. It depends who you had with you, of course. If you had cavalry they'd sort of handle all that.

MCKAY: Did you make out the [mait and M] for the troop?

REEVES: Yeah, sergeants made out the mait and Ms, yeah - they were pretty basic. You just order your rations and ask for whatever you can, but you wouldn't get much of it anyway. Blokes back at base used to get all the good stuff, so we reckoned - all the rum and the cigarettes.

MCKAY: Now, you worked a lot with the Australian infantry.

REEVES: Yes.

MCKAY: What did you think of them?

REEVES: Oh, they were the greatest bloody fighting men in the world, excellent, couldn't be better.

MCKAY: And the types of operations you did with them were (what)?

REEVES: Most of the ones we done with them were being called to assist or to help out in a way, there wasn't a lot of advance to contact with infantry out the sides, and that sort of stuff. We done it a couple of times, but it's too bloody dangerous; the next thing, you are dropping a tree on the poor bugger who's walking alongside. No.

MCKAY: Did you ever do a cordon and search?

REEVES: Oh, yeah - hate those bloody things.

MCKAY: Because?

REEVES: Oh, the way they used to treat the people when we'd get them out.

MCKAY: The detainees?

REEVES: Yeah. We had a bloody intelligence [whacker] at Ba Ria,

[Da Wee Chung] - mongrel, real vicious mongrel. Didn't like them.

MCKAY: And the role, the Centurions are there, really, just like sort of point defence, isn't it?

REEVES: Yeah, perimeter bloody seal, if you like - throw a seal.

MCKAY: And I guess you'd have to have a fairly good field of view ...

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: ... and all that sort of stuff.

REEVES: Oh, you'd get called out a couple of times, blow a village - not a village, a couple of houses - apart because there were bunkers under them, but nothing spectacular.

MCKAY: Going into bunkers, into bunker systems, what sort of procedures did you use to open them up?

REEVES: Oh, we started out - well, Coral taught us all about bloody bunkers - started out with HE in the holes, if we could find the holes. The only way you could do that was to find where they come out. After that we tried AP - armour piercing. You put armour piercing a couple of foot away from where you see the hole, if you see the hole, or just blast them into the deck. We asked for a lot of AP there, we found that they'd come out bleeding out of their ears and all that, so the shock waves through the earth would clean them out of the hole. We only found that out at Coral.

MCKAY: I guess all that experience at Coral must have had a fairly big impact on the way you ...

REEVES: Coral?

MCKAY: ... you then loaded up your tanks ...

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: ... from then on.

REEVES: Oh, it changed the complete bomb load after Coral - again, depending on what you are doing. You only had sixty-four rounds, but prior to that twenty-five of them were AP. And then you had bloody smoke - we never used any of that stuff.

MCKAY: Smoke; I don't think I ever saw smoke fired.

REEVES: We tried running smoke down a bunker, when it was open, after the bloody tunnel rats had been in it. I don't know how it went about.

MCKAY: Interesting.

REEVES: It was like our bloody white phos (phosphorous). But anyway, we tried this smoke. I think it was mainly to find out where all the entrances were.

MCKAY: Where all the drift is, yeah.

REEVES: Smoke come out of everywhere for about 400 yards around so we gave it away then.

MCKAY: It's a bit too scary that.

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: You are better off not knowing.

REEVES: Like the white phos that landed on the driver's head, that didn't work either.

MCKAY: And you obviously worked with engineers.

REEVES: Yeah, a lot of times, we always (inaudible) engineers. Actually, when we were in Ba Ria we - intelligence gathering mob - we had engineers down there and we used to go out every day, that's where we sort of learnt about their role - mines and going into tunnels, and that sort of crap. They were good to work with, excellent.

MCKAY: I don't think people really knew much about using engineers with armour at that stage.

REEVES: No-one knew, no - well, there wasn't anything written, see, I don't think it ever happened before. You've sort of got an engineer out in front of you, and he's walking along the road and you are following him. Jesus! if someone thought that out on the plains of Africa they'd be laughed out of town. But no, we didn't know much about it. Actually they done well, they could see more by just walking along in front of a tank - the only trouble is, with those bloody M16 mines, jumping bastards.

MCKAY: What other sort of troops did you work with out in the 'weeds'? You saw the Americans.

REEVES: Yeah, we worked with the Yanks a lot - didn't like them at all, but anyway ...

MCKAY: Were they American infantry?

REEVES: No, mostly armoured cav. We had a couple of blokes - Fire Base Julia was Americans, that was up Route 2.

MCKAY: Were they fire support bases like ours?

REEVES: No. Actually, I've got a picture in here. Julia was in sand so we dug in, that's probably where Charlie found out he could make a lot of damage with his RPGs, so he used to hit the bloody white light with it and that would stuff your white light up, your infra-red (*sic*) light.

Every base was different, it depends (*sic*) who you had with you and what your task was. If your task was to advance to contact, you only set up your base, say, two nights and you knew that you were going to work out of it. If it was an ambush base, well, you dug in and you knew you were there for a few days. But the majority of them, you'd sort of move out of your base in the dead of night, two o'clock in the morning, to go to your ambush site. If you didn't fall over a bloody cliff, like I did in my tank, you were alright.

MCKAY: You fell over a cliff?

REEVES: Oh ...

MCKAY: Tell us about that.

REEVES: We were advancing to the Song Rai ambush. About two o'clock in the morning we headed off. We were following what we thought was a trail, and it was some bloody engineer - a Yank - had been there the day before and they were pushing earth over a bloody cliff - about eighty foot down to the bottom of it. What it was was where his blade was. I'm looking down over the top - 'Sure you are on the track?' - 'Yeah, there's a distinct track here.' Bloody hell. The front of the tank had hit the dirt he'd pushed over; it was higher than the end of the barrel, so the barrel started ... and this leg fell down into the cradle and just crushed it against the top of the turret.

So they put me up top on the turret for the night while they done the ambush, and first light we headed back into camp. They put me on a bed in the camp and tied me leg to the bloody roof - because it was about that big - and then they were called out. So the whole troop went out and forgot about me. I think I spent about nine hours there and I got the bloke that come down to clean out the shit house to let me go. They took me off to hospital then - just one of those things.

MCKAY: What sort of damage had you done to your leg?

REEVES: Just crushed the muscle, pulped the muscle in my leg, but after a week it was all right.

MCKAY: I notice you had been hospitalised, and you said you had burns to your face. What happened there?

REEVES: The cliff business happened three days after I got out of hospital, I wasn't supposed to be out there.

MCKAY: Oh, right.

REEVES: Well, I still don't know what happened to this day, but we were refuelling in a little village - I think [Lo Gob], one of the small villages near Nui Dat - they had bloody cavalry there, everybody there, coming back from Thua Tich which is an area up to the north-east. We were refuelling our tanks in the middle of the bloody market place. I was sitting on the bladder on the back of the truck - two bladders, 500 gallon bladders of fuel. I was sitting on the bladder - talking to my driver, I

think it was - the next thing, up she went. I finished up about 500 yards away. When I sort of stood up I had no meat left on my hand - I tried to wipe the flames off (with my hands) which sort of went down to the bones - all my hair was gone, and my bloody eyebrows, and Christ knows what.

A Vietnamese, local ARVN, pulled me out of the ruddy rice paddy and they give me a bit of morphine, the Australians gave me some more morphine, the dustoff come in and give me some more morphine, so by the time I got to bloody (inaudible) I started abusing all the nurses, big Yankee nurses that were there. I got into shit for that, but anyway ... I spent about a month in hospital.

MCKAY: You were lucky to get away with it.

REEVES: The only reason I didn't have skin grafts is the bloody local ARVN put some sort of fish oil - they eat this fish oil for their skin, keeps their skin moist - and they just laid this fish oil all over me because I had no meat left. Of course, for the next month everything grows together like skin grows to your chest, and your lips grow together (*sic*), and your eyes. Every morning they'd come in and open up your fingers, most painful, but anyway ... They wanted to send me home, but I didn't really want to come home at that stage.

MCKAY: You were lucky you actually got to stay there because with recovery that long they'd normally send you back.

REEVES: No, they wanted to but I said, 'No, I'll do my bloody tour.'

MCKAY: What was the intensity of operations like for the tank operations in '68-'69.

REEVES: Once Coral was on - I think it was about May or something, I'm not quite sure now - but once Coral was over everybody knew they could use us and accepted us. Prior to that they wouldn't have anything to do with us.

MCKAY: They probably didn't know you.

REEVES: Well, we drew the crowd as far as they were concerned; all that bloody noise, they reckoned, would draw the North Vietnamese from twenty miles away. But no, they didn't like us then, but after that, shit, every time someone got into a bit of shit they'd call in the tanks. Yeah, we were really well accepted then.

The second tour, well, everything had calmed down a bit by then - it wasn't as bad, of course.

MCKAY: Was that the difference between the first and second tour, the intensity of operations?

REEVES: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. Second tour wasn't a hell of a lot ... Well, it depends on what was going on. See, the second tour was strictly your local D445 and sending a couple of troops

down the road to blast out an infantry platoon or something, but there was nothing really big.

MCKAY: Who was your troop leader on your second tour?

REEVES: Warren Hind was one of them ... I think he was about the only one - Warren Hind.

MCKAY: Did you go on Operation Overlord, in '71, the 3 RAR push, where Bruce Cameron was?

REEVES: Oh, Bruce was called in to get me out of the shit, yeah.

MCKAY: Is that right?

REEVES: Yeah. That's where young Barwick got bumped - was that Overlord? - I think it was.

MCKAY: Yeah, I think so.

REEVES: We were brought up from land clearing - yeah, that was where young Barwick got knocked, yeah, I was in there. Actually Bruce come in to get us out of the crap.

MCKAY: Because the tanks had it down to a fairly fine art with supporting the grunts.

REEVES: By that stage, yeah, we knew what they wanted then, dug in front of them and all this sort of crap. Prior to that, Christ, we tried to get out in front and we were the big heroes; after that we found out, stay behind, the bastards know what's going on.

MCKAY: We found that the best way to do it was, the grunts go forward and clear, and then call the tanks up.

REEVES: Bring them up.

MCKAY: Stick the barrels out the front.

REEVES: Blast a bit more.

MCKAY: Blast the shit out of everything.

REEVES: That worked real well.

MCKAY: And then we sort of caterpillared forward like that.

REEVES: That worked real well that.

MCKAY: We did that up on the Song Ka.

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: Which is west of the Courtenay, near the top of the border, on the western side.

REEVES: The Courtenay rubber, yeah.

MCKAY: And Bruce Cameron's troop were involved in the thing with 4 RAR there, which my company, and we found that that caterpillar system ...

REEVES: That worked well.

MCKAY: ... worked really well.

REEVES: Yeah, that worked well when they were dug in too because then your forward scouts could pick your bloody bunkers. They were the only ones who could pick a bunker in the scrub; a bloody tank would drive over a thousand and wouldn't even know they were there.

MCKAY: Even as a grunt you could be laying next to one and not see it, until you were right on top of it.

REEVES: Yeah, well, that's what happened in Coral, that's why we got into so much shit in Coral. They'd come out of the bunker and climb up on the tank. I'm mentioned in Coral there, I shot six that day. Three had got out and jumped on the front of the tank. It was up to me to shoot them otherwise they would have taken over the bloody commander's tank.

MCKAY: I guess people don't really think about the sort of weapons that an Armoured Corps crewman has got to carry to bloody repel borders.

REEVES: A pump-action shotgun, that was the best of the lot.

MCKAY: Or a flame thrower.

REEVES: A flame thrower would have been good, yeah. No, I used pump-action or the bloody old pistol. The 9 mil pistol doesn't do a lot of good; I shot one bloke about eight times with a 9 mil and he just looked at me. I thought, oh, shit. A good shot from the pump-action sorted him out.

MCKAY: I always thought the best thing to do with a 9 mil was to hit him over the head with it.

REEVES: Yeah, throw it at them.

MCKAY: So after Coral, and all that sort of stuff, on the first tour, did you get much time to rest and refit between tasks?

REEVES: No, we didn't spend a hell of a lot of time in base. Oh, you could rest, but you were sent to a fire base somewhere. Wherever there was a battalion playing at that time, like Anderson or any of those big bases - we had our own little fire bases, just tanks, but the majority of the time we were sent out to an area to just stand-by and wait for something to happen, for the infantry.

MCKAY: I guess that gives you the advantage that you're closer to the action.

REEVES: We are halfway there, we are sitting right on top of them. Normally, if we knew there was a battalion going in - not that that happened a hell of a lot - but if we knew there was a battalion going in (inaudible) they'd pick a nice central spot for us, shove us in there, dig us in, and we'd just sit there waiting. We knew something would happen eventually.

MCKAY: When you arrived in Vietnam what sort of clothing were you guys wearing?

REEVES: Greens, normal greens.

MCKAY: Gave tank suits the flick?

REEVES: Yeah, too hot - oh, we probably wore them for a little while, but no, too bloody hot.

MCKAY: And headdress?

REEVES: Oh, whatever you could find. Some liked the beret - no, I just used a bush hat, I think; bush hat or bloody old green scarf wrapped around my head. The worst thing was the bloody sun sort of beating down on your head, that's why we gave the berets away, I think. Those old bush hats were good.

MCKAY: How hot is it inside a tank in the dry season?

REEVES: Oh, bloody hell, probably about 60 degrees, and I mean Celsius, in the turret, yeah. It was just unreal.

MCKAY: So the crew must go through a fair bit of water?

REEVES: Oh, Christ, yeah, oh, yeah, you always had plenty of drinking water on the back, plus the tank needed it too, it used to drink a fair bit. No, we didn't have any trouble with resupply, especially for water.

MCKAY: Talking of the tank, how reliable was the Centurion for the types of jobs that you did?

REEVES: Not ...

MCKAY: I mean, it was an old tank then, wasn't it?

REEVES: Yeah, it was bloody old. Like when we got into Coral it took three days for most of them to get over the run up there. They had something wrong with motors. I think actually the first big contact in the Coral book there, was the one that I was in, there was only three tanks available out of a whole squadron: mine was still going, and Jerry McCormick's, and Nev [Callus]. Those two sergeants and [two pippa] went out to get them all out of the shit, that's all that was going.

MCKAY: When you say the book on Coral, you are talking about Lex McAulauy's book?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: If the tanks were up and running, were they generally able to do most of the jobs that you wanted of them?

REEVES: Yeah, I think so, the majority was ... They were probably restricted a bit on where we could go - well, naturally - restricted a lot on bloody creek crossings, especially in the wet season because old Charlie would come in and blow all the bloody culverts out of the way, and we couldn't get to some areas. No, we didn't have any trouble I don't think.

MCKAY: If you were getting ready to go out on an operation, or a task, where would you get that briefing?

REEVES: Well, you always went to the CP and you were briefed there - troop leader and troop sergeant were briefed, both had to know what the hell was going on. Then you'd go back to your troop area - we had our own little troop areas a fair way away from each other - and brief you men there.

MCKAY: How did your crews billet up? Did you have a crew per tent?

REEVES: Yeah, it was always one crew per tent.

MCKAY: That would be the way you would do it?

REEVES: Yep.

MCKAY: So that means that these guys not only operated in a tank together, day in, day out ...

REEVES: They lived together, slept together.

MCKAY: ... they'd live together, sleep together, shit together.

REEVES: That's right, you knew everything about them.

MCKAY: When you look back now on all your time - I mean, you were a regimental sergeant major of an organisation - what do you think are the essential elements to make crews work? What are the things that they've got to have?

REEVES: Well, they've got to be proficient in the bloody handling of the vehicle, whatever their job may be, be it gunner, operator, or whatever - plenty of tolerance.

MCKAY: Tolerance?

REEVES: Tolerance, yeah, that's probably one of the big things. And you've got to learn to get on with your fellow man, be it dickhead or whatever he is, doesn't matter, if he's part of that crew you have certainly got to get on with him.

MCKAY: You know when you have casualties and guys come and go?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: With the 1st Squadron I don't know how much movement there was in personnel; was there a lot?

REEVES: No, not really, no - no, no, wasn't too much, only if someone got hurt, of course, you'd have to replace him.

MCKAY: Did you ever get a reo (reinforcement) when you were a troop sergeant?

REEVES: Was I (a reinforcement)?

MCKAY: No; did you ever get a reinforcement into your troop?

REEVES: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MCKAY: Was that your job, to brief him?

REEVES: Yeah, you've got to brief him, yeah - either me or the troop leader. Probably the troop leader would generally brief the troop sergeant - the same sort of thing everywhere - but the troop sergeant was normally the one to talk to the digger; troop leaders didn't have a lot to do (with them), except his own crew of course; but the other crews, no, he didn't have a lot to do with them. I don't know why they ever brought that in, I think it's something to do with bloody not getting the digger to hate the troop leader. If he's going to hate some bastard he can hate the troop sergeant.

They started that fragging (fragment of operation order) bloody gear when I was there. A couple of officers got killed with grenades and they sort of started to back off a little bit with the troop officers, which is the way it's supposed to be anyway, they want to go through the chain of command, leave the bloody soldiers to the sergeant, he would normally handle them. If he can't handle them then get a bigger stick, that was generally the way it worked.

MCKAY: So tolerance and harmony?

REEVES: A lot of harmony, yeah. Well, you get it everywhere, you always get it, you get it in your sections, in your bloody platoons. If one bloke stands out as a bloody idiot, doesn't want to participate, doesn't want to mix with the rest, it was just your job to either bloody sort him out or get rid of him; and we did get rid of a few that way. You didn't care where he went as long as he left - sent him to another troop or ...

MCKAY: Is there much mixing and matching going on between crews and a troop?

REEVES: No - try to keep your crew together, as a crew - well, that's the only way you could work properly - no, very rare.

MCKAY: Did you guys ever do convoy escort?

REEVES: Yeah. Probably not so much as we could have, but no, we were too slow.

MCKAY: I was going to say, it's pretty hard to keep up with the bloody ...

REEVES: We took a convoy to Black Horse, which is that Yankee bloody cavalry. I think we only done it once, took a convoy up there, and it took us about six hours to get there - should have taken two. Where the tank had run over a piece of ground the blokes in the trucks weren't real keen on it, just in case the tank didn't set something off. But no, they didn't bother after that.

MCKAY: Did you ever, personally, have a mine incident?

REEVES: With a tank?

MCKAY: Yeah.

REEVES: Oh, yeah, three, I think.

MCKAY: Three?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: Much damage done?

REEVES: No, just blow tracks, get out, you fix it, then you go.

MCKAY: What's the noise like when one of these things goes off?

REEVES: Oh, a bit of noise, a bit of dust, a bit of ... yeah, didn't seem to worry us too much, I suppose. Well, I don't know, I can't remember.

MCKAY: What about the driver?

REEVES: No ... oh, it didn't seem to worry the driver. The driver was in a more solid area than the rest of the crew; the rest of the crew were in that open space whereas the driver, he's got a wall right there and one right there, and he's got another wall two foot away, and another one two foot away. He was, more or less, cushioned. Admittedly, it normally blew up right bloody next to him, but no, he was cushioned.

MCKAY: It must have helped having the headphones on too.

REEVES: That helped, yeah, that helped too, yeah, I suppose. But no, it didn't seem to worry the drivers too much. The only thing that would worry drivers is bloody dead trees and defoliated scrub.

MCKAY: Green ants and snakes.

REEVES: And bloody ants.

MCKAY: Spiders coming in.

REEVES: Jumping ants and big spiders. No, the commander ...

MCKAY: You really don't like spiders, do you?

MCKAY: The commanders used to get the spiders, the bastards used to grow between the rubber trees, and it was always at the same height as the bloody crew commander. He was always sitting right there, and he (the spider) was always that big.

MCKAY: As big as your hand, yeah.

MCKAY: Jesus - I have a thing about spiders.

MCKAY: After you hit a mine did the people get a bit toey?

REEVES: The first one you do, of course.

MCKAY: Then you survive it.

REEVES: Yeah, you sort of get over it. The first one was probably the worst. We've had blokes jump off the tanks and one bloke jumped onto a star picket and run about a foot up his backside, trying to get away from it. But then we found out, well, there's nothing to get away from, and don't, for Christ's sake, get off the tank because Charlie used to have the habit of putting anti-personnel around the tank mine in case the engineers found it. But we soon learnt. The first one was the worst, after that, not a great hassle.

MCKAY: What was your first contact like?

REEVES: Oh, God, first contact - can't even remember where the first one was - I think it was down the Long Green, I think everybody shat themselves because they weren't expecting the enemy, I suppose. I really don't know.

MCKAY: What do you reckon was the most successful contact you had - the most successful task or contact that you reckon you had?

REEVES: Overall, Coral was the most successful.

MCKAY: Because of the impact you had?

REEVES: The impact we had on the enemy, yeah, and what we learnt - I learnt a hell of a lot from that place.

MCKAY: Did you consider some of those Song Rai ambushes to be good?

REEVES: No, not really, no. We probably stopped a bit of ammo going south, but the amount of bloody ammo we expended trying to get a sampan, for Christ's sake, I really don't think it was worth it.

MCKAY: Most spectacular when you hit it.

REEVES: Oh, Jesus, yeah, it used to make a hell of a mess, but they weren't really that successful. The anti-personnel

ambushes were though, they were the real good buggers. Again, we had to learn a lot, after the first couple, but no, they were good.

MCKAY: That must be fairly devastating. Did you guys actually have to sweep your own killing area?

REEVES: Yeah. Oh, it depends; if we had a section of infantry there we'd get them to sweep, but then, after that, after the first one, we found that wasn't really good. There's a picture up on that board in there of an ambush site they swept, cleared - nothing there. The commander told his radio operator to bloody make a call or something, and he looked up, and there's this bastard up a tree; they shot him through the eye - they'd just missed him, he'd got up a tree, and he was shot to pieces with bloody canister.

See, Coral/Balmoral we found - I hit a bloke with a canister at about eight foot, and he was still running away, and there was nothing left, just shreds, full of anti-coagulant and opium. And we used to find it on them; whenever you found a body, heaps of opium, heaps of anti-coagulant. They wouldn't bleed and they wouldn't feel the pain. That's why the infantry had a lot of shit, they'd shoot him full of holes, the bastard would still be fighting, so it was bad.

MCKAY: And adrenalin too.

REEVES: And they are going on adrenalin, yeah.

MCKAY: That's a fairly powerful driving ... I suppose Coral was the most memorable contact of your tours.

REEVES: Yeah, well, yeah, probably the most memorable, yeah. Probably not the most devastating for my troop, but yeah, that was ...

MCKAY: What was the most devastating for your troop?

REEVES: Oh ... probably the one where young Barwick got his eyes taken out, I suppose, and Anderson lost his arm. Yeah, that would have been the most devastating.

MCKAY: That must have a fairly big impact on the rest of the troop, when you lose guys like that.

REEVES: That one did because we didn't expect to lose anybody, we were in a sort of semi-safe area. If it happened in Coral it wouldn't have mattered, it was part of the game, but it shouldn't have happened where it happened, it was just one of those bloody things.

MCKAY: You look back on your time in Vietnam, who's the person that most stands out in your memory?

REEVES: Oh ...

MCKAY: There might even be several.

REEVES: Several or ... yeah ... probably Bobby Owen, as a troop officer (and) Pete Badman as a commander, I suppose. They were just excellent bloody officers - cool.

MCKAY: And the next question: What made them good officers to you, as a troop sergeant?

REEVES: Oh, they knew what was going on. If they knew what was going on they were always on top of it, made a decision, that was it, no changing the bastard, no um-and-ah about it - you had to make a lot of snap decisions, but they were good at it - I've had other officers that were not so good at it, and they'd finish up getting you in the shit anyway. So make a decision, stick with it; if it's the wrong bastard, well, wear it. But no, they were really good.

MCKAY: And when you look back on some of the diggers that you've had ...

REEVES: Oh, God!

MCKAY: ... working for you; what ones stick in your memory?

REEVES: Oh, bloody heaps of them ... Probably some of the most evil diggers you ever come across finish up being the best soldiers.

I got a phone call not long ago from a young (*sic*) fellow in Tasmania - he's the bloke that spat his tongue out, took a fit - he rang me up to apologise - after, what, thirty years? - things like that. Poor little bastard, he just lost it. Yeah, it's pretty hard to say.

MCKAY: What do you think was the toughest time that you experienced on operations, either mentally tough or physically tough?

REEVES: Probably night ambushes - hated them bloody things.

MCKAY: Was that because of the lack of sleep you got?

REEVES: No, no, no, the bloody fear of brassing up the wrong bloody bloke. We brassed up one fellow and he was a bloody infantry guy from our own section gone out for a shit. That used to annoy me, they didn't know enough to shit under the rear fuel tank or something.

No, night ambushes - bad news - plus, you didn't know who the hell you were ambushing. Like the infantry, one section would ambush another one, and Christ, we were always worried about that, hitting our own people. No, they were probably the worst. What you can see is no hassle, what you can't bloody see is ...

MCKAY: As a troop sergeant you must have seen some funny things happen.

REEVES: Oh, yeah, plenty. The next thing you are going to ask

me is what's the funniest.

MCKAY: That was my next question.

REEVES: Christ, I don't know, I don't know.

MCKAY: It probably isn't funny at the time, but someone else shooting your barrel off is a bit untidy.

REEVES: Well, that wasn't very funny. In the morning I got into shit you could poke a stick at.

Actually, I had a young corporal with me - Doug Mcdonald I think his name was. Actually he went all right, he made RSM of the school and all that, eventually. Doug was going down one of the roads and this bloody Land Rover in front wouldn't move - that was typical, after a while they didn't give a shit - so he stuck his barrel in the back of the Land Rover, elevated and turned left, dropped it in a rice paddy. I thought that was quite funny. We got into more shit than you could poke a stick at, but it was quite hilarious at the time.

No, really, I can't think of anything else. Probably a lot of funny things happen when you are on your R&R, but most of the time I was bloody wounded and in agony or something.

MCKAY: Did you get R&R?

REEVES: Yeah - oh, I got (R&R on the) two tours - I come home, come home and see the missus, yep.

MCKAY: What was it like when you went back?

REEVES: Bloody hard, yeah, that was the worst part, I suppose, when you know you've got another six months to go - yeah, that was pretty difficult - two young kids.

MCKAY: What about R&C?

REEVES: Yeah, I think I went out a couple of times on R&C. When you come out of hospital you had to do an R&C, that wasn't too bad. I had two there and I went out on a couple more, just bringing the troop down, but they were bloodthirsty episodes they were, them R&Cs.

MCKAY: They called them 'rest and convalescence', and there was no resting and very little convalescence.

REEVES: But it wasn't outside as a troop, you are pissed and beat shit out of each other - oh, 'Want a fight? Who'll want to fight the sarge? We'll go and beat shit out of the sarge, that's a good idea.' They weren't game enough to do it on their own, the pricks, they never, ever attempted it. I put the ring up and said, 'Right-oh, you arseholes, you want to play bloody fighters, come on', and I never got one taker. But it was one way to let off steam. I used to get them there and would say, 'Right, any of you pricks pick on any of the locals' - because we had a lot of hassles in that Vung Tau.

The Kiwis used to go down there and carve the locals up and put them in rubbish bins, and this sort of shit. That went on quite a bit. Of course, the locals were the Viet Cong on their R&C from up on the Long Hais, they used to come down and ...

MCKAY: It was a mutual exchange facility.

REEVES: Yeah, you didn't worry too much, until they started mouthing off, and if you could understand what they were talking about, well, things used to get a big rough.

No, nothing really outstanding. I could tell you about some of the times I was drunk, but I won't, falling in those piss holes out the back of the sergeants' mess.

MCKAY: You mean those forty-four gallon drums?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: With fly wire.

REEVES: The bloody bastards.

MCKAY: Did you go swimming in one of them?

REEVES: Oh, quite often, that wasn't funny.

MCKAY: Well, everyone else thinks it is.

REEVES: I know, especially when you are yelling to get out.

MCKAY: I never had the opportunity to swim in one of them.

REEVES: They were pretty bad them sergeants' messes; that was the only thing wrong with the whole war, the bloody sergeants' messes.

MCKAY: Now, you were briefed a little bit, you said, about the enemy, and about Vietnam, before you went - about the war.

REEVES: We were briefed on what they knew from coming back from the infantry and the cavalry. But see, the cavalry had an entirely different role to us; they were either taxicabs or they were advance to contact in support. But that was no good to us because there was no way we could advance to contact like the cavalry did, dropping the men off, and then backing off, and then supporting them. You know, we were briefed as best as they possibly could, but all our briefings were based on bloody American armoured, and they don't fight anything like us. In fact, American armour wouldn't even go in the jungle; if there wasn't a road there is no way in the world they would ... All their cordon and searches, and everything like that, the tanks would stay strictly on the road and everybody else would get off them, and surround the village on foot. That was an entirely different ball game.

MCKAY: What was the difference between the way you operated on

your first tour and the way you operated on your second tour? Any great changes?

REEVES: No, not really, no. If you were there before they left you alone to do your own thing, give you the troop, go and do your own thing.

MCKAY: You were a troop sergeant on your second tour?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: Did you ever become a troop leader, act as a troop leader?

REEVES: Oh, yeah, yeah, quite a bit actually. Well, if the troop leader was going on R&R, like Warren did when Barwick got his eyes taken out ... yeah, if they didn't have a troop leader. At one stage there they didn't have a troop leader for 4 Troop so I was sort of troop leader for about a month. You know, it just depends on what the officers were doing.

MCKAY: How did you find that?

REEVES: No hassle, no problems, no. You find out a little bit more. You don't get told everything when you are the troop sergeant, but when you go to the O Groups yourself, with the commander, you sort of find out a bit more. No, other than that, no.

MCKAY: So what did you think about the enemy that you came across? Were they like you thought they would be before you went to Vietnam?

REEVES: No, no, not really - oh, it depended on the enemy. We weren't really told a lot about ... we weren't told anything about North Vietnamese; they were soldiers, bloody real soldiers with webbing on, and good weapons and all that. We were told about VC, that's probably the enemy we were told about. There's people standing out in the rice paddies today, and tonight they are going to come and attack you. We weren't told a hell of a lot about the North. In fact, I don't think they even thought that they were going to come down and visit us, but when we did get to know them, they were pretty good soldiers, they were bloody fine soldiers. Well, even the VC were good soldiers, but they weren't trained or equipped enough to take us on; but when the North come down there, Christ!

MCKAY: So they would be the toughest enemy?

REEVES: Oh, yeah.

MCKAY: Did you ever actually think about them, as people?

REEVES: Oh, yeah.

MCKAY: How did you regard them?

REEVES: Oh, well, when you see the bodies you didn't regard

them as anything, but oh, God, yeah, you sit and think about them at times, especially when you went through the photographs and that and you knew that they had kids, the same as we did. Prior to that it was probably a bit impersonal, it was just some bastard that was firing at you and your aim was to get him first. But no, you don't think, probably you don't think a lot until you go through his personal effects, find out he's exactly the same (as you are). But they were good soldiers.

MCKAY: Well, that would hit home to you a bit because, I mean, that's part of your job too, if you have a casualty, isn't it?

REEVES: Oh, yeah.

MCKAY: With your own blokes, to go through their gear.

REEVES: Stack them through, yeah.

MCKAY: And send their stuff off.

REEVES: Scares you a bit.

MCKAY: Did you ever feel sorry for the enemy?

REEVES: No, not really, no. I felt sorry for a couple of girl enemy, but that was only when bloody intelligence used to get hold of them. But no, I never worried about them. I didn't like intelligence. Actually, I think they found out that Da Wee Chung was a Viet Cong anyway, hopefully they shot the bastard.

MCKAY: Did you guys ever do rehearsals for anything?

REEVES: No, not really, no.

MCKAY: What about zeroing and test firing your weapons?

REEVES: Bulls eye - we never bulls-eyed over there - oh, yeah, we did; once we fired as a squadron. As I said, when I first got there that's what we thought we were going to be doing for the next two years, lined up as a squadron, done the bore sights and everything as per the Pucka. I don't think it worked too well, but anyway, that as the only time, I think. But your personal weapons, you machine guns and that, yeah, test fired every time you get into camp, make sure everything is working properly.

MCKAY: Did you ever do any H&I (harassing and interdiction fire)?

REEVES: Yep. I had some beautiful photographs of H&I - I don't know where they are now.

MCKAY: How did you actually do that, how did you get the elevation on your gun?

REEVES: If needed, bring the tank dozer in, put up a bund - you'd find the elevation. We found that we couldn't do anything much close - say, the elevation was a big problem - but we

couldn't do a hell of a lot close in. Put a bloke up in a chopper and just hope for the best.

MCKAY: And just lob HE in?

REEVES: HE mostly, yes - it was all HE.

MCKAY: When you look back on it all, what do you reckon you learnt most from your time in Vietnam?

REEVES: The most I learnt was to rely on someone else. Yeah, that's probably about it, just learn to rely on other people. I found so much hassle trying to bloody not trust your crew, or not trust your driver, or not trust somebody in your crew, but I found out you had to rely on them otherwise you didn't get to where you were going. Other than that ...

MCKAY: You came back to Australia on your R&R.

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: Was there much of the anti-Vietnam-War thing going on?

REEVES: Yeah, the first tour there was - 1968-1969, yeah. There was bastards marching and carrying on, but they flew us in in civvies. I went straight up to Toowoomba - I don't think too many people up in Toowoomba knew there was a war on, pretty slow sort of a place. My wife was camped up there with my parents. Yeah, there was a bit around then; the second time I never even noticed.

MCKAY: Did that sort of thing ever have any effect on the diggers?

REEVES: Those that lived in the cities it did, yeah. I had bloody blokes going on R&R in Sydney and Melbourne at different times, and they'd come back and they wouldn't even talk for a fortnight. I'd say, 'What's the matter with you?' - 'Oh, bloody all my friends ...' - and, of course, a lot of them are uni students too, the young nashos - 'All my friends are bloody marching. I went to a party and they said I'm a killer, and all this sort of crap.' It sort of played a little bit in their head, (but) it didn't affect me that much, being a regular it didn't worry me what they said.

MCKAY: Right-oh, well, I'd like to take a break now. What was the name of the bloke that had the tapes?

REEVES: John Panton - P-A-N-T-O-N.

MCKAY: Had he taped everything from Coral?

REEVES: Yeah, whatever happened in Coral, he got it all on tape. He had a tape machine set up, hooked into the radio somehow. Whatever come through the radios, even the IC going down to the drivers, he had it all on tape.

MCKAY: And he lives up at ...?

REEVES: Well, the last I heard, I saw him in Mackay, and I went back to visit him and no-one had heard of him again. I don't know what happened to him.

MCKAY: I've got a CD with everyone in Australia on it.

One of the things I wanted to ask you about was the LAD (light aid detachment). I imagine that the servicing requirements, especially in the dry, were pretty steep.

REEVES: Yeah, yeah.

MCKAY: So how did you go about doing all that?

REEVES: Well, we done as much servicing as we could - in fact, we done most of our repairs too. Anything big though - track off - you try to get the LAD. They had the recovery vehicles, they had the winches and all that shit, and they were excellent - who ever let them do what they used to do. You'd ring up for assistance for LAD, and you'd be right out in the middle of the [Ula], up a bloody fire trail somewhere, and three hours later an AV would come out of the scrub with a recovery vehicle behind it, a carrier.

MCKAY: Just by itself?

REEVES: Yeah. You wouldn't know where they come from - they come from forty mile away - they were unreal. They were good. But any of the heavy stuff, they'd bring out your parts, especially after you'd blown a track off. They'd have to get choppers to bring your bits and pieces out and they'd come out and fit them on for you. If they couldn't, well, we made the best and done it ourselves.

MCKAY: How often would you have to have a major service?

REEVES: Probably one a month - yeah, one a month you'd have to. It's a matter of getting the things fixed before they really fell to bits because if you didn't put enough grease in that bloody front idler wheel, it would just ... There were two grease nipples in the front there, and if you didn't grease them, at least once a week, the bloody thing would fall off - because they were so old and brittle. And as soon as they fell off you found out what it was, the metal was just crystallised, brittle, all the pounding it had taken over the years without being changed. You got an idea of what needed doing. So if you've got four hours one day, sitting around, you'd make a list out (of) what you wanted done. The next time you got a spare minute it would be an entirely different list, but you eventually got it all done. I wouldn't say we done it as per the book, but it got done eventually.

MCKAY: When you went back to Nui Dat for a major service, what did the crew do? Did they work with the LAD guys?

REEVES: Yes, the crew were always with them, they were always with their vehicle. Yep, there was never a time when the crew

was sitting around doing nothing. If they were they were on TAOR (tactical area of responsibility) patrols around the Dat (Nui Dat); they'd go out on TAOR patrols, or something like that.

MCKAY: You mean foot patrols?

REEVES: Yeah, on foot, yeah - what did they call them? - 'clearing patrols', for want of a better name.

MCKAY: No, they were TAOR patrols.

REEVES: TAOR patrols, that's right, they were - all the cooks, and bottle-washers, and shit. Well, they dug a crew out of ...

MCKAY: Exciting time for the lads.

REEVES: Yeah, the crews, it didn't worry them because they'd seen most of it before, but the cooks and the bottle-washers, Christ! they'd panic for a week before then when they knew they were going.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: If you had to do a power-pack fill, did you get a new vehicle? Did they keep any spares, or did you simply remain with the vehicle?

REEVES: No, always remained with the vehicle.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: So you never had any spares lying about?

REEVES: In the Dat, oh, spares were in the Dat, yeah. Yeah, they'd run out a motor, they bring a motor in. Actually, we lost a charging set. I've got a picture in there of a Sikorsky picking up the [connax] with all their bits and pieces - they used to bring out a connax if they could, if it was a safe area - and on top of the connax they had the charging set. Anyway, somewhere through the jungle the bloody thing fell off the top and they never found it again. Actually, they sent out the infantry to find it; never found it again. I'd say some bugger in the scrub found it and put it down a big hole, and that was the end of it.

But if you had to change a motor they'd drop a motor out and it would get changed in the bush. That's where you needed your recoveries and that. Oh, they'd do a good job.

MCKAY: How long does that take?

REEVES: Actually, they were running books on records and all that - I think twelve hours, engine and gearbox, I think was about the best, and that's bloody good time.

MCKAY: That's impressive.

REEVES: It's a mongrel of a job, Jesus!

MCKAY: But, I mean, just bashing track on a tank is hard work, isn't it?

REEVES: Jesus, yeah - yeah, putting the track back on, hell. No, I think we got used to it, you found an easy way of doing it.

MCKAY: Did you ever have to do a half track?

REEVES: Yeah - we normally used to do the half tracks. Actually, the front station would be the one that had blown off, all the time - that's the big station at the back that holds those two wheels. That would get blown off, so you'd run your track up through that section there, forget about it and just drive home.

MCKAY: Round those last four.

REEVES: If you are on the road - yeah, if you still had your last four road wheels and last three idlers, just run the track up through here. You'd get home like that, just a bit of constant pressure on one stick and you are right.

If we were on the road, coming back from Coral/Balmoral, we done a lot of that, we had a lot of half-track tanks. Actually, the last one hit the bloody mine in front of the main gate of Black Horse, which was the Yankee cavalry base - right smack in front of it - it was 'Jock' McConnel - right smack in front of their main gate, blew his bloody track off. But he half tracked.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: What about running the gunnery gear, Phil, with the ox gen? Did you do that often, or did you work on manual traverses and stuff like that?

REEVES: Most of the night work - there was a hassle in that bloody thing in that you had to run your ox gen to work your light. What they'd do is try and leave it till the last minute. So, in other words, if you wanted to get your gunnery going, with your gyros and all that - actually, you needed your ox gen - but if you wanted to get it going you'd leave it till the last minute, find out what's out there first, hit your charging set, hit your light, get your gunnery going, and try and pot your target.

That's what I used to hate, is that bloody charging set - oh! In the middle of the night you had to run it - even in an ambush, you'd have to run it in ambush for an hour to charge up your batteries to work your radio otherwise you lost comms (communications). And the poor old infantryman, he's now all silent, and all of a sudden some dick starts a charging set.

MCKAY: The generator was a little Morris Minor motor, wasn't it?

REEVES: Yeah.

MCKAY: But what did they charge them with, I'm not sure about what that is?

REEVES: That's it.

MCKAY: That's the one?

REEVES: Yeah, you had to start your Morris Minor motor, that was the charging set for the batteries. Of course, you can imagine, everything is silent, and they are listening to the rustle of bloody leaves, and all of a sudden some idiot starts the generator.

MCKAY: Could you traverse the turret without the ...

REEVES: Yeah, by hand.

MCKAY: It would be hard work, wouldn't it?

REEVES: Oh, yeah, hell, yeah, it's hard work, but oh, you were ... Well, if you got hit on one of your flanks, oh, God, there was a big scramble to start everything because you could just never get your turret around there. That was the worst part.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: Traditionally found gunners with big right arms because that's where the traverse hand-wheel was.

REEVES: Yeah, bloody traverse-wheel.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: And big left legs because that's where the clutch was.

REEVES: That's where the clutch was.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: What about the radios, Phil, because they were all Pommy sets?

REEVES: Yeah, they were Brits. They were old, very bloody old - comms were not good, they never were. If you found yourself a good radio you'd find yourself with no antennas anyway because the first low branch would wipe them off because they were on that solid base. Yeah, radios were really bad - plus you had that trouble, you had to have your batteries up otherwise you radios - you wouldn't get any radios anyway. No, they weren't good.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: And did you find it difficult because of the incompatibility with the American sets?

REEVES: Oh, with the American sets? - yeah, yeah, we had a lot of trouble with that, yeah.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: Because you had to put it on old squelch on the American sets.

REEVES: Yeah, that's right, a bloody racket going in your ears all the time. The Americans wouldn't talk to us much because of that actually, we never sort of got on with them. No, our radios were no bloody good compared to theirs, but they done the job, I suppose.

MCKAY: Does the infantry tank telephone, on the back of the tank, actually work?

REEVES: Oh, yeah, yeah. Actually, we used that - where the hell did we use it? - we used that on a troop, on an advance to contact, and infantry were on it, yep. I don't know where the hell that was - we did use it once. I didn't think it would ever work either, but they did actually work, yeah. And it was a good idea because you couldn't use your radios.

MCKAY: The 25 set.

REEVES: The 25, yeah, bloody hard to play with it.

MCKAY: I found that if you guys were - especially if the troop leader was transmitting you just cut through all of your ...

REEVES: Oh, yeah, I know.

MCKAY: You get the frequency and you forget it.

REEVES: He'd chop you out, that's right. No, the old inf tank telephone, gee ... I think we sort of give it a miss after that, it was mostly hand signals or just make do.

MCKAY: When you look back on your time in Vietnam, what are the memories that sort of come back to you that make you feel good?

REEVES: Oh, not too many of them ... no, no, don't know anything ... can't think of anything ... coming home! that's about it.

MCKAY: Did most of the guys come back at the same time, in that first tour, or were they scattered all over the joint?

REEVES: No, the majority come back at the same time, yeah. We done twelve months to the day, that was the normal thing then, so the first tour was twelve months to the day. Second tour; well, I went back to bring the tanks home.

Second tour was entirely different to the first one, probably because I knew a bit more, I don't know; but that was entirely different. The second tour I spent six weeks in Vung Tau preparing the tanks to go on the ship. Even there we had trouble, one of our mechanics went bonkers and tried to shoot me and my corporal - a young fellow named Franks. I don't know what ever happened to him. We'd had a heavy night and me and this Bill Burton - Burton was a bit of a bad bastard.

Me and Bill are in the office having coffee because we'd had a bad night the night before. This young Franks is up on the bloody trannie decks doing a service, and he kept dropping them. Of course, if you've ever heard the bloody trannie decks on a tank, they make a hell of a racket. Well, Burton went out and told him to hop down, and as Franks was coming down Burton drove him back up on the engine decks. He came back into the office and had another coffee. The next thing we are being told that Franks is coming down the hill from the MPs and he's got a

machine gun and he's blasting away at everything that moved. He just wanted to shoot us, but Bill hit him over the head with a hunk of four-by-two and that sort of fixed him, calmed that down. But little things like that, well, they are the things you remember.

I don't know what happened to the young fellow, I never seen him again, but I think he got out of it. He come back and had a bit of a court marshal - it was the worst case of anxiety I'd ever seen before. But I felt sorry for the young fellows more than anything, probably because I'd sort of spent a bit of time in the army before we went. You think back on it and you think, Christ, they should never have been here - well, that's my view anyway.

MCKAY: Do you think the tanks, out of Vietnam ... How long did spend in Vietnam before that actually happened? Did you do a full tour before you actually ...

REEVES: No.

MCKAY: You did a part tour?

REEVES: Oh, probably ten months or something - eight, nine months or something, I'm not quite sure.

MCKAY: What was the most memorable thing from your second tour?

REEVES: Oh, that's when young Barwick got his eyes knocked out, that was second tour.

MCKAY: You mentioned the day that Bruce Cameron ...

REEVES: That was the day, yeah. Memorable; that was probably the most memorable in that I'd got close to young Barwick and we were really good mates - because he was my operator, of course, for about six months. He blamed me because I'd put Andy Anderson in charge of him instead of me, but I had to go to troop leader. And because I sent him forward; well, he was the sergeant and that was the normal thing, the sergeant always went forward. Of course, when I visited him in hospital he didn't want to talk to me and he blamed me for it. I remember that more than anything, I suppose.

MCKAY: Must have been hard to handle, Phil.

REEVES: It was, until the reunion in Sydney.

MCKAY: You are talking about the '87 Welcome Home Parade?

REEVES: Yep. He come up and we were great friends, it sort of worked out alright then.

MCKAY: Right-oh, well, I don't have a lot more questions. Have you got any Graham?

ANONYMOUS VOICE: No, that's good.

MCKAY: Okay. I think what we might do, we might stop now and have a look at some of your pictures.

REEVES: There's some slides out there, yeah.

MCKAY: That would be great.

REEVES: No worries.

MCKAY: Thanks, Phil.

FURTHER CONVERSATION ON TAPE

REEVES: Running round in bloody circles, everything is in circles, and you are actually laying in the grass. But what we didn't know, two young grunts had got into the middle of this patch to have a bit of a bunk, you see. Thank Christ somebody just saw a puff of smoke come up - because they thought it was a command det (detonator) about to go - they yelled out, tank stopped. The two blokes - they are on the weed, they didn't know where they were, they could have been anywhere for all they knew. The bloody troop sergeant got in there and beat shit out of them, round the ears - we could have run over them as easy as shit, they wouldn't even known that they had been run over.

ANONYMOUS VOICE: Just see the truck mark up the chest, unfortunately, because you can't see.

REEVES: You can't see it until it's on you.

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