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VETERANS' VOICES
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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee: Lawrence Johnstone (LJ)
Interviewer: Gary McKay (GM)
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Place of Interview: Cotton Tree, Maroochydore, Queensland
Transcribed by Laura Manasserian: 11 January 2002
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Interviewee's details: Lawrence (Lorrie) Riley was born in Manchester, UK, in 1936 and emigrated to Australia as a young boy. He enlisted as a Regular soldier for six years and worked as a signalman until taking discharge in 1959. He re-enlisted in 1960 again in Royal Australian Signals Corps and served two tours of Vietnam, the first in 1968-69 and the second 1970-71. He saw the Tet Offensive in 1968 at close quarters, although not personally in combat and on his second tour he served in the Psy Ops (Psychological Operations) Unit as a linguist and interpreter. He was 31 years old on his first tour and married with two small children. He had a third child when he returned for his second tour. He was hospitalised in 1970 after being sprayed with a chemical of unknown origin. He divorced and re-married in 1991, has had a fourth child and lives in Golden Beach, Caloundra.

Subject of Interview: Australians in South Vietnam, the Vietnam war 1965-72 (particularly Tet '68, and 1970-71), training for war, training courses, combat and battle, deploying to Vietnam, tactics, the enemy, casualties, morale, discipline, return to Australia. Vietnamese people, language, linguistics, interpreting and intelligence functions. Psychological warfare and civil affairs, including medical civil aid projects and dental civil aid projects. The Allies, including Americans, Koreans and South Vietnamese armies. Herbicide spraying, National Servicemen.

Start Tape 1

GM This is a recording of an interview with Lawrence Johnstone recorded by Gary McKay for *Veterans' Voices*, Maroochy Libraries' Innovations Project. Recorded at Cotton Tree on Monday 28 May 2001.
Lorrie, firstly thanks very much for taking the time to talk to us today. My first question is why did you join the Army?

LJ Well, I was a low education guy who had a Army family background. My grandfather was a professional soldier and so that was the only thing I could see to do.

GM Now, Lorrie, that was in 1953, when you enlisted in Melbourne. You did a six-year stint and then got out. What were you doing in that six years, that first six years?

LJ In my first six years, I was what they called the general hand. I did linesman work, Don-R on the motor bikes, I got a steam boiler ticket, I was in a Field Force unit for about three years. All in all, I did a little bit of everything from…

GM But still in Signals Corps?

LJ All in Signals.

GM And why Signals Corps? Why not…?

LJ I wanted Infantry (Corps), but I was only 17 when I joined, so I was allocated to Signals Corps.

GM Okay. And the Korean War had just finished.

LJ I didn't get to Korea. One of my friends went in my place, which is one of those things. Two of us on, up for grabs and I didn't get the end of the Korean War.

GM Okay. So you served for six years and then took discharge?

LJ I was working for a colonel by the name Wolf Cox and he wouldn't give me any courses because he said good general hands were hard to find, so I got out, got back in and got myself a radio mechanic's course by sheer luck.

GM Okay. Right, so, so you re-enlisted in 1960, back into Signals Corps?

LJ I didn't have a choice about that.

GM Okay. Righto. So, well they weren't going to waste all that training. Between the time you went to Vietnam in '67 and 1960, what were you doing?

LJ I was an installation technician with 127 Signals squadron or 1 Sig Project Squadron, it changed its name, and I went to New Guinea for seven months. Did installations all up and down the East Coast of Australia and learnt how to bricklay, weld, woodwork, all those extra duties to my radio mechanic bit. And during that time I also managed to get to corporal with all the qualifications for sergeant.

GM Okay. Now, you married. The first time was when?

LJ I married in 1961.

GM Okay. You then started getting… the Vietnam War came in.

LJ The Vietnam War really only became an issue with the Army in '66.

GM Yep.

LJ Before that it was fairly well hidden. I couldn't get out of my unit to go because of an installation unit, I couldn't get out of my unit, so I applied for Thai language which would break me away from my unit and the idea was to get to Vietnam. Instead of that they put me on a Vietnamese language course, which I didn't particularly want to do, because everyone thought the Vietnam War would only last a few months. Then we then went into Thailand.

GM Gee, I'm glad they don't pick lottery numbers.

LJ Yeah. Anyway, I went down and I was playing around on this Vietnamese course, getting about a 71 percent average and it was 75 percent pass so they took me off the course and gave me the option of going back to my unit or going to Vietnam and I went to Vietnam as a corporal, into a sergeant's slot in 110 Signal Squadron.

GM Now, so you were doing Vietnamese language training at Point Cook.

LJ I did four months of the Vietnamese language training (course) at Point Cook.

GM But eventually you did, eventually you did qualify as a linguist?

LJ I came back from Vietnam, did a full 12 months at Point Cook and topped the course that time and went back to Vietnam.

GM Just needed a bit of time

LJ Yeah

GM Well, I mean it's a difficult language, I mean six tones.

LJ It wasn't … I had no difficulty with the language. I had the difficulty with application. The first time I didn't want to …Vietnamese, but I was still picking it up, the second time I wanted to go back to Vietnam, so I went and topped the course and went back to Vietnam.

GM And then you did a year's immersion training.

LJ Yes.

GM But I mean that was the best thing for it to really consolidate the language in your head, was to be back in Vietnam?

LJ And also it gave me a totally different outlook on the Vietnam War to most other soldiers because I saw it from a (different perspective). I wasn't in the scrub all the time. I was with the civilian population a lot of the time, and I was speaking to them at their level, so I had a better understanding of why you'd live like that.

GM Yeah, yeah. So Lorrie, how did you actually get to Vietnam?

LJ Well, we were only talking about that a little bit earlier. We flew by Qantas from here to Vietnam and, what we laughed at was that, we were in uniform as far as Darwin, where we took off our Army shirts and hung them on a hook alongside us. And (then) put on a civilian shirt carrying a rifle and flew over Indonesia - but we weren't soldiers because we had a civil shirt on.

GM Yeah. Did you stop in Singapore?

LJ We landed in Singapore. We didn't get off the plane.

GM Didn't get off?

LJ We walked into the airport.

GM Oh.

LJ But when I say we didn't get off, we didn't get off the airport.

GM But, so it was a refueling stop?

LJ Yes, just a refuel.

GM Now, when you went up, did you go as a replacement for somebody?

LJ I went as a replacement for someone and because I was a long term soldier, I'd done my homework before I went, and a couple of guys had said to me, whatever you do, try and stop Saigon for a day or two. So I looked at my posting order and it said 110 Signal Squadron Headquarters, which was in Saigon, which left them in a flurry because they were expecting me to go straight on to Vung Tau like all the good little fellas. And I got two or three days in Saigon before I was shipped down to Vung Tau.

GM So, so how old were you when you arrived the first time, you would've been…

LJ Thirty…

GM Thirty-one?

LJ Thirty-one, yeah.

GM Okay. Now, was there any other, anything memorable about that trip over on the plane? Were you, were you the only chook (signaller) on the plane or were there others?

LJ Yes I believe I was. But I'd been through Canungra with the infantry, I've been, mixed with the infantry a fair bit at different times, so I got on well with them. I had a few mates in SAS; things like this, so, no I've always been a soldier that mixed with other Corps fairly well. So I didn't have any troubles with that.

GM The, you said you did Canungra, you went and did the BE course?

LJ Yes.

GM But as an individual?

LJ As an individual.

GM Thrown into a group of blokes all pretending to be grunts.

LJ Yes, yes.

GM What did you think of Canungra?

LJ I found it very, very hard, because I came out of four month's Language School with RAAF cooking. I was about two stone (12 kg) over weight, first time in my life, and they made me a section corporal and the radioman. So I was having to swing from one end to the other carrying an extra, I think it's about an 15-pound (7-kg).

GM With the 25 Set (radio) on your back?

LJ Yeah. So I lost weight very rapidly and came down to my normal weight in about ten days.

GM Was it of any value to you going to Canungra?

LJ Not really, no. I found the Canungra just to be… We had officers that were very, very unqualified. One that comes to mind was an Armoured Corps guy who wanted us to do a recce of about three mile (5 km) out and three mile back in a matter of about two or three hours. And so he got what he asked for, and what I did, with spearing two guys out, taking a sight on them and then running through them. And we did our three-mile out and our three-mile back and apparently they had a set ambush and we went through it so quickly they couldn't set the ambush up.

GM What did you think when you arrived in Tan Son Nhut? What was your initial impression?

LJ Well the sheer size of it. The same thing that hits you now about Vietnam, the amount of noise, the amount of people, the amount of aircraft. You just couldn't believe there were that many aircraft on notice.

GM Yeah.

LJ And of course the American Army's very, very casual. We arrived, we were marched into Camp Alpha and then sort of dumped and I wasn't quite sure what I'd got myself into.

GM How did you get down to Nui Dat?

LJ Well, I went into, I caught a bus that was going to 110 Signals Squadron into Saigon, stayed with them at the Canberra Motel or Hotel or whatever it was called for two days; two nights I had in there.

GM Was that the Caravelle?

LJ No, no, no.

GM No the Canberra.

LJ The Canberra was a… that wasn't its proper name - it was a hotel taken over, and I couldn't find it when I went looking for it because I couldn't remember the original name.

GM Yeah.

LJ And I went from there by Caribou, down to Vung Tau via Nui Dat, so I got a look at Nui Dat before…

GM What was 110 Signal squadron's role?

LJ They were the line of communications people. They picked up all the stuff from 104 Signal Squadron, which was out at Nui Dat and they, they did the communications between 104 and Nui Dat and Saigon and Vung Tau and also did the communications back to Australia.

GM Okay. So they had detachments in Saigon, Nui Dat and Vungers (Vung Tau).

LJ Yes, that's right. I believe they also had a small detachment there. We had two detachments in Vung Tau, one on the bottom of the hill on Back Beach and a very small detachment on the top of the hill with the Americans and that's the one that I went to - that was 532 (Troop).

GM Okay. Righto. So what was, what was your job?

LJ Well, it was a radio mechanic technically, but it was really an operator's job. It was to keep the multi-channelled equipment on line. That's when I first arrived - but being me I got into a spot of bother and was banished to Nui Dat where I was doing an acting sergeant's job running a 5-man troop doing a multi-channel. But we arranged our shifts so that we could go out, especially with a little bit of language I had, and help the medevacs, sorry the medcaps and the engineering civil aid projects.

GM Oh yeah. You said you got into a little bit of trouble.

LJ Yeah.

GM Would you like to expand on that?

LJ We had a an American… They had a party at Vung Tau and our kitchen girls were invited. And it was one of the girls there that I got on reasonably well with, big northern girl - and this American kept pulling out the elastic side of her pants and dropping his hand inside. And she was taking a fair amount of exception to it and I took exception to it too and gave him the offer if he did it again I'd lay him out where he was. And he didn't believe me - and I did. .

GM So they moved you to Nui Dat?

LJ So, yes, of course for causing a disturbance I went to Nui Dat.

GM When you say multi-channel, for the lay person what does that mean?

LJ Well, you have one channel of radio, but in those days they could fit 24 channels down it. Now of course you can fit about 1200, but you could (have) 24 voices going each way down one channel of radio.

GM OK and what sort of frequency band does that operate on?

LJ I can't remember.

GM Was it an HF?

LJ Yeah, it was a VHF.

GM Oh, VHF, okay. Righto. What was important about your job?

LJ Well, up until the time that I went to Nui Dat, not a lot. It was just another job. When I got out to Nui Dat because I was able to shuffle the shifts, we were getting out with the medical civil aid projects (medcaps). And with the rebuilding of Ap Suoi Nghe where all the people that had been pushed out of Slope 30 and out towards the May Taos had to be re-housed, and we built houses for

them and dug wells. We got out there and pulled teeth, and I learnt how to give needles to people, and we were doing a lot of work for the locals. And especially during the Tet Offensive when there was a lot of people hurt. We were the ones that were tidying them up, because their own hospitals had been shot to pieces.

GM And for the uninformed person, the Ap Suoi Nghe project was really about the relocation of villages from, from areas where the Viet Cong had operated?

LJ Well, it was totally a British idea. The British idea was to remove the population from where they could supply the enemy to areas where they could be controlled. It didn't work, but it wasn't given the political backing it should've been, so it just didn't work. But the people were, you know, people like any other, who were peasants and I got to be very friendly with a few of them and we dug their wells. We used ammunition cases to build houses that you wouldn't put your dog in here, but people live reasonably happy in them there because…

GM Okay. Now, describe sort of an average day in Nui Dat.

LJ To stay in Nui Dat and do the job that I was assigned was to do an eight-hour shift shared with three other people, so we did eight hours on, 24 hours off and it was dead boring. You went and sat in a small room and waited for the radio to break down or to hiccup in some way or maybe do a channel change or something like. It was pretty boring. But so this is why we juggled our shifts, and we did 12 hours shifts, which meant we had 12 hours on, and 12 hours off. So every second day you were available to go with the civil aid. Our unit okayed it, in fact they sort of pushed it a little bit and - especially because I could speak a bit of Vietnamese - that was a real bonus to them. And I got out with a Doctor Fox who was an excellent guy, really switched on. He was technically the SAS doctor. Did a lot of side issues with SAS and did a lot of issues for the Vietnamese as well and we got round a lot of places that I would not have seen without, without the Doc.

GM What was the big difference between your first tour and your second tour apart from the fact that you were more fluent in your language?

LJ Well the big differences were the security of the area on my first tour. You wouldn' t have walked outside the wire at Nui Dat of a night. On my second tour you'd stay in Baria overnight and be reasonably safe. Once the Tet Offensive was over and things quietened down, the province that we were in became very, very secure and in most cases you were, you were safe, it was almost a non-event to find…

GM We'll talk about Tet in a minute, but what was the major difference in your job?

LJ The main difference in my job was that on the first tour I was juggling time to get out, outside the wire to work with medical civil aid and the other people and day's tended to be, it tended to be the same job over and over. On my second tour I was interpreter. I started off with Div Int; was re-assigned to Psy Ops and after again, in strife with the hierarchy, got sent to Psy Ops, which is where I fitted in best. And with Psy Ops every day was different. I'd be in the hills with the infantry one day. I might do three or four days out there. I'd be back in. I'd be with the APCs somewhere. I'd be walking villages with a Vietnamese offsider just trying to pick up information. Showing movies at night - and I modified that program to reduce the risk to us - and every day was just totally, totally different. There was no part of Phuoc Tuy Province that I didn't see with the exception of the May Taos.

GM So a lot of people are totally unaware of what Psy Ops does. What is their real aim in life?

LJ Their real aim in life was 'win hearts and minds', but because Australia had no set Psy Ops program, the 'win hearts and minds' was a bit of a copy from the Americans, which was a failure. The interpreters in the groups from Psy Ops tended to be an additive to Div Int, in that they picked up information, and then they did whatever jobs they could see to help or give advice back to Civil affairs for jobs that could be done in the villages to help, and our system, of course, was different to the Americans in that we put in windmills and wells and things like that.

GM But it would be fair to say wouldn't it, that the civil affairs program that we had was successful?

LJ Very, very.

GM I mean, I mean, like yourself, I've been back to Vietnam and found that the regardless of whether the people you talk to are ex-Viet Cong or civilians, they really appreciated the efforts that the Australians made.

LJ Yeah, the, well as I say we dug wells, we put up windmills and that's a big deal to them. We improved roads and a lot of things of that style and yeah. And the medical civil aid side of it was, it was an enormous boost, which is Doc Fox - the doctor we worked for - he didn't care what side they came from; if they were hurt, they were hurt. And there was a couple of times there were, we were, we suspicious of the people we were treating, but they were… well one particular bloke had cerebral malaria and I'm fairly sure that he was from the other side. Didn't make much difference in the long run anyway.

GM Yeah it's true. Now, on your first tour you were in Vietnam at the time in Phuoc Tuy Province - at the time of Tet '68, what are the things that stand out in Tet '68 to you?

LJ Well, we went into the hospital and the picture theatre area in Baria the next morning, the morning after they cleared them (Viet Cong) back out. And there was still little bits of fighting going on in Baria. We did a medical civil aid project firstly in the, at different to the hospital, at front of the theatre sorry, which was shot to pieces and we actually cleared the theatre to make sure there was nothing in there. It had been cleared by the infantry before. There were buildings down all around; bodies in the buildings, the place stunk. There were shops shot to pieces. We then went across to the hospital and we did the rest of our civil aid project in there and the hospital was just torn to pieces. There was, it was wanton destruction for no reason. The X-Ray theatre had been pulled out and just shot to pieces and things like that, and I've no idea why they did things like that.

GM Presumably by the Viet Cong?

LJ Well, presumably by the Viet Cong.

GM When you say this, when you say you went and did a medical aid project, could you explain to the listener what that usually entailed?

LJ Well, the Vietnamese didn't have … they did have little trucks went around and said there's a civil aid project at so and so, go in there if you get hurt. And the Vietnamese would then gather and we had things like … two women who were badly injured from, by an M-79 (grenade) that exploded in the roof so they were all their backsides were full of shrapnel. We had a family that had been hit by a heavy grenade. We had one old fella that'd got into the old folks home three days before and he'd hidden behind a bed for three days and in that he hadn't been to the toilet. He was in a pretty bad way, so yeah, there were all sorts of things. I had no trouble with the adults in the main. The kids used to knock me around a little bit.

GM Yeah, I think it affects…

LJ Because they were pretty badly hurt.

GM …most people. If it wasn't a combat situation, like if you were just doing a civil affairs-type medcap out in a village. What sort of things would you do on, then?

LJ It was mainly people coming in that were, they called it 'thieu mau', anaemic - which is the blood - the white gums, I can't think of the technical term for the moment. And we'd give them a few vitamins and pull a few teeth, stitch up wounds where they'd been hit by a hoe or kicked by a bullock, and just general medical things that they didn't have. They had no medical facilities in the villages at all and so we filled in that gap and people would travel from two or three villages away just to get a wound sewn up or an ulcer treated.

GM It would be true to say it was rudimentary, but you believe it was appreciated?

LJ It was very basic, well, I mean, teeth in particular were a major problem to them. Because if you were an older person whose tooth was falling apart, you were no use in the workforce and for somebody to come along and do what was basically butchery, rip a tooth out, was to us pretty cruel, but to them enormously helpful.

GM Yeah.

LJ Some others we did manage to ship to Saigon. There was a little girl with dislocated hips that the Americans worked on, well she became a quite a useful little girl whereas before she couldn't even walk.

GM Yeah. It's a side of a war that most people don't get to see, isn't it?

LJ We always had infantrymen or something like that early on, we had them as our perimeter while we did it, but…

GM Protection parties?

LJ Yeah, protection parties. And it was interesting sometimes, because at Long Dien (when the battle) began we actually sat on the road doing a medical civil aid project while watching the fight between the ARVN and the VC down in Long Dien. It was probably 500 metres away, but it was a different war, different area. And we just sat there having our morning tea and watching these people shoot one another. .

GM When you went out into the field, was there anything that sort of made you apprehensive?

LJ I hated mines. I'm frightened of them.

GM So the threat of mines?

LJ Yeah. I'd seen cows hit by mines. I'd seen the result of mines. I've never been in an actual explosion of them, and then when I was out with the New Zealanders in the Nui Thi Vais (mountains) one day, the guy ahead of me actually pulled a trip wire up that the batteries had gone flat in and had been stood on and yeah, I think I walked four inches (100 mm) above the ground for about the next three kilometres from then on after that.

GM I think, well, also the injuries they cause are pretty horrific.

LJ Well, I saw a cow with its leg taken off at the knee with just one of those little M-14 plastic mines and he looked like a torch case. So yeah, pretty frightening.

GM When you look back on your first tour, who's the person that most stands out in your memory?

LJ Well… sorry mate.

GM Do you want to stop?

Break in Interview

GM Yeah, the person who most stands out in your memory in your first tour?

LJ When we were doing the Ap Suoi Nghe project, there was a little guy there got voted in as the town leader and he was a battler. He loved most of his village - trying to make both ends join. And I took a photo of him; I've got a photo of him somewhere you know. And one night they (the Viet Cong)

took him out, nailed a note to his chest and shot him - just because he'd allowed us to dig wells in his village - and that one knocked me about.

GM Was that sort of thing ah, did it make people more determined to overcome the problem or did you find you were on the losing side?

LJ It, it made, probably made me very aware of the fact that, unless we really put a full-scale effort in - which we never going to do it - we were never going to win.

GM Yeah.

LJ And we owned the place by day at that stage, but they owned the villages by night and they could do what they wanted to the villages. And they brought the Phoenix Program in and things like that, but then there it was; you never really battled them, never really did.

GM What was the reaction of the villages after Tet? I mean, did they think was the beginning of the end or …? How did that, can you, were you able to get a feeling for that?

LJ It's very, very hard because they only tell you really what, you know, you're the man with the gun during the day and there's the other guys coming in of a night, so very hard to tell. But there definitely seemed to be to my mind a sort of, well maybe this South Vietnamese thing might win. And I think a lot of people became more committed, certainly we had more, or there appeared to be a lot more Hoi Chanhs (defectors) on the second trip than what there were on the first one. And also they were being worn down. After Tet, the villages didn't have the means to supply them anywhere near as well and they were also locked into the Long Hais (Hills) and places like that. One guy that swapped to our side was telling us how they were living on a condensed milk tin of rice, gruel and whatever bits he could find from the scrub, leaves and roots and any bits of meat like birds and that that they could get. One guy was actually shot carting a large dog in to the hills that they'd butchered.

GM What did you, when you look back on it all, what did you think of the enemy?

LJ Well, I didn't. I was a professional soldier, you know, I was, and from my point of view the hierarchy within them were professional soldiers too. I never had a hang-up with the enemy. He was a soldier. He was doing…

GM His job?

LJ …what his government told him to. I certainly never knocked any of them around or anything like that. I was pretty, pretty neutral.

GM I mean they were fairly determined.

LJ Tough, determined men and I saw the way they lived in the bush in caves, and the way that when they were travelling from one place to another, they'd weave themselves a little bed two inches (50 mm) above the ground. They didn't just lie there on the thing, so, yeah, and some of them had a sense of humour, that was shown by some of the commendation certificates they wrote for activities with women and various other things. One of the places that you went into was K Base way out the back of Binh Ba and carved on a tree there was a VC soldier, very obviously a VC with his big hat and a star on the front, urinating on a soldier who was crouching below him with a slouch hat on, so…

GM Is that right?

LJ Oh yeah. And the only way you could get through the swamp into K Base, you had to see this thing. You saw three or four approaches, but they all ended up passing this big tree, at one stage or another.

GM What do you think was the incident that most stands out in your first tour?

LJ The incident that most stands out? There were a lot. I suppose going out on a SAS pick up and pulling them out of a live fire (hot extraction situation).

GM Was it in a helicopter?

LJ In a helicopter, yes. Sitting sort of 30 feet (10 metres) above the trees - feeling as though you were as big as a barn pulling up guys, a couple of whom had been wounded lightly. One bloke had been hit across the wrist and don't know where …I think the other bloke was hit across the calf, and we had these other guys firing at the SAS guys and we were sitting up there in the doorway just above the trees.

GM What, were you winching them out were you? So, the hot extraction was with a winch?

LJ Hot extraction with a horse collar thing, you know that…?

GM Oh, okay.

LJ They dropped the first one in and picked up two fellas and the second one, we were only supposed to pick up one at a time and two came up the first lift, and then three came up on the second. And one fella had thrown himself through the horse collar and was pinning the arms of the other two coming up. On the first lift, one of the guys was about, he was a big fella, about 6 foot 2, 6 foot 3, (187-9 cm) he was the one that had been hit across the wrist.

GM Yeah. They got better at doing that, they ended up throwing five ropes out and…

LJ Yeah.

GM …and then lifting them all out together.

LJ This was pretty early, yeah.

GM I think the pilots came up with that idea!

LJ Yeah.

GM What about on your second tour, what incident stands out? When you think back to your second tour?

LJ On the second tour, probably the one that most worried me and was different was, I took a group of soldiers out to Xuyen Moc, which was out from the back of Dat Do and there was nobody else out there. The American Special Forces team, I think there was one of them in the place, I don't know where he was. And we had a second lieutenant Army Reserve(ist) with us who decided he was a leader and as we approached Xuyen Moc there was a PSDF camp, you know, the popular forces - the local soldiers sort of home guard – and they had put in what looked to me like a cow paddock with two fences round it. They hadn't even cleared between the wire. The set-up had a little wooden tower, which I would never put a soldier in a wooden tower way up high above the ground like that…

GM Something to range in on!

LJ But they put a soldier up there with an M-60 and it was a shambles. Backed onto a patch of scrub, you know, the patch of scrub was still there because they weren't allowed to chop the trees or something. And there were houses very close against the other side of it. And the second lieutenant decided he was staying in there so, after a bit of discussion with - I was a sergeant but, you know, not his sergeant - he decided that he would go with us; that he wouldn't stay there on his own. And we went into the main fort. Now one of the funny parts about this was that I was the interpreter, but my offsider was a fellow by the name of Philip Chin Quan, who looked more oriental than most of the Vietnamese, but spoke nothing but good old Strine and didn't particularly like Vietnamese. And we got into the main fort and the major called us in and he said, 'Look if anything happens' - he obviously had an idea things were going to go wrong – 'if anything happens, I want you to take the main gate. You hold the main gate with your Australian soldiers.' And Xuyen Moc is a fair way out; it's beyond range

of Australian artillery, so that didn't sort of make for a real good night. But we sat down and had a beer with him anyway and relaxed a bit and half way through it there was hell of an explosion. The roof got spattered with bits and what had happened - we didn't know this, it was purely fortuitous - the gun (artillery cannon) firing out, 155 (mm howitzer) firing out had had a prang (premature detonation) and it exploded above the fort. But of course the major thought it was artillery. And he said to me 'phao kich' so I turned to the oriental looking guy alongside me and said 'phao kich' (meaning) 'we're being shelled', but I said it in Vietnamese and I left, which left Chin Quan sitting at the table wondering what the hell was going on! And then I rushed back to the other guys and we took over the gate. Well, we were there and the little fort - that we were supposed to have stayed at where the second lieutenant wanted to stay - got overrun, it was just knocked over. And most of the soldiers scattered and left it. We were in the main fort and in the market place - I always carried an M-79 in the vehicle as well as a rifle - we could see figures at the end of the marketplace, obviously getting set up to have a go at the gate. So we threw a couple of M-79 (grenades) down into that area. I can't remember, I can't remember whether we fired our rifles or not, but I've got a fair idea we did. It's just one of those blanks. We couldn't find the second lieutenant, who shall remain nameless, and he was known as 'Jungles'.

GM Green and dense?

LJ Yes, well thick, green and dense. I went back to get him and he was standing against a building watching the Vietnamese artillery fire out and he thought it was all out-going. The fact that there was big dust puffs around the area sort of indicated that it wasn't. There was B-40s and, oh the other one, B-41s - I think they called them - coming in and anyway, one of them hit the breech of the gun and knocked a couple of Vietnamese over. They dragged them aside, I don't know where they went to, I didn't see where they went to, but there were immediately replacement guns went on firing and we managed to talk this second lieutenant into taking cover. And he went into the American area, we went back and covered the main gate, and then a few minutes later, well, probably quite a lot later, but it seemed like a few minutes, and an APC came tracking in. They'd actually sent the APCs down the road and the Vietnamese artillery had covered them down the road on the way in and the APC circled the marketplace with some clown on the front blowing the American cavalry charge with a bugle and that's one of the…

GM Yank cavalry was it?

LJ No, that was Australian, Diggers in APCs.

GM Yeah?

LJ And I don't know who the guy was to this day, but there was a guy up there doing that dut, dut, dut, dut, dut, dut! And then went round the marketplace and then we all went out to the fort that had been run over. We searched it, found a lot of grenades there; in fact I actually kicked a grenade across the floor not realising what it was. The VC had a lot of grenades that didn't go off.

GM Yeah. So, now, your second tour was now March '70 to April '71. Wasn't it?

LJ That's right yeah.

GM When do you think this is, when the Xuyen Moc thing was? When you went out there?

LJ It was towards the end of my tour.

GM Okay.

LJ About three quarters of the way through the tour.

GM Okay. So 1970. Okay.

LJ I was with Psy Ops, so it had to be, but I stayed in that area for quite a while after because we went back to Xuyen Moc at one stage.

GM Okay. Yeah.

LJ Also met Big Minh out there.

GM You met who?

LJ Big Minh. The guy who handed over to the VC at the end. General Minh? He was hiding out there, had a house out there.

GM Okay, Lorrie. Looking back on both tours, what do you think was the worst time you experienced in Vietnam?

LJ I'd say Xuyen Moc. I'd have to say Xuyen Moc, because all the others, if I was with the Infantry or something like that were looking after me. At Xuyen Moc I was more worried because I had, well four of them were National Servicemen and then I had the second lieutenant. When the major, when he told us about the main gate, he had already taken us in and shown us the escape hole in the middle of the fort - so he obviously thought there was something really solid going down.

GM And you're really out there by your own?

LJ We were totally out on our own, we couldn't be reached by Australian artillery. I found the ARVN artillery out there to be really, really good soldiers, but there was also a couple hundred PSTF and other sort of hanger-on troops that I didn't trust. And I take it the major didn't trust them either and I figured if they dug the hole for him, they probably told the other side where it came out.

GM Yeah. Oh, we'll stay on the Allies. We'll stay on our Allies for a few minutes. Just working through the Allies that you worked with in both tours. What did you think of the Americans?

LJ Well, the Americans were very, very patchy. Their American Signals battalion had a small core of very, very good guys in that I saw, but they also had a lot of hangers-on and they had all sorts of things like Puerto Ricans that spoke minimal English and I couldn't see what value they really were. Nice enough guys, but not, not usable soldiers. In the field, I didn't have a lot to do with the Americans. The few times I was lined up with them, they did things like reconnaissance by fire and things like that, where you all sat in a fire support base and that, given time you all fired your rifle out, which sounded to me like you might as well send a letter to the VC and tell them what weapons you had. And I found them to be very reliant on their numbers and their equipment. Whereas Australians - we didn 't have the numbers and we didn't have the equipment, so we fought a totally different war.

GM You would have run into a few of them down in Baria.

LJ Yes.

GM You know, with the, with the intelligence groups, that were assembled in the middle of the province?

LJ Yeah, and I also had an occasion there where one of the guys who was running the police, there was a mob of soldiers got drunk and were shooting up Long Dien. And Chin Quan and I got out of the vehicle with two other soldiers - whose names I don't remember - and we sent the driver slowly out behind us while we walked up the sides of the street, the way you do, two on either side, keeping down as much as possible. And we found this American had lined up his Vietnamese Police at each end of the street which, you know, if they opened fired, they were going to hit their own people. And I walked through, and this is one that Chin Quan still remembers, walked through and by this stage I was pretty angry, you know, to have your own side shoot at you was stupid, and I stormed into the shop alongside the one that all the shooting was coming from. And as you know their shops were only built out of Coca-Cola tins, kicked my way through the wall and stuck the SLR in some guy's ear and said, 'Out the front now!' We sort of settled the argument and he said, 'If I go out they'll shoot me,' and I pointed to him that he had about two seconds to make a decision before I shot him. I was angry because we'd been coming into town in an unarmed vehicle; we actually got a couple of hits in the canvas from M-16 fire. And we had a couple of young ladies with us, who were giving a voice broadcast - this was part of the Psy Ops thing - and I was pretty angry more than frightened. And anyway, he went out with

his mates, who had dived out the back - I couldn't cover all of them - and jumped on a motor bike and got away. But this Yank had, well he seemed to have no idea of what to do. You know, he just, had lined his troops up out in the street and was standing there, just sort of what will I do now? So, if he was typical of the officers they had on the liaison duties, they weren't real good.

GM What about, what about the ARVN. What did you think of the ARVN?

LJ The ARVN were also very, very patchy. Most of their infantry battalions weren't worth having, the ones I saw. I had a mate, he was a captain up on the slopes of the Long Hais that had an ARVN battalion there and the officers were useless. A lot of the soldiers thanks to him were pretty good and soldiers are soldiers. If they've got good leadership, they'll get there. The 2IC of the battalion died in strange circumstances - he fell off a cliff into the sea - and the battalion improved enormously after that. And …but then the ARVN, the ARVN artillery at Xuyen Moc as I said, took fire, lost men, but went on firing. There was no quitting, and I found them to be excellent and they used to, they were always very neatly dressed and if you walked past and you had any sort of rank on at all, you got a salute.

GM Well, that's usually a pretty good sign of discipline and morale, isn't it?

LJ Yeah, they were extremely, yeah, yeah. I found them very very good. Others … apparently they were replaced at different times and I can remember Keith Innes saying that the, when he was out there that the mob that were there at that time were no good.

GM And who was Keith Innes?

LJ Keith Innes was a sergeant at that stage. He made warrant officer in Intelligence Corps, he was another interpreter. He was in Vietnam the same time as I was, along with Lex McCauley and, who was, I can't remember, [LJ: *Captain*] Stan Bryant was the OC.

GM Was any…

LJ Alan Cunningham, yeah

GM Oh Al Cunningham.

LJ Yeah, Alan and I didn't see eye to eye at that stage.

GM Was Ernie Chamberlain there then?

LJ I know Ernie Chamberlain, but I don't know where from.

GM I think he must have. Yeah, he was in Int Corps.

LJ Just gone home.

GM What about, did you work with any Koreans?

LJ Only in Vung Tau, and I didn't really have much to do with them but the, I found the two very, very arrogant and quite cruel. I did see one beat up his, his housemaid. Well he couldn't see any real problem with that.

GM Now you mentioned before, National Servicemen. How many National Servicemen would you have had in your own organisation? Let's say the first tour in 110 Signal Squadron?

LJ It was nearly all National Servicemen.

GM Was it?

LJ Pretty well, yeah. Chin Quan was sent to us because he was from the infantry, because they were frightened they'd shoot him in the jungle.

GM Yeah well we had a bloke in our, in our battalion who nearly got nailed a couple of times when coming back in through the wire, you know, because people thought he was a bad guy.

LJ Well Chin Quan was that style; he was an excellent soldier.

GM So he was Chinese extraction was he?

LJ Chinese. Pure Chinese. Pure St Kilda-Chinese. Yes.

GM St Kilda-Chinese.

LJ Spoke nothing but good old Strine. And he's had to learn Chinese since with his new wife. He speaks a few words.

GM So, what did you think of the National Servicemen that came into your organisation?

LJ In the main, they were very, very good. They were just soldiers like any other, and they took their leadership well. In some of the non-combatant units, there was probably a tendency to yahooing and other guys who didn't get outside the wire much. It was probably boredom set in. But there were no worse probably than normal recruits.

GM But you couldn't see any difference between them and a Reg?

LJ Unless you asked a guy, you wouldn't know.

GM Yeah, yeah.

LJ I know you're a Scheyville officer. I didn't meet any of the Scheyville officers to any great degree, so I don't know how they went.

GM Probably because they weren't in long enough...

LJ That's right.

GM …to get all that extra training that you needed.

LJ I knew a lot of guys like Geoff Kendall and people like that, because I was in the Army for so long, you know, that were Portsea (OCS) guys and I mean they were a mixed bag too.

GM Yeah, what did you think was the funniest incident from your time there?

LJ The funniest incident that I remember was a big fella by the name of Frank Burgess, who is somewhat of a character - Frank's on the way out now, he's just had a stroke - but Frank's a big burly, half-German and half-Irish, always got the mouth open. But this day he took me up to the tip at Nui Dat and we were picking up socks because we used to pick up socks, shake the sand out of them, send them back to Vung Tau, which was our base unit and swap them for new socks. And we'd end up with a truck load of socks, you know and other stuff, you know, boots, boots in particular because you could trade boots with the Americans for tools and stuff that you needed for to keep your unit working. And there was a troop of the big mean-looking monkeys that were sitting around the tip pulling stuff apart. And one of them was rummaging through a box of apples or rotten fruit of some kind and one of the Diggers walking along picked up a boot and hit this monkey right in the bum with it. Threw it, hit it, whack. And this big monkey - they stood about 3 foot (1 metre) tall, or squatted about 3 feet tall - came up the hill screaming and there was about eight or nine soldiers up there all with rifles over their shoulder, just scattered and ran for their lives. No one thought to shoot this mongrel thing. They all just ran. . Maybe a fear of rabies shots! Yeah. And to see the soldiers scatter like that, I think we were still laughing about a week later.

GM Yeah. It's funny isn't it? There's a mentality there.

LJ Yeah.

GM I mean. Yeah, so much for trained jungle killers. Okay. What do you think was the toughest time, either physically or mentally, that you experienced and why?

LJ Physically, the toughest time was getting up into, I think it was in the Nui Dinhs (Mountains) - the front ones. To go in there, I went in there I think three or four times. But to climb up through, it was all black palm, that spiny rotten black palm and the only way you could get up there really, or with the group I went in with, was to crawl up the water courses. And so you were in water, you had no idea what was going on around you, deep in this water, and you knew that there was only a limited number of creeks and crossings you could go up, and you crawled up through the water in them. And then we got, from there into lantana in one of them. I think that was the same set of hills. We got into, and lantana was, there's no breeze in lantana and it was just so hot, so you know.

GM What was the reason you were going into the Nui Dinhs?

LJ We used to have VC come in and swap sides and they would take us in there to show us things. Or they would've picked someone up and you'd have to climb up the hill and talk to them while they were there and bring them back out. But usually the, the times I went in there, I was going in with a returnee or Hoi Chanh as we called them. And on one of those trips, we ran into a cluster bomb group that had been picked up and moved by the Vietnamese and I've got photos of that somewhere, of these cluster bomb groups all stacked against the trees.

GM How confident were you that the Hoi Chanhs weren't setting you up, or weren 't you confident?

LJ I had a mate by the name of Hetherington, 'Slim' (Mervyn) Hetherington. Slim used to put his pack on them so they couldn't run.

GM That's not a bad idea.

LJ He said to me, 'Why don't you put your pack on them?' And I said, 'Because if they do run, I'm not going to shoot holes in my own pack.' So I used to just keep an eye on them. You weren't sure of them at all. You know, you could make a rough judgement and you knew what their side would do to them if they got them again, regardless. In fact, them being in contact with us would make them suspect to their own side. And so, no, you weren't confident of them in the main - there were some good ones.

GM After you come back from your first tour and you were going back, did your perception of the war change?

LJ Wars always attract young guys, I mean, that's one of the sad sides of it. And this was the only war I was ever going to get to because of my age and everything else. And so no, my attitude to the war had probably changed that I wasn't quite so eager and enthusiastic, I was just doing my job as a soldier going back. But I also wanted to practice my Vietnamese. I also wanted to see what it was like outside my own Corps.

GM Yeah.

LJ Getting in with a totally different area, you know.

GM Well you got into a more, I mean you got so much more exposure didn't you?

LJ That's right. Yeah, yeah

GM What did you think of Vietnam the country?

LJ Oh, it's a lovely country. There's no two ways about that. Just going back to what we did there. You mentioned the 'win hearts and minds' (WHAM). When I got there, the Americans used to

show propaganda movies and quite regularly used to get hand grenades dropped amongst their movie crowds. And there was one particularly village called Hoi Mi which was pretty tough; was forever getting incidents of one kind or another. Engineers had grenades thrown at them. I used to show them movies in Hoi Mi of a night and leave, and get into the local centre with no troubles at all. But what I did was I went down to the Americans and I got a thing called a *Long Ride Through Hell*. It was a Clint, Clint Eastwood movie, or that style of movie. One of those 'spaghetti westerns'. And it was all stabbings, killings and shootings. Whereas the American propaganda movies used to get maybe 50 or 100 people there, around our vehicle we could count over 700. To this day, Chin Quan and a couple of the others swear that half the VC were up the back of this screen watching it.

GM But these weren't with subtitles?

LJ No subtitles, no.

GM Still in English?

LJ How many subtitles do you need when the guy is speaking in Italian, dubbed in English and he's busy shooting or stabbing someone?

GM Yeah.

LJ The other one that got them all in was the, I think it, the *Altmark*, (*The Heroes of Telemark)* the one where they went into the snow and got the heavy water plant in Germany, I can't remember the name of it.

GM Oh, yeah, the World War Two adventure flick.

LJ Yes,

GM Yeah.

LJ There's snow and all, the skiing and all that got them in there. And then the third one that I got into trouble for keeping for so long was a thing called *Bupe*. Bupe was a doll and it was a story of seven Vietnamese soldiers all of whom were killed. But it was the first time in any Vietnamese movie anywhere - in black and white - that they had a full frontal nude. And one of the guys is lying there, very, very, I mean, it wouldn't even be noticed, you'd show it on daytime television here because it was done so at a distance and so quietly and you know 'nicely' for want of a better term. But this girl walks down in his dreams towards him as he lying there wounded - and it's his wife or girlfriend - and she's in the nude. Well, that used to cause a real gasp in the villages, because they're very conservative and you couldn't move for the crowd, you know. If anyone had ever thrown a grenade, they'd have killed about a thousand people, you were that crowded in.

GM Okay. Were you well prepared for your first tour?

LJ No. All my preparation was done through the dreamworld of Canungra and I got into trouble at Canungra too for refusing to jump off the tower. Went off three times - I'm a non-swimmer and don't like heights - and I went off three times and the fourth time some second lieutenant wanted me to stand on the edge and jump off. And he got told to get stuffed and I didn't jump and I never jumped again. They tried the usual stunt of standing you out the front and shaming you. I don't shame easy. I'd done my three jumps and I was quite proud of that and that was the end of that one.

GM So, but you felt pretty prepared when you went back on that second tour?

LJ On the second tour, yes, I knew what I was walking into.

GM Did you go to Canungra again?

LJ No. No.

GM You didn't.

LJ No. I think Canungra had had enough of me.

GM Probably, probably because oh yeah, you had two years, you had less than two years (between tours). Yeah you had less than two years. That's probably why.

LJ Yeah, I only did 12 months, yeah. And I've done a couple of, I did a couple of exercises in the hills in between times with Sigs on radio and things like that, so they probably expected that…

GM Yeah. Okay. Now, did you take R & R on your first tour?

LJ I took R & R to come back to Australia. I had a marriage that was probably less than good and being away in Vietnam didn't help it. Good lady, looked after the kids and all that, but a lot of other problems. So I came back to Australia, but I also took R & C in country that the Army didn't know about. They assumed I'd gone to Vung Tau. I went to Dalat. Being a little bit older than some of them, and also knowing the Army system, I went down, saw the RAAF guys, got on the plane [LJ: *a Caribou*] and flew to Nha Trang and into Dalat, because in my readings I wanted to see Dalat. I still like Dalat. I spent four days, five days in Dalat. Didn't have dried strawberries in those days but yeah, so I saw the Americans in action there. I saw them, when I say in action, I saw them on leave there and they went on. And the money they spent which left me sort of astounded. And yeah, sort of then I went back to to Vung Tau, to Nui Dat from there. On the second trip I only took R & R and again I came home and had a couple of problems to sort out again.

GM So, when you came back on R & R, what was it like, sort of going from the war zone back into Australia?

LJ Probably made worse by the wife that I had, like you know, driving up to the house, it had 'welcome home our hero' and things like this across the front. And I'm a pretty quiet sort of guy, pretty much a loner and I didn't get on well with some of the guys in the area that she lived in.

GM Were you living in a married patch?

LJ We were living in a married patch out in a very small camp called Digger's Rest. There's only about 30 married quarters.

GM That's in …?

LJ Victoria.

GM Yeah.

LJ And a couple of the blokes there were older staff sergeants that were basically alcoholics and I didn't get on with them you know. So having little signs like that and giving them the opportunity to poke mullet didn't sit well - and the, also the enormous change. I mean one day you're sitting in a tent disappearing off out into the scrub every couple of days, and the next day you 're sitting in the backyard with nothing… you know.

GM What about going back to Vietnam after you're in Australia for what, five days?

LJ Yeah.

GM And then back in. What was that like?

LJ I could be rude and say it was a, a relief from my marriage. No, I didn't have any troubles coming back to Vietnam.

GM Okay.

LJ In looking at Vietnam, from a soldier's point of view, and given the same opportunities and the same choices, I'd probably go again. But by the same token, I don't know, I mean, I spent four and a half days in hospital, as you saw, with what was sprayed - and they knew it was sprayed, even then. I had ulcers all down the side of my mouth and…

GM Was that from defoliant or herbicide or insecticide? Any idea?

LJ No, no idea. The planes came over low.

GM You didn't know?

LJ We all ended up in hospital. We, there, we were told we had food poisoning which, when we sat down and worked it all out, Chin Quan and I had eaten in the village; other guys had eaten in camp, and a couple of guys had not - they had eaten ration packs - yet we all had food poisoning. And to add to it, they knew because Ching Quan and I both got four and a half days in hospital on our records - but no reason for being in there.

GM Where were you when you got sprayed?

LJ On the outskirts of Long Dien from memory. And that doesn't mean much because it wasn't until I was thinking about it later that I realised it was on the second trip and not the first one.

GM Okay.

LJ I did get sprayed on the first trip.

GM Yeah.

LJ I've got pictures of the rubber trees, well during the Tet Offensive, Nui Dat, just before the Tet Offensive, Nui Dat was sprayed quite extensively.

GM Well, they used to go round the perimeter and…

LJ Yeah.

GM …and keep all this stuff (long grass) down.

LJ The Yanks made a mistake apparently and instead of spraying us for mozzie spray, it was for leaves.

GM I wouldn't mind betting that either. What was it like coming back and seeing your kids?

LJ It was great, you know. I'm very big on the kids, even now, they're my thing and yeah. That part of going away and leaving the kids was hard and probably one of the, on my first trip, when I came back in coming home, the pilot was a bit of a character and he did some sort of detour and actually went over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and dipped a wing and there were a few guys upset because…

GM Did you find that difficult going back for your second tour, leaving your kids behind?

LJ Yes, because I had another baby by that stage. It was one of those accidents that happened whilst I was on the language course - and that was my daughter. And on my first trip, my son, who was four years of age, had been having a lot of difficulty with his mum. Or she'd been having a lot of difficulty with him, if you want to put it - as an adult. But it really, the trouble was that the kid was having trouble with mum, not the other way round. And so that side of it was difficult, you gotta remember the Army was the only way I knew to earn a quid and this was my, my way of earning reasonable money.

GM Okay. We'll talk about casualties now. Did you know, did you personally know anyone who was wounded or killed?

LJ We went out to a …oh yeah, Mick Gill was killed. But I wasn't near Mick when he died. He was with Ray Simpson at that stage. I was at a place, a little hamlet out the back, out the back somewhere, towards Thua Tich somewhere and there was a little hamlet that was left there, stone houses. And we went out down to search one and we found a hell of a lot of stuff. And there was a pig there that'd been shot the night before by our guys, you know, it'd moved and somebody had seen the movement and fired and killed the pig. And when we went into this hamlet, the pig was actually being cooked when it shouldn't have been, you know, it was in an out of bounds area. No one thought much of it but when the APCs (came)… And there were mines all around the place and I've actually got a picture of a mine-clearing tank blowing a mine on the road as we went in. And a big sergeant, infantryman, whose name escapes me, you know what you're like with memory, and he and I were acquaintances, we didn't know one another well. But as I left and we got down the road too far to sort of double back, they swept in and he was one of the ones killed and a couple of the other guys were wounded.

GM How does that make you feel when you, when you know that you've come so close?

LJ I was always lucky that way. I had several incidents like that where things blew up after I left or died down as I walked in. Very lucky, very lucky.

GM Does it make you, do you tend to become a fatalist?

LJ Well, I've always been a bit that way, yeah.

GM Yeah.

LJ If it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen. But at the same time I also am a very firm believer in hunches. If there's some, doesn't feel right, don't do it. Like the incident with (Second Lieutenant) I looked at that paddock and I'm not a grunt but, I looked at the place and it didn 't look the sort of place I could defend, and it was creepy to me so we went into the main fort.

GM A lot of blokes have mentioned the fact that sometimes you go in, you just, it just doesn't feel right.

LJ Doesn't feel right, no.

GM Yeah.

LJ There's a lot of times that used to happen and we'd just wander off and find something else to do you know?

GM Okay. Now we talked about mines before. You said you saw a mine incident where a cow…

LJ Oh, in the, in the fence at Hoa Long a cow had stepped into the fence and blown its leg away. When I was in the hospital, I used to go to the hospital sometimes with, with kids, and with others too. But at Baria hospital we used to call in occasionally and help with different things, and we had firstly kids who were badly burnt at one stage, and then we also had a couple of kids who were hit with mines and it's not something you want to see again.

GM No, yeah. Did you ever see anyone wounded or killed?

LJ Yeah, yeah.

GM Would you describe that incident?

LJ Well, one of them sticks with me. On our first - just after Tet ('68) - we were in the hospital grounds and there was a family there, quite a pretty lady, a fairly standard, ordinary peasant and a young child, a young boy. And the young boy was completely covered in blood and had, to me looked as though he was badly hit. And I had trouble even touching him, you know, he was in total shock.

Mum had holes through her - size of that cup there to give you a fair idea - through her arms and legs and that. She hadn't, didn't have any body wounds that I could see you know.

GM On the main torso?

LJ On the main torso, but she had some enormous wounds in the arms and legs and when we, I picked her up to carry, the bones creaked. You could actually hear them grating together, you know, and I carried her over and put her down and she was, had lost enormous amounts of blood and her husband was only minimally better and apparently it was a payback. The VC suspected him, so they put one of the big heavy potato masher grenades into a pit with them, with him, his wife and the kid. It turned out the kid only had one very, very small mark on him. My mate stripped him - a bloke named Billy Wyndham - stripped him and gave him a bit of sponge over, but the woman and guy died, well the guy died later, the woman died as we put her on the chopper.

GM Well, my next question was did you ever witness a casevac by helicopter?

LJ Not for Australians, not for Australians. Technically not for Australians, but when we pulled the SAS guys in, as I said, one had a wound across his wrist, the bone wasn't broken, but he had a wound across the wrist and the other guy had a flesh wound in the back of the leg.

GM Did you do much work with 9 Squadron or 161 (Recce Squadron)?

LJ No, no.

GM You didn't do any of those, you know, those aerial broadcasts?

LJ Oh yeah, yeah I did.

GM One with Psy Ops?

LJ No, I did the voice broadcasts over the hills and I also did one where, when I went out and we voice broadcast into the east or north of the province whichever you want, you know, depending on how you look at it, but up into that wild area up the top there. I'd had a bad night and was pretty sick. Well we went up into there and we actually fired rockets at, because they were little Cessnas, had rockets on them, and we fired rockets into the ships in the illegal creeks up there.

GM Oh yeah, what about leaflet drops, did you ever do any of them?

LJ Yeah.

GM Did they work?

LJ No.

GM Yeah?

LJ No. Oh well, I think the best, the best picture that I ever saw on leaflet drops was the VC sitting there with his pants down around his knees saying 'thank you' and he's reaching up and taking a leaflet out of the air.

GM Yeah. What about, what brought the Hoi Chanhs in?

LJ In the main, starvation and … there was a guy there that Lex McCauley didn't like at all - and I really liked - he was a Montagnard and his name was Dao Van Dol and Dao was a hunter in the area before it all started up. He had an old Japanese .22 rifle - you know the old Japanese Army .22 rifles? - and he used to hunt with that and the VC had picked him up and he'd gone to them because they offered him a certain amount of money, a bit of education and the education you got from them - from what I could work out - wasn't bad and a certain amount of food. Well, it got down to the point where he was getting a can of rice a day and no money and the education had gone out the window, so he swapped sides and came to our side.

GM It has got to be better than this! Yeah.

LJ Yeah. His first fight was with 7 Battalion (RAR) from memory, that they walked into a bunker system and Dao was there, they didn't realise he was a Hoi Chanh. They thought he was one of their Bushman Scouts and someone gave him a M-16 and he sailed into the fight supporting our guys. He then ran out of ammo, then went back to the APC and asked for another weapon and was given an SLR, and he was able to fire that, but he couldn't reload it. Didn't have a clue on how to reload and he was an excellent bloke.

GM It's a big cannon for a little guy.

LJ Oh, no, he was a big boy.

GM Was he?

LJ He was a tall boy. Yeah, Montagnards are… really tall.

GM Oh right. Okay.

LJ He was, I believe he was, what do you call it, executed in 1975, when they (the Communists) took over.

GM You mentioned that you were hospitalised when, after you think you were sprayed and all that sort of stuff, but you talked about things like getting dizzy, mouth and hand ulcers, light sensitive. Would you like to expand on all that?

LJ Well, we got sprayed and we were all right for sort of a few hours, you know, and got back to camp and had a wash and everything else. And then I just got totally confused with walking into things, couldn't look at the light. Just wanted to crouch down, my stomach was, you know in turmoil - but I didn't have diarrhoea and I wasn't throwing up. It was just nausea, you know, total nausea and I had these ulcers, I had ulcers across my hand - you can still see a bit of a scar there, and there, the big ulcer down the side of the mouth. I thought I'd walked into bamboo and for years I used to say that I walked into bamboo. It wasn't till I read up on it later that I realised it wasn't. And the treatment of the hospital was just to put a bit of powder on the ulcers and throw you face down on the bed and hit you with a needle to knock you out. And we were knocked out for, well I was in hospital for four and a half days and I don't know any of it. The last day I was feeling you know…

GM Did they do that in Nui Dat?

LJ Yes.

GM Or in Vung Tau?

LJ No, in Nui Dat.

GM Nui Dat.

LJ Never left Nui Dat. And I believe, I don't know you see, because I don't, I was out of it, I believe Chin Quan was a couple of beds down from me, but he did about two and a half days and came good. And there were other guys that I knew around, but I don't remember who they were. You know, because you, it was just one of those things. But a lot of them were the guys from this Long Dien spraying thing, yeah.

GM We may have already covered, what do you think was the saddest incident?

LJ Probably the one with the family. It would have to be the saddest. To see a young woman like just for no reason. Or perhaps, that'd be the saddest on the second trip. The first trip was hard, the first trip. Fairly close to it would have to be the guy, the little guy in the village (at Ap Suoi Nghe)…

GM The village?

LJ You know, you've got no protection, nothing, trying to juggle to make ends meet. Some prick nailed a note to his chest and shoots him. Left him in the rain and the mud and we drove into the place the next day and there he is lying there. No one was game to touch him. The schoolteacher was lying probably about 30 metres away.

GM You came home in April '71 from your second tour. And the Australian withdrawal was coming and they were going to replace 8 RAR etc., how did you feel when you came home, firstly from the war zone and then secondly with the war being basically over for the Australians?

LJ Basically like most Australian soldiers that we'd wasted a lot of lives and the politicians had sold us out once again. We'd won the war on the ground and that bumper sticker 'When we left I was winning', is pretty true. And that was pretty true. But we were sold out by the politicians again, but then we were sold out… later on we realised we were sold out when we first went in there. It was all political.

GM You mentioned that the province had really become a lot safer during your second tour.

LJ In the (Phuoc Tuy) province, during the day and quite safe. Well, there were very, very few places in the province you couldn't drive to with your lights on. You could drive from Nui Dat for instance, which is out in the scrub, to Baria. Baria to Long Dien, certainly to Dat Do because there were people doing it. I got on the grog in the outskirts of Baria with a lot of infantrymen and others who were supposed to be in Van Kiep and yeah, so yeah, it was very, very open and very easy. And I wouldn't have gone, as I say, Long Hais, the road into the Long Hais would have been a bit messy probably because they had, very close to where they lived and they'd sneak down a million different ways and whack you and get back but no, in the main the province was, was totally secure.

GM Was it a surprise to you then when, when we did pull out that all then collapsed four years later?

LJ No, I don't trust politicians anyway. It was an enormous disappointment from the point of view that I had seen a lot of people who had declared for the southern side who were in a very, very bad way because we pulled out giving them no support, nothing you know.

GM Was, was there any of this, was any of this going on while you were there on the second tour or did it really mainly happen after you left?

LJ Mainly, they were doing this 'Vietnamisation', where, you know, we, our guys were doing less and less and the hope was that it would… but there was still the hope that the Americans would give them the arms and the ammunition and everything. But of course the Americans pulled out and took everything with them. Oh, they left a lot of stuff on the ground, but there was no way in the world it could be maintained.

GM Some one said that Vietnamisation was 'too little, too late'. What' s your reaction to that?

LJ That's probably about it, yeah, that's probably very, very accurate that. We should have Vietnamised right from the word go and if we were going to do it at all. Though in retrospect when you look at it and the way the place is going now, the speed it's going ahead, we probably shouldn't have been there at all. The waste of 500 good lives.

GM I think so. I think we, our French mates, have got a lot to do with it.

LJ Oh yeah.

GM What do you think you learnt most from your times in Vietnam, Lorrie?

LJ Never trust another politician.

GM Okay.

LJ No, no, no, no, I, I mean, I had a little bit of exposure to New Guinea and I've always been the sort of guy that trots around and talks to other people. So I had a whole new culture open up to me and a whole new way of looking at things and the other side of it was that when I went into villages - most Australians went down and saw the Catholic priest - I always went down and saw Buddhist because I figured he represents 90 percent of the people instead of 10 (percent) and so I've been exposed to this Buddhism and their ideas on things and whilst I'm certainly not a Buddhist, a lot of their ideas made more sense than Christianity did.

GM But as a soldier what did you learn most?

LJ Keep your head down. No, I, I mean I gained a whole lot of experience in certainly field techniques which I've passed on, I suppose, in the Army Reserve. But not a lot, no, there wasn't a real lot to learn from it, except just basic soldiering.

GM Have you got any regrets about going to Vietnam?

LJ Only, only that I wasn't able to support my children as much as they needed at that time. And I have got no regrets in regard to the war. I mean, war's happen, Kosovo and these other places are prime examples of that and I did as I was told. I always behaved as a professional soldier and a decent human being, or decent in my eyes. So, no, I've got no regrets from that point of view.

GM If you had the Australian people as your audience, what would you say to them about the Australian servicemen and women who served in Vietnam?

LJ In the main, I was very, very proud of most Australians. There's a few that I doubt that did things, but there's always a few. In the main, the guys that I worked with and certainly I would've had an influence there I mean, to say, we were very professional, very humane, and in the main very well received by the local populace.

GM Okay. So, probably the last question is, was Australia's involvement worth the effort and lives that were lost and if so, or if not, why?

LJ Well, knowing a bit about history, I mean, Ho Chi Minh was promised a lot of things. He got none of them. And you see blokes like Ngo Dinh Diem, his cousins and friends and they passed it from one to the other men - Truong and Ky were all in the same group of families - so no, it wasn't worth our lives. It wasn't worth the Vietnamese lives and it wasn't worth the amount of sadness that has come from that war, and spraying, and things like that.

GM Now, you've actually been back to Vietnam.

LJ I've been back twice.

GM Okay.

LJ Once on my own, once with my family.

GM What are your reactions and impressions of Vietnam today?

LJ Well, the first impression is of a country that's really, really going ahead as fast as its limited resources will take it. And its main resource is its 70-odd million people. It does export a lot of rice, but that will slow down as the population keeps expanding. I find the people in the main to be very cheerful, considering what they're living with, friendly, and the funny part of it is, basically fairly honest. There's a few thieves and, but if a Vietnamese tells you he's going to do something, that's what he's going to do. So I found them good. The country's really storming ahead. No, I've got no, you know...

GM It's a socialist republic.

LJ It's a nominal socialist republic. The mighty dollar still rules.

GM That's a big sway.

LJ The Vietnamese … if you've got a choice between your political principles and a million dollar note, you know which ones going to win.

GM I think so. Yeah, have you had the opportunity to talk to any of the former enemy?

LJ Yes.

GM And what was your reaction with them?

LJ Well I found the first guy was very, very proud of his unit. He was an old artillery commander, just a soldier, decent sort of soldier who, he and I had a bit of a chatter together and he was a nice guy. The second guy was lieutenant colonel who had been a lieutenant in the Long Hais in the time we were there. He's having a lot of problems with things and he was glad to sit down have a few beers with me and a bit of a talk. Because he could say things to me that apparently he can't say to his own people. He had a son that was going through heroin addiction that doesn't look like coming out of it. And having trouble with one of his daughters and he could tell me about that, but he couldn't tell others. Like the heroin in Vietnam is very cheap and he sat and we had a good chat and then we were talking about our families more than anything else and our little things that we, you know, saw as being problems. And both of us had the same idea though. He wasn't quite so open with it as I was, (it was) that politicians in the main should go out and do the fighting!

GM That's probably not a bad way to finish Lorrie. Thank you very much for taking part today.

LJ Thank you.

End of Interview