Australian War Memorial

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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

ACCESSION NUMBER: S02602

TITLE: VETERANS' VOICES

INTERVIEWEE: NORMAN COOPER

INTERVIEWER: GARY MCKAY

RECORDING DATE: 30 MAY 2001

RECORDING LOCATION: TANAWHA, SUNSHINE COAST, QUEENSLAND

SUMMARY:

TRANSCRIBER: LAURA MANASSERIAN OF EAST COAST HUMAN RESOURCE GROUP

TRANSCRIPTION DATE: 21 DECEMBER 2001

VETERANS' VOICES
MAROOCHY LIBRARIES' ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Norman Cooper (NC)

Interviewer: Gary McKay (GM)

Date of Interview: Wednesday 30 May 2001

Place of Interview: Tanawha, Sunshine Coast, Queensland

Transcribed by Laura Manasserian: 21 December 2001

Corrected and edited by Gary McKay: 5 February 2002

Final edit by Gary McKay & Caroline Foxon after interviewee perusal: 23 August 2002

Interviewee's details: Norman Cooper was born in Sydney in 1936 and completed his intermediate schooling at Hurlstone Agriculture in Sydney before taking up a trade in trade magazine production with a publishing company for about five years. He completed compulsory National Service between 1955–58 and served as a Bren gunner in an infantry unit. In 1958 he joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as a photographer and served for 35 years retiring with the rank of Squadron Leader. During his service as a photographer he covered all aspects of the ADF serving in Malaya (1961-63), Thailand (1963), and South Vietnam in 1967 and 1969. He is twice divorced and now lives at Tanawha on the Sunshine Coast and is actively involved in veterans' affairs.

Subject of Interview: Australians in war, Malaya, Thailand, South Vietnam, the Vietnam War 1965-72 (particularly 1967 and 1969), The Emergency, training for war, training courses, combat and battle, deploying to Vietnam, tactics, RAAF photographic procedures and techniques, RAAF bases and aircraft, photographic imaging and film development, photographic journalists and photographers, casualties, morale, return to Australia. Entertainers: Johnny O'Keefe. National Service 1950-53. Allies, leave: R & R and R & C.

Start Tape 1

GM This is a recording of an interview with Norman Cooper recorded at Tanawha on Wednesday 30 May. Recorded by Gary McKay for the Maroochy Libraries' *Veterans' Voices* Project.

Norman, firstly thanks very much for taking part in the project. Could you tell us what you were doing and how old you were and why you got into the air force?

NC I wanted to be on the land. I went to an agricultural college and then I was hoping to go jackarooing. However I wasn't a good student and my parents wouldn't let me go jackarooing until I

was 18, so I went and worked with the K J Murray Publishing Company in the production department of several magazines and as I turned 18 my number came out of the barrel and I went into National Service at Ingleburn and I so much liked service life that after three years infantry I transferred to the RAAF.

GM So, that was in 1955?

NC '55 when I went into nasho's and '58 when I transferred to the air force.

GM When you went into the RAAF, what decided what mustering or what section you would go to in the air force?

NC I had already done a photographic course in conjunction with my magazine business and I did a trade test as a civilian prior to the actual enlistment; passed that, and was what they called a 'direct entry' into the service and was not air force trained, which created a few problems later on, but at that stage it was pretty good I thought.

GM So you didn't do a normal sort of recruit training?

NC Yes, I did recruit training, which I enjoyed, having done 3 years infantry training, thought the air force recruit training was hilarious.

GM Well, what's the basic difference?

NC Well, I was using Owen's in the army and Bren guns, and in the RAAF I had Thomson's which I didn't like at all; I thought they were a ridiculous weapon. There wasn't as much section infantry-type work, but yeah, we did night marches and compass marches and all those sort of things.

GM So basic fieldcraft?

NC Basic field, yes, basic fieldcraft and lots of drill.

GM Lots of drill.

NC Not that they ever use it when they go on parade.

GM So, after you'd done your recruit training where did you go from there?

NC Well, my recruit training was at Rathmines on Lake Macquarie, old World War Two seaplane base, and I was posted to Central Photographic Establishment (CPE) as an Aircraftsman Provisional. By that I mean I'd passed the photographic exam to get into the air force. After six months I had to pass another exam, which was purely air force photographics, air force forms, air force procedures etc. And until that time I was only provisional. Once I'd pass that test I was then a fully-fledged aircraftsman.

GM Okay. Now the type of photography work that you did was basically what?

NC At CPE, or in general?

GM In, well, let's talk about both.

NC All right. In general, the air force covers every known branch of photography. The primary role is reconnaissance, surveillance, bomb damage, gun cameras, that sort of material. What we loosely term as domestic is everything that goes wrong with a piece of equipment or aircraft; any defect is photographed to accompany defect reports, any modification - the same. We cover police investigations, medical, operations. Every building on an air force base is on an assets register and has to be photographed inside and out. There's public relations, there's cine, or there was movie, it's video now. Portraiture. Pretty, pretty pictures of aeroplanes flying in the sky. That sort of work.

GM They come in, all those…?

NC There was no specialisation. You had to be able to do whatever the boss sent you out on.

GM Yeah, because I mean a lot of people just think of the PR (public relations) side of it, but in actual fact there's a hell of a lot more.

NC More so, there's more than PR. PR was separate although a photographer on the base would do a parade or a medal presentation or something that that was too lowly for the main PR people. And I'm saying that having spent seven years in PR, so…

GM Okay, righto, so where were you posted, first off?

NC First to Central Photographic Establishment (CPE) at Laverton, which was the headquarters where we retained all the aerial films taken during World War Two right up till that particular time - and which we worked for. We worked closely with the Army Survey Regiment at Bendigo.

GM Oh right.

NC We did a... all the aerial…

GM For surveying?

NC For surveying.

GM Yeah right Okay. Yeah, well without that… I remember lots of maps of New Guinea, you know, with big white blobs saying ‘covered with cloud’.

NC Cendawasi was the operation.

GM Because we did a lot of work in Irian Jaya didn’t we?

NC Yes, although I can’t remember the name of that one.

GM Yeah.

NC But yes, all that.

GM So what was your job?

NC That was, they were flown by Canberras, the straight and level aircraft, and the films were sent down. We processed them and registered them and filed them. Produced the prints for the Survey Regiment at Bendigo.

GM Okay, so, how long did you spend there?

NC ‘58, middle of ‘58 until early ‘61, February ‘61 I think it was when I went to Butterworth in Malaya.

GM Okay. Right so, what was your job in Malaya?

NC Well, I was basically a base photographer. As I explained earlier, you could be sent on anything but I seemed to - being very new in the service - I spent most of my time doing the loading and processing of aerial cameras for the Canberras - the loading and processing of the gun cameras for the Sabres. But I still did the other work as well, but I seemed to be channelled into that, for the majority of my time anyway.

GM And what was going on in Malaya at that time?

NC The Emergency was more or less running down. They still had trouble up on the border and the aircraft were used for surveillance. I'm not aware of any actual bombing going on, but there were Sabres up there. There was no air opposition. The Sabres were going up and patrolling the areas and the Canberras were going up there as well. There were still outlying posts. I really don't know a lot about it because I was relegated to the dark room.

GM Kept in the dark!

NC Only saw the results.

GM Well, you were - how old - you were 25 years of age, were you?

NC Yeah, I'd be around that mark.

GM Yeah, 25 yeah. Were you married at the time or …?

NC I was married; had one child.

GM Whereabouts did you live?

NC In a street called Jalan Gaja in Tanjong Tokong, which was…

GM And whereabouts was that? That suburb?

NC Tanjong Tokong; it was on the north side of the island, on the eastern side of the island.

GM On Penang Island?

NC Yeah.

GM Okay, right. So, and you went across by ferry to (work)?

NC Every day.

GM Across to Butterworth? Was there much of a threat?

NC Not in that area.

GM No.

NC No.

GM So fairly secure?

NC Yeah, we had the Royal Air Force Regiment, a field regiment there and there was also a detachment of Australian troops.

GM Okay, right.

NC (They) came up from down south.

GM What sort of missions was the photography based on? What sort of jobs were they doing?

NC Mainly reconnaissance, and I'm not about sure the gun cameras on the Sabres. They were used, but I'm not sure what for.

GM Target practice?

NC Possibly, I don't know.

GM I was trying to think of the name of that island where they used to go and (shoot)?

NC Not Langkawi. I could tell you later.

GM Yeah I know. I've actually stood on the island and while Mirages have come in, and they put the crayon tips on the bullets.

NC Yes.

GM And they go through a big screen and they can count who and how many times they hit it. Yeah. So, was it a 9 to 5 job or were you on shift? How did it work?

NC Basically 9 to 5, but there were times when we worked on shift work and there were times when we did 24 hour duties. Primarily it was a 9 – 5 job.

GM Did you get outside of the Butterworth-Penang area?

NC Oh yes. I went up to Alor Setar. I went to Taiping, Ipoh. I did Singapore. I went to Ubon Ratchathani in Thailand with the Sabres for three months when they first went up there. That would be late '63. Yeah, I got around a fair bit.

GM What was your job in, when you went up to Ubon?

NC Gun cameras, solely, that was all I did. We had six Sabres up there; they were constantly being flown, and I had a bucket, which is all I had to process the film. It was 16-mm film in gun cameras and in total darkness, I used to just put my finger through the centre of the spool and let it run into the developer - in a bucket. The temperature of the developer was extremely high. I had to literally guess how long to (leave it), and it was just a matter of push, pull, out into the next bucket of water, and then the third bucket with developer, and (then) hang it outside to dry.

GM Pretty basic?

NC That's right and they wanted to see the results before the next sortie left.

GM And what sort of jobs were the Sabres doing?

NC Again, I never saw the results, I never saw the films, they went straight up to the intel(ligence) officer and the briefing and I never saw the results. I mean I could look up and see that they were processed properly, but apart from where I'd scratch, because I had no equipment whatsoever.

GM Geez.

NC This was right in the very start of it. Later on they had equipment; they had huts and all that sort of thing, but when they first went up there - in '63 - I think. I was the second photographer, I think.

GM And what sort of a base was it?

NC Very bare, I mean we were living in tents to start with. The Thais had six T-28s fully armed and pointing at the RAAF work area, and down the other end of the strip there were 200 USAF radar people - and that was it. Later on we became more permanent. I called in there in '67 and I wouldn't have recognised the place.

GM So it was really just a forward operational base when you were there?

NC Yeah, right at the start. And as I say in '67 when I came back, we passed hundreds of USAF aircraft and it was a totally different area. It was a (fully developed) fighter base at that stage.

GM It sounds like something almost out of island campaigns during the Second World War.

NC Well I don't know. There was a concrete strip and I don't know who put that down. I've no idea.

GM Could've been the Japs. During the Second World War?

NC It was right on the [NC: *Mun*] River.

GM Or the French, yeah. What was the hardest part about the job in Malaya?

NC The processing. The gun cameras were processed in a 16-mm machine called a Lawley, which I grew to hate. It was a series of rollers, it was a machine, it ran itself. It was a series of rollers and rods. And if the tension wasn't right, the film would snap, which meant you had to put the light out and start feeling and grabbing film and reefing it out and that sort of thing. Many times I kicked it in the guts and swore blindly I'd never use it again, but when it ran well it ran perfectly, there was no trouble. But not only myself, other guys had trouble with it. It was a machine that we just couldn't operate successfully all the time there. The aerial film was a totally different setup. We had no machine, all the processing had to be done by hand. Aerial film, the F-52s, that's 10-inch wide film. F-24s are 5-inch wide film and they go up to 250 feet or 500 feet [NC: *exposures*] of film, which is a lot of film if they used the whole roll.

GM 500 feet (exposures)?

NC Yes

GM Geez.

NC And we had to take the magazine off the aircraft, into the dark room, put the light out, take the film out of the magazines or cut it if it wasn't totally used, then take it over to what we called a 'B5 tank'. Now this was two big spools and you would clip the film into one side, and then you would wind it onto that first spool making sure the emulsion was on the outside. When you got to the end, you would then clip it into the other side and then you would turn it, counting the number of turns. When you'd done that, you had to work out - and this is in total darkness - but we had a small area that was covered so

that we could just look in and we could work out so many turns meant so long in the developer. And you had to make sure that the film was always going on the outside. You couldn't cross over and make like an (figure) '8' because that meant the film was on the inside and it wasn't getting the agitation from the movement. And this could mean quite a long time once you put it into the developer. When the time was up it was lifted out, put into a second tank, which were about 2 foot long, about 1 foot wide and about 18 inches high. Then you put it into the second tank, you washed it; (then) go through the whole roll several times to wash it, then it goes into the fixer and you do it again for whatever time that it takes to make it permanent. So you could be in there, in the dark, for literally hours.

GM Did you have a little red light or anything like that? I mean was it just (black)?

NC No, no.

GM Pitch black?

NC Pitch black.

GM Geez, and how long would you spend in there?

NC You could have a very, very, very dark green safe light. But I mean it was useless, you know you'd have to get about 3 inches away from the light to be able to see or do anything, it was virtually useless. Your eye does become accustomed and it's remarkable how you can put something down, move around and come back and put your hand straight on it in the dark.

GM It's probably more sense than sight?

NC Well yeah, you get to, well there's no sight. You get to know the area, and where you put things down and so on.

GM So how long might you spend in a dark room? You doing something like that?

NC Well, I couldn't give you an exact time because I can't really remember, but it was literally hours sometimes if it was a full roll. Sometimes it might only be 20 or 30 feet, which (meant) you could be in and out in an hour.

GM So, when you came out. What did you come out into, a room or…?

NC Out into the corridor.

GM It must have been hard coming into brightness again?

NC That's right.

GM Having to adjust (your eyesight).

NC It wasn't too bad there in Butterworth 'cos the corridor was in the centre of the building. In other places you'd come out and you'd come straight out onto the concrete, the hard stand. The aircraft were silver, but it was quite...

GM Take a while to get used to?

NC Yeah, well the eyes seemed to adjust quite quickly because you're constantly going in and out.

GM Yeah.

NC That sort of thing, but yeah it was (hard).

GM When you were going around to places, how did you actually travel around?

NC If it was on base, it was either on foot or bicycle. If it was off base, we always went by vehicle and if it was too far away, aircraft, choppers

GM What sort of aircraft were they using?

NC We had the RAF helicopter squadron there. It was 110, I think, Royal Air Force Helicopter Squadron. There were the Valettas - another Royal Air Force Squadron - and of course 2 Squadron; our own 2 Squadron had Dakotas there. So we could move around by that as well.

GM And the RAF helicopters would've been, did they have Whirlwinds or…?

NC They were Sikorsky, those funny looking things that looked like dragonflies.

GM Oh yeah. Ah right. How did you get up to Thailand?

NC Herc.

GM In a Herc?

NC C-130, yes.

GM Would've been an 'A' model wouldn't it?

NC Would've been yes.

GM Okay. The three months in Thailand, did you feel under threat?

NC Not personally although pretty worried about the T-28s pointing at us. We weren't over confident with the Thai personnel you know. Could've been a misfire, I don't know if there ever was, but we were a bit worried. We weren't allowed to eat or drink off base at that stage. We were allowed to move (around), I was involved in football, soccer and we used to of a weekend sometimes get invited up to some village or somewhere, and we'd go up in a Yank vehicle and play a game of football against the local team. So there wasn't any real military threat as such - and this was '63, so I mean with the countries on the other side of the Mekong.

GM But security was tight?

NC Security was very tight, yes.

GM You mentioned soccer. Was that your football sport?

NC Yes, I played professional football in Sydney, Newcastle and Melbourne - if you can call it 'professional' in those days; all expenses paid and so much a game, but it wasn't anything like these days. Yeah, I played and I had a State Rep as an under-18 player. I was a goalkeeper.

GM What was it like playing the locals in Thailand?

NC Interesting. Very interesting. Yeah, we didn't have any real skills you know, there weren't too many of our people, especially a couple of the Americans. There wasn't a lot of footballing skill. The grounds were very very rough.

GM Agricultural.

NC Very agricultural. And very gravelly in a lot of cases, especially in the goalmouth where I worked. But that was all the better for me because it meant I was usually pretty busy, and I thoroughly enjoyed my game. I played right through until I was 52.

GM Yeah?

NC Played competitive football.

GM Yeah. Did you get to play much in Malaysia?

NC Yes. RAAF Butterworth had a very good side. The RAF Regiment had most of the players. There were only two, myself and a Malay auxiliary policeman called Awang, Awang Bin Sali, and he and I were the goal keepers and we did very well in the Penang State First Division and played on all the big main grounds around the place. We also went, the team, the squad, the Butterworth team, also took part in the Far East Air Force Championships down in Singapore every year against Hong Kong and all the Seleta, Changi, Tengah bases down in there. There was another one, I can't think of where it was, it was an island somewhere, they were usually the only ones we could beat.

GM Yeah, because that is their football sport, isn't it?

NC Yes. I also ran the Australian Combined Services Soccer Association for 15 years. Took them overseas on things, on tours and things; organised the annual championships every year between services.

GM What sort of social life did you have back in Penang?

NC We had a thing called the 'Hostie', a hostel. It was a huge hotel on the waterfront. We regularly organised dances. The women had their basketball or netball, softball and all that sort of thing. There was tennis courts there. There was always something going on down there. When we first arrived - I went up by ship - we were booked into that hostel and we stayed there until our married quarter became available. So yeah, there was plenty to do, there was always dances.

GM Was it an enjoyable time?

NC It was a very enjoyable time. Yes, yeah, the social life side of things.

GM Yeah. How important do you think your job was?

NC I think it was very important because quite often they'd be waiting for you to come out of the dark room to take the films down to the crew rooms or the intel(ligence) area and that sort of thing to check them over. Like I say, I never really saw the other end of it.

GM It's really strange that you weren't, you know, it must've been hard doing all this work and never knowing, you know, what the results were.

NC Well, you know, I mean if the results weren't good from our side of things, the processing side of things, then we'd know about it very quickly. But I wasn't always on that side of things. The defects and all those sort of things, they were always going on. I did just as many as the others but I did a lot of the processing because I was the lowest rank in the section. There were about six or seven of us in the section.

GM What about aircraft prangs?

NC Yes, yes. There were three fatals while I was there. When the crash alarm went, photographers were always in the first response. The service police would pick us up and we'd be rushed down with the ambulance and the 'firies' and the doctor and all those sort of people. We had to photograph; and I had photographed aircraft landing on foam and movie, cine and that sort of thing. If there is a crash, well that's a totally different setup.

GM So if you were going to take moving pictures, what sort of camera equipment were you using?

NC Bell and Howells, the old 16-mm Bell and Howells, hand wind setup that were all we were issued with in those days. Back in Australia, we had Mitchells and Araflexes but that was with the cine unit, which I was in because I have a RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) certificate for documentary motion pictures. When I first went to CPE in '58, I was put straight into that section.

GM That's more where you use the tripod and stabilise cameras and stuff isn't it.

NC That's correct.

GM But if you were going to take still photography, what sort of cameras were you using?

NC In those days, speed graphics, quarter plate speed graphics, 35mm Nikons and Leicas, and 2 and a quarter square were Rollicords, which I hated and never used them (unless) I was forced to.

GM Okay. What is your most memorable incident from your time in Malaya?

NC My first fatal. It was a Royal Air Force helicopter who crashed and burnt south of the base, quite some way down and we, we have a set procedure, as I said, we were the first response, we were rushed, I was rushed down there with the other people. This bloke had crashed and burnt and was killed. There is a procedure that we have to follow; taking shots for the crash investigation, the flight safety teams. And we're sort of under control of the air safety officer and the doctor, and besides the

particular things we had to take automatically, we had to do anything else he wanted. So, bits of body, bits of aircraft, (I) always carried a ruler in the kit.

GM The whole crash scene?

NC The whole crash scene. There could be fifty shots or more different things.

GM Are they black and white?

NC In those days, black and white, yes.

GM And you mentioned a ruler, is that for comparative purposes?

NC For size. Yes, you put the ruler down beside some piece of equipment or some small piece that was on its own in the bush or wherever, put the ruler beside it so that it was easily recognised and showed the size of it. It might be something that snapped, and might've been originally 10 inches long and we only had a 3-inch piece or something. Yeah, so that was, yeah, always carried a ruler on me.

GM And most aircraft prangs, most, are fairly horrific because of the impact and trauma?

NC Yes, and there's a definite smell of death. I can never forget that. Possibly because the first one was also burning, you know, the aircraft burnt and the guy was still in it. He was on his own fortunately and it was on a plantation. I can't remember now but it was some, some way south, some 20 or 30 miles south of the base.

GM And, you might be there for a quite a while? At the scene?

NC Yes, I don't leave until the doctor and the air safety guy say they got what they wanted.

GM What was the (most important thing)?

NC I just hoped that I hadn't stuffed up and made a mess of the shots, you know, because you can't go back and do it.

GM Yeah, yeah. And I guess the idea is to get it before it either rains or whatever?

NC Yeah, well I mean, as soon as the crash alarm goes, everything stops and just everyone goes to do it, you know. It's number one priority all the way down the line.

GM What's the funniest, or the strangest thing that you might've photographed in Malaya?

NC Well the strangest photograph - and I photographed it as well - the strangest thing that I saw resulted from that first fatal. The Royal Air Force Regiment came down and they stood shoulder to shoulder - they're infantry in Air Force uniform - they stood shoulder to shoulder and they moved through the crash area step by step and they picked up and logged on a map every single piece of wreckage they could find right down to small pieces, even match size. Splinters and things especially with the chopper, the blades and things. And these were all taken back to Butterworth, it took quite some time to do that because they logged them and mapped them. These were taken back to the base in a hangar. A couple of - the Brits called them boffins - came out from the UK and they physically matched all these pieces, back together and virtually tried to reconstruct the aircraft in an effort to find out what went wrong. Because I did the crash site shots, I continued with this particular task and I had to photograph every day - or every second day - how much they'd put together and how much they'd got off (the site). And that was intriguing; I was tied up with that for weeks. Not only that, I did other work as well, but every so often, every second day at the least, they'd come and they would take me back down to the hangar, to take this, take that. 'Can you get that?' sort of thing. And they reconstructed the thing (helicopter). And I heard some very interesting stories of other things they'd done in the past. They worked out how a 'V' bomber crashed in the North Atlantic because of some sand in the pitot tube that didn't come from anywhere but the Middle East. And it was slowly clogging the pitot tube which gave the pilot the wrong reading and…

GM Amazing.

NC It was.

GM What do you reckon was the best photograph you took?

NC The best photograph I took in Butterworth, personal one was, it was a 12-Canberra start up. And the reason I think it was the best photograph was because it was split second timing. Canberra's engines are started with an explosive charge and there's three charges in each engine, and there's two engines on each aircraft and we had 12 aircraft lined up all spick and span. They were silver and white in those days, 2 Squadron they'd organised this. The CO had come up, he wanted this shot. And I was plugged into his aircraft and when everything was set and ready to go, because normally they can start them with other ways as well, but the charges were the usual way in those days. And he counted down, '10, 9, 8, 7', etc and when he said 'start', I fired my shot and I got all 72 engines with three black spurts of smoke coming out. And it was on a bright sunny day, lots of fluffy clouds, and I thought that was a magic shot. I was really pleased; it was one of the really pleasing shots that I took.

GM As you say, split second timing

NC Split second timing. Yeah.

GM Yeah.

NC So that was good. I mean if I was just a fraction (off) the smoke would've been gone; it'd just would've been 12 aeroplanes sitting on the, on the tarmac.

GM Yeah, righto. Now you came back from Malaya in '63. Where did you go between then and when you first went up to Vietnam?

NC In late '63, I went back to Williamtown. I was posted to 481 Maintenance Squadron, which didn't mean a great deal, because while I was on their books I was still working out of the photo section which was a base squadron photo section. And I worked on normal base squadron duties as well. But the Mirages and the Sabres were there and again I was on gun cameras and again we had the Lawley processor, which everybody hated. And I did a lot of (work). I got through some promotion exams and had been promoted to corporal and I spent '63 to '67 - early '67 basically - the end of '66 at Williamtown, which involved many trips and exercises to Darwin. The Indonesian Confrontation - we were on a rotation basis where we'd go up Darwin for three months and then come back and somebody else would go up. And we did the normal base photo work. At the end of '66, a vacancy came up in Public Relations in Canberra. I had the opportunity on the one day to either go back to Butterworth in Malaya, or to go to Public Relations. I have no idea why I said Public Relations, but it was the best thing I'd ever done.

GM So when did you get promoted to sergeant?

NC When I got to Public Relations in early '67. I was made acting sergeant and the reason was for that was as a sergeant, if I went on a trip somewhere, I could straight into the Sergeants' Mess.

GM You needed a bit of rank.

NC You needed a bit of rank to organise people and things.

GM I mean, because that's pretty quick, you know, six years?

NC That's right.

GM And you're a snake (sergeant), it's pretty good.

NC That's right. So I was made acting sergeant and then as soon as I was time qualified - because I passed all the exams - I was made substantive.

GM Okay. You went up to Vietnam in June '67. How did you get up there?

NC Went up by Herc, via Ubon, as I mentioned earlier. We were up there for five weeks, I think. My boss went with me, Mr (Jeffrey) Sebastion, he was an ex-Air Force photographer who now held honorary rank as a civil servant and we went up there to fill in between the permanent people that go up for a full tour.

GM So, it was a short assignment?

NC It was just a short assignment.

GM Okay. So where were you based during that time?

NC Vung Tau. We were in Vung Tau down in the Villa Anna, and the two villas down in town.

GM What was your impression when you landed in Vietnam of the country and what was going on?

NC Well, I think I was still very naive in those days. I was sort of keyed up. I was able to do things that I couldn't do - shots I couldn't take - back home. We didn't do a lot, but what we did was sort of exciting. We were in Nui Dat and places like that. Did a lot of jobs with the choppers. We also went up to Phan Rang and 2 Squadron were still very new up there and did everything from taking shots back for the newspapers back home, to filling sandbags for the bunkers around the new blocks that were being built. Only one interesting thing that happened up there and I...

GM Yeah, go ahead.

NC Well, I was, I was at Nui Dat one day when a patrol out in the scrub came into contact and they had a wounded Digger who had copped an automatic across both legs and they were still in contact. And the Dustoff aircraft, which were Yank in that time, wouldn't go in while they were in contact because they had to hover and there was no landing area - they were in heavy canopy sort of thing. And I was in the crew room at Nui Dat, or the crew area, and a RAAF pilot said, 'I'll go'. So we went. I said to him, 'Can I come?' And I was shooting movie this particular day and he said 'Yes' and I jumped on. It was an old 'B' model (Iroquois) and we flew in and we located them through some smoke and we had to hover. We didn't actually receive any fire at that stage anyway. But we didn't have a litter, we had a - I'd never seen one before - and I haven't seen one since, but it was a sort of jacket, a nylon type jacket that you strap the bloke into.

GM I've never seen one of them.

NC No, I hadn't seen one before. And we sent that down on the hoist and the guys on the ground weren't too sure about how to get him into it. So, the gunner went down to do it. The crewman sent the gunner down and I'm filming all this, the guy on the ground and then we started bringing him up and we got to the bottom of the skids and the winch jammed. And I'm still filming. And then I received some very curt words through my helmet from the captain of the aircraft. He told me to put the so and so camera down and help the crewman lift him in - which I did - and we lifted him. Of course the winch was jammed, the gunner was still on the ground.

GM Oh no.

NC We couldn't get him - right?

GM He would've been really impressed.

NC I mean we tried, but it wouldn't work, so we had to leave him there and I was told to man the gun on the other side of the aircraft until we got out of the area.

GM And this is, one of the door guns, M-60s?

NC Yeah, on the old 'B' models, so I had to man the gun to get out and the pilot went (flew) out so that the crewman was on the side that would receive any (fire), because I didn't have a flak jacket, he had a flak jacket, you see as well, but he made a point of going out so that the crewman on that side of the aircraft was the one that was sort of…

GM Exposed?

NC Exposed.

GM Yeah.

NC So, but I had to man the gun on the other side just in case, so we did and when we got to Back Beach and the hospital there, I filmed, picked up the cameras and kept filming and it was just like the *MASH* program; they ran out and grabbed this bloke and put him on a litter, and ran him into the hospital, and I got a couple of shots of him later in the hospital after he'd been attended to - not that day - a couple of days later. And we went back on a medevac aircraft and he was on the aircraft, so I filmed him all the way (home).

GM So you, oh you went back to Australia?

NC He went back to Australia.

GM Yeah.

NC We filmed him, all the way back, via Butterworth, to Australia and my last shot was him being loaded into the back of an ambulance at RAAF base Richmond. And the doors closed and he was driven off to hospital, and that made a 9-minute film that went out over the TV stations and it was…

GM Yeah, I was going to say - what was it used for?

NC Yeah, TV. All the film we shot was always sent to the TV stations, and it was called 'To Save a Soldier', or 'A Soldier was Saved', or something - I always forget.

GM Do you remember the guy's name?

NC No.

GM I mean that would be a great momento to have, wouldn't it?

NC Yes, yes it would. I have somewhere a copy of it, all the stuff I shot.

GM Yeah, yeah I mean that's quite unique. You know, from basically the point of contact to going home.

NC There's only that bit in the middle that I couldn't get, you know, but the journos managed, 'cos in those days we didn't have sound, we were only using hand cameras right so it was like a narrative…

GM Okay, like a voice over.

NC …all the way through, a voice over.

GM Yeah, that would've been an exciting day.

NC It was. Yeah.

GM Especially for the door gunner who was left on the ground with the grunts.

NC Another chopper went back to get him.

GM Oh yeah?

NC We radioed, apparently they radioed and somebody else went and got him.

GM So, what was your impression of Nui Dat?

NC The first trip or later? The first trip, it was a lot of low scrub, track, rolls of barbed wire; that's about all I saw on the first trip.

GM Yeah.

NC Because, didn't really go up into Nui Dat proper, sort of in the helicopter…

GM In the ready room there?

NC …ready room area.

GM Yeah.

NC Crew room, so I didn't really see a lot of it that trip. I saw Luscombe (Field); we flew into Luscombe.

GM What about on your second trip?

NC Second trip I spent a couple of nights up there. I escorted on the second trip. I escorted different photojournalists - Denis Gibbons, Robin Strathdee, in particular were two guys I did a lot of escorting around.

GM And that was in the middle '69. Wasn't it?

NC '69.

GM March to September '69 yeah. Yeah I know Gibbons. He spent a lot of time in Vietnam.

NC Yeah.

GM Yeah. What was the big change between your first and second tour?

NC How do you mean change?

GM I mean things that you saw, I mean how did it all seem to have changed to you, or wasn't there much change at all?

NC Oh yeah, there was. I can't talk about Nui Dat, but in Vung Tau there was a big change.

GM Was there?

NC Oh yes, I mean we were all, in '67, we were living in these villas down in the town. In '69 we had our own protected area on the base on the airfield, with our totally self-contained within, we had our own guards and everything else. The locals didn't come in except one or two and so around the base at Vung Tau, there was you know quite a bit (of change)…

GM Yeah, because we'd had Tet '68.

NC That's right.

GM Which probably changed a lot of ideas around.

NC That's right, yes.

GM Yeah. What other places, what was Phan Rang like?

NC Totally different to the airfield at Vung Tau. The airfield at Vung Tau was cluttered, cramped. You couldn't turn around without bumping into something or falling over. In Phan Rang, it was a huge, huge base. Lots of open space. Which is good because I was presented with a plaque on leaving Phan Rang the last time made out to 'Red Alert' Cooper because every time I turned up - and I used to turn up there at least once every ten days or so - they had a red alert. And there were incoming mortars and rockets and things every time except the last day - the last night I spent in Phan Rang - when they presented me with the plaque - it's on the wall there - and fortunately there were no real problems to our areas because there was a lot of space, lots of open space in Phan Rang, and all the aircraft were in revetments and they occasionally hit something but it wasn't ours - it was the Yanks.

GM Yeah, 'Red Alert' Cooper.

NC It's on the wall here. I can show it to you and all the guys have signed the plaque on the back.

GM We talk about either of your tours here. What was the hardest part of the job? Going with the PR people and all that?

NC The hardest part I found was if I wanted to do something on an operation, the hardest part was convincing the commander of that op, or the captain of the aircraft or more importantly the patrols that I did, (it) was convincing the patrol commander, who quite often was only a corporal, that I knew what I was about having done National Service in the infantry, having had three years infantry experience. But I never had any complaints or anything like that, so I got away with a bit. For somebody that's planning an operation or a sweep or something, for me to walk up and say 'Can I come?' Then they've got apprehensions about what I'm going to do, and how I'm going to behave. Do I know what's really going on and that sort of thing. But I attended all the briefings every morning, I attended all the briefings of the aircrew guys, so I had a very good idea of what tasks and jobs were going on, and at first it was very hard, but as they got to know me, it got easier.

GM Were you just doing RAAF PR or was it Defence PR?

NC No, I was covering all three services. I did a fair bit of Navy, the EOD boys, and a couple of jobs with the Navy pilots up at Bear Cat. I didn't do a lot of army jobs because the army had their own guys up there but if there were somewhere else in or doing something else or they didn't have someone to cover something then I went. I was on strength at RAAF Headquarters AFV but I lived and worked out of Vung Tau. I was my own boss for several months. I didn't have a journo, so I had to write my own captions and storyline. I had a pass that the American public relations people gave me that would get me to the head of the queue at any movement control centre and on an airfield. So if I wanted to go to Dalat or An Toy, or wherever, I just went up and said when is the next aircraft, showed them my pass, I'd go straight to the head of the queue, be first on the aircraft.

GM That's a handy piece of piece of paper to have.

NC It was. I also had my own jeep in Vung Tau, which was also handy.

GM It must have been, it must have been a great experience, I mean to be doing that

NC It was. Under those conditions I would've gone back again; I could go anywhere. As I say, I was my own boss. I could go down to Vung Tau and have a look at the mission board, and say I'll go on 005 or I'll go on such and such and I'd become part of the crew if it was a RAAF aircraft and away I'd go.

GM How far north did you get?

NC Not that far. From Phan Rang one of the courier aircraft went up to a couple of places, but I can't recall the names.

GM Was that on a Wallaby?

NC On the Wallaby, yeah.

GM Yeah.

NC Yeah. That's as far north as I got but I got right down south right through the Delta, down to An Toy - the POW island - and I went out on navy junks and things like that. I went out on the (HMAS) *Brisbane*, I think it was the *Brisbane*, up there at the time, so yeah, I got around a fair bit.

GM You got around a fair bit, yeah. You mentioned the EOD guys with the Navy, the clearance divers, was that in Vung Tau or was that up in Da Nang?

NC Vung Tau yeah. I met them through the two photojournalists, Denis and Robin, and I went up and they lived in a cave. In fact one of the guys I still see, Mick Ey, down here, he was one of the guys I got to know very well and I used to take the journos, the photojournalists out with them at midnight on or some early hours in the morning on these launches. And the EOD boys would go down the anchor chains in the middle of the night looking for kerosene drums that were full of explosive that they float down to catch on the anchor chain and come around sort of thing. So yeah I did that a fair bit and I went out with them on other things. Once I was sitting in a little rubber dinghy while one of them was extracting - taking out or getting out - a couple of mortar shells that had been jammed in a propeller on a Filipino tug and I thought to myself, what am I doing here? You know.

GM I mean some of the things those clearance divers did were just so scary.

NC Yeah. My first job in country was with the EOD boys and we went to Cat Lo and boarded a landing craft and there was a platoon of American GIs and they backed a big truck full of explosives, captured explosives, weeping explosives and all that sort of thing, a big American truck full of this stuff. They backed that onto the thing. We went out and we went up the Delta somewhere to an island, it was a known VC stronghold, and was just like a John Wayne movie. We nosed into the beach, the ramp dropped, the GIs splashed through the water up the beach, fanned out and set up a safe perimeter some 500 metres or something into the scrub. And then the EOD boys then proceeded to unload all this weeping and captured ammunition into a big pile on the beach. And they set a time fuse on it and the idea was we pulled away, set the fuse, pulled away, Charlie would come out to get the things and he doesn't know when it's going to go off and 'bang' it goes off. What happened was - I've

got photographs of this - I was standing next to this pile of ammo with the PRO, taking a couple of shots and getting all the information. First job in country remember, and suddenly a .50 cal(ibre) started going, 'bang, bang, bang, bang, bang' and I nearly dirtied myself, you know. But what had happened was the bosun on the landing craft, had spotted some guy in a little canoe-type…

GM Oh yeah?

NC Dugout, was the word I was trying to think of, and he was getting too close, so this American bosun on this landing craft put a few shots across his bow. But yeah, that was the first time that that story, was the first time the EOD boys became unclassified – that was the first story (on them). And we pulled out and you know we were a kilometre or so down the Delta when the big bang and things go up. So we don't know how successful we were.

GM Yeah, yeah.

NC Yeah, that was that was the theory of it anyway.

GM Yeah, that was a good one.

NC Yeah.

GM I like it. What do you think was the important part of your job in PR?

NC For the home market, I think we had to show (what they were doing). I mean a big part of my job - when I wasn't doing operations or recce things - big part of my job was hometown photos. Joe Blow happy in the service, working away on an engine or in the instrument section, or somewhere happy in the service - doing his job - and the shot went home for the home town newspaper, that was a big role as well up there. I did a lot of recce work for the EOD people.

GM What does that entail?

NC Just taking photographs so they can…

GM Oh, so you fly over a target area or an area they're going to go so they can do familiarisation and planning?

NC Yes, that's right. Yeah. There's a funny story, which we might get to later with one of those. But the recce work was always good. And then of course anything that I did on ops, that was always

important from perhaps, training, from confirmation of things and to show again, what's happening up there to the people back home. Because that's (important).

GM There's always intelligence value too.

NC Oh yes, I mean that, as I said earlier, the primary role of photographers in the air force was intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, I mean that's our number one role.

GM Did you get to visit with the blokes who were doing the sort of job that you'd been doing in 2 Squadron? You know they were doing the developing and all that?

NC Oh yes. Oh yes, yes. Up in Phan Rang in 2 Squadron they had four or five RAAF photographers, but they didn't have the same trouble as I had in Malaya because the Americans were also flying Canberras there, the JB-57, which is a very similar aircraft except for the engine and the canopy. But they yeah, they used 600 Photo I think it was, 600 Photo, USAF, they had a big section in Phan Rang and for all their aerial stuff, bomb damage and reconnaissance sort of work and our guys used that and they didn't have the same sort of problems.

GM So BDA wasn't just visual, it was often photographed?

NC We carried cameras in the bomb bay and in the normal camera port in the Canberras. We carried 16-mm movie cameras as well as the normal still cameras up the back.

GM Oh right. You mentioned before, that there was a funny incident on a recce.

NC Yes, the EOD officer had just changed and this was only a week or 10 days before I was due home, and he came and said that they had to go and disarm some barriers in a canal down in the Delta - that they'd been wired. They believed they'd been wired and set. And would I come him with him and photograph it or as I was going home, would I lend him the camera? So I said, 'no I'll go'. And we went by an American helicopter. It flew into Vung Tau, we got on board and we flew down to the Delta to some Vietnamese Navy outpost on one of the islands there and we were briefed by a US Navy guy that was working in the same place and he said I can guarantee that it's so many metres up this particular canal, I can guarantee this that and the other and he said, 'I can guarantee you'll get brassed up,' he said, 'because we've always been brassed up. We've never gone up there without getting brassed up.' So we said Okay, and the pilot and the Navy officer and I went back to the aircraft and as I put my helmet on and plugged in, I heard the captain, the pilot, say to his two door gunners, 'Arm up boys it's a hot area.' And the gunners replied, 'Sorry sir, we didn't bring any ammunition!'

GM Oh no!

NC … We thought it was just a transport job.' So he looked around at the Navy officer, the pilot looked at the Navy officer, and he said, 'What do you want to do?' and the pilot, the officer, said, 'I've got to see it before I take the guys in.' And he said 'All right, well I used to be a (F-) 105 pilot.'

GM It's going to be a fast pass.

NC He said, 'I know what to do', so off we went and we located it at right up high above small arms limit and then we came in almost auto-rotated straight down you know, (in a) dive, came in very steep flattened out up over this area with all these stakes in the water sticking up. I'm leaning out of the aircraft going 'click, click, click, click, click', Navy officer's leaning out looking at it. The only armament on that aircraft was my 9-mm pistol and the Navy officer's 9-mm pistol. We climbed up and out, no we didn't sorry, we got to the end of that short flat run, and I reckon the aircraft turned on the rotor rather than the rotor on the aircraft, and we came back for a second run then climbed up steeply out of it and there wasn't a shot fired.

GM Brilliant. I was going to ask you what sort of, when you went out on these jobs how were you armed? With just a 9-millimetre (pistol)?

NC Yeah, as a sergeant as I was then, I was entitled to an automatic [NC: *sub-machine gun*], but carrying cameras, carrying a bag.

GM Gear everywhere.

NC Yeah, what I used in fact were Claymore mine pouches, you know the pouches?

GM Oh yeah, yeah.

NC I found those ideal because I used to use in a lot of cases a plate camera rather than a 35-mm right? Better quality, and unless I was on a patrol in the jungle or this recce, where I needed the quick action, I always used the plate camera and I found Claymore pouches ideal and I always had a couple of those over my shoulder. And there was a flash, so I could use a flash. I didn't want to have an automatic [NC: *sub-machine gun*] on my shoulder as well. So I convinced them that a 9-mm pistol would be all I'd be needing if I got into trouble because I'd drop everything else. So that's what I carried, I carried a 9-mm pistol right through out.

GM What was the most memorable incident from your time?

NC Most memorable? Well, that was I think the medevac situation I mentioned earlier. Yeah.

GM The strangest thing you ever saw?

NC Strangest. I, wasn't really strange but I went with Johnny O'Keefe, I was attached to the Johnny O'Keefe show.

GM Oh yeah, yeah, the rock concerts.

NC Yeah. Up at Phan Rang. When he went up to Phan Rang, I was with the show for ten days. Went right round and at my age then, and rock and roll wasn't sort of my cup of tea really, but I was quite impressed with the man from the point of view of his genuineness in various things. When we went to Phan Rang, I mean he wanted to go and meet people in villages and smoke their smokes and drink their wine and chew their betel nut and everything, but which the Army officers that were with us had difficulty in convincing him that he shouldn't. But he also wanted to speak to the oldest nun at the orphanage. The RAAF had an orphanage that they looked after and helped build and things. And he wanted to speak to the oldest nun and see the children at the orphanage. Now these kids I mean it was, some of them had no feet, no arms, no legs, some of them were sort of just crawling around on the ground, not on the ground, in the rooms. And he was quite genuine in this; he had them laughing and all the sort of thing. But we were walking out going back to the vehicles and we passed a chapel and he looked in and I was sort of level with him, I was sort of moving up to pass him, I was sort of level with him and he looked in and it was only a small chapel. But down at the alter rail there was a little girl, about 6 - 5 or 6 - kneeling, praying, by herself and Johnny O'Keefe just turned and went in. Down to the alter rail, knelt beside this little girl and she just looked up at him and went back to what she was doing and when she finished, she stood up and she waited for him and then he stood up and she took his hand, not a word spoken, she just took his hand and the two of them walked back up the chapel aisle and I got two great shots. And all my shots from the Johnny O'Keefe tour I've never seen one published and I reckon that's a magic photograph, this little 6-year old, 5, 6-year old walking down the aisle with Johnny O'Keefe's hand.

GM I reckon the people that are doing the Johnny O'Keefe show now would be interested in one of those.

NC Well, I mean, it was an official photograph; they've gone back. I don't know where the negs are. I mean, I everything I shot…

GM Well I haven't seen it at the War Memorial.

NC No, well everything I shot in Vietnam I proofed before I sent back, well 90 percent of them I proofed before I sent back.

GM Do you reckon that's the best photo you ever took?

NC No it wasn't the best photograph, but it is a great photograph, in my opinion that's a great photograph. You know, knowing the circumstances, I mean somebody else might look at it and say oh it's just a bloke and a girl walking down a chapel, you know, chapel aisle. So you've got to know the circumstances. But yeah, and of course everybody was armed, I couldn't go in, we're sort of all… but from the door I got those two shots, him kneeling beside the girl at the alter rail and the two of them walking out. I can show them to you later.

GM What do you think was the best photo you took?

NC The best photo I took, again was one with split second timing. It was the Canberra bomber 231, which was later lost up north, was one of the ones we lost.

GM That's the one with Carver and (Herbert)…

NC I think that was the proof.

GM Yeah, Carver, yeah we lost two guys MIA didn't we?

NC Yeah, we lost two aircraft (Canberras) up there, yeah.

GM Yeah.

NC Yeah, 231, anyway, it was 231. I'd organised to fly in another aircraft, another Canberra and get a photograph of the bombs being dropped. I went off in Magpie 11, that's the first aircraft, we went and did our bombing run, etc. etc. and then we rendezvoused with Magpie 21, and the safe limit is 3500 feet - I think - from memory. We were below and behind that aircraft to the side right, and I was trying to get a shot of the bombs dropping. He had six 750-pounders, there was a heavy overcast sky and we were well below 3500 feet. My pilot said to me, 'Soon as I see that first bomb clear, we're pulling out'. So I had everything set, I had the plate camera; I took the plate camera on this job. I had my finger on the button round the front and we went in and as you know, our aircraft flew straight and level for their bomb drops, in fact I think it was the only aircraft in Vietnam that did. And the first bomb dropped and I didn't shoot and the second bomb fell clear and the third one and the fourth one, the fifth one on the wing tip dropped clear and I thought, it's gotta be now, so I flicked, took the shot and we went whoosh and pulled up. I felt every one of those six bombs. We felt the concussion as they came up you know. Got back, processed it and I've got five bombs clear of the aircraft and the sixth one, the nose is clear…

GM Just about to (drop) yeah. (*looking at photograph*)

NC … and the tail is just about to go.

GM And that photo appears in the *RAAF in Vietnam* book.

NC That is the only official photograph of a RAAF Canberra bomber dropping bombs on the enemy. I say official, I stress that, I mean, there's probably a lot more that belong to crews you know, that have taken them and things like that and it was also, in 1971 made the backdrop for the, when Prince Phillip came out for the RAAF's 50th Anniversary in the War Memorial, and they blew it up to about six or eight feet.

GM Where were you travelling in the Canberra? There's not a lot of room in a Canberra bomber.

NC On what you call the jump seat which is an iron thing that just falls down and was in this very short narrow alleyway between the pilot and the nav(igator).

GM Right.

NC If we'd had trouble I couldn't of got out.

GM Yeah.

NC You know. I mean I could've, but I wouldn't have lived.

GM Yeah, so, where, what did you take the photo through? The canopy or…?

NC Through the canopy.

GM That's not a bad photo, it's pretty clear really. (*looking at photograph*)

NC Oh yeah, I was very pleased with that. So that to me is the best best shot.

GM Yeah, I just remembered it was Herbert and Carver. Were they the pilots of that plane then or not?

NC No.

GM It was their aircraft?

NC It was that aircraft.

GM Okay.

NC The RAAF don't have an aircraft for a crew.

GM No. What is the saddest thing you can recall from your time in Vietnam?

NC Saddest. Oh yeah, well, the kids at the orphanage. I mean, you know, that's pretty horrendous thing. 12-month, 18-month, 2-year old kids with no feet, no hands. And Johnny O'Keefe when we took him, back at Vung Tau before we even did the first one, he came to Vung Tau - that's where I met him, and we're sitting having a drink at his hotel and the officer in charge – an army bloke - major I think he was, was talking about the different things around here and O'Keefe said, 'Is there an orphanage?' And the bloke said yeah, there's one you know so and so. 'I want to go now; I want to go now'. So we did. And he walked into this orphanage, they were in the middle of tea and I reckon within ten minutes he had them laughing and singing, and the nuns were singing. You know, magic but he certainly, the ones at Phan Rang were…

GM I've read he had a good rapport with the Diggers and the people he played for.

NC Yes, oh yes, yeah. He did shows for the Koreans up at Phan Rang as well as our blokes and all that sort of thing and yeah, he was well liked.

GM What did you think of the Allies that you worked with?

NC I didn't have a lot to do with the, with the Vietnamese. I had some contact but not enough to really say, I'm not talking about the military.

GM Yeah.

NC Not a lot to really judge them by, and they were mainly Vietnamese Navy guys. But the Yanks, had a fair bit to do with the Yanks both in travel and other things. A lot of contact with them to help get things processed and that sort of thing as well although I did most of my mine processing. I found them very generous at times. I went and asked for a box of, a couple of boxes of 16-mm to shoot something for myself, colour, Kodachrome, see for myself - and this was up at Bien Hoa - and he said 'Yeah, no problem,' and he went out and he came back with a carton with 50 rolls in it and said, 'Here's one box.

I'll go and get you the other.' I said, 'Oh no, one box will do' and took the one box! But I found the Americans could be grouped into two lots, there's the extremely intelligent, dedicated, professional servicemen; and there's the grown up kids that sort of couldn't care less one way or another that sort of thing. I didn't really find a middle man like most of our people. I mean we've got our brilliant people and we've got our grown up kids, but the majority of our troops are average sort of sensible normal people. I found those missing in, generally I mean, they do have them as well but the bulk were either in the top group that would run rings around me, you know, and probably 90 percent of our troops or the guys that were, our guys would run rings round their lower guys. I just found the two groups, I just found the middle you know, not only from Vietnam from, you know I spent time in Clark airbase in the Philippines and other places, Ubon and things, so I just found the two groups. That's what, that's what I thought.

GM I mean you actually saw quite a bit and you saw all the suffering and all that. How did you feel when you came home?

NC Yeah. Okay, well, personally I was, I was pretty proud. I was proud to wear the ribbons, I was pretty proud of what I had done and what I'd been able to achieve and what I'd been able to show back home. I was quite surprised at the public attitude. I never took my ribbons off if I was in uniform in public, but I was quite surprised at the reports and things I saw on television and all that sort of things of the Moratoriums and all that. Yeah I was pretty shocked at that. I didn't march in the ANZAC Day marches until about six years ago.

GM Is that right?

NC Yeah, yeah, I didn't march. But I…

GM But you served in the air force for quite a while didn't you?

NC Yes, 35 years in the air force.

GM Yeah, yeah. What do you think you learnt most from your time in Vietnam?

NC Right, I felt I learnt a lot of how important my work could be and I learnt to get that importance for back home. I got some good wrap-ups from the boss back home on the work, especially the plate camera work. But the briefings and all that and the training I'd had before going up, I consider that was what got me through, and got me the results that I wanted. Right back to Nasho's where I'd had the infantry training, what I had been taught, I was able to put into use and come back with the goods, you know. I felt that was the most important sort of aspect that. There were times, when I wrote to my wife and sealed a letter and left it with my goods because I had… I never had fear at the time. I was apprehensive sometimes. There was one army operation in particular that I was quite apprehensive,

but as it turned out it didn't eventuate but I was briefed and ready to go. But I wrote a letter to my wife and I sealed it and left it with my things, you know, with her name on it because I was, I knew the dangers but I wasn't scared at the time. I'm thinking back afterwards, there was a gunship mission once where the gun, we were in support of an ARVN patrol and the gunships worked in threes, one down, one up and one across and I'm shooting movie behind the gunner and they'd come down with their rockets and mini guns then flattened out. The door gunners were brr brr brr, picking their shots. After we'd expended all our ammo, we're going back to the Dat for re-armament, I said to the door gunner, 'You're picking your shots', I said. From where I'm standing, looking through the viewfinder, it's just a blur you see because I was back behind him and he said, 'Oh yeah,' he said, 'I can see them', he said. 'I think I've got two possibles,' and I said, 'well if you can see them, why can't they see us and shoot back?' And the captain clipped in and said, 'Yeah well they were and I'll show you the holes when we get back!' And he did, and there were a couple in the tail boom.

GM Well, you see you never knew when you were going to cop something you know either.

NC No, well the thing is about it, I didn't have a flak jacket you see. It was only aircrew issued with flak jackets and I even though I was on the sheets as crew, I wasn't issued with a flak jacket. So I was standing behind this bloke.

GM Have any regrets about going to Vietnam?

NC No, no, I have no regrets. I think it was an experience for me in my job and the fact that I could get around and I could pick my own tasks a lot, 90 percent of the time, I could almost say I enjoyed my time there, you know.

GM I can understand that.

NC I was able to do things that I couldn't (normally do). I've always had a military sort of background and my uncle that raised me was an original ANZAC and he was also the manager of the Gallipoli Legion of ANZACs down in Sydney for 20 or 30 years or something afterwards before he died, and I've always gone as a kid. I've always gone to ANZAC Day Dawn Services and that sort of thing, so I've sort of had a background in military and yeah, I could say I enjoyed it.

GM But was Australia's effort and the loss of lives worth it?

NC Well, for loss of life - no. Definitely not. I can't see anyone saying that. I lost two mates - an army major killed on his last patrol before coming back to get married, booby-trap coming through the wire or near the wire or something, and my roommate. Both of those guys didn't come back. From the other side of things I think the experience for the services is well worth it in that lessons were learnt.

The cooperation between the nations, between the services, right down to, you know, the sections and units and things. I think that the equipment - obviously we had to have the right equipment - and lots of things were learnt in equipment that didn't work well.

GM Oh yeah.

NC All that sort of thing.

GM I think one of the greatest things that came out of it was the revolution in casualty evacuation.

NC Very much so, yes.

GM I mean, that was, that was a huge leap forward in military medicine.

NC Yes. No, I totally agree with that. And as I said earlier, I followed one case virtually right through all the way through.

GM Norm, the last question. Is there anything that you'd like to add? I mean that's the end of my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't talked about?

NC No, I think we've sort of covered it pretty well actually. I was lucky in the fact that I was a permanent air force photographer able to do that particular PR role over in Vietnam because normally the RAAF PR officers - DPR - would hire a civilian newspaper photographer, give him an honorary commission and send him up there for 12 months. And it was only when they had trouble to fill that gap that I got the opportunity in '67 to go up for a few weeks. Then in '69 they had all sorts of trouble and I went up on a, literally, on a few hours notice to Vietnam and ended up staying for 10 months or 9 months or whatever it was, 9 or 10 months. So I was lucky for the experience and I think I think I grew up a fair bit. You know, I saw a lot of things and did a lot of things that I would never have done or seen before or since. No I think that's pretty well covered.

GM Righto Norm, well thanks very much, really appreciate it.

NC My pleasure.

End of interview