ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

ACCESSION NUMBER: S02603
TITLE: VETERANS' VOICES

INTERVIEWEE: TREVOR HAGAN
INTERVIEWER: GARY MCKAY
RECORDING DATE: 31 MAY 2001
RECORDING LOCATION: COOLUM, SUNSHINE COAST, QUEENSLAND
SUMMARY:

TRANSCRIBER: LAURA MANASSERIAN OF EAST COAST HUMAN RESOURCE GROUP

TRANSCRIPTION DATE: 2 JANUARY 2002

VETERANS' VOICES
MAROOCHY LIBRARIES' ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee: Trevor Hagan (TH)
Interviewer: Gary McKay (GM)
Date of Interview: Thursday 31 May 2001
Place of Interview: Coolum, Sunshine Coast, Queensland
Transcribed by Laura Manasserian: 2nd January 2002
Corrected and edited by Gary McKay: 8 February 2002
Final edit by Gary McKay & Caroline Foxon after interviewee perusal: 23 August 2002

Interviewee's details: Trevor Hagan was born in Toowoomba in 1939 and after a short time as an apprentice electrician joined the Regular Army as a career soldier in 1959. He served for 24 years and attained the rank of WO1. He saw active service in Malaya in 1960-61, South Vietnam in 1965-66. He served in Malaysia in 1968-69 and returned to Vietnam for a second tour in 1969-70. He was an infantryman with 1 RAR on his tours of Malaysia and a sergeant in a rifle platoon in 8 RAR for his second tour. He was lightly wounded in action during heavy fighting in 1969 and remained on duty.

Subject of Interview: Australians in South Vietnam, the Vietnam War 1965-72 (particularly 1965-66 and 1969-70), training for war, CMF service, training courses, combat and battle, deploying to Vietnam, tactics, mines, booby traps, casualties, hospitals, morale, return to Australia. Ambushing, allies, leave, morale, discipline. War widows, entitlements, camaraderie.

Start Tape 1

GM This is a recording of an interview with Trevor Hagan recorded at Coolum on Thursday 31 May 2001. Recorded by Gary McKay for Maroochy Libraries' *Veterans' Voices* Project.

Trevor, firstly thanks very much for joining us and helping us with this project. Could you tell us how old you were and how you actually got to get into the Australian Army?

TH Well, Gary I first joined in 1956, the CMF D Company, the 25th Battalion, in Dalby, Queemsland, and I was in that for nearly three years until I had a, my first 'Dear John', and I decided, hang the expense, and I joined the Regular Army on the 10th June 1959.

GM And how old were you then?

TH I was 19, I believe, because later on I had my 21st Birthday at Canungra.

GM Okay now I take it you went to Kapooka and did your recruit training down there?

TH Yes, I went there but I'd enlisted as a RAEME enlistment because I was an auto electrician apprentice and had been thrown out of my apprenticeship, but they'd accepted me as RAEME, but the good Major Bird, I think his name was, said to us 'Ooooh they need good men in infantry,' and that's where the most of us ended up - infantry - and I've never regretted it.

GM Yeah, so where did you, you did your infantry training in Ingleburn?

TH Ingleburn and 4 Battalion, 'Ronny The One' and 'Kala' Thompson, names that old soldiers would know.

GM And where did you go from, after you'd done your corps training?

TH We did corps training and we were thrown up to 3 Battalion at Enoggera and we arrived just before Christmas 1960 and I think they only posted us there so we could do duties over Christmas.

GM Okay. So, what, how did you end up going to Malaysia with 1 RAR?

TH Well, I joined up, I'd heard the cannons I suppose, it was the old term in them days, you'd 'heard the cannons' and I wanted to get down and see the rounds go off. I was in 3 Battalion and I was - even though by then 20-odd - I was the youngest, because all these blokes were Second World War

and Korea veterans. And I did every blooming sentry, every hygiene and that was me first nickname, 'Hygiene Hagan'. So they got me for everything and I enjoyed it, it was good, and they were good soldiers, they taught me a lot, 'specially how to iron clothes. I did a lot of that. And the scrub working gear that 3 Battalion wore in those days. I was given the boat fare, and a big bag and I had to drag it in the Brisbane River to get it clean and then I had to scrub it, so I learnt from the bottom up.

GM Yeah. And, you, whereabouts were 1 RAR? Were they…?

TH 1 RAR was in Malaya, and I put in for a transfer to Malaya and it came through in about the middle of June '60 and at that time we're at the wharf loading the boats for the island, New Guinea Islands, because the waterside workers were on strike and we did the job. I think there was ten of us - a section of us - we did the … (*Brudnell White* - a tank landing ship). We loaded it in a day and a half and the waterside workers were going to take a week. And we did it in a day and a half. And the captain sailed on the high tide, and everyone had forgotten about us. We were left sitting on the wharf with nothing - I think we had about 10 bob (one dollar) between us - so the waterside workers wanted to hang us, and then they decided oh, we weren't bad blokes so they shouted us a couple of beers and we only had enough to ring Enogerra that came and got us, because I was supposed to have gone on a flight out and I didn't get away till July, I think it was. I arrived in Singapore 29th July 1960.

GM So how, what sort of, how did you actually get up there, was it a Herc flight or …?

TH It was, no, it was a civilian flight. There was Athol Bell, of course, Athol was always known as 'Dinger' Bell, him and I went up on the same flight. My number was 15254 and he was 15260 and even today, even though he only did six years and got out we're still friends and he was only up and his wife were staying with me three weeks ago, they stayed with me for a weekend so from that flight over to Malaya and landing in the steamy Singapore on the 28th of July '60, we're still mates.

GM That's interesting, isn't it, how military service creates these bonds, you know, between blokes?

TH Yeah, well at that same reinforcement was Kenny Eustance who also only did six years. They both got out and joined the Queensland Police Force. 'Dinger' stayed for fourteen years in the Police Force I believe, then got out driving a taxi and Kenny Eustance did 34 years in the Queensland Police Force and got out and bought a corner shop in Townsville and he's just been down in the New Year and stayed a week with me. So there's two blokes on the reinforcements to one still friends.

GM Now, what was it like arriving in 1 RAR as a reo?

TH We didn't class ourselves as reos because we'd had that six months with 3 (Battalion) and of course 3 being the 'blue swimming pool' mob - they had the citation from Kapyong, you know - we were treated as blooming, you know, experienced soldiers.

GM Yeah.

TH But still with my platoon commander who was Barry Petersen, one of the greatest blokes I've ever met - for an officer - and he was really good and he taught us a lot.

GM Yeah, so whereabouts were you based?

TH We were in Sungi Siput - B Company, 1 Battalion, and it was renowned because it was the start of the Communist Terrorist blooming uprising in Malaysia that started at in Sungi Siput and out at Lasah.

GM Where is, where is it exactly, where is Sungi Siput, whereabouts is it?

TH Oh, it's a couple hours drive from Penang in a taxi when you're going on leave and it's Kuala Kansar and then Ipoh, you go Sungi Siput and then you're on your way to Penang.

GM Oh. Okay.

TH So it's in the central part?

GM Okay, so central west coast.

TH Yep, central west coast, yeah.

GM Okay. And that was a normal barracks or was it a field base?

TH No, we were in barracks. We had 'bashas' I think they called them with the galvanised sides that would lift up and you'd put a big stick and they'd stay up and let the air through until the wind blew the stick down and they all crashed and kill you if you were in the way.

GM And what sort of what sort of operations did you start doing then?

TH We were on a 28-day (patrol) on the border between Thailand and Malaysia - because it was called Malaysia then they, when the 1st of August 1960, they separated into Malaysia and Singapore. That was Merdeka [TH: *Malay for 'Freedom'*] that was one of the reasons why we didn't get up country in July when we should have been up country there. It was the 3rd when we arrived in Sungi Siput after the Merdeka celebrations. And we used to go bush for the 28 days, come home and with like nine days off. And the first day of it was cleaning up from the operation you that were on, handing in your weapons and everything like that and then you had a week's leave and then you'd come and you had two days to prepare, pack up and get everything ready to go up north again on the next operation. So that was the sequence of events.

GM Okay so, it's a fair hike up to that border. How did you actually get up to the border?

TH There were a couple of ways. Mostly which was truck to Grik and then from Grik, you either got Pommy helicopters into a LZ (landing zone) on the border or you went up the Perah River on boats and that was a hectic bizzo. You'd… used to take you nearly all day to get up to where you were going on the, on the boat. You used to shoot rapids and sometimes you'd have to get out and drag the boat over the rapids - but it was an experience.

GM It's pretty rugged country up there on the border isn't it?

TH One thing about up there we used to carry like nine days rations in bergens. You used to go out about 90 pound (42 kilograms) it was, in the old terminologies - you had about 45 pound (22 kilograms) just in your basic webbing. And if you were a rifleman you carried flares and all the other things you had to put on and all the country in the north was all up hill. You never ever went down a stream, you always went up it, you never went down a hill, you always went up it and the only time that you went down hill was when you had to walk out to an LZ or to a river point to come out on the last day and it used to be that bad on that last day because you'd been two days without rations by that stage because you'd eaten everything to make everything lighter and your stomach used to be hitting your backbone. And the webbing didn't fit you; it was falling off you.

GM What was the hardest part about those operations?

TH I think the hardest part was trying to play real soldiers because the public didn't think there were CTs around and there was… and you had to be on the ball all the time with every one saying 'Oh, but there's nothing up there'. But we used to come across camps of them where they'd been. We'd just missed them by a month or even a couple of days. And there were still villagers getting kidnapped and killed out of the kampongs up north.

GM But it was like trying to find a needle in a haystack wasn't it?

TH Yeah, well if you got up what they call the Gadang - which was the big ridge that runs right across between Malaysia and Thailand - we could sit on our side and see the opposition and their camp fires burning and laughing and giggling on the other side, you know, a couple of thousand metres away. [TH: *The Gadang was a 'T' formation in the centre of the Thai/Malay peninsula. It had mountain peaks and ridges running off and was four days march from the town of Grik to the border.*]

GM Yeah, yeah, so did you, were they company bases or platoon bases that you worked out of?

TH Mostly platoon. The platoon would be spread over a certain area and the platoon would go in and do operations and then link up with the company and come out. And there was always one platoon left back in base to be, you know, on guard.

GM For security.

TH Yeah.

GM Yeah, it must have been tough bloody work?

TH It was, but a man was young then and he could, he could put up with it, but the weight was the main thing. You'd just struggling up blooming mountains with all this weight on and every afternoon without fail at 1400 hours y ou got the monsoons through so, you know, you had your washing and everything done and your shower was done and that.

GM I was going to ask how you went for water in mountainous terrain but it just bucketed down did it?

TH It did come down and every one wanted to carry a map because you had your maps waterproofed and you could used it as a funnel to fill your water bottles.

GM Yeah

TH And every one was carrying four water bottles because water was, even in the tropics. Water - if you haven't got water - you just don't survive.

GM What sort of gear were you wearing then? What sort of webbing?

TH We had the British bergen main pack and we used to have sewn on the sides two 37 Pattern basic pouches for the extra goodies and we had 37 Pattern webbing.

GM What sort of boots?

TH We used the British jungle boot, which was canvas. 'J' boots, I think they were called, yeah they were canvas. You had to carry two pair of them and they were like a lot of things, if you got a good pair you'd get 28 days out of it, and if you had a bad pair you were walking bare feet after a week.

GM Geez. Yeah, and what sort of weapons were you carrying then?

TH We'd gone onto the SLR, we carried the SLR but we still had the Bren gun.

GM Yeah.

TH And that OMC.

GM Yeah, useless.

TH Useless, yeah.

GM And what was your job then? What…?

TH I was only a rifleman.

GM Yeah, so a rifleman in a rifle section.

TH Yeah, yeah.

GM What do you think was important about that job that you did there?

TH Well, when you went up and got onto some of these tribes that were still like our indigenous Aboriginals - they had their Aboriginals - and you guarded them - that was one of the reasons trying to keep the CTs out of those, and the Aboriginal over there, he was that Stone Age that if anyone died in one of the kampongs, they moved. And everything just packed and they just walked out of them and went somewhere else because they reckoned the spirits were bad in that area. So you used to have to follow them and still guard them. And a lot of times, or one time in particular Barry Petersen okayed us to fire live ammunition to kill the pigs because the tribe couldn't get anything (to eat). They had moved a couple times because of deaths in the tribe. So we shot a couple of pigs for them and they were real glad of that, so they put on a barbecue for us. And we all went over - or less the guards that were still on sentry and that. We arrived over there and the platoon sergeant had issued us two night's rum ration so this was going to be a big night, even though a nip in the bush, we still had to put water with it, they wouldn't allow us to drink it straight. But anyhow, we arrived at the party with our mugs full of water and rum and the bamboo was handed round. That's how they barbecue over there, they split a bit of bamboo about four inches diameter (100 mm) apart and they put the meat in it, and then they tie it up with string, you know, cord from the jungle - that's just a vine - put it in the coals and when it cracks open it's great. So we were all munching there until one of the boys said, 'Look what I got' and it was a baby monkey and then we worked out when we went over the next morning, all the pigs were still hanging in the shed and they'd fed us monkeys!

GM Yeah, because they use blowpipes don't they?

TH Yeah, poison darts and I've seen them up to 100 foot (30 metres) in a tree, [TH: *shoot a monkey*]. They spit this arrow into the sky and down the monkey falls in a split second.

GM You're out there for 28 days. How did you get re-supplied?

TH Re-supply was always by chopper and you used to have to plan the operation that you got to an LZ and then the Poms would come over if the wind and everything was right, and they weren't having a party in Penning, and they 'd drop it. And nine times out ten it used to be roman candles, because they used to have the old rayon chute that was just you know, couple of bits of parachute cord and a bit of rayon and they'd throw them out with that. And all it was, was a brake and it stopped the thing from hitting the ground.

GM So they didn't actually land and unload, they just free dropped?

TH They free dropped it.

GM Oh geez.

TH And nine times out of ten if you took ten chutes, five would be roman candles and nine times out of ten, the rum ration was in the ones that roman candled and blokes were sucking dew and everything to try and get the rum out of the ground.

GM Now you, you then went, you stayed with 1 RAR then?

TH Yes, I came home, we came home on the S.S *Flomina,* I think it was, the Italian cruise liner, they sent us home from Malaya to Sydney - and once again I starved. I was caught playing two-up on the first night out and I ended up as permanent runner to the blooming bosun for the rest of the trip. I fulfilled my aim of going over as a private and coming home as a private.

GM Right so, you came back to Australia and then in the middle of 1965, 1 RAR was told it was going to Vietnam. What sort of training or work-up did you do for that first deployment with 1 RAR?

TH Well, we had a mixed sort of life then because we'd been through, when we' d come home in November I think it was '61 or something we went through the cycle you'd start with your section drills build up to a battalion exercise end of every year and we went through Pentropic. We had been Pentropic at one stage, which was where they give us everything, artillery, Service Corps, everything was in the battalion - we had a bit of everything and the battalions then were massive. But just before

we 'd left or got warning to go to Vietnam - and everyone knew we were going to be deployed somewhere around South East Asia in the near future, because you know it had been coming since we were in Malaya in '60, because we had Confrontation that was in Borneo and everything, and it was always brewing that we would be going there so everyone was prepared to go there - but they split us. 1 Battalion - which had been together then for nearly six years, the sections had all served together as the one section - they split us up to 4 Battalion and every section was split in half to form the other battalion and when we got the warning, we got … [TH: *on about 19 March 1965*], not much warning at all. We got Diggers and they were trained Diggers from other units that built us up to then I think they called it… oh what is it? A jungle-type battalion which was just normal battalion strength.

GM Yeah, tropical warfare.

TH Tropical warfare - 770 strong or something, and in my section and I was then section commander of the fir st section of the first platoon of the first company of the 1st Battalion in the 1st Division and I lived in hut 11. So there's a lot of 1s in that and I had half my section gone, which was my 2IC, one scout and two rifleman disappeared and I got in new blokes and I got in Tiny Parker as my 2IC who will star later in this interview when we toured Vietnam.

GM Yep so, how much time did you have with the reformed 1 Section, how much time did you have together before you went?

TH About three months I think was concentrated training. We went down to the Victorian-South Australian border and we were enemy for 4 Battalion because they were shaking out and training to go to relieve a battalion in Malaya. And we did JTC and then we were away. They were only for the blokes that had been there together for the five years-odd that was the backbone and these other blokes had to fit in and I was lucky, I ended up with no 'marrieds', we were a single sort of section until these blokes come in and of course Tiny was 2IC and he was married.

GM And naturally he'd be about 6 foot something?

TH With a name as Tiny, yes, his initials were R.H.J. Parker. Richard, but I didn't know that for years that that was his name because he was from Day One and he was just 'Tiny' and he's been 'Tiny' to me now for 35 years, 6 months and today, 23 days since I lost him.

GM Yeah, now, what was the reaction when you were told you were going to Vietnam, you know, within your group?

TH Everyone was pleased and because this is what we'd be training for now, well it was nearly five years from when we left a war situation in Malaya to train for war and now we had one and everyone was professional and they wanted to go.

GM Yeah, because this was an all-Regular battalion?

TH Yeah, 1 (battalion) was I think the first and only Regular battalion that went to Vietnam.

GM Yeah, so how did you, how did you get up to Vietnam?

TH Well, it was something else. They put us in covered trucks in Sydney, drove us around the place. I remember one dear old lady, in a little red beetle-type car, tried to get in between two trucks. They pushed her out of the way and she hit the gutter and she was shaking her fist. And here're we blooming a battalion of blokes going to fight the enemy and we've got a lady in her 80s shaking her fist at us, in a red car and we're going to fight communists. So, you know, that was an omen but anyhow, we ended up at Richmond and we weren't allowed to wear our caps, hats or anything. We weren't allowed ammunition. We had rifles we were allowed to have with us but we got in the plane, one of Qantas' planes, 707s and they flew us in and we landed in Manila and they had the Philippines Army around the airport. We weren't allowed out of the bar so everyone was allowed to drink in the bar for the 40 minutes we were there and we were allowed to perve on the dear beautiful Filipino stewardesses that were walking past and that brought everyone on and then they put us back in and away we went to Tan Son Nhut.

GM And where did you go from Tan Son Nhut?

TH Well, Tan Son Nhut, we were bundled out at Tan Son Nhut and of course here we've got weapons, no ammo, so it was in the luggage compartment. So with our packs that were in there, we had to get the ammo, we could see a line of buses lined up to put us on and these buses had grills on all the windows where you had glass they had steel grill mesh. So we thought oh well, you know, they're either police and they're prisons on wheels or what, but anyhow. I grabbed the 9-mm ammunition to fit me OMC, Owen Machine Carbine - which the old soldiers told us won the war in the islands - and I grabbed the toggle on the top of the metal container and it was meant to pull off like a sardine tin and peel it back, and of course the toggle ended up in me hand and still no ammo. So I had to use a machete to cut the top off the thing and out fell a bit of paper and on that paper it was packed in 1946.

GM Oh Jesus.

TH Now this was beautiful ammunition, it was shiny! And we had to lay down 28 rounds in a 30-round magazine and we did this and then we frog marched over to the buses. And away we went through Saigon to Bien Hoa, which was I think about 30 odd mile. We had to go along a highway to get to Bien Hoa, but the first bus out the gate ran over a young child about 8-year old, and everyone else. There was a bump as we went through the Tan Son Nhut airport as we all ran over the body. They didn't stop for anything. And at our first intersection when they'd … American MPs pulled us up, one of the locals threw a grenade at that first truck. I don't know whether it was in anger at running over the kid or what. Then we found out why the windows weren't glass and were metal screens. The grenade bounced off the window and landed in the gutter. And it went off there and hurt no one.

GM God. So when you arrive at Bien Hoa. What did it look like, when you got off the bus and looked around?

TH Well, it was late in the afternoon when we arrived and the airstrip, it took us you know, 20 minutes to drive around the damn place; it was a massive airstrip was Bien Hoa. And we were given I think it was the south-eastern corner of it to defend for that night and that was a cemetery. And the Americans put on the first meal for us and we queued along with our dixies and they were cutting it with a bloody machete - the meat, pork or beef, and you just got a slab of it and then they hit you with the cranberry sauce and we thought oh, this is not bad tucker. And then they said, we said, 'Where we gonna dig?' 'Oh they're not digging in tonight, we're guarding you tonight.' So Harry my scout and I, we slept in a grave. It was beautiful, it had rock all round it and we were the safest people around and nice fine white sand and Harry and I were happy and about 11 o'clock we heard this noise. Americans yelling everywhere. Bien Hoa airstrip had been mortared and the first round landed in the cockpit of one of their jets and up she went. I think they lost four jets that night and where the primaries were coming from was over the side that we finally got as a battalion to defend.

GM So, the next morning, what sort of things were done?

TH The next morning there was a call and it was 'Corporal Hagan' and you know I always got this, it was either 'Corporal Hagan' or when they had stripped me as Hygiene Hagan. Anyhow, away I went. [TH: *2Lt E.J. Eric*] 'Ric' Culpitt, my platoon commander says, 'You got the path. I want you to clear to the top of that ridge.' And it looked to be about 3000 metres I suppose away and all the country was rubber stumps. They cut a rubber plantation down and left rubber stumps 2 foot (600 mm) high and then all around them was growing 'wait-a-while' wild and all the other nice vicious plants that grow in cut-down jungles. And we had to walk through all this, or patrol through all this, to the top of the ridge and see how far, or see if we could see the Song Dong Nai River and by a bit after lunch we were on the top and we could see the Song Dong Nai River which was a beautiful big river that flowed, you know, past the Bien Hoa airbase.

GM You were the first Australians in a battalion. How did the Americans react to the way you did business?

TH They thought that we were digging holes and that wasn't for the Americans. They didn't, you know, they had equipment to dig holes and us blokes with entrenching tools digging holes, it was, you know, you don't do that. You get a, you know, a trench digger in to dig trenches, but no, not us, we dug CPs, pits and everything and as fast as you dug, the faster it filled up with water.

GM Is that right?

TH Yeah, because the monsoons hit there too every afternoon.

GM Yeah, that's right. You arrived in the wet season.

TH Yeah.

GM Yeah, so how long was it before you actually got out and started doing operations?

TH We did our TAOR patrols - that was the close tactical area of responsibility - we did them from the first night. But I think we were about a fortnight before we started on our first shake-down operation, which was out to one side of the airport and it was only a sort of couple of days, and we come back. And then we had the first grenade incident where we lost five-odd blokes via an accident with a grenade when they were jumping off the American transport trucks.

GM Oh right.

TH Yeah. And that happened right in front of BHQ, I think it was. We lost…

GM So the, what, the pin got caught on the truck or something?

TH I think it was an American soldier jumped off, and hit, they had their, their grenades pinned just anywhere and like you say it was caught on the side of the truck - I think. Anyhow it come off and it was an American that dropped the grenade and he dropped it amongst a section of Australians and we started five down and, you know, and no runs on the board.

GM Yeah. Yeah, that's pretty ordinary. Then you got out into doing operations.

TH Yeah, well, what we had opposite us was the War Zone D it was called and that was the other side of the Song Dong Nai River. We went over into that and the operations then were up to about a weeklong and you'd go out, come back, re-supply and go somewhere else. Wherever (General) Westmoreland wanted to show 173rd (Airborne Brigade (Separate)). Because we were a battalion of the 173rd I think they…

GM And they were an airborne brigade weren't they?

TH They were airborne and the only time we got airborne was when the chopper picked us up.

GM Did you do most of your deployments by chopper or by truck or by APC or what?

TH Most by chopper. We did one that I remember by APC and we did one, up to Xuyen Moc I think it was, and that was a road convoy one, but you know the roads and that were very poor over there and there was not much room for manoeuvre.

GM Had you done much helicopter deployment training before you worked with the Yanks?

TH We had a couple of flights in Sydney. They had two, I think, what are they called, Hueys or something. They brought them on and they give us a couple of flights and the only thing I remember about it was the pilot telling us there's such a thing as auto-rotation. And they said we'll take off and we'll go onto auto-rotation and let you experience it but the chopper will then fire up again and take off. We're doing this the football field and this bloke yells out 'Righto, crash positions', so you put your head between your legs and the only reason you do this is to kiss everything goodbye if anything happens. And then you put your head down, your hands in the back of your neck. Put your feet on your weapon so it doesn't fly around if that's what you have got, but if you've got your legs out of the choppers you've still got your weapon around your shoulder. So he says 'auto-rotation' and it sounded beaut, the thing stops and starts going down but it never ever bloody started again. It hit the centre of

the football field and we nearly scored a goal. And they reckon you only hit at 32 miles per hour (48 kph) but I think it's 132 really and that was my first experience of a chopper landing.

GM Yeah, geez. What was the jungle like, where you were working?

TH We, we had, when we first arrived, primary jungle. It was Long Khanh Province. All our operations to Long Khanh, we went into primary jungle. Now, to work in jungle is one of the greatest things a soldier can experience because they say the jungle is neutral. But the jungle you can't move in it without making a mark, so you can see anyone who's went before you. The weather and the climate down on the ground is always beautiful. Admittedly you're wet a lot of the time but to get wet over there with the humidity, you dry in, you know, and in ten minutes you're dry again. And the canopy could be 170 foot (58 metres) above you and it's, the light is not fantastic but once you know it, there's no such thing as shadows. You can move from cover to cover without, you know, the shadow. Silhouette, there's hardly any silhouette. If you make a mistake and expose yourself, you're exposed and that's just it. The enemy can be waiting for you and you'll walk into an ambush, but if you're doing the right thing and staying off tracks and things like that in the jungle, you'll be on top. And you'll meet him in <u>your</u> area, that you want to get him.

GM Now, you were a section commander?

TH I was a section commander at that stage, yes.

GM What was the greatest responsibility you had?

TH My responsibility as the section commander of 1 Section, but 90 percent of the time I was acting sergeant and Tiny Parker would have to run the section. I was not only devoting my time to the platoon sergeant's tasks which like every one knows is the administration, the re-supply and everything of the platoon, for example, ammunition, the food and manpower, trying to keep sections viable - because over there we never ever got a chance to go out with a full section, because you always had to leave someone back to be sentry when you were away and guard the base and you had sickness and things like that that come in that happen in civilian life as anywhere else. You've always got, you know, those sick and we didn't have leave until later on when they used to send blokes on leave in country and I think they got a week off home - the marrieds and that got home. But you're always on a skeleton section, so one of my biggest tasks was trying to keep an eye on Tiny in 1 Section, because that was my life as a section commander because they were my men. And then devoting the rest to the platoon.

GM How come you were doing platoon sergeant jobs?

TH I was the senior corporal.

GM Where was the sergeant?

TH No, it was the sergeant was running the platoon and the platoon commander was…

GM Oh the platoon commander was missing.

TH Yeah.

GM So everyone had gone up one.

TH Everyone went up one. Gordon Peterson was my platoon sergeant and he was running the platoon and I was doing his job. And that was the majority of cases over there. All the big ops we had on, that's how we worked. They always found jobs for the platoon commanders. We weren't the only platoon in the town and I think that whole battalion, the platoons were run by sergeants most of the tour because I don't think they trusted one thing without the officers and of course it's damn dangerous too, because they lost a couple of platoon commanders. Then the safest thing was - platoon commander leave them right out of it and give them a job at home, you know, in the base.

GM Now, you started getting out into the weeds and before long you must have had a contact?

TH Yeah.

GM What was that like?

TH The first contact, I can remember, that vividly sticks in my mind. We're in a blooming paddy field and it was, you know, about 500 metres across. And each paddy bund is about 50 metres between paddy bunds and you're up to your crutch in water and mud and Georgie Constable was my scout and he was 10 yards (10 metres) in front of me and he had just reached the paddy bund, and I was struggling along to try and catch up with him. And I saw in the tree about 35 metres in front of George, a sniper, dressed in black and he had a rifle. And it looked like he was aiming at George. So I up with me trusty Owen gun that I was a little a bit apprehensive, because after I saw the ammunition was made in 1946, and I checked the top of me OMC and it was repaired in 1948 - now we're into 1965 - but it had won the Second World War, so through the sights I aimed at this bloke in the tree and the only thing I heard was George let out a scream. And I looked down and there was little plops in the water, the ten yards (ten metres), not one round went past him. And I'd fired a full mag(azine). And they didn't go past George and, lucky because if they had've, they might've landed on him. It wouldn't have went through him, it might a give him a bruise, so if any historian wants to go in that paddy bund, and in there's an OMC. I used to know the number of it, but it was repaired in 1948 and it's still there because it was simpler and easier to strip to the five basic parts and throw accurately with great force, was the only way you could hurt any one with them and we found out after, that 1946 ammunition they sent us over with was for pistols and had a range of 5 foot perhaps.

GM Yeah

TH Yeah, so that was another thing the brilliant Australian government sent us to war with.

GM So what did you do for a weapon after that?

TH The Americans come to the party and they give us the AR-15.

GM Oh yeah, Okay.

TH Now the AR-15 was the forerunner to the M-16 that they carry now, but the only problem with the AR-15, it was made by the Colt organisation, a fantastic company in America, and with it come an ammunition made by Remington and with the AR-15 it was a 5.56 mm, had a muzzle velocity of all these 5224 [TH: *3760*] feet per second – [TH: *damn fast*]. But you only got one shot and then you had a stripped case and it only ever fired one round and you had to put the metal cleaning rod which is in four parts, screw it all up and poke it down the barrel to get rid of the…

GM Separated case?

TH Separated case, yeah, the one that hadn't been extracted. So then you fired another shot but after the first shot in any contact, there was two men in every section unarmed because the Owen Machine gun (sic Carbine) was useless and the AR-15 that scouts and section commanders were was, you know, after it fired one shot, so we had to rely a lot on hiding. You know, fire a shot and get out of the way, so you could get back. But it had a bipod that you could clip on and kept it out of the mud and water I suppose that was pretty good.

GM So this wasn't a real memorable first contact was it?

TH No. The bloke in the, in the tree only got the one shot away and it missed. And he, Charlie, and he was looking at his rifle too and when he just threw it too out of the tree and it was a home-made…

GM Oh yeah

TH …weapon that they'd put together. I think it must've been an old musket from the ball and chain days. And he left it and he strolled off into the jungle and said, 'Well bugger this. I'm giving up and going home'. And that was it and we didn't get him.

GM What was the most memorable incident from the 1 RAR tour?

TH Well, there was a couple. The one the stuck with me for all these years is Hill 82. When we lost Tiny Parker missing in action, believed killed and young (Peter) Gillson missing - killed. That was the 8th November 1965. That will always stick in me memory as, you know, the worst day of my life.

GM What happened?

TH The, it started really on the 7th of November. We were given the task as a battalion to patrol I think it was north-east of Bien Hoa looking for a regimental headquarters, and the battalion was split up and we and A Company had a certain portion to do and we come across a system of tracks. Now these tracks were, couldn't be seen from the air because they'd tied all the trees above them and had the jungle sort of covering the tracks. But the tracks were down to about 6 inches (150 mm) deep - trodden bare earth with peoples feet, elephants, trucks, everything in it and they could've been moving thousands of people through it and no one would've seen them when they went at night. Anyhow, we'd found this and it was pretty, you know, we knew we were onto something. And on the 7th we started to have contacts. And as we patrolled off of the tracks, these blokes were walking in.

GM Were you travelling as a platoon or company?

TH We were then as a company.

GM Okay.

TH And we used the old ploy of if we went into a harbour for more than 30 minutes we always dug in a shell scrape and that and we always ambushed the position when we left. And we had two type of VC then against us. We had the local ones who come straight into the position and dug up the rubbish pits, to see what they could find - the scavengers - but our (policy) was bash, burn and bury everything that you opened. You bashed, burned and buried and they'd never get nothing. But we used to ambush the position and you always got someone coming in, and it was like taking rice off kids. They just didn't fight. And the other ones - the NVA ones - these blokes we'd never struck them really before, but they were the North Vietnamese blokes who were done up in khaki uniforms and they all had AK-47's, brand new, still with the tropical proof on them. They couldn't use them.
[TH: *The enemy we were ambushing were recruits coming to a base to be trained by a permanent force that we hit on 8 November; the forces that were set for 1 RAR and 173rd Airborne battalion were bigger than the local Viet Cong units we were used to.*]
They wouldn't have fired, but they were slung over their shoulder and they were walking, in pairs, down the tracks. And I think we'd ambushed three lots of these blokes and this was into the, onto the 8th day [TH: *of November*]. We were still having contacts with them and we're moving towards the top of Hill 82. And once again, Tiny was doing my job as a section commander and he was given the task of going to the top of Hill 82. And Hill 82 was a very prominent feature that had from memory about three spurs running if you like east, west, and one running south off it.

GM And the ground around is fairly flat. But this thing just sticks up out of the ground?

TH It was, it was a gradual climb up to it but it had a series of false crests and at the first false crest was a well and I think 8 Platoon had a contact and they had two blokes there; got two of the enemy and they were buried in the well. It was a unused well, it was just a big hole with nothing in it and these bodies were put in there and covered. And we'd just moved off from that contact and Tiny had just went over the top, with 'Wingy' Townsend was our scout, just went over the top of the last false crest and five machine guns opened up. And from the noise and that, of course me being sergeant I was 'tail-end Charlie' of the platoon, that's where I, the (acting) sergeant, normally worked, walked, was 'tail-end Charlie'. [TH: *The platoon was being led once again by Sergeant Gordon Peterson*.] And from where I was, it sounded like an L-shaped ambush with, we'd went into but we'd hit the, if you say the long side of the 'L' but on the outside of it not inside there were as the long end was running along the ridge and the foot of the 'L', the short part of the 'L' was across the ridge. We hit in the outside of the centre of the long part, so every machine gun on the ambush position, which was designed to ambush someone walking down the ridgeline, was turned back on us. And after the initial burst and all the yelling and screaming, and we all closed up to try and find out what was going on. There was

nothing from Wingy or Tiny, not one sound. So we had to move forward to try and find out what happened to them and what we were against. And of course every time we moved we got one or two of these machine guns open up on every any movement on the, on the ridge that we were on. And (Major) John Healy our OC at this stage had deployed Col Fawcett; he was 3 Platoon, deployed him round to the left. And we were going to do is keep 2 Platoon in reserve and Col was going to do a left hook up the, against the short end of the 'L' and we were giving him fire support from the, from the position where we were in the centre of the long part of the 'L'. We moved, we had to move up to get to the crest, the false crest, to, you know, do anything because we could see nothing and every time we moved, they tossed Chicom grenades. And if anyone' s ever seen a Chicom grenade, it's mostly round and it's brown powder and there's a puff of brown smoke as it goes off and of course they mostly, I think the puff of brown is the clay they put round them and they fill them up with bolts and blooming bits of tin and anything you know. And that's the shrap they use. Anyhow we got up to the false crest and got in a position to give fire support and then I think it was Geoff Cave, was my gunner, he got hit doing the old IA on the machine gun (GPMG M-60) where you lift the feed cover and look up in to see what's in the chamber.

Well he put his head up and got one right through the centre of the head from the forehead right back. Nearly scalped him. Anyhow, he went down and someone else grabbed the machine gun and of course one of the rounds that had missed Geoff and would've killed him had taken the feed cover off and it had a hole in it. Danny Hayes is on my right. He tried to go up and he was shot through the arm and it went through his beautiful 'one-shot' AR-15 too. It went right through the receiver group so his weapon was, you know, to say US. I had fired my one shot and it was had a stripped case in it, so I left it beside Geoff Cave I think it was and grabbed the only weapon that was there that was, wasn't damaged was the M-79. And I was amazed that I had one in the spout. But I had no others. And the only bloke that was then left standing in my section was Chocka Pryor and we were what was left, unwounded or missing in the section.

So we'd lined up, he was on my right and I was on the left and we' d worked out which buttress tree we were going to and who was going to move and when we were going to move and who was going to cover who and that's when John Healy moved up to Russ (Errol) Rasmussen and said, 'Hold where you are. Fawcett is doing the left hook.' So we heard the attack go in on the left which is from us about 75 metres away and it stalled because there was nothing coming from Col's mob and a lot coming from the ambush that we'd hit and it wasn't till later in the night that we'd heard that young Gillson had been trapped in a buttress tree and shot to pieces. And I think Col ended up getting a MM I think it was for going to young Gillson and trying to recover him. But every time he touched him they opened up a machine gun and just cut him to ribbons and they had to pull back and John Healy said to me, he said, 'Well, what do you reckon?' and I think I said, the words I said, I said, 'It's murder sir, but we'll do it. We'll get you to the top.' [TH: *At this stage I thought Gordon Peterson was wounded o*r *dead*]. And Chocka and I were then going to move up to our fire and movement that we'd planned and do and I was going to use my one shot from the M-79 either having an accidental discharge or do something with it anyhow. We were prepared to go when John (Healy) said, 'No, we're going to pull back. Come back and we 'll cover you,' so that's we used fire and movement then for about oh a hundred yards or 150 yards (100-150 metres) I don't know how far it was. But it was back the way we'd come till we got to a position where the company could go into a very close harbour and that's where we ended up with our five stretcher cases and walking, I think we had four walking wounded, blokes of different stages of … like Danny (Denzil) Hayes only shot through the arm and I think he got hit again in upper chest when we were trying to get him, the wounded, behind a log.

But anyhow, we got back into this position and the five stretcher cases were in a bad way but I got to admire them, they didn't want for anything. The medic did everything he could in his power, to make them as restful as they were on the stretchers we'd made. We had just makeshift stretchers for them out of the stretcher bizzo and a couple of poles that's all we'd done with them and Bruce Murphy was our Kiwi FO and now if you want a employ an artillery blooming battery and have a FO make him Kiwi because they are the best. If you want a round to land on a sixpence, they'll put it there. And he brought in an open box battery fire mission that covered the top and both flanks of our position and every time a round went off, you heard the opposition yell and scream and even the wounded were grinning and it was pitch black as the one of those dark nights in Vietnam that you always got in the jungle and that. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face and you had to even ask, if you touched your nose, you'd have to ask the hand if it was yours. It was that dark, but with the flash of the artillery going off, everyone was grinning. It was a great feeling to know that the opposition was getting the cane and you were covered by it and that was our night. We got probes all night, every blooming 15 minutes or so there'd be an incident on the perimeter where they'd probed us. And of course the American battalion that was doing the sweep on the other side. Oh they would've been 4000 metres or four, say four

kilometres away. They were getting a caning too and whereas we'd lost the two blokes killed and missing and we had five stretcher cases, they had 77 killed - I think - and they had about 100-odd wounded. (40 killed and 60 wounded)

GM What did you run into?

TH This is always … the Americans reckon they hit the regiment. Well if what we didn't hit was the… ours must have been a battalion of the regiment that they hit. We must of hit one side of it.

GM I mean five machine guns, that's a pretty big organisation.

TH Yes, and every one of them had grenades and they kept throwing them grenades so they had plenty of ammo and they were well stocked up and so I think we hit the end of a regiment and we lured out [TH: *struck*] a battalion position we would have been up against.

GM Were they dug in?

TH Yes, they were.

GM Oh right.

TH They were, and we'd found lecture rooms, now, they train soldiers the same as we do, they had their seating where they'd put the poles up for lecture rooms and they had their sticks up where they'd hang maps and things like that and we'd found those on the 7th you know into the 8th, we'd found a couple of these. And the amount of movement and everything into the position we knew that we were going to hit something big.

GM Something big, yeah. I mean when you find tracks like that.

TH Yeah

GM Yeah. Now can you remember what that operation was called?

TH Hump was it, the Hump or something like that. (Battle of Gang Toi)

GM Oh. Okay.

TH That was… yeah.

GM So what happened the next day?

TH Well the next day, of course we were all ready and we'd been given orders by John Healy what we'd do if the battalion had come to do a battalion attack on Hill 82. We had our task and he'd given orders and everything for that and we had the wounded, we had to get them out and I think we went 1500-odd metres and of course the Americans couldn't spare the Huey Dustoffs because they were using them on their own (casualties) and we were still taking fire. There was still, we are still in contact even though it, the next day it was sporadic because we'd had the CO up. I think the CO went up in the Bell chopper. That would've been high he was up, I suppose. You don't fly around in a little plastic Bell chopper at tree level. Anyhow, he'd come over and they were able to direct artillery pin point onto the position and I think that he told us that there was 30 to 40 bodies lying around, but they couldn't identify whether they were our two that were missing, but anyhow the only thing they had to give us as support was a thing someone called it a Husky I called it a Huckle. I thought its name was a Huckle but it might've been a Husky and it was just a big silver shoebox - that's all it looked like. It had a big square opening at the back as it hovered at treetop and they sent down, you know, the stretchers and we put ours on to it and it just sat there on the tree level right on top of the trees and until we pulled them out and got rid of them. And then we got the order to move and defend an LZ to pull the whole 173rd (Brigade) out. They were all going out and we were going to be the last lift off. We were defending the, you may say the south side of the LZ and we moved then and we had to move. A Company had to move through the battalion and I think that was the last, hardest patrol or walk I've ever done in me life is going through your mates in the battalion. Because in them days, you knew

everyone in the battalion and the look on their faces was we wanna go and try and find Tiny and young Gillson. But we were leaving them, and to leave a bloke in action is one of the worst, I think is the worst, thing that you can do but we were out-fought, out-beat and of course out-manoeuvred by the Americans pulling us off.

GM So there was just no way of going back up there and getting th em? And they're still MIA aren't they?

TH Yes.

GM MIA presumed dead.

TH Yeah, well young Gillson was pronounced dead by Col Fawcett and given to him, and he had you know, well I won't go into what a body looks like when it's been continually hit with a machine gun you know there's…

GM But no one could find Tiny?

TH Tiny was heard by Wingy to make an exclamation of some sort. Whether it was, well it should've been, 'Contact front' he would've been yelling out, you know, when the initial thing went out. But I believe he was firing for a while because I could hear because he was carrying the SLR.

GM You could always tell when they fire.

TH Oh, well, you know it's a friend. And it was firing but I heard three rounds and then I didn't hear anything else and we were within you know 25 metres, I think, Chocka and I got the highest up the hill and we were within 25 metres of where he disappeared. Now whether he ran to the right and found cover or went down where he was shot we don't know. But for the 35 years, 6 months and 23 days of my life since that night, the 8th November 1965, I've thought about Tiny, what I did to him and everything. And of course his wife, Wendy. I've now got very friendly with Wendy. She's in New Zealand. Of course Tiny had sent her, she was a Kiwi girl, and when they married on the 29th of September 1962, he had taken a Kiwi girl and made her an Australian lass. And when we'd gone away, he had said to her, because she had no friends, except her bridesmaid and her bridesmaid still lives in Port Macquarie, he said, 'Look, go home to your mother. All these Moratorium (protest) marches and everything in Sydney and everything stirring up trouble, go home to your mother and I'll pick you up when I come home.'
So, she went Napier in New Zealand and [TH: *and on 11 November 1965, I wrote my letter to her after we returned from Operation Hump – on Salvation Army letter pad paper*], and in late November, she got the first indication, a letter from an Australian, to say that we'd lost Tiny. And I didn't see that letter until Christmas Day 2000 when I went over to spend time with Wendy and her new husband. And you wouldn't believe, the bloke that wrote that letter was 15254, Corporal, T F Hagan. I was the only Australian, military or government to write to her when we lost him.
Well I kicked up a bit of a stink. Like always, when you go into battle, you gotta do a bit of planning but I went in headfirst and accused people and did a lot of things. But then I found in her archives another letter, dated 1st August 1966, this time it was written by 15254, Private, T F Hagan. I'd been stripped in the meantime because after I'd lost Tiny I played up a little bit I think and did a few things wrong, but anyhow, I'd written to her after I'd talked to her on the phone, that I'd find his personal belongings and make sure they got to her New Zealand. And they did. The steel trunk that the section had packed on the 11th of November 1965 and we put timber all round it like it was the SOP then to make it square because it was the issue footlocker. The old, oh and the best trunk they ever issued was the aluminium one with rounded corners. Anyhow, we'd put a lock on it. SOP put the two keys in an envelope with masking tape on the top, like always, and away it went. Well it arrived at Wendy's mother's address in Napier in 1967. We'd lost him remember in November '65 and I'd got onto her in August '66, anyhow, not far, but it is a long way I suppose for a trunk to get to. And she put it in h er cupboard and that was it. She told the powers that be that were paying her then a War Widow's pension and Tiny' s superannuation that she was going to re-marry and the superannuation mob said, 'Yeah, that's all right, we just change your name and everything.' And when I saw her at Christmas, the only pension she was getting was the Lance Corporal, five eighths of a Lance Corporal wage in 1965, in her pension. And not even a blooming Kiwi sheep could live on that. Anyhow, she married on the 13th, re-married on the 13th of February '84, but in 1985, the Australian government had passed the Veteran's

entitlement, the Veteran's Entitlement Act that any war widow who married on or after the 28th of May 1984 would keep, I say keep, her War Widow's pension. So Wendy had missed out by 74 days, yet that dear lady had spent 15 years of her life as a recluse working for Telecom New Zealand. Going home to her mother's house and remaining in her bedroom until Don fell in love with her voice of Telecom and it took him another couple of years, four years-odd, to - combined with her mother and him - to get her out and marry her.

GM Was that, was that the toughest time for you in the platoon?

TH Yes, I'd say that was. That was one of the toughest times. But I'll just say one thing on that trunk. It is still unopened. It is still waiting for Tiny to come home and the beauty about it is … I combined with the women, these re-married women who had lost their pension now. The government says there's 4000 of them. I've found the names of 200 and in the last budget the government said they 'll put $68 million over four years to give these ladies their War Widows pension back because we'd discriminated for 17-odd years. So that's one good thing that come out.

But you say was it the, the, before Hill 82, we'd in October the 12th, I think it was from memory, we'd went into the Iron Triangle. And this Iron Triangle was an area in the shape of a triangle that was supposed to be and was the re-supply and administrative controlling area of all the VC in South Vietnam against Saigon. And this day, 1 Section, 1 Platoon of the First Battalion, we were point on the left, advancing down this from this fort that the ARVN had defending the village against the VC in this triangle and low and behold there 1 Section found a minefield fence. It had a skull and cross bones on it marked as the Geneva Convention would say. I said 'Christ, we've found something that the enemy have marked.' So we sent that back and from his position on the, on an APC at 1010 metres behind us the CO said, 'Push on.' And we said, 'But it's a minefield,' and they said, 'Push on' - so we did. Two killed and 34 wounded later we were in a blooming mine field, and we'd been forced through it and we lost Lance Corporal, was Tommy Ross; he was blown in half in front of me. And 'Blue' (Ray) Unwin had only 176 holes in his body and I had three. But I was pretty well right. I'd blown up at least 20 foot in the air and I saw above the trees and I landed on an ant's nest. Got down and I said to young Jimmy Fitch, I said, 'You grab Jock's feet and I'll grab his shoulders and we'll get him off the track.' Well we didn't plan which we way we were going to get him off the track, so he went his way and I went mine and we both had parts of Jock, he'd been blown in half. So we had to try and put him back together, which we couldn't, we weren't medically trained, and then we dragged Blue Unwin out. We got the Dustoff chopper in [TH: *and while* waiting] we found in this, going round the area, two ladies, and they would've been 80 to 90-year old. And they had command detonated this explosion that had killed Jock and [TH: *wounded Blue*). And then someone said to me, 'What's all that blood?' I said, 'It's Jock's.' They said, 'No, it's coming out of your shirt.' I looked down and being a coward I opened up me shirt and sure enough it was my blood. So they said, 'Go back on this chopper with the body and Blue Unwin. So I don't think the Americans wanted to take me because I was walking (wounded) - I think, and they said walking wounded walks, you know, but anyhow they took me back. We went back to the 83rd Evac (Hospital), which was the American clearing hospital (in the field) and Jock was laid out with the rest of the bodies that the hospital there that they were and I was told to stand in a line. And there was about 80 Americans in front of me. And they were all Negroes and the ward that we were put in was a sloping grassy bank and all these Americans were told to lie down face down on it.

And these couple of doctors were going round with pliers pincher-type things and pulling out these rounds out of their backs and holding them up and saying '7.62'. They'd been shot by their own blokes in the back and it must've been lucky because they might've had 1946 ammunition too and that didn't have the power to go through the body. But anyhow, they'd been all shot by their own blokes. Eighty of them. TH: *The Americans were attacking up a hill and were shot by their own GPMG M-60s.*]

And he got to me and he said, 'Where are you hit?' And I said, 'Oh here, across me chest.' And he said, 'Oh does it hurt?' And I said, 'Nup.' And he said, 'You're right.' And he turned around and then with a snotty rag he wiped the blood off. He said, 'Nooo,' he said, 'they're just scratches.' So that was that. So I then had to get me own lift back to Bien Hoa which I did, they got me back there and as I walked into the battalion there and they said, 'Oh, Corporal Hagan you can take out tonight's TAOR patrol.' So I said, 'Yeah, no problems.' So I looked and I had bottle washers, I had cooks and I had blokes from the Q (Store) and I …holy living dooly isn't this going to be a night. Well, I didn't sleep all night but we went out and guarded the base for the night but I don't think those kids will ever want to go on a TAOR patrol again either.

GM No. You finished your tour with 1 RAR, then did a tour of Malaysia with 8 RAR.

TH Yes.

GM And then you came back to Vietnam with 8 RAR?

TH Yes

GM What, what was the biggest, what were the big differences between the tour in '65 and then going back with 8 RAR in what, '68 wasn't it?

TH '69.

GM '69, 70.

TH '69, 70

GM What were the biggest differences for you? You were a sergeant then.

TH I was a sergeant then.

GM In a rifle platoon.

TH In a rifle platoon. Yeah. The biggest thing was that I'd had these blokes in Malaysia and every one of them, the National Servicemen that I had with me. My first time with National Service and I've got nothing against them whatsoever, they were the cream of Australian youth was our Nashos. Every one of them except a Regular soldier, JJ Barrett, signed on to go to Vietnam with me, so I had blokes that I'd had for two years at least. And once again I had to have a corporal as a acting platoon sergeant and I was mostly the platoon commander. Where I'd been in Malaya I'd been the platoon commander, all through Malaya, of the platoon and the only thing that gives me the pips about that was I was given [TH: *recommended for*) a BEM for my service as a platoon commander in Malaysia, but it was never ever issued to me.
And I was there for 18 months as a platoon commander, acting because like... Once again I had all singlies until I got Dougie Barber - another hometown Dalby boy - and he come in as a 'marriedy' and he had a different blood group to me, so we didn't get on at all, Doug and I, and he ended up taking a posting to RP's. But I had a single platoon and they were all O4 – O Positive - blood because, as I said before, I' m a coward and to have all the blokes with the same blood as you, then you're right.

GM So, what are these big differences between the, from the type of gear you had to the types of operations to the types of contacts. What were all the big differences?

TH Well, the major difference was the weapons we now had, because then was now the M-16 was, you know, they worked and the weapons all worked and the clothing we had now didn't fall off, the boots were the GPs and they, you know, …

GM Because you had boots and gaiters hadn't you?

TH We went for TS in the first, TS boots which were brown and we had to pay our 38 shillings ($3.80) or whatever it was for blooming Raven oil to make 'em black to fit in with the dress manual and they lasted a fortnight in tropical conditions. But they issued you two pair so for a month at least you had boots on your feet and then if you weren't in Malaya and got parachute cord so you could strap the soles to the uppers, you walked bare feet. So you know.

GM So equipment, you've got the Australian Pattern pack.

TH Well, yes, we went with the Australian Pattern pack until packs, until blokes, the funny thing was, even in 8 Battalion, if you went to the Americans and got the American gear which wasn't 100 percent but it was, you know, 100 percent on ours, you weren't allowed to wear it. You know, Battalion SOPs - you couldn't have American greens, you couldn't have American gear until some of the senior officers said well, 'Ooh, we look good in this.' So they started parading around with it, so we got to wear it.

GM Were you still in A Company on your second tour?

TH No, I was C Company.

GM Charlie Company?

TH Charlie Company.

GM Who was your company commander?

TH We had Dave Rankine.

GM Yep.

TH Yeah, Dave Rankine was.

GM So, the types of operations you did, how, how different were they from what you'd done with 1 RAR?

TH Well, we did a lot in 8 RAR of ambushing. A lot of ambushing in 8 and it was another way of working, but Australian soldiers, now I will back 'em against anyone, especially in the ambush role of, you know, movement and everything to get in the planning. And everything we did in the ambush was by the infantry book, not the blooming books they print. We'd learnt this, especially us blokes from 1 (RAR). They'd learnt and applied things we'd learnt in 1 Battalion into 8. So I think 8 was better trained - definitely better trained than 1 (RAR) - but 1 was professional soldiers so they were, you know, you'd have to say that they were pretty good but 8, with the Nashos and that, they were excellent really. But tactics had changed with lessons learnt, you know. We'd applied that principle of what we'd learnt in the first tour; we'd brought it into our own tactics like movement especially at night and moving into defensive positions. In C Company we'd used the triangle ambush. Now I reckon it is one of the greatest and simplest ways of getting into a defensive position at night and it's so simple when people learn angles and can walk straight, you know. They can go into it and it is one of the things that I've learnt because the blooming opposition were using the 'L' against us and an 'L' is only a, a triangular … not finished, you know.

GM So what do you think was the most memorable incident from your 8 RAR tour?

TH I wasn't there for the most memorable incident because I was I'd been moved out for 12 days to Butterworth because I had falsyprin malaria. It was a time when an American had died from taking dapsone and so they said, 'Righto, everyone will cease dapsone', and because it kills one in a million because it was a blooming … a drug for that disease that things, fingers fall off, what's that called?

GM Leprosy.

TH Leprosy. Yeah, it was a Leprosy drug and it was against all medical knowledge it was given to us Australians on a trial basis. The thing was we'd, we were taken off it, but the one the thing it was doing is suppressing these new type of malaria. Now I've had MT, BT and now I've got falsyprin. It was suppressing those, and we were ambushing a field hospital of the opposition when we got this, there was a whole heap of us went down and seven of us had to be put down to Butterworth to make way for 4 RAR - I think it was - had a mine incident; they had 15 wounded and they had no beds at Vung Tau, so they put us on a plane and sent us down to Butterworth. But while I was coming back into the country after me 12 days rest in Butterworth, Chad Sherrin had sprung a … again a sergeant leading the platoon, had sprung a ambush and killed…

GM 23.

TH 23-odd enemy mainly with Claymores, and he used his initiative and moved an ambush position that had been set and moved it at night using his own initiative to get these blokes coming out of a village. And it worked but if it hadn't worked he would've been hung. That's the, but once again

the old system and I have always stated that if I ever had the pleasure of going back into action I'd have all platoons led by two sergeants and the officers could sit back in their map room and do their bizzo.

GM Okay. When you finished the 8 RAR tour in 1970, the war, 8 RAR wasn't replaced.

TH No.

GM And so the withdrawal and the Vietnamisation was starting to take place. You know, you had been a professional soldier at that stage for almost 20 years. Just over 20 years. How did you feel when you came back home?

TH I was disheartened, because I honestly believed that the Vietnam war was the safest place for soldiers and us to fight and learn, You look at statistics - 503 [TH: *520*) KIA in 10 years and 2243 wounded and while we were doing that which everyone was against, the Australian public lost, in the same 10 years, 36,000 [TH: *22,000*] on our roads. Now, no one will bloomin' admit to that but that's fact. Now if you could only lose 503 [TH: *520*) when you're trying to kill and be killed, why should you lose 36,000 [TH: *22,000*] back here on our roads?

GM I mean well, it's a fact isn't it, for a shorter period of time, we lost as many in Korea. I mean Korea was a lot more intense?

TH Yeah, yeah yeah.

GM And that was supposed to be a police action.

TH Yeah. And look what they've done to the Korean veterans.

GM So what do you think? What did you learn most from your time in Vietnam as a soldier?

TH I think the main thing I learnt was trust men that you've trained, especially Australian soldiers. If you've trained them to react one way when something happens, you can bet your bottom dollar they will do it, and that's why I say, sergeants, sergeants live with soldiers, sergeants are the father, the grandfather, the mother that everything of soldiers and you can take a kid and sit him on a stump and tell him in five (minutes) what he's got to do, how he's got to do it and he' ll do it. You can't command men from afar when you're down in that nitty gritty thing of you know, killing and being killed and weapons. It's all right to teach a bloke, oooh, this is a SLR; it'll kill a bloke up to 900 (600 lethal range) metres. But when you put him in a position and sight him as a rifleman, you've got to tell him, show him what that weapon' s going to do out to that 900 metres and how he's going to have to use it. It's like machine guns. Machine gun's no good to use it as a pistol. It's got to be used when the arc of fire (cone of fire) lands on the ground, that's where you kill people. You don't, or you'll kill 'em point blank… but. The idea is to sight the weapon and tell the kid what its capabilities are and train him to that when he goes to a position with a weapon, he's gotta be able to use it at its most deadly capability to kill the enemy.

GM You've mentioned training a couple of times during this interview. One gets the impression that training is the key to success.

TH It'll always be. And the thing that hurts me really is that as we've gone on, we've tried to get more educated soldiers into the field. I was always as a sergeant and I was seven year s and a bit a sergeant given the dregs of a battalion. They'd always - the RSM, no matter who it was, A G Smith or Joe Lee – 'Sergeant Hagan.' Up I'd go, 'Yeah.' 'Private Bloggs here. Oh, no one wants him.' 'Give him to me. Is he single?' 'Yes.' 'What's his blood group?' Oh, he's had to change it to O Positive in his mind, so you know, but I got all the dregs, all the kids that everyone reckons were useless, and everyone of them turned into a bloody beauty. And I think because I was dumb meself, that I could relate to blokes, you know, I could sit down, like a say, on a stump and we could talk it out and we 'd work out and nine times out of ten those blokes that they reckon were dumb, were brilliant in one part of soldiering, you know. And once you found that, whether it be sniping, or whether it'd be scouting, or whether it'd be carrying weights, you know, it didn't matter. He was an expert in that and when you employed him in that bizzo and just brushed up the edges of him, he was great you know. And that was

I think the art that you get after being… I was soldier 23 years 6 months and 3 days; enjoyed every bit of it. When I went to Army Reserve - the old CMF which I'd first joined was then - when I got out, the Army Reserve and I went there, I found the same thing where they were expecting a lot but not training in it. But once you got in, and they say, ' Oh but that's no the RSM.' It is. It is my job to instruct soldiers how to fight and stay alive.

GM You look back on two tours of Vietnam and the fact that the Yanks pulled out and all that sort of stuff and we followed suit. Do you have any regrets about going to Vietnam?

TH Personally I don't, but if you look at, if we knew what we know now, we should never have went in there. You know, but we as Australians had to fulfill like I say a promise. We joined a treaty. Now that treaty, the people in that treaty that we were there to defend asked for help. Okay we might've been lied to but they didn't ask the right way, whatever it was, but within that treaty once you've put your name to it, you've got to abide by what it says and we were there for that reason. To stop the communists from taking over Asia. and after you've seen what in the two places, the CT - the communist terrorist - in Malaya and the VC in Vietnam, in both places, we had instances where we had called truces so they'd have a democratic election and we'd pull back and let them have their election and had to go in two days later and pick up the bodies of the people who had won the election and when you get to see a person who's been disemboweled and their privates shoved in their mouth and beer bottles placed in women and broken, you know. That's what communism is, you know.

GM Well, war's fairly brutal isn't it?

TH War is, it will always be brutal and it takes a certain type of person I suppose to voluntarily go into it, but when you're trained - like I say when you're trained, and that's the sole thing of soldiers is training - if you 're trained the right way, you will fight and you will come home.

GM I would like you to finish on a note now that, imagine you had every one in Queensland as your audience. How would you describe the Australian soldier?

TH The Australian soldier is the best jungle fighter in the world. I have worked with Americans, British, Malaysian, Singaporean, South Vietnamese that's to name a few, and the only one that comes anywhere near an Australian is the Ghurka. So if I was asked to pick 120 men to form a company to do a certain task in the jungle I would pick 90 Australians and 30 Ghurkas and no one would beat me. No one would beat me. If I was allowed to train them.

GM Well, on that note we'll wind it up.

TH Thank you Gary.

GM Thanks Trev.

End of Interview