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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

S02874

Neil Ronald Eiby as a private rifleman 3rd Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR), later a corporal rifle section commander 1st Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR), Malaya 1958-1960, interviewed by Colonel David Chinn MBE (Rtd)

Recorded

at: Canberra, ACT
on: 1 May 2003
by: Bill Brassell, AWM Staff

Description

Eiby speaks of his training for service in Malaya with 3 RAR, later 1 RAR; impressions of 3 RAR on joining as a reinforcement; weapons, ammunition carried and clothing, with effects on weapon handling and acclimatisation; base camps and accommodation; rations and operational ration packs; field equipment used by the soldier; the nature of operations as experienced in A Company 3 RAR and the level of communist terrorist (CT) activity; the employment of Iban trackers; memorable experiences on operations air resupply drops, crowds of monkeys moving throughout the tree tops, meeting a tiger in its lair, encountering a boa constrictor; test-firing of weapons and weapon/ammunition security in base camp; local leave and dress while on leave; health problems and anti-malaria precautions; accidents - an overturned boat in the rapids, a lightning strike; personalities in both 3 RAR and later 1 RAR; sport, mainly softball; rest and recreation - married and single personnel; his opinion of service in Malaya being an 'accompanied' posting; the most influential character from his point of view; the value of infantry service in Malaya for the Vietnam commitment.

Transcribed by: C.L. Soames, March 2004

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Identification: This is an interview with Warrant Officer Class 1 Neil Eiby OAM (Rtd); it is conducted by Colonel David Chinn MBE (Rtd) on Thursday 1 May 2003 at the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered are mainly the experiences of Warrant Officer Eiby as a rifleman and acting rifle section commander in 3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR) in 1958-1959, and 1st Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) in 1959-1960, during the Malayan Emergency.

Warrant Officer Eiby was born in Brisbane on 11 February 1940, educated at Nudgee State High School, and then by correspondence until Year 10. His significant postings were 1959-1961 in Malaya with 3 RAR and 1 RAR; 1963-1965, Malaysia and Borneo with D Company 3 RAR, as a section commander; 1967-1968, Vietnam, as the CSM of Delta Company 3 RAR; 1969-1973 at RMC Duntroon as an infantry instructor as a WO2; 1974-1975 at Kapooka at the Recruit Training Battalion, at the School of Recruit Training; 1975-1977, Infantry Centre as an instructor on the RSM's course; 1977-1979, 6 RAR Enoggera, as the RSM; 1980, 6th Brigade as the RSM of the brigade; 1981-1983, RMC Duntroon as the RSM; and was discharged in January 1984 and awarded the OAM in 1979.

Neil, thanks ever so much for coming down and giving us all that time in preparation for it. It was very interesting listening to your discussion before we started the interview, and I wish we'd had the tape going; but I'm looking forward to some good material which we'll have for the oral history.

Thank you very much, David

First of all, Topic 1: Could you talk a little bit about your service background and experience, as well as training, which were preparation for the Malayan Emergency commitment?

I'd have to say that my preparation for Malaya was very limited. I joined the Army and then did all the normal training to get to an infantry battalion, and I ended up in 1 RAR, and I was posted to Machine Gun Platoon which had the Vickers machine gun. 1 RAR were due to go to Malaya that year, so I actually was looking forward to that. And then we started our training on the Vickers machine gun - and my sergeants were all Korean veterans, all old soldiers. Then the request came for reinforcements to go to 3rd Battalion who were serving in Malaya.

The battalion itself, the members didn't want to go because they were, in fact, going with 1 RAR and they wanted to serve with their battalion. Several of us had only just arrived and we had no sort of alliance with the battalion, so we volunteered and found ourselves at Canungra, which we never, ever knew existed at that stage. We did quite an extensive period of training at Canungra, and I still, today, would say this was the foundation for everything that followed later on in my career - great soldiers, all of the old soldiers there were instructors, tough but fair, and very able to teach very well. We gained a lot of experience from that.

From there we flew to Malaya and we went to Kota Tinggi, the Jungle Training Centre, for a short course, it wasn't long. I think the major effect it had on me there were the Ghurkhas, how regimented they were. You know, when we were grumbling, these little Ghurkhas were just going ahead with blank faces, and saying nothing, and doing the job, so it sort of inspired us to do it too because they were so much smaller than us.

From there I ended up being posted to A Company 3 RAR, and A Company had blokes from Malaya. We went up, I think, by train, and then by truck, to Lasah. So we ended up in a section. Though I'd say my jungle training preparation was just the two schools, probably the two best in the world at that stage.

That's right. That was a good run through. As you say, a bit of a shock being taken from the battalion you were expecting to go to Malaya with, to be suddenly pushed in that much more advanced.

Yeah. I didn't mind going as a reinforcement, no-one really wanted to.

No, that's right - it takes a while to settle in. This cropped up in the Korean interviews, the fellows that came in as reinforcements, and they took a long time to settle in, particularly when the operations were so intense.

Yeah, they sort of, you know, the fellows are on the ground, believe that the person coming in - and rightly so - doesn't have the experience to be able to do it.

That's right.

It takes them some time to realise that they are the ones that have got to help you get the experience.

That's right. I think Len Opie brought that out in 3 RAR in Korea, his experience as a reinforcement. And then he made sure, when he was a section commander, that he had the fellows properly bonded in with the section.

Yes. I think later on in my Army career that sort of came through, although I have struck kids that had served in Vietnam don't even remember their section, so it can't be very important - that's a tragic thing. Our training there, we soon blended in though, I mean, it was certainly up to us, in a lot of ways, to make our own way - we were only young, little experience in anything, let alone ...

Topic 2 would be interesting from that point of view. As you say, you were inexperienced, but you had the good courses. What were your impressions of the state of 3 RAR when you got there, from the operational point of view, as much as you could judge at the time? What were the impressions you had, and particularly, say, the warrant officers and NCOs you encountered when you first got there? What was your impression regarding their professionalism, and so on?

Well, all of the ones that I had were truly professional. I had a Sergeant Jack [Catin], who was my platoon sergeant, had served for many, many years in the Army, and he was like a father-figure to us, but he wasn't too soft. I would say the battalion, like in my part of it - I never saw the rest of the battalion - I can't say that I ever saw the whole battalion ever together, I can only just remember our company, and perhaps other companies that we had sport against.

In A Company, I would say (it was) very professional, they went about their business proficiently. They were hard players at night, of course, whenever they were in base, but they were certainly very professional soldiers, and ones that you sort of got comfortable with, you never felt any sort of fear or doubts about them, they were always the ones that gave you the

confidence to step forward. I loved those men, I love them today, they were very good.

You joined 3 RAR at what stage of their tour of two years?

They were in their way home that year, so I actually joined in March 1959. They went home in August - the start of August - through to September 1959, and then 1 RAR came.

So you encountered them as quite an experienced battalion in terms of the Emergency?

Yes, they'd sort of had their trip, and from there it was in a different training phase, they were sort of preparing to go home, and were sort of tidying up various ... we did operations, but most of it had been covered in our area. 1 RAR later came and stretched further up to Grik, right up to the Thai border, but we weren't, at that stage, patrolling that area.

My first patrol in Malaya - my section 2IC was a fellow by the name of Garry Sutherland - got us lost, and we spent the night out under a rock, the whole of the patrol, but he always blamed us. When he got back he told the section commander and the platoon commander that it was unfair sending him out with all these inexperienced soldiers. We said to him, well, it was the bloke with the compass who was the problem.

It was hard enough anyway. You'd expect by that period he'd realise the tricks and traps of navigating in that sort of country.

Yeah. I actually think they had become a bit blasé about where they were going because a lot of areas they'd been in before and they sort of knew the creek, and they knew where they were, and with us there, we didn't know. So sometimes, when in doubt, when you are in a patrol of experienced people, you could turn around and say that's the creek there, and they would say, no, it's further up, or they could guide you to the right one. Well, we couldn't - it was up to you.

From their point of view it's an advantage to stay in the one area because you get to know the tracks, you know the creek junctions, you know where to move quickly, and the map just confirms it. But if you keep changing areas, and you people being new in the area ...

Yeah, we didn't have a clue. And at that stage we were also sort of living under issue equipment; no, we didn't have any of the stuff that they had at that stage - like stretchers, they got canvas stretchers made, and all that sort of thing.

Also they would have modified their equipment - we can talk about that later. Some of the guys bought Bergen rucksacks in some of the battalions, some had got plastic li-los, plastic sheeting for a hootchie instead of the heavy issue on, and so on. You arriving new, you had to go through what they'd gone through eighteen months before.

Yes. So we were on the deck and we were living it fairly rough. When we got lost overnight, when you are lost in the jungle, you are not sure how long you are going to be there. But the next day we back-tracked - it was us new fellows that got them back actually.

That would be worth a few drinks at the bar.

Had to keep quiet about it.

That's right, they wouldn't want to hear about that.

No.

When you were, say, with 1 RAR, and before you went to Malaya, were you given much of a brief on what you could expect in Malaya, like Strategic Reserve jobs, or the Emergency itself? Did you know much about it before you left?

No, I can't ever remember that. Being in Machine Gun Platoon was quite different because that was the end of the Vickers era, and we were doing training with the Vickers. Of course, that was quite different then. I don't know even then if they planned to take the Vickers to Malaya; I guess they were going to otherwise you wouldn't be training on them. But there was no sort of, that I can recall, any Malayan training in the battalion that we took part in - we were up at Tin Can Bay did shooting and exercises there, but there was no jungle thing. The only time we ever got any briefings on Malaya that I can recall was at Canungra, and it was very thorough and well put together. There was a little bit when I was in corps training, but there was not the terrain to train in. Canungra was the first time that you got a realistic look at what it's like, and then, of course, you are destined to go to war, so to speak, and therefore the training increased, the pressure increased.

In Canungra too, I suppose, because it had been the training centre for people going to the South West Pacific area, there was a bit of a background to it, which I think we all realised, they had trained Australian soldiers, ten, fifteen, years before to go to another war, which was still a jungle war. So in that sense you probably developed a bit of confidence in what you'd learnt there because it was all part of that place.

You came away believing that you could handle it, you can handle the jungle, it wasn't sort of a worry for us when we went to Malaya. In fact, I found the jungle very comforting.

I asked that of Mealing yesterday, I said, 'How did you feel?' because I always felt the same thing. You weren't, for a start, being sunburnt or burnt in the blazing sun, it was cool - sometimes a bit warm and humid - but it was cool, shadowy. There was also the business of it being so much different to Australian terrain where it make a lot of noise, and you can sometimes see much further; in the jungle it was fairly short distances. You just sort of felt that it was ... I felt, as you do, I guess, much more at home in the jungle.

Yeah, and you could move quietly. When you are planning a patrol you could observe, you could cover a lot of ground, the various methods we used to patrol, based on fan methods, and those sort of methods. You covered a lot of ground and you always felt fairly safe - I did. You knew that he couldn't see you much better than you could see him.

That works both ways, doesn't it?

Yes.

In open country, in Australia, you've got long fields of vision and you could be fired at from a fair distance, and you could be observed, and you could be headed off.

And later on in Vietnam, it was the same, you were never sure how much he could see better

than you.

That's right. You mentioned, in Topic 4, training in Australia for service there, and, as you said, your concentration was really on the Machine Gun Platoon in Australia.

Until we went as reinforcements, until we were sort of stamped as reinforcements.

And then you went to Canungra?

And then we sort of stuck as a group and away we went. I got injured at Canungra, mainly through stupid things. We were practicing jumping off a bridge. Anyway, we did this one night, we thought we'd go down and have a practice, and I landed on a rock, a whole rock shelf, did both my ankles then. Anyway, I thought that would stop me from going, but it didn't, I was out of there in a short time.

That hasn't lasted with your ankles now, has it?

No, no.

That's good. As long as in later years you don't end up with arthritis, or something like that.

Probably.

You are young so you have no trouble with that.

Topic 5 is really related to 3 RAR in transit from Australia to Malaya, so we won't need to deal with that. Your transit to Malay was by air, I guess, wasn't it?

Yes, that's right, I flew up, and we went to Kota Tinggi. I think we went by truck from the airport to Kota Tinggi, to the Training School.

How many of you were there?

Probably about ten, twelve, I suppose; then later on we joined a lot of others. In fact, 3 RAR, at the end, were a lot of reinforcements because they were filtering them back to Australia. I think, at that stage, there was some other conflict that may have ... oh, at that stage I forget what it was, but there was some other thing that may have been cropping up, they may have been building up in Australia or something because a lot of them did go back in that last eight months that I was there.

And the course at Kota Tinggi, as you say, was a very professional course, compared well with Canungra and vice versa.

It was a time when I found out that we were better than the Poms.

That's good for confidence, isn't it?

Well, you know ...

They had a lot of national servicemen too, didn't they?

Yes.

Did they still have national servicemen then?

Yes.

Apparently they had them in Korea.

Yeah, they were nearly all national servicemen, all my time there, I think. They had to spend their time there. I found their officers weren't up to ... Well, I didn't have a lot of experience with officers; in fact, in my Machine Gun Platoon days they were all sergeants - there were five sergeants there, there were four sections, and the sergeant was an old fellow named Dan Kelly, a World War II bloke. We didn't have many officers until later; I think my first officer was an officer I struck when I got to 3 RAR, who was also a reinforcement named Ian Gollings.

Oh, yes, I know him well.

He was my platoon commander - he would be my first recognised platoon commander in the Army.

There was a question on Kota Tinggi. Some people have remarked on the technique of getting off a quick shot. At Canungra the teaching was to fire a quick shot from the hip, but apparently at Kota Tinggi it was to get up to a roughly aimed shot from the shoulder. Do you remember those differences, and did you have any views on which was the better one?

I think the aimed shot is always the best shot, David, but there are times when you have to fire from the hip and you just don't have the time in the jungle. I think our first reaction was from the hip in 3rd Battalion; I think we were trained in the aimed shot all the time, but I think the hip was the ...

The quickest shot is from the hip, I think Canungra tended to emphasise that.

Yeah, Canungra emphasised the hip because you did those sneaker courses. I can't remember Kota Tinggi actually, but I do know, when I was in 3rd Battalion, we concentrated a lot on both sides, certainly, because in your range practices you did both.

That made sense because it developed your skills at doing both, whichever one was the quickest.

That was the way at the time. It's easy to fire from the hip, I liked firing from the hip, but it's more expensive on ammunition. We never carried as much ammunition as we did in later conflicts.

How many mags did you carry, say, Owen and Bren?

Three, I think, no extra - I can't ever recall any extra ammunition. I think there was one for your rifle, and two in your pouch - we had the old short .303 when we first went there.

The jungle carbine, was it, with the flash eliminator on the front?

Yeah, on the front, the little one. That's what we were first issued with in 3rd Battalion, and then we got the Belgian FN. Then we got the machine gun, it was the modified Brit SLR.

The heavy SLR.

Yeah.

Heavy barrelled job.

Yeah; then we got the SLR, but initially it was a .303 Bren that we used, and then we got the heavy barrelled Bren - I think it was still the Bren when I left, and the Owen gun ...

That's right.

... with the slide. And then they got the F1, but that might have been later there.

The F1 was later, the Pentropic days, I think.

Yeah.

The Pentropic came in in '60 anyway, which is about the time one would have come back from Malaya anyway.

Yeah.

They all started to merge in after a while though.

We used to fire a lot of rounds, I know that, at training; we did a lot of that in training, in Malaya. We had a small range, it was only close range stuff, of course. I remember there was a time when the sergeant would take you down and you'd fire, and you did all these things.

This was at Lasah, was it?

Yes, at Lasah. We had this little range there and we'd go down, and march down and fire, and then march back, and that would be our training. And we'd do our weapon training beforehand - constantly did that, even though we'd been at it - I can always remember that we were frequently at it.

In 2 RAR we were also in Lasah Camp, but there was no facility then to even test fire your weapons. We carried five mags, and in A Company of 2 RAR, because they had that big contact at Sungei Siput with that ambush, they carried seven mags. When I was with them we had a contact up near the Thai border. It was just the reaction; they'd been ambushed so they were carrying those extra two mags over the five.

I can't remember that we carried that much, maybe I'm ...

In the contacts we'd have in Malaya, we didn't need to carry five mags because the

number of contacts you were having would be such fleeting contacts. It's only cases like where Claude Ducker put that attack in.

Attack in on the camp.

You didn't often get that opportunity.

Yeah, well, we never got the opportunity, I never fired a round in anger. That was one of the things that you wanted to do, but we never, ever contacted anyone. Whether we were too noisy or not, I don't know. No, I think most of it had thinned out by the time ...

It really had, yes.

It took a dive very quickly.

And 1 RAR, I gather ... Brigadier Morrow said the frustration was just the absolute where 3 and 2 had some camps located and the odd contact, but 1 just didn't have any. It was very hard from the morale point of view, to keep the blokes switched on.

Yeah, the whole time.

How did you find acclimatisation when you got to Kota Tinggi? Was it a shock to your system?

Yeah.

Although you'd left Australia in March-April, it was getting cooler - it can be cool in Canungra at that time.

Yeah.

Kota Tinggi would have been a big of a shock to the system.

Yeah, it was, but we settled in alright. The humidity gets you, and then you are walking around in base without a shirt on, and all that sort of thing, initially. I don't know, it never affected us greatly.

I'll tell you, when 1 RAR came they went in to do an extensive period around our base, and we did a lot of contact drills and stuff. When I was with 3 we didn't do that because they were on their wind-down, but when 1 came ...

Fresh into the theatre.

... fresh into the field, we did a lot of it. I found out then it was a lot harder doing contact drills than just patrolling.

Yes, that's right.

I found it tough then, but we sort of settled into it, I think, all the training and that you do, and you are fairly fit.

The other thing too, you know you are going to be there for a while. If you knew you were going to be visiting Malaya or Singapore for about a month or something you'd feel the heat, but I think at the back of your mind it told you, we are going to be here for a long time, there's no point mentally fighting this thing, you've just got to start getting acclimatised. And as you said, stripped to the waist, and most times on operations you never wear underwear, you'd just wear your greens, slacks, so your body was a little bit cooler anyway.

And the gear we wore was fairly good, I suppose.

That airtex stuff wasn't bad, was it - the shirt?

We used to wear those towelling shirts, I remember.

That's right, you wore the towelling shirts, didn't you?

Yeah, they were sort of pretty hot.

That's right.

But I don't know, it was the Pom issue.

We didn't get them in 2, we had the airtex shirts, hung out if you wanted to.

We got those too.

They were almost like a Korean winter issue, weren't they?

Yeah - these khaki shirts?

Yes.

Yeah. I had one for years.

Did you find them irritating?

Oh, yeah, when you just got a new one it was terrible. We didn't wear singlets or anything, and you just had that sort of a thing itching you the whole time. But then they eventually wore out, I suppose.

A bit of washing, dhobyng, and so on.

Yeah, on the rocks - you could give them to the old dhoby wallah to clean.

They were a bit like a Nomex flying suit, I think, they were that woolly sort of finish, weren't they?

Woolly finish, yeah, more like a Korean type thing. I don't know why we got them, but we got those - we had those and the jackets, they were good, the jackets - we used those as ceremonial

gear, when we went off to do little guards and things.

That's right.

Topic 6 looks at the base you had and when you deployed into the operational area, and that was Lasah Camp.

Yes.

Just as an aside, what were the other bases? Lintang was another company base.

Lintang.

Sungei Siput?

They shifted. Lintang was Support Company, and they shifted to Grik later with 1 RAR; Sungei Siput was B Company; Kuala Kangsar was C Company and Admin Company. We didn't have a D Company.

That's right. I was trying to get the reason for that, I guess there weren't the numbers for it in the Army at that time.

No.

But your support company was employed as a rifle company.

Yes, and then, later on, when they went to Grik, they ran the promotion courses. I did a promotion course there.

How did you find Lasah Camp?

Excellent, loved it. It was a well laid out camp, we always felt very secure there - we were, I guess.

The river covered a fair part of the camp, with the road on one side and the curve of the river right around.

Very good the river because we used to go to the bridge behind the kitchen and throw [sea pores] in there, bait them, and then we had a group down where the bend came around, and they'd get all the fish, take them up to the sergeant cook, he'd cook them all up for us.

Great stuff.

So it had its advantages, yeah. It was a lovely camp, David. The tents were good, we just had those old ...

12 by 14, was it?

Big old canvas tent - I think there were six of us in it, six in each tent. We had our mosquito net and that sort of thing, it was very good.

Did you have a boozier in Lasah?

Yeah, oh, yeah, she was the hub of life - later on the jukebox came in.

Did it?

Yeah, all the latest music. That was forever a pain - that was supposed to be for company funds, but none of it ever got to company funds. They worked out how to play the records, and then somebody worked out how to turn up the volume. Then the thing would go all night, and then ...

What was the food like?

Well, quite good - I didn't like it - there were periods there. I think it's just what you get when you live in, you get bored with it. We had the British rations, the ration pack was quite good - I don't know what you'd call those. You had two types of meat - they had a pretty good ration actually.

The little lunch had a Mars bar, and there was a little can with jam in it, and biscuits.

Later on they got a chocolate in it - not the chocolate they have in the Army now, these were civvie chocolates, it was a well put-together pack.

I did never break mine down to the extent that some of the blokes did, but I always liked the evening meal, there was a nice big can of meat, and there was also a little packet of raisins, or sultanas, or something like that, and there was a bit of chocolate, and a good brew in those big dixies we had under our water bottles. I used to really enjoy that evening meal.

Well, we learned to improvise, we could buy curry - well, there was some curry in it, but you'd take a tin of curry and various other sort of foods. Initially we couldn't take them because of the smell or something, but later on we carried all these things, like extra rice, and you'd get rid of a lot of the ration. We used to take that down to the Lasah village, give it to all the kids, lollies and all that sort of thing. These rations were full of lollies and chocolates. If you carried ten or fourteen days' rations you can't carry ...

Did you find you lost weight?

Yes.

Most of the blokes would lose weight. Carrying the weight is enough to start losing weight anyway, then you'd reduce the rations. The ration was designed carefully to get all the right nutrition in, but you weren't getting it - lots of rice.

Yeah. I could probably go on a ration pack nowadays.

Oh, yes, that's right.

We improvised, I think, with the food. The food in camp was good, from what I can recall. I guess you've got to eat what you are given, there is nowhere where you can run down to the

local MacDonalds. It's there so you eat what you are given.

There was no NAAFI set up inside camps of that size.

We had a little char wallah. You'd get a boiled egg and a cup of Milo.

Did you?

Yeah. He had a great booking system; when you didn't have any money you'd run up a bill - a boiled egg on a bun and Milo. If you didn't want to eat in the kitchen you could go over there and have a boiled egg.

I've got a recollection of Lasah Camp - getting back to the sort of layout - it had weapon pits dug at various points around the perimeter.

Yes.

We had a stand-to in there one day - one night - no, it was one morning when the company 2IC thought he'd test the whole thing out, and he got one of the young Brit officers we had with us to fire a burst of Bren on that curve in the bank. The Bren opens up - it obviously wasn't one of ours, it had to be the CT - and people were diving into the weapon pits, and they hadn't been occupied for years - there were spiders and scorpions, you can imagine what it was like. You wouldn't have had occasion?

Yeah, we went into those pits - we had to clean them all out - and we did a training thing there. I remember a couple of those actually, all round our place were the pits - my platoon - and it linked up with others. We were up looking down over the river.

You were a bit vulnerable there with the river on one side. You could open fire on the other side of the river, just to harass you. The same thing with that stretch of road as it came onto the bridge.

Yeah.

There were a lot of open areas there where you wanted to be below ground level if you could.

Actually, at our reunion last year, people had photos of that, people who had been there that year. There's the old boom gate on the camp, that's all that's left. The other side of the bridge has been developed as a correctional centre.

When you and I were there, there was logging going on up in the forest.

Yes; the logging track went further on. I don't know whether we operated up there. We went up another logging track that went from in between Sungei Siput and Lasah - a logging track - we worked a lot up in there.

Did you get back to Minden Barracks very often, on like an R&C type thing?

No, I never went there. I went to Minden Barracks when 3 RAR went home because we were

responsible for packing up the houses - (inaudible) got the job of the sort of removal man, and we lived in Minden Barracks then. That was the only time we were there. Then we were given leave later and we stayed at ... oh, it was a Brit camp further down.

Topic 7 was on the clothing and equipment issued in Malaya. In fact, you've really probably covered all that, I think.

I still say that a lot of the equipment we used was excellent. Later on, designing packs and things that we carried from that era - the Brit equipment was very good, I thought, compared to what we were carrying in Australia when I left.

The '37 stuff, yes.

And then, later on, when I came back, you had the American gear - you know, our initial American pattern equipment was terrible.

Hopeless, the tiny pack that went on the back of your belt.

Just to give you a pain in the small of your back.

You had to wear a '37 pack on the top of it if you were going to carry anything. The Americans, presumably, had a big pack which the Army had never bought. It was a crazy mix.

This '37 pack.

I think in later times in Malaya a lot of units used Bergen or bought Bergen packs - even Delta Company too, a lot of blokes had Bergens. I found that '44 pattern stuff was good.

Yeah. We used the A frames, a lot of our fellows used A frames - well, the sigs used A frames.

That's right.

You could put a box on it, cover it with the water bag that they used to give you, and with that gear.

What was a deep bag, about that deep.

Yeah.

Rubber lined, and a draw string around the top.

Yeah. We used them to cart the water up into the platoon. If you live on the river we'd go down and fill that up, take it up, and put it in the platoon - several would get water from it instead of everyone going down there. That's what we used it for.

I found the equipment good, things like mosquito masks, I think they were a must - we used those in ambush, particularly in 1 RAR. We ambushed a lot in 1 RAR, that sort of became our lot, ambush, up on the Thai border, and we used those masks. Initially we didn't like them, but you get used to it when it keeps the mosquitos off you - the net.

Some of the guys bought li-los early in the piece. Did you have any sort of inflatable mattresses?

No, we had canvas stretchers; we built a frame, and two poles down, and dropped it onto the frame, so it was like a cross, and the poles come along inside, and you lived up off the ground.

Did you get issued with the hammocks, the nylon hammocks?

Yes, we were, people used them.

They weren't comfortable to sleep in, were they?

No; and you had to have nice trees to set them up, whereas the other way you could go where you were told to go and set your position up. We got the green plastic because that was larger, you could make it out to keep the water off you. What else did we get? - oh, pillows, we got those blow-up pillows, people used those - I never did, I just threw my pack down over it - people used to use these blow-up pillows. Generally the rest of the gear we used that was issued. We used to carry the canvas stretcher top, which could be used for casualty evacuation, which was used occasionally by us, and the plastic shelter. I can't even remember the issue one, that's how far back it was. When we got there we lived in it for our first operation, and then, when we got back, we got these plastic ones, what everyone else had.

Initially there were two. That bloke you were sharing with had press studs along the top, set your stringer out, and then it had the holes for the neck, it was a real poncho.

Yeah, that's right.

You had to close the neck off with two strips of wood, two bits of twig, tie that off so that the rain wouldn't come in.

Very pathetic sort of a thing - you had to like your mate.

That's right. Also try and arrange that your turn on the Bren gun, as to who was going to go outside, you both went the same time and one wasn't going to be disturbing the other getting out. How did you find the jungle boots? Most people stuck with those, didn't they?

Yeah, for a long time, but yeah, they bugged your feet though, particularly when you were dealing up on the Thai border - like in 1 RAR's time, we did a lot in open sort of secondary jungle stuff, and you are out in the heat a lot - they are no good on your hot feet.

Especially hard ground too. It is one thing on the soft stuff, in jungle, due to moisture and rain, and so on, but if you are belting out along a track or trail, through fairly open stuff, through belukah and so on, it was, as you were saying, hard on the feet.

Yeah, very hard. But, you know, we suffered a lot from tinea and various other things, from sweaty feet ...

Dermatitis and heat.

Dermatitis, yeah.

Topic 8: How was A Company employed on operations? How was your section organised? Some of the personalities of the blokes in your section, can you remember them?

Oh, well, a lot of them are dead now, unfortunately, David, but there were some great fellows. There was a fellow named Merv Kirby, he was a gunner. Initially I was a machine gunner with ... their were three of us. Our company commander in 1 RAR was 'Peggy' O'Neil; 'Peggy' was a sort of stickler on the machine gun being spick and span, and forever inspecting it. We had the top gunner of the month award, we used to fight for that - throw a bit of dirt on our mate's machine gun to try and win the prize.

But I can recall Merv Kirby, we were going down the Perak River - we used to go on operations, go up - I talk more of 1 RAR because 3 RAR was winding down at the time. We used to go in by truck, drop us off, and we'd patrol up these logging tracks. We did a little bit of ambushing in creek junctions - and we had little or no contact much with any operation, and certainly no other force - and then we'd walk out all the way, probably back to our company base. 1 RAR moved more towards Grik on the Thai border, and we used to go from Grik, up the Perak River by boat.

First of all we worked as a company, then a platoon, and then we used to ambush on the Thai border; so we did a lot of ambushing. Our access in was up the river, on the boats, on these old boats, driven by Malaysians - sometimes I remember police driving them - Malayan police - but other times it was just the local people so everyone knew what we were doing. We worked in a place called [Betong Glodang] which was all these aboriginals, the local population who couldn't speak (English), they lived in these ... Our thing was to try and win the hearts and minds of the people, so we sort of used to take in bags of lollies and try to teach them to eat, to know what we ate, and know how things go. Every so often old Betong would kill a stack of chooks and bring them up, give them to the company commander - he was the head, Betong, and it was called Betong Glodang, which is his village. We worked a lot there, and we worked by platoon patrols out from the company base there, and there was always a platoon in with company headquarters, and the other platoons were out patrolling, and we used to go out and then do creek-line patrols, and fan patrols, and very seldom saw anything. There were old signs of CT camps at some places where they'd built their type of basha which is straight out, straight down, with all palms on it. They just sit in there and they have their cooking fire in front of it. That's how we operated, pretty well the whole time we were there.

What was your section strength?

It would have been eight - seven or eight.

So your platoon would go out normally with no more than about twenty-six, twenty-eight?

Yeah, that would be about our maximum.

Did you have a medic with your platoon?

Yes.

Dog handler?

Sometimes the dog handlers would come with us, most times we didn't have them - early in the piece we did. They operated as a separate platoon - the dog handlers would go out and do their own searches. They lived with us at Lasah, the Tracking Team.

Coming back to the personalities, I can remember old Merv Kirby (and I) were coming down a river, and we had these rapids, and we flew into this pile of rocks. He had a machine gun and it wasn't tied - we were supposed to tie them with a bit of rope - he didn't have it tied in and over we went - we all went into the river, in the rapids. We pulled each other out, but he just kept going down underneath. Finally we grabbed him and tried to get him up, and he said, 'I've got my machine gun!' Anyway, the water was going over the top of us, we were all about to drown. I said, 'No, let the machine gun go.' Of course, he did, and from then on he was harassed by the rest of the battalion about losing a machine gun, and that it was rusty, and he couldn't win 'Peggy's' reward.

So he never got it back?

No - oh, it was a very dangerous situation we were in.

You couldn't risk lives getting a weapon out like that.

I'd say that if the weapon had been tied on - we got the boat out, emptied it, and carried it down through the rapids. Well, coming down the rapids, you had to rely on the fellow who was on the stick at the back of the boat, and the outboard motor - they had outboard motors.

What were some of the other personalities? Can you remember other in the section?

Within the section, oh, we had all sorts of ... it's a bit hard to ...

Were there any Korean veterans amongst them at that stage?

Yeah, our original section commander was. He got stripped and then became a private in our section - Col Cooper his name was, he's since died. Darcy [Furness] - oh, it was a motley group of people, but very good soldiers, I thought, at the time, all different personalities. They always used to play tricks on one another, that's the Australian way, but I can't, off hand, remember anything. Personalities within the battalion that I remember, like within 3rd Battalion, I think Wally Brown was the most colourful. I think he was an MID, MM, he was a C Company commander, but he was fairly well known in the battalion. Frank Dean, the CQ, was probably the most famous of the later people.

Very well known, yes.

It's a bit hard, David, to think of some of the sort of ... you know, when I meet them I remember some of the funny things.

It's a long time ago, I have the same thing, it's very hard to remember them.

A 1 RAR platoon commander was Peter White, he later became CO of 1st Battalion, and then a

politician, lived up the Gold Coast. My platoon sergeant was Mick Servos, little bloke. I can still remember, see, every morning you used to have a short-arm inspection - paludrine, that was at the start of the day - 1 RAR had taken over on their very first morning. When 3 RAR were going everything died off. Our platoon commander was Gollings, and he used to make sure that we had our paludrine.

Did he ever fall asleep easily?

Very easily.

I hate to ask you that question. I won't talk about him, but he used to fall asleep in the odd strange places at Staff College.

Well, I can tell you; we were on operations, he was our platoon commander. We received this message from an informer that there was going to be a meeting of these CTs at the corner of the junction of this creek we were on, and another creek - I suppose it would be about 4,000 metres in the jungle. So he got us in and he said, 'What would be the quickest way? What would you think would be the quickest way we can go down the creek?' - which often could be dangerous, with foliage and that - 'Or can we go up on the high ground and down?' - so there was an argument between everyone. So he said to me, 'You take a group down the creek. You go down the creek and come back up', and he said to this other fellow, 'You go up over the ridge - only go for a short while and see what the going is like.'

Anyway, I went down and it was quite alright where I was going. So I shot back up and I said, 'The creek will do', so we waited for the other fellow to come back. He said, 'It's not too bad over here.' Whether he didn't believe me or not, but we went the other way to high ground. Two days later we arrived at the junction.

The wrong bet.

The wrong bet - we just kept going up and down, and oh, eventually he got totally confused. He stopped one night and he said, 'Well, I'm not sure where we are', and we said, 'And neither do we', so we all sat down and we worked out where we were, and we were miles out.

It's really hard to find out where you are. In some of those positions you'd be climbing along a spur line. I think it was a mate of mine, Alec Piper, from another platoon, he kept on climbing this ridge and he was so unsure. The company commander was tracking the locstats every movement, and this hill kept on going up and up, and he must have apparently taken days to cover what seemed to be about 500 metres. You couldn't be sure where you were. You couldn't get any bearings through to other features to get a resection, or anything like that.

Nothing. Well, that what we had.

As long as we all had to be honest and say, 'We don't know where we are right now', and if you were stuck, and you had comms, perhaps get an Auster to spot for you, or something like that.

We actually had one of those somewhere, I remember, on one operation, where we threw smoke and he gave us a position. But that wasn't that time where we just said, 'Well, where we come up

we've got to go down; when we get into this creek we'll probably know where we are', because we patrolled a lot of that area. The sad part was that we probably could have had our first contact, we were all fired up, and nothing there when we got to this ... We eventually made the spot, but a couple of days late - they probably wouldn't wait.

It's frustrating, isn't it?

Yeah, but you won't tell Ian that, of course.

No. He probably won't hear the interview anyway; he'll probably laugh anyway. All of us, all the things you've done, you think back, gee, you make the best decision you can at the time.

You'd be silly if you said that you never made one.

Topic 9 we've just about covered, your initial reactions to the environment, and the training in Australia, you've covered that well.

Topic 10: Can you recall what the communist terrorist threat was that was given to you, generally speaking, what size force you were likely to encounter?

Twos and threes, and couriers; there was never much larger than that.

There was very little information on camps that you were likely to strike?

No. They would be in creek junctions mainly, the (inaudible) creek junctions, they were close to water. Our information was really ... they'd be in two to threes, they would be moving. I think the enemy sort of became ... sort of started to disappear at the time 1 RAR was there. We ambushed up at the Thai border, and the Thai Army did a major exercise along the border while we were ambushing to try and push them into us, and we never got any. So I think that was the sort of ... towards the end of it ... well, it did become the end actually, when they sort of ...

1 (RAR) was there at the time the Emergency was declared finished.

Yeah, we did a big guard, I was lucky to do the guard.

Topic 11: The sort of operations that your section or platoon was committed to. Generally, from what we gather, these were either patrolling, as you've mentioned - jungle, rubber, lalang, belukah - and the other one was food denial on the village gates, and that type of thing. Have you got any recollections of those?

Yeah. I think it was the most amazing thing. I never served on those, you know, initially - I guess, in your time, David, and the earlier times, where the Australians served as sentries on the villages when they put them in there, and they had to search the villages. Well, at the time I got there the police were doing that, and the Malayan Army; we didn't get involved with it. But I always found it was the most successful thing the Brits ever did, was to sort of locate them in villages and put a fence around them. They could work all they liked in the day, but they come back into their village (at night-time), and anybody out there after dark was an enemy.

Either us or the enemy.

Yeah. It sort of gave you a nose, of what you did, if you did strike something ambushing, that there was going to be a CT or someone that shouldn't be there. I always that was excellent. We used to often ambush the tracks in and out of villages if there was a suspect. I remember one on the way - Sungei something - I can't remember, there was one - but they always said that that was a hostile village. We used to drive past this place, this hostile village, and obviously it was one of the ones where they put a fence around and they didn't want to be there. We ambushed those tracks a lot, but we never got anybody. They probably knew more about our movements than we did, those times.

I guess they could smell us, our clothing, the soap we used, the smell of under-arm deodorants, that sort of stuff, which they probably wouldn't use.

Topic 12: You've mentioned you had no contacts the time you were there.

No.

Were there any incidents, camps located?

Old camps.

Old camps?

Never any fresh camps. In the whole time I can't ever recall us ever finding anything that was sort of relevant to the time, you know. No, it was only the putting together of a bit of history of where they might have been and what they did. We did a lot of searching, a lot of base-line, creek-line, searches, and we'd spend days and days doing that, and never ... And the real problem, as Colonel Morrow has said, is keeping people alive, alert, because you become so bored with doing the same things.

Was there much of a risk of contact with your own troops?

Not ...

You knew where the other ...

... very well.

You wouldn't sort of find Police Field Force occasionally operating too close to where you were?

We were always told if they were in the area, and they were never put very close to us at all. I mean, the only real time was when the Thais were patrolling the other side of the border, doing operations there, that was the only time we really had to be ... you know, that anyone was close in the area.

We did a relief in place - Loyals - oh, that was terrible, they were very unhygienic and we had to shift the base after they left. We had to take over, you know, and when it was done we came forward, and we'd been briefed that we go and sit by the pit, and a bloke would tell us, and they got in, and they went out, and eventually they left, and we were left with their blinkin' rubbish -

terribly unhygienic place. We couldn't stay there, we had to shift - that was all dug in, they'd dug pits and that.

This was up near the Thai border, was it?

Yes. And very seldom did we ever dig pits that I can recall.

This is what, a platoon or a company position?

A platoon, and our platoon took over, yeah. It was the only time we ever saw them, we never soldiered with them, but oh, my vivid memory of how unhygienic ... you know, our bases were very clean and kept that way; they were just unhygienic, I thought. Whether they were ... I don't know how long they'd been there, but there was no need for throwing cans over the fronts of pits, and that sort of thing.

Foreign to our approach to things, isn't it?

Yes. They were pretty good soldiers, most of the time, I think, but I think they were just probably depressed, or down, or something.

Guys who had been called up for national service. Our national service scheme I saw in Vietnam worked very well.

Oh, yeah.

The average national service bloke in the battalion fitted in, you never wanted to find out who was regular and who was national service - I didn't find out anyway. If anything, I suppose, you could say that the national service bloke put up a bit of a challenge to the regular bloke. The national service bloke had a different background, a different outlook on life.

I found them great, and even today - like I wouldn't know, in my company reunion - we have a reunion next month - no, this month, in Mornington Peninsula - we meet every two years - and I wouldn't know who was the regular Army in that company - I was the CSM. Some of them tell me that they were regular Army, I am never sure of that, and that never entered your mind in those days.

I think it worked so well, compared with the Brits, when we had ...

They were all national service.

Yeah, that's right - their officers and most of their diggers, strange thing.

Topic 13 just goes through a series of small questions, some of which you've already covered; your experience with your section on operations. The first one was the application of this Use of Lethal Weapons thing which I sent up to you, which is very much like our Rules of Engagement from Vietnam. You never had occasion to ... I think commonsense is what guided you, I presume?

Yeah, that's all though, we never had to ... we were never in a situation where we had to apply

that, you just went. We had a mag on - I remember we had a mag on, and then we went into alert - we actually went into that a few times - well, in ambush you are in alert all the time. I think there was alert - I forget the terms they used.

I get mixed up with the Vietnam ones.

Yeah - oh, do you?

Working parts forward, magazine on, working parts, rear (inaudible).

Yeah, and then catch off was the last ...

Yeah, something like that.

... and finger on the trigger. We never used that. When I saw those, I thought I remember being briefed on them, but I don't ever recall us ... they always came out in the orders, when you were going out, and then that would be it, that's how you operated, I suppose. We never had to apply it so you don't know the effect of what you did with it. I did the second time, when I was in 3 RAR as section commander, when we were going to Borneo. The first group of Indonesians arrived, and they arrived by ... they were air dropped in, parachute drop in, and our company surrounded them. That was an engaged thing because there were police, and there were other people there, but that was under different rules of engagement. I captured the first Indonesian to land in Malaya - that the Australians captured - and I was warned that I'd have to go to court. I said, 'What for?' - you know, for capturing this Indonesian. I said, 'But he landed illegally in the country' - 'Yes, but you have to go to court to prove that.' I never went to court, but it was supposed to be part of how the soldiers operated. We killed one.

You were police, and you arrested the guy, and so you had to go to court to identify him and everything else?

Yeah.

And he'd be charged with being an illegal immigrant, or something?

Yeah, well, they had to find out what he was first, then find out whether I was innocent. I never went to court though.

No, we never struck it in Malaya.

Did you find much sign of CT movement - you said camps, but anything on tracks and trails that you saw?

Yeah, a lot of human movement, but then there was a lot of the local aboriginal population where we operated - Betong Glodang - they operated from the village and often you'd strike a couple of them out there, cutting a bit of stuff out of the trees for eating, and all that sort of thing.

You'd find footprints, tracks?

Footprints around where they were, yeah, but you had to sort of determine whether it was a local villager or decide if it was something more serious. But most times - well, all times I saw - it

wasn't. Initially we had Ibans working with us, and they could tell you most times.

They were pretty good, were they?

Yeah, they were very good, very good at teaching you to find all signs in the jungle. I had a fellow named [Buntang], he couldn't speak English, but he could get his message across. He would be going along and he would say, 'You are going to eat', and he would point to the bush you could eat, and he'd pick a bit, and he'd end up with a bag full of this stuff. That night he'd cook it up and we'd all eat it - test it first. He was very good at signs, if he saw anything on the track - he'd say if it was animal. Most times we could see some animal tracks, but you'd see some breaking through the bushes, and you didn't know if it was animal or not, and he'd say, 'Animal', and he'd show you how. Yeah, they were very good. We had them living with us, we had two in our hut. The worst thing that could happen is if they got onto the rum and they'd start doing dances with their parang, and they'd be looking for heads. We'd lay awake wondering whether we were going to be one of them.

Wouldn't want them in the boozier.

They used to come into the boozier with us, and they'd sit there, and they'd sit there smiling the whole time, nodding their heads. I don't know whether they ever understood anything we said.

We didn't serve them rum in our boozier, did we?

No.

It was all beer.

All beer, yes, straight beer - no rum - they used to get the rum issue, and they can't handle rum because they don't (normally) drink it. But by gee, they changed pace very quickly.

Talking of methods of searching ground - you mentioned that earlier. There was the fan method.

Yeah. Well, we used two methods - or several methods we used - but one is the creek line where you would just point and you would go out, say, 500 metres, go left 500 metres, and back in; and the other fellows would go out and come back in on your trail, so you'd have all your patrols going out - the headquarters would be central, and you would do the creek that way, and just go along the creek and fan out. The other way was a fan where you had the central base and you'd go out, and you all go the same way, say, right so many paces, and then come back in on a back bearing to your base. You'd keep doing that, and you would search that way. So they were the methods we used.

Was there a chance of a hassle when they were getting in closer to the base, coming in?

Yeah, there is a lot of that, but you have to be very careful with it.

You didn't have any casualties?

No. I do believe they've probably had some, but we were always told that you've got to be careful in that last bit. But no, we found it ... it was a good way of searching the ground, but, as

you say, there can be a casualty. If there was a contact during that it would be a bit of a disaster, wouldn't it?

That's right.

Because you are out there. But we did have to return to base, come back, if we struck trouble. No-one had radios, like we didn't have radios, walkie-talkies - later on they got walkie-talkies, and various other things, but we didn't have any communication that way.

The platoon just had radio back to base?

Yeah, to the company. And when we were in the platoon, on our own, we had the 510, and a 26 set, I think - 26 set was probably the most useless radio set ever invented.

How did you base up at night?

All-round defence, over a track.

A circle of defence around a track?

Yes - always a harbour drill. In fact, that was where our first - I remember the harbour drill was at Canungra, that harbour drill. You may remember the red helmets, and the blue helmets, when they did the training.

That's right.

You know, the riflemen. I can always remember that, and that's the drill we used to use. Then the platoon commander would shift us around, and then we would clear a track right around, linking hootchies. We had a stand-to position, and we had a comms cord - we all carried a cord and we put that around so that you could move along the track at night - it was clean, the track was clean, and the platoon commander was in the centre. We had sentries; early we had sentries, and then we had central sentries - radio piquets and other things. It became less, the security dropped tremendously later.

As you realised there was less chance of a contact anyway, people got more sleep.

Yeah, I think they did.

Topic 14 talks about any memorable experiences on operations, like the jungle at night, animals encountered - you mentioned jungle navigation problems earlier - being located by light aircraft, et cetera. You didn't get any supply drops by air, did you?

Yes, we did.

Did rum come in with the supply drop?

Rum came with the supply drop - you always had to find that first.

That's right, yes. The worst thing you would ever hear was the parachute caught up, and the rum bottle swings like a pendulum and smashes against the tree, and you can smell

rum for about 500 metres, but you couldn't drink it.

Yeah, you couldn't drink it, everyone would be crying. Oh, they were disasters, a lot of those air drops. We had quite a lot of air drops, you'd fight over the parachute then, and you'd get the parachute to make your track suit, make a track suit type thing to wear at night, we'd wear that sort of thing. So there was a fight over the parachute, to cut it all up. They never got any of those back. We had a lot of air drops for our rations, yes. I can remember one place where the little Auster flew over and dropped us - we were out of rations, we'd been out of rations for a day, and we couldn't get out, so they dropped fresh rations, and that was meat, and they were just kicked out. That was all they could get from Grik camp. The next day we got an air drop and then we had too much food, you've got to get rid of all that stuff, burn boxes and clean up - and we had to carry a lot of that food.

Once you had the air drop you needed to get out of the area because any CT knew you were there and were alerted.

Yeah. We had a few air drops while we were there, mainly up on the Thai border because it was a fair way from the Thai border out, it was a day's travel down.

You were portering food in, so I guess the air drop had to ...

Yeah. And they'd drop by air right near the Thai border.

Was it hard to get the aircraft in over the DZ?

Yeah, very hard. I think we just used those markers.

Marker panels?

Yeah.

And smoke, if you had it?

And a bit of smoke. Yeah, we used smoke, the platoon sergeant always used to carry that. And we used to clear, we'd try and find ... When we were up at Betong Glodang it was alright because that was a village and that was cleared, where they had their agricultural stuff. But then, in other places, we had to cut it, we'd try to find the smallest space, place with the smallest trees, and clean it out, so that would give them something to drop at. But they were most inaccurate anyway, you'd find them everywhere, all over the place.

And the hard thing, I suppose, if one dropped clear you had to take a bearing on where it had dropped, and you were supposed to find it and bring it back in.

Yeah, there was a bloke out in the centre, the platoon sergeants normally, and they took a bearing. And then, when it was all over - because you had to watch, you'd get a box on the head if you (weren't careful) - and then the platoon sergeant would send you out, and you'd go out. Of course, mail and everything came in on that.

That's right.

So you had to sort it all out.

I can always remember the first day with fresh rations, they were always fresh, they put some fresh in the first drop. The platoon sergeant hated it because he'd have to cut it all up, serve it all up.

I was talking before about a character, and I can remember a Korean veteran whose name is [Bill Landsburger]. We were on this operation, the first one was with 1 RAR, and we went up this creek. We'd been walking, and walking, and walking, and Bill said to me, 'I've got to get out of here, this is no good to me.' I said, 'How can you get out?' He said, 'Watch me.'

Anyway, he got a sock full of wet sand and was bashing his knee. Unbeknown to him, the platoon commander saw him doing it. When you bash your knee it comes up with like water on it, sort of swells up. So he limped over to the platoon commander and said he'd done his knee in. Our platoon commander was Peter White at the time, and Peter said, 'Oh, did you? Well, I'm sorry, you're not going out.'

He had to get along with his crook knee then?

Yeah, he had to get along with this crook knee, and he grumbled the whole way, and we all knew, and we said, 'You can carry your own gear.'

Self-inflicted wound.

Yeah. Oh, he was a real character, Landsburger. He had a girl in Ipoh, he used to live with her when he was in camp, sneak out all the time.

He was in Japan, I suppose, and Korea.

Yeah. I think he's dead now - he went back to Malaya to live with this girl.

Did you strike any animals at night ...

Yeah.

... or by day?

The biggest fright we got in our life was monkeys coming across the ... we were in ambush and we could hear this noise, we thought, holy hell.

This is near the Thai border?

Yeah. We said, 'What's going on here? There's a whole 300 tanks' - you know, you could hear this noise, and you knew it couldn't be humans. And we were looking, and there, they came across the - and they all look down at you, just a blanket of monkeys - across these trees - spider monkeys and various other ones, and they go across, like in a wall, over the top of you. You've just got to sit there hoping they can't see you - the temptation to shoot them to get them away, but they stop and look at you, and sort of give you - it's like looking at a zoo, but we are the ones in the cage.

One other time I was in front of section, I was acting forward scout - I was never a forward scout. Anyway, this day I had to get up this ledge, and I put my rifle up, and I pulled myself up, and I was looking straight in the face of a tiger. He sort of looked at me and I sort of fell back down the ledge. The old section commander was saying, 'What's wrong with you? get up there', and I was saying, 'Tiger! Tiger!' Anyway, we eventually got up and you could just see, that was his lair, and where he'd been lying, but he'd gone; there was all these bones and everything there, and I was thinking, it could have been my bones. You could smell him, I could smell this when I was going up, and I said to the section commander, 'I can smell something', and he said, 'Keep going' - that was [Keyboyd], the section commander.

And lots of elephants, but never a problem. Elephants just sort of move on. And cobra snakes, the red cobra - what do they call them? - anyway, they were a bronze-red cobra, and a grey one, and the grey one was the most vicious - it was a little one, it would chase us, you could see the whole patrol disintegrate with a snake after it, and its ballooned out head. The other one, the copper one, he was sitting on a rock, just dancing around, and we were going to come across his path. One of our blokes got bitten by a snake, but it was a viper. The cutter was given to slash it and bleed it, and everything, but it was worse than the snake bite because they weren't actually deadly, but he didn't know, in the night.

When you think of those, particularly snakes and that type of thing, it just puts that little bit of extra pressure on the leading scout because the last thing you want to be doing is either getting badly bitten, or walking into a tiger. You were alert to pick up the scent of the tiger.

Yeah, well, you could smell them, David, you could smell the urine and everything.

So it wasn't just looking for CT, you also had to be alert for things that you'd be either injured by, or that the platoon is going to be injured by, as you come through.

The big snakes, what do they call those?

Not the boa constrictors?

Big things, yeah. We walked across one of those one day and never saw its head or tail, and everyone, they just pointed. You were looking and wondering if this thing was there - its head and tail - it never moved, it was just laying there on this track. Initially the scout at that time, he didn't know what it was, he looked, and then he realised it was a snake by its skin, its colour, speckled colour, mottled like camouflaged look.

Did you ever strike hornet's nests (as you were) moving through the scrub?

No, not there.

That's guaranteed to get a platoon moving pretty quickly. They reckon the best way to handle it is to go to the thickest bushes; if you go through the thickest bushes there is less chance of the hornets getting through.

Getting through to you, oh, yes.

Probably handy next time you are in the jungle.

They are not calling us up, are they?

I don't think so, though I think we are both young enough to get back in.

I think so, with a bit of training.

It's a frame of mind - take my beard off, I'll be right.

Topic 15: you've already talked a bit about this, and this was the ingenuity or individuality of the Australian soldier with their plastic hootchies, and li-los, and parachute sleeping bags, modifications to the ration packs. I guess we've covered that pretty well, haven't we?

Yeah, I think so. It's marvellous what the Australian does, and I think it goes right back to Gallipoli, doesn't it?

Yes.

I don't know whether it's just Australians, but the soldier living, you've got to work out a way to improve it, haven't you?

Every way, yes.

And you are sitting there all day, and all those minds thinking about how this can be better. You've got to come up with something.

It comes also from a lot of the guys who come from the bush ...

Yeah, bush people.

... to Gallipoli, and that type of thing, and it's just built in.

That's where they started, wasn't it? the old bush people. I suppose even going back to the convicts, their having to think to keep alive.

That's right, they had a very basic style of living, and they had to improve on everything really.

The soldiering experience, it was never any different, there was always someone thinking of ways of improving something.

It's always a challenge. I think a lot more flexibly than I ever could have if I'd never come into the Army. It's also a feeling of satisfaction, isn't it?

Oh, great satisfaction.

You'd beat the system, or beat whatever is getting you down, or get ahead of it. That's part of the incentive, I suppose, to get ahead of it.

In soldiering.

Not just the comfort, but it's just the satisfaction up here too, of solving your problems.

Yeah.

Topic 16: Did you ever encounter the Police Field Force, Home Guard, and so on? You mentioned the Home Guard on the village gates where years before we would have had our own blokes on.

But we didn't actually deal with them, David. We'd see them wave, and that sort of thing, but we never actually came in contact with them, they never worked with us. We worked with the Ghurkhas on guards and things, they were there but you could never talk to them. We worked with the Brits from time to time on various things around the camp area, but never on operations, that I can recall.

Topic 17: With either 3 RAR or 1 RAR were there any formal training periods conducted?

Yeah, well, we had, in both of them, the range practices, that was constant, so our weapon handling was fairly ... well, it was constant, you know, whenever we were given time we would do it and we were into it.

Would you test fire weapons before you went out on patrol?

Always test fire them, when we came back we fired all our ammunition off on this small range, then got issued new ammunition to go out - well, we never got issued that until we came out the next time. That was always held in the arms kote, so if we had any contact we had to get it from there.

The arms kote, I gather, would be pretty tight on accounting for ammo too, wasn't it?

Yes, very.

If you lost rounds you were in strife.

Yes. You knew exactly ... the platoon sergeant knew what you were firing, so when you fired, when you come home, we used to fire at the range and then go back, clean our weapons, and put them away.

It's a good technique, I guess, too, not having had contacts, but at least you've fired your weapons, before you went and when you came back in, your skills are being maintained. It was almost making up for not having had a contact, at least you could be engaging targets.

Yeah, target practice - coming back you don't feel like it, you just think, ah, I want to get rid of this and get home. We had that range, not far from our place. Once you got back and cleaned your weapon, then you could stand down, so the firing was pretty brisk.

I can imagine - a rapid five rounds sort of thing.

Getting right away from that, Topic 18, looking at the aspects of discipline - leave, out-of-bounds areas, malaria, alcohol, that type of thing. Any recollections of that?

A lot of it actually. Like in 3 RAR, as a young soldier, we'd go to leave in Ipoh, and of course, the old soldiers - there was 'Dasher' Wheatly - this is where you'd run into the other companies - VC 'Dasher' Wheatly. I remember first seeing him dancing on the table in the Princess Bar at Ipoh.

A character.

I said, 'Who's that fellow?', and it was 'Dasher' Wheatly. I saw him many times after.

We had leave when we were in base and we could go to Ipoh, get a taxi - I think that's how we went, taxis would come, Mercedes taxis.

This was up to Lasah, was it?

Yeah, to Lasah, and they'd take you into Ipoh.

What was the travelling time to Ipoh - about thirty minutes or something?

Probably a bit longer.

You had to get back to Sungei Siput then.

Yeah, Sungei Siput and then out to Ipoh.

Back down the main trunk road.

Yeah. You had to be home by midnight. The MPs - Brits - camp was at Ipoh, they had a camp in there, and the MPs sort of patrolled the whole time - they were fairly rugged sort of people.

Was it combined patrols of Australians and Kiwis with the Brits?

Yeah. The Australians were the worst, I always thought.

Were they?

Yeah.

I'll tell you a story later at morning tea about a bloke called 'Nipper' Dunque. You say that the military police went for you in terms of ID cards, and dog tags?

Yeah, they'd see you had a leave pass - had to have a leave pass - and then there would be brawls - invariably there would be a brawl against the Poms, and the Kiwis and the Australians would bash the Poms, and the MPs would come and we'd all get carted off.

When we went on leave we had to be in civilian clothes - we didn't have civilian clothes when we went to Malaya, us young fellows, and so we went in and we ... I remember the first thing I

bought was a white shark-skin suit, I thought I was 'Prince of the Palace'. I used to end up, it would be black by the time I got home.

Did you wear it out?

Yeah, oh, yeah.

You could be taken for a local planter, or something like that.

I thought I was better than that, after a few beers I did.

I'll bet.

We had all our normal VD lectures, and that sort of thing, and we did have VD come in. All jokes aside, it was a blinkin' pain because you'd lose a bloke, you'd lose blokes.

A bloke would be due for a check if he had it, if he discovers on patrol that he's got it ...

Then he's got to be taken out.

... and when you are due to go out you've got two blokes due to go back to BMH (British Military Hospital) Kamunting to have a check to see that it has all cleared up, so you've lost two blokes out of the patrol.

Yeah. We only had a couple get it, fortunately.

Malaria; I got evacuated for what was called 'pyrexia of unknown origin'. Our CO of 3 RAR was Colonel John White. We were in ambush there, in this jungle grass, we were in grass, and the mosquitos and the swamp, for days, and eventually I got pretty crook. So they took me out on the road and picked me up in a Land Rover, and that was the last operation 3 RAR did. He took me back and I went to the hospital - where was it?

There was a BMH in Taiping, and there was BMH Kamunting, I think it was called.

Kamunting, yeah, where the Kiwis were.

Yeah.

That's where I ended up, and I spent some time there. That affected me for a while. Several of our blokes got sort of minor fevers, but we never had anyone, I don't think, that had malaria, actual malaria.

You were taking paludrine all the time, weren't you?

Yeah, and very conscious of it too. One of the good things about the platoon sergeant and the platoon commander, in our case, the platoon sergeant would take the rum around, and the platoon sergeant would take the paludrine and mark the book.

That's right.

And I would have to say, my platoon commander and sergeants were very regular about that. I guess there's no problem taking a pill, but people don't take pills unless they are shoved into their hand - they used to shove it in their hand and make you take it, then you'd have your rum, and you didn't get your rum until you took it.

That's a good incentive.

Great stuff that rum, wasn't it?

Wasn't it? yeah, it really was. The platoon sergeant would do the rounds, during stand-to, dealing out the rum, out of the water bottle top - the rubber tops on those cups - and that was just enough to warm you up. If you went through and you changed out of your wet greens into the dry greens, and you went on sentry for about four or five hours, the platoon sergeant comes round with a tot of rum, and gee, you slept so comfortably. You'd be working hard during the day, patrolling, you are out of your wet greens into your dry greens, and that tot of rum, and gee!

Whoever thought of that is a genius really. I can recall, in 1 RAR, we are in Betong Glodang, and our platoon is sent out, and we ran out of rum. So the then acting platoon commander said to me, 'Well, how about slipping back tonight and getting some rum out of the CQ's tent?' They had all live rounds and everything too. We went back and we stole a [jimmy jum] rum from old Frank Dean, a jimmy jum of rum, right under the sentry - he was asleep.

Was he?

Yeah - and we got the bottle out and snuck back to our platoon, then we had double issues. Old Frank, for years, he blamed everyone in that camp - because we were a fair way out, and in the middle of the night.

Poor old Frank would be a bit affronted by that though, losing a bottle of rum.

Well, we told him later it was us, but he wouldn't believe us. He said, 'You wouldn't be good enough to come back in the middle of the night, through the jungle.' We admitted it and we felt good then that we'd told him.

That clears everything.

Yeah. Did you ever hear of a man by the name Von Kurtz - Herman Von Kurtz.

Herman Von Kurtz, yeah.

Well, Von Kurtz, he was from the German - he served in the German Youth Camp - he ended up as one of our section commanders. Old Von Kurtz, he was blamed for stealing the rum.

Logical, I suppose.

Well, Von Kurtz was one of the section commanders in 3 Platoon, and he used to often start skiting about Hitler and that sort of thing, just to stir us up. One night in Lasah Camp we tried to shove him in the incinerator because they burnt people, but we couldn't get him in the door - we nearly killed him that night.

The social side of it; with 3 RAR it was Ipoh, then, when 1 RAR came, it was Penang, we used to go to Penang for three days, four days. Our platoon, we used to always have to spend the first night, all of us single blokes, we'd sleep on the floor everywhere in the platoon sergeant's house.

This is in the married quarter?

Married quarter. The last night we had to spend there, so we had two nights we were out, then we had to come back in. His wife, Jean, she used to give us a lecture and clean us all up, and then we were put on the boat and go back. He'd come back the next day.

You'd be well looked after then.

We stayed in the Garrison Club there, the British Garrison Club.

So you didn't stay at Minden Barracks in that time?

No.

You were out in the married quarter or Garrison Club?

Garrison Club, yeah.

That would be a good break. I don't know what the Garrison Club was like, but it would be better than staying in Minden Barracks ...

Oh, yeah.

... because you had troops living in the barracks anyway.

Yeah, we wouldn't have survived there, we'd have been sort of ... we got into enough trouble where we were, but if we had to go back through a gate with a sentry on it.

We got banned. When 1 RAR came we had never been on leave, so they sent us on leave to Penang for two weeks. It lasted a week because then they called us back because Laos was starting, we looked like we were going there. We stayed at a Brit camp there, and there were other Australians there, and the other Australians played up, and it was the first time it wasn't us - normally it would have been us, but this time it was this other group; they tried to hang the Sikh sentry, as a joke, but anyway, it was a poor joke. The RSM there - they had an RSM - he called us all up and he banned us, so we were kicked out of the camp. We'd paid for the whole time, and we said to him, 'Can we get our money back?' and he said, 'No.'

So where did you go then?

We went back to the Garrison Club for a few days. Fortunately we were only there for a few days and we were called back to camp, so we were saved.

Topic 19: health problems. I think you've covered this pretty well, malaria; were there any cases of such things as dengue fever?

No.

Or hepatitis, anything like that?

No. Some people suffered a bit from dysentery types of thing, and other people just had this fever of unknown origin that we struck a couple of times. But generally, tinea was a bad thing with feet, rashes in the crutch, and that sort of thing. But other than that we were fairly healthy people, I think, David, I don't think there was any that I can recall, no.

Topic 20: this, I guess, relates more to 1 RAR, but what was the most testing, and/or trying time you had as a rifle section commander in 1 RAR?

Probably the time I nearly drowned in the rapids, I think, would probably be the worst. That time the bloke was bitten by a snake, because we had to come down off this mountain area, down this creek, with a stretcher, to get him onto a boat to go down the river. That was probably the worst, I suppose.

There was never a contact time. We were hit by lightning one night on ambush - the hill was hit by lightning. Our platoon sergeant, he went a bit off his head, we had to grab him.

He was concussed?

Yeah.

He was in shock, I guess, from that.

Yeah. Oh, I know, I was off the ground, but surprisingly, no-one was hurt. There was an old tree, not far from us, that was blown to bits, it must have hit that. The old platoon sergeant settled down after a while.

Any rum?

We didn't have any rum then.

I think the times when we had to get ... I think probably the most distressing was when somebody's mother or father had died and we had to get them out. That happened a few times while I was there, and I seemed to be selected as the section commander to take them down to the boat ramp, to meet the people to take them out. But you have to talk to them about it. A lot of young fellows, it knocked them about.

Make it worse too, being so far away and realising they can't get back to the family. Did they take them back to Australia?

Yeah. Do you remember Mick Barrett?

Yes.

They had to take him out twice actually, through his family - a lovely bloke, Mick. The first time his mum died, and another member of the family later.

But from the patrolling point of view I think when we were coming down the rapids and we hit the rock wall and the boat went down, I think that was probably one of our hardest ...

I guess you were lucky not to lose anybody really.

Yeah, and we didn't lose much equipment - we did lose a gun, it's in there (the river) somewhere.

Topic 21: Can you recall any events which were cause for amusement or light relief for either 3 RAR or 1 RAR? Any great humorists, or practical jokers, or people like that in the battalions?

Lots of practical jokers. The short-sheeting the bed was a norm for the camp. When I was promoted to lance corporal and they had the tailor stitch on hooks on everything that I had - my socks, my underpants, and everything. Yeah, some of them were hard to take.

I've got some good photos of the whole platoon swimming in the Perak River, all naked, wonderful photos. I think it was just constant humour, the whole time, really, they were a very good group of people. I just can't think of anything funny now.

We should have had the interview on Anzac Day. As you say, most people try to make fun of the time they are in there.

Yes.

Life's far too serious anyway.

I think probably one of the funniest things was, we had this fellow - two incidents - we used to have to have a little parade of a morning to issue the paludrine, later times with 1 RAR. We took this fellow out of his tent, we carried him down with his bed - and he was still asleep. We got him down carefully and put him on parade. We had him on parade in front of the platoon, the platoon all quietly formed up, and the CSM came out and gave the order - or the platoon sergeant gave the order - for the platoon to come to attention. And he sprang out of bed, and he had nothing on, and he was standing there on the road junction where we had this little parade. He was scrambling and screaming, didn't know where the hell he was.

Another time there was a drop-down from us, like a bank, and the road was alongside. We shifted this fellow out and we put him round the other side of this post that was holding the tent. He looked out - like normally he would wake up and he'd look straight at this post, and he'd been doing this for nearly two years or eighteen months. And he looked straight out and there was no post, and he lay still. We were watching him, and he just lay still, and then he started to scream; he started to scream, and he couldn't work out where he was. Then he realised what had happened.

Simple things like that though shock the system really.

We were talking about 3 RAR when you were at Lasah Camp there; which camps were you in with 1 RAR?

The same - yeah.

The same camps - Lintang, Lasah and Sungei Siput.

Oh, now, and 3 RAR had, I think they had a D Company.

Did they? 3 RAR didn't?

3 did, I think.

I was talking to Mealing yesterday, he said Support Company was the fourth ...

I think 2 was the only one that had a D Company, was it?

Yeah, we certainly had D Company.

When I was there with 2 and 1 they had Lintang, they had Sungei Siput, Kuala Kangsar and Lasah, and then later on they got Grik.

That's right.

I think you had [six] in Grik, didn't you?

No, there was a camp at Kroh.

Kroh, right.

We had a company up there for a while.

We went up there for a while too with 1, ended up somewhere there. yeah, but they were the only camps there, I don't think it changed much.

Topic 22 is a sort of contrast: What events, and perhaps administrative actions, had the most significant effects on the raising or lowering of morale within either 1 RAR or 3 RAR? Had you any problems or nonsense, or real breakthroughs in terms of ...

'Black Jack' Weir was promoted as CO, he came as CO.

He took over from Bill Morrow, didn't he?

Bill Morrow - Bill Morrow was a very popular sort of bloke, and 'Black Jack' Weir arrived and I can still remember his first inspection of the camp, and we'd polished everything. I don't know what it would have been like if we hadn't when he arrived. He went right through like a tornado and he said, 'I'll be back the next day', and he was, he was back the next day. I don't know, I think people just disliked him immensely, they never got on with him, I don't think. You know, he was a very straight soldier, but when you are going from a quiet bloke like Morrow, who we saw occasionally, and he used to come out, and he'd always talk to you in his gentle way, and talk to you about soldiering, and to meeting a fellow that couldn't communicate with people, I didn't think.

'Black Jack' was a fairly fierce sort of bloke, and you could never tell which way he was

going to jump.

Yeah, that's right.

That was the trouble, whereas Bill Morrow was a gentle person, predictable, and obviously a caring sort of person, and deep thinking, but 'Black Jack' Weir, you never knew which way. He was an instructor at College when I was there, and in Vietnam he took over as the Task Force commander. It was the same sort of thing, as you've mentioned, with the battalion when he took over, he sort of went through - 'I'll be back, and I'll check', and getting people rockets left, right and centre.

And he would always come back too.

You never knew which way. I don't think you would ever feel comfortable with him.

No, I never did, David. I suppose he affected the morale of the battalion - the morale of both battalions was very high, and I think when we lost our first soldier - that was my first military funeral - he was drowned in the Perak River - I've always remembered his name until now - he was the first one to be killed in our battalion. I'm not sure how many we lost overall, but I can remember him, and I had to go to his funeral - terrible. We were pretty low for a fair while then, everyone was sort of down about it - he wasn't in our company actually, but we had to do the funeral. I can remember people being down then and thinking, well, someone has died, you don't expect that - well, we'd begun to think that we were bullet proof and nothing is ever going to happen to us - some were later killed in car accidents, that sort of thing.

Makes you realise.

Sadness then, I suppose, when the Kiwis beat us at rugby again.

Golly.

We were very sad when those Kiwis beat us. Both battalions had very good morale. I don't recall any sort of real discipline problems; I don't recall any of the feedback you get from a soldier, like anybody was totally dissatisfied with the place.

The whole command system right down, it worked well, and they were very professional people.

There were a few in there that you admired more than others. Old Dick Whitton was our company 2IC, and old Dick had asthma, and they didn't have those nebulisers then, so he used to get the company driver, Jack McBride, and a Land Rover, or a morning, and he'd drive with his head out the window, and Jack would go flat out and he'd be getting air into him. That was the only way he could get air. He survived, he's still going today, old Dick. He arrived at this reunion we had last year - lovely bloke. Everyone admired old Dick, he was the sort of stable influence in the headquarters. The CSM was a bloke that you could take or leave, and the company commander was 'Peggy' O'Neill; 'Peggy' was sort of erratic. I don't know whether you know old 'Peggy'.

We interviewed him for the Vietnam series.

Old 'Peggy' is sort of ... well, he came to the reunion too, but he'd lost a bit of his ... oh, well, he didn't seem to be stable to me and he couldn't seem to relate ... whether he didn't like where he was or not. But he was a mad softballer - I don't know whether he's ever told you about that.

No.

He used to pitch, be the pitcher - of course, he'd only have diggers as umpires and they'd give him 'ball' all the time, you know. So we told him that he was pitching incorrectly, so we wrote to the Queensland Women's Softball Association and got the Australian rules on softball, and we read the rules to him.

And we used to have a hygiene wallah - Goobah Sherry - he was umpire one day, and we were playing Support Company softball. And you couldn't just - 'Peggy' picked the team, he would come up and say, 'You will play softball this afternoon' - 'Yes, sir' sort of thing - and he'd tell you where you were playing. I remember, Sherry gave him 'ball', the first one was 'ball'; and he'd pitch the next one, and 'ball two'; third one, 'ball three'; and he walked up to him and he said, 'Now, Private Sherry. You can't quite sing right.' He gave him 'ball four', then he sacked him as umpire. He said, 'You are required up at company headquarters; report to company headquarters and work there for the afternoon.'

He got the message.

We actually played the Kiwis, they knew about this softball - we did the guard. We did two guards; we did one when the King died, and I went down there with a fellow named Jack Curry who was our sergeant, and there was thirty of us, I think, and we were at reverse arms the whole time, and it was a procession, and there were millions and millions of people. The procession went for hours and hours, we'd march and we'd stop, march and stop. Old Jack Curry wouldn't let us rest - the rest were laying down, sitting down in the road, people sitting down in the road, the other contingents - not us. Old Jack Curry said, 'You are Australians.' But I was always proud of doing it. And then he worked out a way that we could change arms - because it wasn't a drill, we hadn't learnt the drill then, so we did this change arms. We were doing that all the time, had to keep moving.

Then we did the Freedom - Merdeka Day - and we practiced there - there was a hundred-man guard there, and 'Peggy' O'Neill was our guard commander. We used to have to get up at three o'clock in the morning and we'd march through the streets of Kuala Kangsar - Kuala Lumpur - then we'd go back and we'd have to have a sleep. Right next to our lines were the Kiwis; the Kiwis were ill disciplined, no sleep, and they'd be singing 'Bah, Bah, Black Sheep', and 'Come on, can't you come out of bed, Aussies?' We'd be having to put up with it. One day we snuck out and went down and played them softball and got flogged. They beat us, so we came back and did the same again, nobody will know, and then they put it in their routine orders and sent 'Peggy' a copy. He fronted us all, 'What's this? What's this?' We insisted on playing them later on and we beat them, but he was pitching.

A good pitcher, was he?

Yeah.

This is underarm pitching?

Yeah, underarm, but he used to screw it like that, pretty quick.

Pretty experienced.

Yeah. Then we did the opening of Malacca, the guard then went on to there.

Was it Terendak Camp?

Terendak, yes. We had a Pommy RSM there, we couldn't understand him, didn't have a clue what he was saying, and so the Australians had to stay back. We ended up his favourites because on the day of the big guard - I think it was for Prince Charles, (he) opened it.

I forget now.

I think it was - anyway, it was one of the Royal Family. We were lined up there and it was hot. We finally worked out what the Pom was saying - you know how their commanders go 'Hush, hah!', it's hard to work out. We worked well, and the others then started to fall over, and we didn't lose one man. We didn't lose one man, and he just stood there and he couldn't believe it. He was watching all his favourite Brits ...

All dropping off?

Yeah, dropping off. They weren't acclimatised like we were, we'd been on guard too, you know, we'd just come from this other guard.

I remember, we got beer for lunch because the royal person was visiting, and we were up in the mess where you got very little. All of a sudden there was a beer there, put on our table. Everyone looked, and along he came, and royalty said, His Highness said, 'It's good that you get a beer', and we said, 'This is the first time we've ever had one. How would you like to visit again?' Oh, he loved it, and they were all going ...

I can imagine.

Anyway, that was digressing a little bit.

Topic 23 was the topic of looking at rest and recreation periods out of operations - you mentioned leave at Ipoh and so on - and the lifestyles of married and single people. Did the 'marrieds' tend to look after you a bit?

Yeah, very much so. You know, having married and single in the platoon balanced it, it didn't take away from the good running of the platoon, we had enough single corporals and people around to sort of ensure that the married people could go off and come back after their leave and everything would be alright. So I think that was good that we had both sides, it didn't detract from the battalion at all.

The single fellows didn't feel out of things at all, they could go to Ipoh on their own if they wanted to, or if they had mates who were married ...

Yeah, they could meet. Even we played the women's basketball team. When we went on leave, the second day there, we used to have to go to the Australian hostel and play the women's

basketball team, the dirtiest team that ever put a pair of sandals on.

These are the wives, living in the hostel?

Yeah, living in the hostel. That was a standard thing. We'd go there, then we'd have a cup of tea with them - cup of tea, mind you - we'd have a cup of tea with them, then we'd be off. That was a sort of a standard routine for our group.

Nice test though.

Oh, yeah. Some of those women, and their husbands, would be friends for years, you know, from those days. We'd be a bit lost, I think you get a bit lost when you are only seeing and talking to the locals all the time. Having the Australian married quarters there was excellent, I thought, particularly in 1 RAR where our platoon sergeant, Mick Servos, and Jean, made us go there first. We'd have a barbecue sort of thing that they'd set up.

They were up in Batu Feringhi were they? You went past the Australian hostel, I think; there was a Ghurkha leave centre ...

That's right.

... and then you went past that to Batu Feringhi which is overlooking the road with a mosque down below.

Yeah, that's the place - and they had red painted floors. We used to end up with red paint all over us from rolling round in our sleep. But that kept a bit of sanity in it. If Jean thought you were doing the wrong thing, she'd tell you. You know, there were set rules - no swearing, no smoking, all sorts of rules, which everybody abided by and it was great. We would take food, we'd all go around to the NAAFI and buy food and take drinks, that sort of thing.

That was really great bonding of the blokes together in that sort of thing, looking after each other, both on operations and out of that. The single guys were away from home, and so on.

If you had a problem, Jean was always a person you could speak to. And the other wives that would come, the other families - like the other corporals who were married would bring their wives for the night, and then they'd head off - and you'd see them at the end of it. The main thing was, they'd come in to see that we were all together, I suppose, and Jean would say, 'Well, get on the boat now', so we'd get on the boat, go across to the mainland, get in a taxi and go home. We'd be home when Mick would get home then, they'd always come back the next day, they'd get rid of us.

Then, like in a later time, when I served with 3 RAR in Malaya at Terendak - I was married then - and I found it harder to know our married section commander because we used to go home most nights. So what was happening in the barracks ... The next morning I'd come in and my blokes had been playing up, and the CSM would have me, and I felt a bit out of touch.

This is like living in Australia with married quarters out at Enoggera and the rest of the company living in, and that sort of stuff.

Yeah, I lost a bit of it there. Then, when we went on operations, you'd pick it up again.

Oh, you would.

And when we went to Borneo.

Topic 24 follows very closely on Topic 23 - and you've answered Topic 24: Should the deployment of Australian forces to Malaya been an unaccompanied posting?

No.

Under those circumstances it was much better as an accompanied posting?

Yeah - on the first circumstance, the second one was, where I was saying, when you tended to be home every night you tended to lose touch, whereas the first one, when we were going on leave, then it was good, I think.

I guess, from the family point of view, they were very low intensity operations, say, compared with Korea, and so on.

Yeah.

So it wasn't that the families were up against a really tough situation that they were worry whether you'd come back every time.

Yeah.

There was always that concern. When it was a two-year posting it would be a long time, say, for married or single people, to be away from the company of their wives or friends, and so on.

Yeah, well, see, with East Timor now, it's only for short periods, six months or so now, and that's because of the separation, it would be too hard and a lot of people wouldn't want to go, would they?

That's right.

No, as I've said, I thought it was good value, I would make it accompanied.

It's interesting, I'm getting both points of view. Obviously, if it was much more intensive, unaccompanied for one year might have been better, a bit like Vietnam, but it wasn't intensive. Even on the accompanied basis you were being amongst civilians all the time, to a certain extent, civilian traffic, encountering the odd civilians, and so on.

Yeah. See, Vietnam we were twelve months, and I guess that's hard enough on families - that is hard enough - but I wouldn't make it any more than twelve months if I ever did make it unaccompanied.

No, it's a long time.

Topic 25: What circumstances of the operational environment put most strain on 3 RAR? Was it the weather, enemy tactics, patrolling, any casualties, or even the lack of contacts?

Well, certainly, the last one, the lack of contacts, put strain on people because maintaining the alertness and operational readiness is more difficult when you are not in contact and have what appears like no aim. Therefore it's hard to continually keep people on their toes, ready for action. Of course, as any enemy would know, that's the best time to get you.

I would say the weather is a draining thing, but I think, as you said before, once you know you are going to live with this for so many years, well, your mind says, well, this is okay.

You settle down to it.

Your clothing is reasonably comfortable, I think - well, you can't do much else with it.

Where you can you strip to the waist with socks rolled over the top of your boots, and to be as comfortable as you can.

Yeah. I think probably the weather and lack of contacts, in my time, would be the things that were the most damaging to us, not having anything to sort of ...

But with 1 RAR we had a long period where we were with aboriginals, and in their village, Betong Glodang, a long period of time there, and that was very interesting. It seemed like they were our family, in a way, we got to know them and it was also a very interesting experience.

Topic 26 - you've already covered this - the member of 3 RAR who had most influence on you during your time with the battalion, or the most outstanding character or personality, in fact, of both battalions.

I'd say Wally Brown and Frank Dean. These are people who had the most influence on me and my platoon sergeants, Mick Servos - this is on me, not on the battalion as a whole. I think Frank, in our company, was probably the most influential, I guess. We had a lot of very good corporals, as I remember, in 3rd Battalion and in 1st Battalion; these are people that had served for a long time, or fair time, and had done their apprenticeship well and were good people, and later served on to become RSMs and other people.

I'm just trying to think, you know, like, even though I've thought about this since you first sent me the interview stuff, there are a lot of very good people who I would be ashamed to ever leave them out of this interview, but I just can't think of their names and situations at this stage. But you know, when you go back and you think of people like Von Kurtz, he wasn't one of my favourite people, I must say - he's no longer alive unfortunately - but mainly because of his sort of stirring us about Germany. Even though we weren't there we still felt it was part of our make-up as Australians.

Wally was probably the bloke, but see, even then in the battalion, he wasn't a great influence on me personally then, he was just well-known, and then later on he became better known because I then served with him in Enoggera and other places, so I got to know him better in some ways. There are lots of other characters that came in later that were serving then, but weren't an influence then, but were later.

My platoon sergeant, Mick Servos, would probably be one of the most influential.

His is a very well-known name, isn't it?

Yeah, as a young fellow he probably would be a better ... he was a good influence on us.

I think I started to tell you about the short arm inspection of 1 RAR - and Mick's only a little bloke, and Peter White is quite a big bloke - and they came along and told us to get out of bed. Well, with 3 RAR we stopped doing that, and we still got out pill. But with 1 RAR - this is their first morning there - stand by your beds, you know, and we were all asleep. All our tents were ex-3 RAR, we were the reinforcements to 1 RAR. Everyone thought, what the hell is going on? Anyway, old Mick came and screamed, 'Get out of bed', and I saw this little bloke, and I didn't know who he was. I thought, who the hell are you? and then I thought, well, he must be somebody with authority surely. So I jumped out of bed and he told me to strip off, and I asked him what for. He said, 'Short arm inspection.' So that's how we started. Peter White was there and he said, 'In future, don't argue with the platoon sergeant, take your tablet', so I had to take the tablet.

The first night there we had a big brawl, all of our blokes.

This was 3 RAR and 1 RAR?

Yeah. I don't know whether there was a winner or a loser in it - we did pretty well. We had to front the company commander and we got told that we were a bunch of rabble. That was after Mick had given me the tablet too. Then we got fronted to Peter White and told to brace ourselves up and that we would be finding our way out of the company.

It would be a shock being woken up with a new situation though.

Yeah. Well, in between the two styles, you know, one going home and then we were on our own for a while while we were packing up all the married quarters. We had to go round with packets and pack all this stuff up.

While I was thinking of that I started to tell you before about it, and I was thinking of Mick, because he was only a little bloke - Who the hell are you? you know.

A good start.

It wasn't, I've had better introductions.

Topic 27: Were there any other postings or employments you had during your time with 3 or 1 RAR?

No. I didn't get attached to anybody, I stayed with the battalion, in the same bed space actually, for the two years.

Topic 28 says about transfer to 1 RAR, but we've been covering 1 RAR all the way through, pretty well.

Topic 29: How useful, do you reckon, the experience in the Malayan Emergency was in preparing infantry for service in Vietnam?

I thought very good, excellent. I thought one of the sad things that I've seen in the Army, in my time later, was how the Vietnam experience was dropped off the agenda of training, and how we lost it, and the same was as a result of Vietnam and Malaya, but not to that extent. In the Malayan experience, and the George Mansfords, and those people, and a lot of other good people, were able to keep that Malayan experience alive; and as Korea was a foundation for a lot of the sort of comradeship in the Army, I think Malaya was the foundation, to me, for Vietnam. A lot of the learning for Vietnam - different stuff, of course, but we were able to sort of juggle it around. But I found, like, when I was RSM of 6th Battalion, my CO was Colonel Harris - Mick Harris - he said to me, 'Look, we are losing the skills of working in the jungle, so we've got to go and do it (*sic*).' So we wrote up an exercise for jungle which included casualty evacuation, and all sorts of things. The only thing wrong with it was that we couldn't get the actual support from helicopters and other things, so we had to sort of mock it with Land Rovers, and that sort of thing, so it sort of took away from being able to properly do it. But all the SOPs (standard operating procedures) were written as we were in Malaya or Vietnam, that's how we operated. We were able to use the few Vietnam people that were left, even at that stage, in the late '70s, that were left around that could pass it on.

But then the Army got onto this little tangent that if you've had twenty years we want you out, and they got rid of a lot of the people that actually knew. It would be better off to have some older people around writing some doctrine or doing something with it. But they didn't, they got rid of them, and I found a gap. Then they go to East Timor, and East Timor must surely relate to both Malaya and Vietnam, probably a mixture of both, I suppose. I guess a lot of their experiences then would have had to come back - I don't know.

But I found Malaya was definitely a great foundation for soldiering - great.

A lot of stuff was obvious, and other stuff was built in to the back of your mind, wasn't it?

Yes.

Just the confidence of working in close country, in jungle, and some of the problems, and even the vague recollection of the acclimatisation, that your body adjusted to Vietnam a lot better because of it.

Did you feel it?

I think it was, even the techniques. Some of the more senior officers in the units hadn't served in Malaya, they came from Korea. Like the Americans; the Americans apparently expected the North Vietnamese Army to come roaring across the 17th Parallel. In fact, those who had served in Malaya recognised guerilla warfare for what it was, but realised the scale. But techniques from Malaya, like leading an ambush; you pull out of a fire support base and leave an ambush party on the fire support base, having recovered most stuff.

Another thing in Malaya was the Austers would occasionally come over and try and spot CT fires at night. We tried that in Vietnam, put a Cessna up, throttled back at about

10,000 feet, tried it. It wasn't very successful, but the technique, the idea ... There were a lot of things like that, a lot of things you could apply.

Well, the food denial was a thing in Malaya, where they put these villages in; and they tried that with the one that's outside Nui Dat, but that only made them hostile and that became the worst part of the whole thing. But if they could have used a lot of the British experience in Vietnam they may have had a better show.

And the ambushing applied from Malaya - I think 8 RAR particularly did a lot of that in Vietnam because of 'Peggy' O'Neill's experience. But we had a lot more ambushing, and I always felt that where every time we had a call sign in contact, in Vietnam in a bunker system, you knew you were going to have one or two blokes killed and about three wounded. To my mind we should have been looking more at the fact that the VC had to move, they couldn't survive in the jungle without making contact at the various villages. You ambush their tracks and trails - and they wouldn't go across country, they used the trails, and they were sitting ducks for ambushes over and over again. We could have saved a lot of our own blokes' lives, I believe, by ambushing more. Even if they never made a contact, the fact that the VC knew there were Australian ambushes in.

That was one of the effects that (Brigadier) Sandy Pierson had. A battalion, with Fire Support Base 'Thrust', out from the Long Hais, put almost a complete cordon around the Long Hais by combining our battalion, the companies out, with RF and PF, being prodded by the Australians, by ambushing to stop the VC getting in and out of the Long Hais. That had a drastic effect. See, we didn't carry those lessons further.

Before (Operation) Balmoral we had to skirt a village in the morning - early morning - and we had more contacts going round that village than we had of people coming back in after their nights out firing than we had for the whole time we were in the rest of the operation - before we got to Balmoral we had to shift. I can't remember the village, but this village, every time we crossed a path we'd stop, and sure as anything, there would be people bumping into us. What you are saying, if we'd have just ambushed there we could have just stayed there, just kept shifting.

Without losing blokes' lives; we lost too many lives, I think, in Vietnam by attacking. Sure, the principle that you've got to clear the bunker system, but there are other ways of clearing it instead of assaulting it every time and losing fellows attacking. And you read that over and over again in battalion histories, blokes lost in attacking bunker systems.

We struck it, we attacked this place, and it was a dummy position. On the right was all this bamboo. Just as they got in all hell broke up and we had to switch axis (of attack). During that one of the platoon commanders froze and a platoon commander took over, and he's screaming and yelling, and getting them moving, and everybody is going again, and the sniper got him. But, as you say, why go in there? you could sit outside and get him.

That's right, they've got to move, they really have to.

Yeah, anyway, that's going back to the other place. I do think it was a great foundation for our soldiering, and it's a pity that a lot of it was tossed out. You get some of those old books, and go back and get some of the old fellows, it will all come back to them.

Last topic: Are there any other comments on your period of service in the Malayan Emergency?

My only comment would be that without it, David, I don't believe that I could have ever reached the heights that I reached in the Army, the people I've met, the training I had, the experiences I had, all of which led to a good foundation for later on in my Army career. I think it was a marvellous experience. I thought it was a shame that we stopped doing it.

From what you said, it was a very fortunate experience by serving with two battalions.

Yes.

Comparisons you can make, a battalion towards the end of its tour and a new one coming in, all those things, and different methods, and so on.

Yeah, it's a great experience, and an experience being a reinforcement.

That's critical. It's easy with the whole team going in, but as a reinforcement, as you've said before, you had to be brought into the team and encouraged, bonded in.

And often you are not. We found that our section was predominantly reinforcements. For some reason we ended up together and stayed together, most of our time over there, so when we left our section almost left at once. When people joined us - and we had a couple of people join us - we were very conscious of where they fitted in to the scheme of things, and we looked after them.

See, little things like when we were going to change our greens prior to 3 RAR leaving, we went down to the Q store to change our equipment, which is always one for one, and the old CQ said to us, 'No, you are 1 RAR, you can do it when they get here.' So we had to suffer until they left, and then, when 1 RAR arrived, old Frankie Dean, he went down and he said, 'No, you had your gear with 3 RAR.'

You can't win either way.

And they were quite serious about it. So we did an act, we ripped all our gear and went on parade with all our gear ripped. The OC was 'Peggy' O'Neill, he screamed at us, 'What are you doing dressed like that?' and we said, 'They are the only clothes we've got left.' So he ripped the CQ out of his ... 'Take these men away and change their gear' - he couldn't give us enough.

Better do it.

But later, when we got into his Q store - we worked out how to go in the back way - so we used to help ourselves to his (inaudible) - he didn't find that out for nearly six months.

Like the rum.

He found that out after Malaya.

Really, I believe Malaya was a great experience with wonderful people, good soldiers. There were some idiots, of course, as in any place.

You learn from them anyway.

Yeah.

What to do and what not to do.

Some of the funny thins - well, we were talking about things. I was just thinking about the jukebox. In Sungei Siput they had a jukebox - this is in 1 RAR. The blokes got so annoyed with them playing music at two o'clock in the morning - you know, somebody would go down and put a couple of coins in, someone who lived a fair way from it. These blokes would have all this music going, they'd have to get up and pull the cord out.

Anyway, they took the old jukebox and put it on the railway line in Sungei Siput. The train came along and cleaned it up.

There are solutions to everything. That's another thing, the initiative of the Australian soldier. I don't know whether the Brits would have done that.

They didn't have a jukebox. The canteen committee voted whether they'd have another one, but they didn't get one.

Oh, there was a dog who went through a couple of battalions, his name was Stupid - that was in Sungei Siput - I think it was 2 and 3 RAR.

I remember the name, Stupid.

Yeah, they had Stupid. He went on, he was still there in 1 RAR when I left, I think, old Stupid. They used to do some things with him, he'd get drunk on beer.

The jukebox was a funny thing. Our jukebox, they worked it out how to play it without the coins, and then the last bloke out at night used to turn the volume up, flat out, and play about twenty different numbers, and then go to bed - particularly if he lived a fair way away. We were fairly close to it so it used to annoy us. You'd be woken up to Bill Halley and 'Rock Around the Clock', and then all of a sudden you'd hear someone screaming and they'd pull the cord out.

And they burnt their sergeants' mess down - the officers' and sergeants' mess got burnt down.

This is in Lasah?

Lasah, yeah. The whole tent went up in flames. I don't know what that was about. There was a charge report, 'Burnt in the fire', I think.

There was another thing. We used to get those etherised eggs. I can remember, we were all up there one day and this corporal organised everyone to throw our eggs down to the cookhouse. There must have been about 100 eggs went flying down into the cookhouse. The old sergeant cook, he ... When you were talking about the food, that reminded me, the smell of that egg - etherised egg they called it.

In later times, with eggs, in Borneo, the Poms got one and a half eggs per day whereas we got

one egg, which included cooking, something like that. In Borneo we used to get that many eggs, and when we were back in the rest company base our cook used to cook them up. We had a little canteen there, and he'd cook half of them and have half raw. The blokes would be drinking there, the next thing there would be three or four eggs flying to try and kill the cook.

Did you call the cook a lot?

We lived in long 'atap' sort of huts - where was it? - at Baa in Borneo. This cook, one night he crept along - it took him a while - and he broke an egg in each bloke's boot. We didn't know, of course, till next morning. We got up next morning and the sergeant said, 'You are on parade', and they pulled their boots on - oh! - and everyone is standing in an egg in a boot. They chased the cook for ages. He was a character, a fellow named [Gotbolts] - old Gotbolts. He used to batter pieces of board for fish - you know, you'd have fish and you'd get a bit of board. He normally did it to visiting officers.

That's the best time to do it, yeah. Talking of eggs, we've got some egg sandwiches upstairs too. You'll be pleased with that - they are not etherised either, I don't think.

Well, Neil, thanks ever so much for that, it was a fascinating interview, great stories, and this is what we want to bring history to life. It's not just the official history, but it's the slant from the soldier's point of view, the platoon commander's point of view, and you've really brought it to life this morning. I thoroughly enjoyed that.

I feel a little inadequate actually.

No, that was excellent.

My memory does fade.

No, your memory functions extremely well there, it linked up with so many things we were looking for.

One thing; the operational side is not as clear to me. There are parts of it that are certainly very clear, in 1 RAR and Betong Glodang, and the ambushes on the border, and that sort of thing. But some of the early sort of things; you know, I can remember with amazement, when I came out of my first operation, and there was the Red Shield bloke with his Land Rover. I couldn't believe that they'd be up in this bush. Here we were, limping along, and there's a bloke there with his hot cup of tea. He was most welcome too, but he was there right at the end of this logging track. We had to walk, we didn't have any vehicles out, he had his Land Rover there. I said to the corporal, 'How does he survive? He is just riding around in his Land Rover and we are in such dangerous country.' He said, 'Oh, he gets around.' They had a bloke with him, with a rifle.

Still on their own, moving up these logging tracks, one Land Rover with a shotgun or rifle, that's not much protection against three or four CT coming through.

And they are still very strong in the service.

Yes, they are. Looking at traditions from World War I, World War II anyway, a lot of those with good courage went into the desert and the islands, the Red Shield blokes.

They just started a donation thing they send to us in the RSL, we support them when we can.

Well, again, thanks, Neil, I enjoyed that. We'll turn the tape off.

03/04