

CITY OF SYDNEY

ABORIGINAL SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Harry Allie Part 1

Date: 7 November 2008

Place: Indigenous Coordination Centre, Surry Hills

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Recorder: Marantz PMD 620

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 MB: This is an interview with Mr Harry Allie. It's taking place in his office in the Indigenous - - -

HA: Coordination Centre.

MB: - - - Centre, in Elizabeth Street in Surry Hills. The date is, I think, the 7th of November 2008. My name's Margo Beasley. The project is Aboriginal Servicemen and Women Oral History Project, being done on behalf of the City of Sydney's History Programme.

O.K, so, Harry, I met you, I think, originally through a project which is separate to this one but linked called the 'Coloured Digger' Project which, I guess, is a large project with, I suppose

you would say, it is basically about getting recognition for indigenous servicemen and women, many of whom particularly after the major world wars were treated pretty badly and their contribution has not really been recognised. Is that correct way to describe the Coloured Digger Project?

HA: Ah, that would be correct, Margo, more so from a Sydney and certainly a Redfern that the indigenous community in Redfern have always had that belief that they would like to honour and to sort of highlight the recognition of those servicemen and women who served their country. And the community was saying down there they wanted something unique to them.

1.57 There's been other things that have done throughout Australia but nobody seems to hear it or hear much about those things and it's always been a community thing but this time Redfern felt they wanted to do something in their community. Because of the interreaction that Ray, Pastor Ray Minniecon has with the community, we came forward to give him the support. What has progressively happened over the last couple of years is word has got through that people can come down and support the event and also have a bit of closure themselves, particularly those families that lost their loved ones, particularly in overseas conflict. So, it's a little bit for them to give the show to us and so to get their brothers or their sisters or their grandfathers or their uncles or whatever that recognition that they did serve their country.

MB: When you say "us", do you mean the people who are involved with the committee that runs the Coloured Digger Project?

HA: It's a little bit of everything; like when you're from a community organisation there are so many aspects and you have, naturally, your veterans and your ex servicepeople who have served their country and they come along and march with the community. A lot of the early days - and particularly servicepeople, have always said that the reason why we went on for as long as what we did and endured is because we had that love and support of the community, wherever that community was, whether it was here in Sydney or whether it was in the Torres Strait or even in Darwin or whatever.

4.12 And it's a two-way thing, where recognition from the service fraternity gives it back to our community and to proudly say, "Well, this is my mother and my aunty" or whatever and we have a great delight in doing that as well, as well as they themselves say, "Well, that's my uncle - he served his country" and things like that. So, it's a togetherness-type thing and probably as the time goes by with the aging veteran community, where they are, then that legacy will be up to our children and grandchildren to carry on that tradition and to give recognition for those people that went away and served their country. I think probably that tide is changing right across not only indigenous

but certainly the non-indigenous side and particularly with migration where it's becoming a bigger issue in Australia where these traditions were forged and where they served their country. I think even today as you look at the modern Defence Force there's many sorts of faces there now that characterises that we are multicultural Australians. But we have also – like from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait concept - we've encouraged and tried to be role models to the younger ones coming up where they can say, "Well, we've served our country - we went through the problems of coming away from home".

6.02

There were issues, like of homesickness, of moving away from your loved ones and your family but again it's the support that you get from home that keeps you going and things like that. The communication levels today are much better because of the internet, the phone. In our day we'd have to depend on letters. That side of things was too dear or too expensive to try and ring home or whatever and you're always conscious of the beeps on the phone, that the three minutes were up, and if you didn't have any more money to put in the payphone then you'd say, "Well, it's going to get cut off now, I love you. Keep writing and I hope we will see you soon", and clonk it'd go off, so. So, these sorts of things were always conscious in our minds and particularly with being homesick and before you have formed a relationship and had a family of your own you tended to do that. And you'd be allowed to go home once every twelve months, which the Service paid for you, so, but you'd be home for that. You'd extend all your leave as long as you could to be at home and you'd always dread gettin' on the train to come back to your unit and many a time there'd be people crying at the station and they'd sort of wait till your hand was completely out of sight and then you'd throw a hankie or a shirt out just to get that little bit more distance of "I love you, I'm going, I just can't wait till I come back home". So, those things you remember very uniquely.

MB: And so that's how it was for you?

HA: Very much so, yes.

MB: When did you join the forces?

HA: I joined in 1966 - I felt that I wanted to serve my country. I missed two national service intakes, so I've missed out on the first one, then I was just out of the bracket for the second one.

8.11 **MB: So, you'd have been happy for national service?**

HA: Yes, I would've been but by doing the option I felt that I wanted to join the Air Force as opposed to the Army. So, I was a little bit fortunate; I was a qualified linesman under the Postmaster General's Department. But I wanted to go in to the Air Force as a linesman but they had no vacancies, so.

MB: Can you just tell me what a linesman does?

HA: Well, a PMG linesman, which in the old days, if you went away it was a two year linesman course which we had to go to Brisbane. So, that was I had to get leave of Charters Towers to go to Brisbane.

MB: Because, of course, you were from Far North Queensland, yes.

HA: Yes, so up there and a lot of the things were capital city based, the major things like that. And so I had my two years but in those days to get what they call a city posting or job you had to do what they called "three years western service", so I ended up going into a line party which was out around a place call Ewan, which was about halfway between Mount Isa and Townsville and we were camped in tents. But because of that three year thing they wouldn't let you come into a town, into a normal job in the bigger town.

MB: What was it like out there?

9.54 HA: Well, at that stage, see, the government was putting sets of wires for the Defence Force because of what they termed the "Communist move" out of Asia, so we were sort of running these extra wires and plus they were also upgrading the Townsville to Mount Isa railway line; so, they had three major contractors for the upgrading of the railway line. The idea to upgrade the railway line was they were going to have their first mine and a half trains with silver lead coming out of Mount Isa, so they'd try to take all the hills and straighten the railway line. So, they had three main contractors, which was Hornibrook who did all the track laying; Thiess Brothers, who did all the approaches for the new bridges and Hornstoff who did all the bridges and they diverted the main railway line over the new high level bridges and then the PMG because the telegraph line always ran alongside the railway line. The PMG's rail was to shift the telegraph line out so it didn't interfere with the deviation of the railway line. But which meant that because that was the first time of mass employment in North Queensland so there was a lot of Torres Strait men coming out, working on these jobs and it'd be nothing for at least a thousand men to end up in a small town of three hundred on weekends and plus the PMG but we were in much smaller numbers than compared to the main contractors that were doing the railway line. But you had to grow up the hard way because it was very male dominated towns and things and it was certainly - - -

MB: How old were you when you first went out there?

HA: Uh, I would've been – '62, yes, I would've been about twenty, yes, when I went up to – yes, about twenty one or that there.

12.05 **MB: Still pretty young?**

HA: Yes. But when you're young you think you're gung-ho and bullet-proof and nobody's going take it out but it's a very – it makes you sort of aware of growing up with men. Men – some men – are very hard to understand. There was major drinking that went on; it was a culture, it was a very hot thing, the social aspect. Men drank in very big ways.

MB: And I think we probably should stress that you're not talking indigenous men, you're talking about all men out there.

HA: All men, yes. The major population of the workforce was Aboriginal and - mainly Torres Strait as opposed to Aboriginal - but because they were working long days, they were working twelve hour days and six day weeks the idea of the seventh day was a maintenance day and washing day and it's also the day we played football, so. So, it was a pretty male dominated culture out there and certainly the women that sort of came out into that - certainly, I believe - had it tough, like, putting up with that sort of thing but then that's how it goes, I guess.

MB: I think you told me once before that you were out there one day and it was extremely hot, it was very, very hot and you were very tired and you'd been working really hard and you thought, "There's got to be a better way to make a living than this". Is that right?

HA: That's right.

MB: Am I remembering correctly?

13.56 HA: You are, yes. Like when you're young – just to quote you an example how people in the other part of the world think – what we used to do – the same as all the railway workers: they used to have the main train going from Townsville to Mount Isa but we'd all sing out, "Paper, paper", but what the idea was the local paper that they'd bought in town they might've read, the idea was to throw it out so we could get the paper or the magazine because we didn't have access. Except some of the naïve – I was on a train one day: one of the naïve ladies, she said, "Oh, those poor men, they want paper". So, she ran into the toilet and pulled all the toilet paper and threw it out the window. And, of course, the idea was - we never had much, there was no television and the main thing was radio – and my mother's words always stuck in the back of my mind to keep improving myself and there are better things. And a friend of mine – I was working with his brother – had just joined the Air Force and he was saying how he was enjoying life in Melbourne because he was posted at Laverton or somewhere. So, I thought about it and it was a stinking hot day there – it was about forty four degrees or something – and we used to have

these whirly-whirlies, just sort of big wind things that'd pick up all the spinafex or whatever there was and just - - -

MB: And dust and grit.

HA: - - - and you're fighting your way through the dust and I said, "Oh". You'd come home and then the blokes – it would be payday and the blokes – because being at that age we weren't into drinking, we'd go up with them to start with and then they'd come home later when the pubs are closed and we'd just say - - -

MB: And they were drunk, were they?

15.55 HA: Yes. And, O.K, they left us alone but even if they did they'd come and wake us up and say, "Come down and have a thing" but you can only put up with it – and we'd been doing it for three years – well, I had been. And probably coming back into a city I felt I wanted to – there was a number of things that, because I'd kept in contact with a couple of friends in Brisbane and things like that, so I felt, "I'll see if I can join the Air Force – there must be something", not understanding that – I'd been in the school cadets and had a bit of an understanding of military but the other thing is I come from a very disciplined family. All my - mother and father and both of the uncles and aunties on both sides always kept an eye on us and if we didn't do the right thing we were kicked up the backside or it always got back to my mother and my father and sometimes that was better than the towelling down that you got from your parents, I guess. So, discipline was never a problem.

MB: Self discipline, you mean?

HA: Self-discipline, yes.

MB: So, you thought that you'd be O.K. in the armed services for that?

HA: Yes. I always felt that I had no problem with – like, school cadets is nothing compared to the real thing in discipline but I felt that I could make it. So, as a result of that then I did join the Air Force. But in saying that, then having to get up after swearing your allegiance to the Queen and you're on a plane and next minute you're in Adelaide and doing ten weeks' recruit course and not allowed into town for the first eight weeks of it – so that didn't – I settled into the discipline but probably the hardest thing then is when I had to do my trade training in Wagga.

18.01 Then my first posting was to East Sale, which is in Gippsland, south Gippsland and everybody goes to bed with a [?] because it's that cold.

MB: It was a very quiet life, was it?

HA: It was something - until you get to know people. And a friend of mine said to me, he said in one of my things when I was tryin' to settle, he said, "Three months are always the worst in any job that you go to", he said, "till you get to know the running order and who's who and they get to know you, you've got to bounce". And I took that on but I must admit I looked at an assessment on the calendar at the three month mark. And I say that to so many of the young people today, particularly the young Indigenous ones that come to Sydney or even in the bigger cities after being out there, I say, "Don't try and change the world in the first month because you're not going to do that" and I always pass that word of advice onto the young people today. And it's true to life in a lot of things that you do – it still happens to me today; I still use that philosophy.

MB: That it just takes time to get used to something?

HA: Yes, and then you know you're going and then you can start changing the world a bit if you want.

MB: What was your trade training in the Air Force then?

HA: I went into it completely. It was logistics or in those days we adopted the RAF, a lot of the culture and the terminology, and it wasn't until we sort of withdrew out of Vietnam that they changed to the American terminology, Defense with an 'S' and logistics and all that so that where in the RAF thing it was either equipment or supply and it was always being sort of changed around and they were changing the command structures.

20.11 But certainly I noticed with dealing with the guys that had come out Vietnam and also for my own dealings when I went to America for the ferry of the F1-11s, where I was dealing with the Americans in their own setup.

MB: For the what of the F1-11s - ferrying, did you say?

HA: Yes, when I finally got posted out of Sale after five and a half years - -
-

MB: Five and a half years in Sale?

HA: Yes.

MB: Well, you must have got used to the cold there.

HA: Oh, I did. Well, I met my wife and my son's born there, so. But I got a posting to Amberley and I joined with what they called the Maintenance Squadron, 482 Maintenance Squadron, and I arrived there as they were leasing the F4 Phantoms which, until the

government made up their mind on whether they were going to accept delivery of the F1-11s which they'd bought ten years or quite a number of years previously. And so I had a lot to do with the lease of the resupply and all that sort of thing and then when they were ready to send back the Phantoms after the lease I was arranging some of that equipment to go back to the various Air Force bases in America. So, then my equipment officer, when they were looking for a guy of my mustering, selected me to go over because they had the idea for the government is they had to have six F1-11s fly over Amberley – I forget the exact date – the 2nd of June, 1973 or whatever – exactly at 11.30 they were to step off the aircraft, the minister would meet them and it was set to a tight schedule.

22.07

But the idea is they had eight aircraft on – they had two spare just in case they lost one for the long ferry – and because the F1-11s had never been flown over such vast amounts of water I went over as the logistics guy. And then they sent a team down to Edwards Air Force base in California - oh, this was in California but Southern California – and they did trials to see what the best performance they could get out of engines and all that sort of thing. Then after they did the trials a lot of the data was analysed then to get the best maximum performance out of the aircraft. And then I stayed there till the second – what they did is they'd bring them out of the factory, Fort Worth General Dynamics, six at a time. In the second case, because they brought a couple up that were on standby, they brought around, so that there was another six ready to go for the next ferry and then I did my stint and then I came back. But it was a very enriched period of my life because when I was there they – when we were flying, we went over by Hercules aircraft out of Amberley, we flew into Pago Pago, spent a night, then we flew into Hickam Air Force Base and then we flew into McClellan Air Force Base. But when we were at Hickam this first lot of POWs – they were coming out of Vietnam, they'd brought them out of Vietnam into Clarke Air Force Base - - -

MB: American POWs?

HA: Mm. And it's one of the most moving things that I've ever seen in my life.

24.03 **MB: Tell me about that.**

HA: They marched them off under ceremonial flags into the terminal just as the sun was rising and just everybody had a complete lump in their throat. But then when we were in America and probably the 'Tie the Yellow Ribbon Around the Old Oak Tree' was the theme thing and a lot of that happening in America and that was my favourite tune that my wife and I – because we related to the absence, that we were away from my children and her and even now when they play it it still brings back that period. And again, we got back to the old letter

writing and sometimes the letters got delayed or something but I wrote every day while I was away.

MB: How long were you away?

HA: I was away for about five to six months at that stage. But there were other things when we got back to Australia and the Squadron where they had to do flight trials, so we were moving in and out of Darwin while they did their operational exercises. So, in that three years period that I was there at Amberley I was away for quite a bit of it but that's how your wife and children cope.

MB: And I guess it's the same for everybody in the Defence Forces, that kind of separation thing.

HA: Yes.

MB: But I wonder if it's true that it's a different experience again for Indigenous people - I don't necessarily mean you, particularly - but whether the separation from home might be more extreme, particularly for the young ones because they might feel a bit culturally out of place.

25.57 AH: It's always aware of it. Like, that's what I always notice, that it would be the same for them. Although within your own work environment it's mateship, you get on well, but it's the other areas of social atmosphere that you go to that you're made aware of. For example, when I went from North Queensland down to Adelaide I've run into a couple of instances where they wouldn't serve me, you know. But what I did, because of the mateship, I used to always wait till the last one to shout so that if I went they'd say, "Oh, well, we can't serve you", well, the blokes would walk but at least it was they had a beer and things like that - and it's funny how things stick in your mind because of that. Townsville, North Queensland is still - in areas and spots there there's still that sort of thing that goes on. Some of the Australians today much more understand the story a bit more - like, they've heard the stories and the things like that, they're more understanding - whereas in that day and age nobody was aware of that and you were seen as a group thing and there's good and bad in everything.

MB: But Aborigines, I guess, were like in a way stereotyped or for most Australians they were kind of two-dimensional - - -

HA: Yes.

MB: - - - because most white Australians wouldn't even know an Aboriginal person.

HA: No. No, that's right, very true.

MB: And so their images and their perceptions were all coming from some strange place - - -

HA: Yes.

MB: - - - like a history book or something like that.

HA: Yes.

MB: So, you're up against that as well as - - -

HA: Yes.

MB: - - - you know, innate racism, I guess, which - - -

HA: Yes.

MB: - - - was very extreme then and - - -

HA: Yes.

MB: - - - you know, still with us today.

28.03 HA: That's right.

MB: So, it's a whole big bag of things, isn't it?

HA: Yes. Well, that's why the RSL - and despite everything there was some good ones but there was some bad ones - they went in there, they were alienated. Charters Towers was a little better than in town, mainly because of the community that we had up there but there are instances where - mates is probably our term and all that sort of thing - but even the blokes in my community, they never spent much time in there as opposed - - -

MB: Never spent much time in the pub, do you mean?

HA: Yes, but in the club on the day and - - -

MB: No. On ANZAC Day, yes; because they never really felt a hundred per cent part of it.

HA: Yes. Yes, comfortable. Yes, they never felt comfortable and it only takes one to make a comment and that can upset the whole scene for the day and despite, you see, you can get over it or you're above that it's still sort of in the back of your mind. And things are changing in the modern thing where people will automatically come to your defence and - and today I've noticed that on some things that have

been said in my case whereas that wouldn't have happened in that early days.

MB: So, what sort of things are you thinking of when you say that, that people come to your defence?

HA: Well, for example, somebody might say – who doesn't understand – “Well, what you doing here?” and not - - -

MB: Where, in the RSL?

HA: In the RSL, for example. Like, irrespective of the day and the meaning of it but not thinking they would sort of say something like that and if you're wary about sort of treading in there or working in there and what you tend to do is move to the back so you don't make yourself a prominent-type sort situation.

30.12 **MB: So, in other words you don't have that kind of innate sense that most Australian and servicepeople – mostly men, I guess – would have of just being a fully equal part of all of that – ANZAC Day and all of that?**

HA: Yes, yes.

MB: Like, if you're putting yourself at the back, that means, “I'm at the back” - - -

HA: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - “I'm not part of this, really”.

HA: Yes.

MB: “I'm trying to share it but I can't”.

HA: Yes. Well, a lot of the thing, a lot of the community used to say - well, when a couple of the blokes used to march they used to go down the back of the flight anyway and, of course, a lot of the exasperation used to sort, from the community, was like, “Why are all the blackfellas down the back again?” and “Why can't you march up the front?”. But there's a little bit of not understanding either, that the RSL protocol is always the oldest veterans, whether it be WWI, and they come through and the last conflict, the returned have precedent over ex and that's the way that the unspoken protocol is.

MB: Right. So, sometimes you might be down the back for reasons that haven't got anything to do with skin colour?

HA: Yes. Yes, that's right, yes.

MB: Like, if you haven't seen active service, for instance?

HA: Yes, that's right, and that's what was in the old days that - I don't know whether it's as much today. I've never gone down there and I haven't been in a big parade to see. Probably you don't notice it much here because they form up in their battalions or their units on what they served.

31.56 But in a sort of a bigger thing where they're all together, particularly the sub branch members or the RSLs or the returned, and all march together, then – but because it's not as much today, they all line up and just the way you line up but in the old days - - -

MB: It was very formalised?

HA: That was formalised, yes. And when you were serving it was an unsung thing, that you paid respect to those returned guys, we were asked to sort of do catapult [?] parties or participate, then it was expected of you to acknowledge those guys. I can't speak for what the protocols or what's expected of them today but I think there'd be still something that would be handed down; it's the done thing that would be handed down and expected of you.

MB: So, when you joined the Air Force, you said that you actually wanted to serve your country.

HA: Yes.

MB: Can you tell me a bit more about during those times – I mean, this must have been during the Vietnam War?

HA: Yes, there was yes.

MB: So, very different circumstances to today. So, what was it that made you feel as though you wanted to serve your country?

HA: Well, because my two uncles and my aunty – one uncle was in WWI or at the end of it and he served in WWII - I had another uncle that served in WWII. My aunty served in the Land Army and I can always remember growing up at – my grandmother lived next door – that was always a photo on the mantelpiece of them in uniform and it never - and plus my grandfather, he looked after the stockyard for the horses to go over to Egypt and they - - -

34.06 **MB: In WWI?**

HA: In WWI, so.

MB: He was in Charters Towers?

HA: Yes, yes. And they used to bring the horses in from the station, then they'd hold them in the paddock at Blackjack - on my father's side and grandmother and grandfather - and then they'd ship them out from there. So, we've had a bearing on, have an understanding of that sort of involvement and commitment. In saying that, when I went down one day and joined the Air Force, my brother felt that he wanted to join the services - and he's younger than me - but because, see, the Air Force didn't want him he went in the other door, so he joined the Army but he ended up in Vietnam but because the Air Force only had aircraft and because of the minimal involvement I didn't go to Vietnam in the end.

MB: Minimal involvement of the Air Force?

HA: Mm.

MB: Did you want to go to Vietnam?

HA: Oh, yes, I volunteered, you know. I did hear that I was on standby to go because they said - what you had to do in those days, depending on what squadron you were going to - if you were going to helicopters then you were expected to go into Fairburn to do an M60 machinegun course before you went, plus any other training that you required while you were over there but at that time they were brought back. I think it was the Labor government brought them back, Gough Whitlam.

MB: 1972.

HA: Mm.

MB: Yes, they brought everybody back from Vietnam.

HA: Yes.

MB: So, you didn't have your chance to go?

HA: No, no.

MB: But in general you supported that war - - -

HA: Yes.

MB: - - - you thought it was a just war?

35.55 HA: Well, because we had to respond on - which was expected of you of a serviceman - there were certain aspects that you thought about. Certainly, there were things like the domino effect and it was better to fight them up there - that was one of the things that - - -

MB: That was one of the big theories at the time, wasn't it?

HA: That was one of the things that were going on. I was also around in that time when they came back and the paint was poured over them when they did the march down Melbourne.

MB: Red paint was thrown over some of the returned servicemen?

HA: Servicemen, when they were marching. They did a march in Melbourne, so the anti-Vietnam thing poured red paint over one of the guys. Plus, it was very strong towards the end to get them home, the anti-Vietnam demonstration. In the end we weren't allowed to wear uniform in Melbourne, in the city of Melbourne; you had to wear civilian clothes and that wasn't taken off for quite a number of years later, so.

MB: That was as a protective thing.

HA: Yes. But I can remember going to Melbourne and you were a bit ostracised as well because of the short haircut, which short haircuts wasn't the go in those days.

MB: No, you could pick an Army or policeperson, couldn't you, because of the hairdo?

HA: And I saw things where we were at a party and they were – one girl come over and said, "Oh, baby killers" and things but, yes, you just had to rise above that. You didn't provoke anything, you - so you tended to keep that to yourself. But again you supported the guys that went and when they come home they made sure that they picked up where they come back.

MB: Did your brother come home O.K?

37.58 HA: My brother came home O.K, yes. He, like a lot of those Vietnam vets, some of the stuff is coming out with him in later life. So, again we sort them, we've always supported them. My sister, when David was in Vietnam when they cut across the news she used to break down, she used to get very emotional and those sorts of things.

MB: Worrying about him?

HA: Worrying about him, yes. We used to worry about – he wanted to come back to Sydney for R and R [rest and recreation], so I made sure I came in and spent the time with him while he was with R and R and all those sort of things, so. And plus we used to make sure the wives were looked after, lawns were mowed and all those sort of things that you do.

MB: When you say “we”, who do you mean there?

HA: The guys of the unit and if their wives had anything that in any form or shape that she felt that she couldn't talk to the padre or anybody, if just in discussion she was talking to one of the wives and she might say something to our wives and then the wives would say to us that such and such is not sort of travelling too well or – so, it was that command, regiment to look after each other and - - -

MBT: So, that was actually like a military thing or an Air Force thing?

HA: Yes, yes. But they would all do the same, yes.

MB: That was part of - - -

HA: Part of, yes.

MB: - - - being part of that unit - - -

HA: Yes.

MB: - - - that you'd take care of each other a bit?

HA: Yes, yes.

Part 1 interview ends