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## TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Title	(VX139898) Howson, Jack Lawrence (Smoky) (Private)
Interviewer	Martin, Harry
Place made	Caufield
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Description	<p>Jack Lawrence (Smoky) Howson, Private with 39th Battalion, interviewed by Harry Martin for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.</p> <p>Discusses pre-war education; religion; economic depression, class differences, pre-war employment, conscription; enlistment; army training; embarkation; authority; Australia; 39th Battalion; casualties; health; food and equipment supplies; humour; AIF/Militia relations; post-war employment; demobilisation; homecoming; troopship SS Aquitania; unit solidarity; battle tactics; combat conditions; conflict with officers; Salvation Army; Australian American relations, relation to authority; field ambulance duties. Mentions Buna, Ueberi, Deniki, Kokoda, Oivi, Isurava, Hombrom Bluff, Golden Stairs, Seven Mile, Port Moresby, Wewak, Papua New Guinea; Bill Merritt, H. N. Sorenson.</p>

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Australian War Memorial

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This is an item for the Australian War Memorial. It's an interview with Lawrie "Smoky" Howson, formerly a private with the 52nd Battalion and then later with the 39th Battalion. It's recorded at Caulfield, on the 5th November and this is Side 1.

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A

Lawrie Howson, can we start by having you tell us where and when you were born and a bit about your early childhood.

Yes, I was born in a place called Clarinda, which is just a few miles from Clayton, or couple of miles from Clayton – commonly called South Oakleigh at the moment. Born in 15/3/21 – born into a family of nineteen children. At the moment – this present date – there is still five brothers and five sisters alive. That's eleven of us at the moment which is pretty good going I thought.

Well, nineteen is a very large family – exceptionally large even by standards when they were trying to build up the population at that period. So how was life with such a large family?

Pretty rough going. But before we get to that – they needed football teams those days and nineteen just made the football team – eighteen and one reserve. It was really tough going and there wasn't much tucker about and we all had to work in the garden even when we – it was a market garden in those days – and we all had to work in the garden when we was four or five upwards, all this sort of thing and there was no loser – not much tucker and plenty of beltings. A bit like the book called My Fortunate Life and that story and I could nearly repeat that with the hardships we had.

With such a large family was it possible to get to know your parents even really well. They'd find it very hard to spread their time pretty evenly, I'd imagine.

I don't think that come in in those days. They were too busy working and my mother, soon as she had a baby the eldest one would look after the younger ones and she worked at the Rosella factory and – this was before we had the market garden and my father used to work in that and us young nippers got older we all just took on one after another and worked in the garden.

What about your nickname "Smoky"? Was that something that came during childhood or later?

That was early childhood. Once again there was no facilities in the house we lived in. In those days we had very little and had an open fireplace to do all your cooking on it – no stove – and this had what you call a hob inside the firebox where we set the bars on it – and when the fire was on we hopped in the side there and keep warm, amongst the smoke and everything and that's how I got my nickname "Smoky".

What about school in those days?

Oh those days well there wasn't a great deal of schooling. You used to have to work before school and after school and most times you get up at three or four o'clock in the morning and go down to the market garden and get a load of vegetables ready for the market. Then you come home and – with the arse out of your pants, mainly – wet, cold,

starving, and then go to school. Then also take a note with you – that would be ten or eleven o'clock in the morning – and so you can get out of school at two o'clock in the afternoon, so you would work then.

What was the attitude at the time towards people or children from poorer families? Were they looked down on? Was there snobbishness in those days?

Yes very much so. I think more so those days than they are now. It's bad enough these days I thought, but those days – yes people did look down on you. I remember we used to go to Sunday school and they wanted to know what us snotty-nosed little kids are doing there – the Howson mob were doing there – wherever you went they looked down on you.

Sunday school, does that mean that the family was a religious family.

We come from a religious family but I finished up the opposite end of the scale.

What denomination?

I call it Callithumpian but it was Presbyterian but I changed that during the war.

Was it important to your family, to your parents?

My parent's parents, they were very religious – as it went on we sort of dropped the church a bit.

(5.00) So how far did you go with your schooling?

I went till I was fourteen. Just .... break my neck to get out of school of course because we were hardened workers before you was 14 and that's what you learnt to do those days was work, work, work, work.

What were you thinking you wanted to do with your life at that age?

We didn't have enough skill in the work we had you wasn't skilled enough in the brains to do it. Though I was pretty good at arithmetic and what they call mental arithmetic – doing that sort of thing. That was about the only thing I really excelled at.

But were there things that you dreamed you'd like to do? Did you think you'd like to travel the world or...

I can't go back and recall any of that because I think it was bashed out of you if you thought of doing anything else. I don't think you had time to think. You work, slept, and went to school what part of it until right up to the later years.

Did you remain living then with your family? Are you finished school?

Oh yes, up till about sixteen or seventeen and like the ones before me, I – after I started to learn a bit and got treated – still get treated pretty rough, I, what you call, shot through and the family, one-by-one, shot through.

What do you mean by being treated pretty rough?

Oh, well, if you only looked sideways at the father you'd probably get a smash across the head with a lump of wood or a belt with a buckle on it and it wouldn't matter if you'd done

one thing wrong that would be it, you would go to bed without tea – if you got a bed to go to – or he'd hunt you down until he got hold of you and bashed the Christ out of you and this type of thing. It's pretty hard going.

So shoot through to where?

Oh, you might shoot through to a friend's place or finish going up living somewhere and getting a job and living away from home.

What kind of work?

Mostly market gardening and those because it was depression years and there wasn't much else work about.

So during that schoolhood period when you're looking at contemporary history and looking at the First World War, was the notions of the ANZAC and Australia's role in the First World War a matter of particular interest, concern, either to you personally or to your family?

Most of those times I don't think it sort of rang a bell, I don't think there's much to same these days with a lot of young people – unless you been through something it's very hard to make it tick inside I think.

Have you had any of your family served in the First World War?

My uncle served in the Navy in the First World War. He's the one that made the landing at Rabaul when the navy took over from the Germans there and I am not sure about my father and another of his brothers – I am not sure what they did – but only one of the uncles as far as I know.

Perhaps much more so in those days people were particularly conscious of their British background. How did you tend to see yourselves? Did you think yourselves...?

In those days, very patriotic, you stood up for the flag and sang God Save the King and were full of heart and full of everything because that was the way you was learnt and of course if you said anything against the crown or anything against Jesus Christ, or something like that, they'd get stuck into you and that was the worst thing in the world you could say, it was really a naughty thing.

Was it the mother country? Did you think...?

Oh yes it was the mother country. I didn't think it was the mother country, only what we were taught – England was this and England was that – that was the way we was taught.

So as we got closer to war where did you find yourself? Where were you when the threat to Australia started to become apparent?

I was still have a – still working in market gardens and not learning much else but knew how to work – worked liked a bullock – carry a bag of spuds, no trouble, a bag of super, which was about 180 pound or something – strong as an ox, all brawn and no brains as they say. Apparently might have been pretty right too, because we never mix with anybody to learn anything – the market gardens – and that's where I finished when the war started.

Do you remember the occasion when it was announced that Australia along with Britain was now at war?

Not really, not really. I was only seventeen at the time, I think, roughly, seventeen getting on to eighteen, and it sort of didn't ring a bell a great deal. But after a while after you seen your mates join up and going away you start to wake up that something going on and then you finish up having a go at it yourself.

Did you have any interest in politics as such at the time?

No, no, not really at all.

Were there any issues that loomed important – I mean if there was a lot of unemployment and things were tough...?

Oh no I couldn't recall anything at that stage. You didn't get educated on anything like that, or you wasn't interested. All you was learnt to do when I was a young fella, you learnt how to work – and I still know how to work.

So how did it come about that you first got interested in the idea of joining up?

Oh well I was working in the market garden with a friend of mine, a mate of mine – Bill Leehman in fact his name – and he was well twelve-eighteen months younger than I am – he was about sixteen and a half and I was about eighteen, getting close – and he said "Well bugger it, why don't we go and join the navy". So that's what we did and went and had a crack at the navy and he got into the Navy and I got told to go and join the army. I was too old at eighteen to join the navy, because they was looking for young stuff at that time and so I give that away and then I had another crack a few weeks later with a cousin of mine and also I still got thrown out. So anyhow I give it away and finished up getting a call up in '41.

(10.00) Why were you thrown out as...?

I was too old; I was eighteen or eighteen and a half at this time. I was too old for the navy because they were only taking sixteen and a half year olds and this sort of thing.

Was the navy anything to do with the notion of seeing the world?

Oh, probably. I wouldn't say – well, probably. Looking back I'd say it would have been, but I can't recall the moment what I felt but I think that was the idea. Go and see the world and a girl in every port I s'pose.

So after that then how long again before thought you'd have another go?

I think it was four or five months after that, and I think at the stage there I think me father – he wouldn't sign the papers or something like that – and anyhow so oh bugger it I'll give her away until I was called up and you had no control over them.

How did you feel when you were called up?

Oh well, I was keen to go. I was keen because it's a different life and – I didn't really know I suppose when you look back until I really got into it and then I was pretty keen.

You were single at that time?

Oh, single, yeah.

What about the way of life? Was it a period when most young fellas tended to drink a bit? There was a suggestion that Australian soldiers were pretty hard drinkers. Did that come from a tradition before they joined the army?

Oh, I just started to drink just about the same time I joined up as a matter of fact, but I always swore I'd never drink because me old man used to drink enough for about twenty or thirty and I swore I'd never drink because we had a lot of hardship through drink. I was about eighteen and a half when I had me first drink and that was just before I went in.

When you joined up did it have again any special meaning? You were saying when you were younger the term ANZACs, as such, didn't mean very much, but did you start to reflect back upon those supposed traditions or wasn't it part of your thought.

No, I don't think so. What took your fancy you met with a lot of fellas at the same age and they come from all different backgrounds and you realise how much backwards you was and well they became your friends, you never had anything like it before, you never had three feeds a day, you never had a decent bed to sleep in. The bed we got in the Army wasn't too bad, it was straw in a bag on some hard boards, but it was better than sleeping out under the stars or somewhere waiting for your old man to come along and belt you with a lump of wood or something. It was very hard to say what you felt like. But as time goes on because you can't get mates you become inseparable.

Well if you found good friends, and you had better food and conditions in those terms, what about the nature of army life, the discipline and that side of it?

I think I handled that okay. It was quite a bit strange but every kid and lad you go and play merry hell until they come up and the sergeant roared Christ out of you and you jumped to attention. I think that most of the fellas those days were used to a lot of discipline because you were used to discipline at home.

But did the discipline seem to make sense or did there seem to be a lot of discipline that was petty and to do with temperament and of individual people in charge.

Early it didn't seem to make great sense but as time got on during the war I realised that you certainly had to have discipline otherwise we wouldn't have got where we got.

What about the training side of it? How did you find that?

Pretty hard going – it was completely different to what we was used of. It was hard but it wasn't as hard as working where I was working at home.

What sort of things were doing?

Oh mostly marching and rifle drill and this type of thing as from the first unit I went into and the bull ring, learn how to use the bayonet and so forth.

What's the bull ring?

That's where you charge with your rifle and bayonet into a dummy bodies and use the bayonet and push it in and pull it out and use the rifle butt like the old – going back to the first world war where you used open trench warfare when trained in that way nothing in jungle warfare, it was all done for open country.

Did they have exercises as such? Were you fighting mock situations?

Yes they had the mock battles out in the paddocks and different things, and – but they were only a bit of joke really because you didn't know what was going on – you never been in a war, you hadn't been trained long enough. This all happened in two or three months you was doing these things and you was nearly ready to go into the front lines, so you never had much time to learn anything.

Well what about equipment? Was there plenty of good equipment about?

I don't know what you would call good but...

Well, what you would call good.

Not what I call good and bad but now is different what I thought then. I didn't take much notice when we first got the equipment because it was only training equipment and you weren't firing bullets or anything like that and if you do get rounds you might have got a couple of rounds to fire, but I can tell you now what the equipment was like a couple of years later – or twelve months later or less – it was bloody terrible, there wasn't any equipment at all. I'm probably jumpin' the gun here – I'm getting from now when I joined up now to the middle of the battle, well when we went overseas well, they give us ten bloody lousy rounds to make a beach landing and it's just bloody laughable, you know.

(15.00) Before we go into that, what about the officers and so on during the training period. How did they strike you? Did they seem men of calibre at the time or...

No, I don't think they were men at all, personally. I think they're a lot of bloody snobs and to me, what I can gather at the time half of them were given the commission because they some business people or something to that effect, not too many of them come up through the ranks and so the consequences now as we know most of them made damn bloody losers.

Was that a class thing? Did it seem...?

Oh yes I think it looked like a lot of class thing. If you was in the know – it was definitely a class thing. If you was a scrubber, you was a scrubber, and the only time you were only good when you got out in the field, in the front line, that's where the private and the corporal maybe showed his grit and the other bastards showed their weaknesses.

Well during that stage were there ever occasions where it became possible to know officers on a personal basis?

No, that was taboo. That was one thing they really separated themselves from. You had – the idea what – you see you had to be – you had the lower and the upper and that was it, you know. In their quarters or in their clothes or whatever, you was the – you was only a bit of bloody shit under their feet. I'm using these words now because that's what...

You felt at the time?



No, hang on, I still feel it, not only at the time, I still feel it and I feel it more now because I've learnt so much – you see what mongrels most of them are.

Well what about for those who started as privates. What sort of opportunities were there for promotion and was there an interest even in the notion of promotion.

Oh, no not in the early stages, no there was no interest at all.

Why was that?

I do not know. I do not know, because I wasn't education in the army way of life to find out for a start, weren't there long enough to find much out. There was a little bit of encouragement in the 39th Battalion when that was first formed because they needed new NCOs, etc but how much I do not know.

What about leave during that early part of the training. Did you have weekends off or...?

I had weekend leave, yes. There wasn't a great deal of leave as I said we was only in the Army a very short time and we was on the move, so by the time we settled down we two or three weekend leaves, I suppose, in the first three months. No well, maybe another couple when we got to the 39th Battalion and about a seven day leave, I think, because we were sailed away.

Well before you sailed on the odd occasions of leave and so on, if there were tensions between the officers and the men were there any particular troubles? Do you remember any disciplinary incidents where fellows gave cheek back or whatever?

There's not much cheek you can give back because you soon wake up to the fact that if you give cheek you finish up in the bin.

Did that happen to you at all?

Only once, but not through cheek, it was something else. I forget actually at the moment, I will recall it later, but one the tricks they used to get up you get down the street and we used to have to salute the officers wherever you passed an officer, see. So we thought this is a lot of bulldust, you know so, every now and again we get a crew to get walk up and down the street and every time we seen an officer we salute and we would make 'em salute ten or twelve times, we'd come back again and walk past them again and keep saluting.

Did they realise but didn't know what to do about...

They cut that out a bit later on because I think this all stemmed from the pommy setup, from the army, pommy army, but so that was one of the tricks we used to have a go at them and it used to annoy them very much especially they had a sheila on their arm. Yeah, it used to be great.

How were the Military Police in those days before you'd gone off overseas or did you not have experience with...?

I didn't have experience because you only had short leave and you had your leave pass on Sunday night or whatever it might have been and unless you was playing up well there was no need for them being otherwise than they were.

So, when did it first became apparent then that you were about to go off – overseas, I mean?

That was we was, as I say in the 52nd Battalion and anyhow they – I can recall when the officer came down to our tent – we had tents in those days with hard boards and whatever – and they come round and explained that they was looking for troops, or looking for men from the 52nd Battalion to join the 39th Infantry Battalion for a special duties overseas, over in New Guinea and with all this stuff so, anyhow, my tent was six and the tent, we, volunteered holus bolus and they wanted so many out of each section of the 52nd to go so that's how I come to volunteer. But I believe that was the way they started but when they couldn't get their numbers I believe they finished up they said you, you, you, you and you. That's how I come to join the 39th Battalion.

(20.00) Why were fellows so keen?

Well, I don't know – I just don't know, I suppose because they'd made up this mateship and this type – that's the way I looked at it, I didn't want to lose the blokes I've just mated it up with in the first three or four months of this army life and they'd become pretty important to me because I never had anything like that in my life before and so I was going. Two days after I volunteered I got told I wasn't going because I had to go back growin' vegetables because I was essential services. I kept an eye on the officers and that that much and they said "Oh you want to go and go and bloody killed well you go" so I finished up in the 39th, but I – every time I recall those words 'you can go if you want to go'.

Did you regret it at some times?

Oh, especially when things were that bloody tough, yes.

Was there a sense of threat to Australia at that time? Did...

Well, there definitely was but we didn't actually personal notice it, no-one knows nothing unless it comes to your front door really. People are very blind and whatever, in lots of ways. I don't think you think of those things, it's always saying you remember this and you do it and it's going to be a threat unless you go your own thing to do and I think people do that. You can like – look at Darwin for a start, you know – you just went around here as nothing was happening and it right there on their front door step.

So when you were going there was no sense that the Japanese were about to sweep down and...

Oh no, no. But we was – no we was going over there and we thought it was going to be great, you know and it – personally I didn't feel anything about any of it until we got our first lot of bomb raids.

Before you went how were you gathered up? What were the circumstances of your being sent away?

In what way?

Well as far as the transport side of it was concerned.

Oh the transport. What the ship transport?

Well from the time you were told at camp as to when you were mobilised, got together and began to move out.

Oh yes, oh well it was only a week or two if it was that and we was most of us shipped down here to Caulfield. Matter of fact, where we are now, just over the road here and they signed up all up and got our medicals and different things and all that sort of thing.

They were using the Caulfield race course?

Yes, that was our depot where we went in there and you got in there and you couldn't – that was the funniest thing there too there was a section there with – well my group, my group was six or seven and you weren't allowed to leave or anything and a chap named Charlie Pike – he was a corporal – so he lined us up and so all got on the march and we had our rifles and we marched up to the gate and he brought us to attention and he said to the MP, "clear the gates, picket going to the Caulfield, up so and so", and he opened up the gate and we all marched out and got to McNamara's pub and get a bellyful of grog and then do the same thing coming back a couple of hours later. So we got in and out the Caulfield race course that way.

You never got caught?

No, they opened the gate and let us in. Yeah, so from there, Caulfield, we went to Darley, our Bacchus Marsh camp, we was only there a few weeks. Then of course we went on the 27/12/41 I think we boarded the *Aquitania*, or we moved out on 27...

You went up to Sydney by train then.

We went up to Sydney by train and...

How was the train journey?

Bloody terrible, hot as hell and of course you had the change stations, change trains at the other side and well, you're like sardines in a tins, none of us had room on the train, you know, you were set six bums you sat six bums and that sort of thing, so it was quite a pleasure when we got on the boat.

Any trouble at all on the journey?

No only skylarking and jumpin' off the train and gettin' grog and the pub across – when the fellas are altogether you do these sort of things and when the train pulled up you jump over the fence and all the coppers would be chasing you and everything, you get a couple of beers and back again.

There were none missed the train then.

Oh not very many, I don't think I think there was a few but far as I know I don't know who, there was a few odd ones and everything, but most of them got rounded up alright.

This would have been your first trip out of Victoria then I presume.

Oh, virtually yeah, oh yeah, it was alright and we was still getting plenty of tucker, that was good to me because I never had that much tucker in my life. You know you wrestle a couple of slices of bread a day and that was your rations and you worked like a bullock and getting three feeds a day that was good doesn't know how it come up.

What did you think of the *Aquitania* when...?

Fantastic, great, great meals and I thought it was great and you know, I never been on anything like that. Never got sick which was good, lot of them did get sick on it and that.

Some of the cabins, I gather' were even below the water line.

I was below deck, I was down below E deck and below the water and by crikey it was hot and they had tier bunks and they were four or five tiers high, I mean you had only two or three feet between the bunks and you had all your gear and this sort of thing with – you were the – I suppose you look back now that's conditions were pretty shockin' if you class them what you get today on different things.

(25.00) Did fellows complain at all or did they accept it was war...

Complained and accepted, we had nothing else; you couldn't do anything because discipline in them days as I said was pretty strict.

Did fellows start to become conscious of the difference between their circumstances in the ship and those of the officers?

That was on all the time, that was as I said before, there's definitely a great – was a great difference between the – whatever went on was between the officers and the private or even the corporal, or whatever, it was miles apart and doesn't matter if it was on the ship or on land or wherever you were.

Was it resented?

Oh yes, oh yeah, but you couldn't do anything about it.

So what was the attitude while you were at least on the ship as far as the relations between the officers and the men, did they tend to drive fellows or did they allow a fair amount of time for relaxation and so on?

Oh we had a fair bit of time, relaxation because you couldn't do much else while you was on the ship. Well you had a few odd duties to do but, like you had gunnery duties, what one gun, a couple of guns we got a lot of men on there and of course they had no armoury at all really they only had a couple of guns and so you got sentry's duty – stand out in the middle of the ship at night and what you could do with no bullets in a gun I don't know but that's what you was made to stand on sentry's duty.

You had a gun with no bullets?

Oh yes.

So you'd shout out bang, bang if you...

Oh yeah, that's the bloody idiots for you. That's why you was crooked when they give us ten rounds to make a beach landing if we had to make a beach landing.

Well as a sentry on duty what was it expected you'd do if you saw something, if you saw a periscope or...

Oh you wouldn't see it, it was the middle of the night, you was on night duty.

So what were you guarding against?

You don't really know, you just had to do sentry to stand out and watch the bogymen come out of the top, I don't know.

Would fellows skylark in that sort of circumstance where they've got a friend who's on duty and...?

Oh no, you wouldn't do that, you'd finish up – that's taboo that type of stuff.

You've mentioned that you joined the 39th with groups of friends, that you referred to in one of the background papers you've written as the 'Zorro' gang. Where did that come from?

That's a story on its own. There was a – in the 52nd Battalion, there was a – we're all what they call the Gippsland Bushrangers from the 52nd Battalion, we're all members from up through Gippsland and that's their logo type of thing, and we had a chap named Captain Sorenson, or he might have been a Lieut at the time, anyhow we was all in the mess hut one day and Sorenson come along and it was his first day in, and he called all their attention sort of thing, he said "My name's Sorry" or something and someone yelled out "What the bloody hell are you sorry about?" so he finished up getting the name 'Sorrow' so that's he we – he finished we made the name Zorro gang because we all went around with the pals and everything done with pips sort of thing and we used to go on duty as the Zorro gang and all this type of thing. And so we joined up as the Zorro gang.

So when you arrived in Papua New Guinea I gather the disembarkation was rather difficult, the boat was off-shore and you had to get down into barges and so on.

Yes, there was a couple of Navy ships there, there was quite a few got down on those and transported out to the jetty – about seven mile out the *Aquitania*, you couldn't get any closer because she was what about the third largest in the world at the time, I think she was just below the *Queen 'Lizzie* in size or whatever, and went out in all types of craft. Myself I finished up going out in life-rafts, the *Aquitania* life boats they lowered all those and we went out in those and it was seven mile from the Port Moresby jetty.

And where did you then get billeted?

We got billeted all right. We amalgamated around the jetty there until about night time and no-one knew where we seemed to be going, so once when they got us on the move they said we're going to a place called 7 Mile, and it was seven miles, it was a seven mile march we had to do in the tropics, getting straight off the boat with all our gear and whatever, you know – full packs and whatever we had we had to carry and we had to march seven mile after being all soft and green, you know, we're not hardened people because you never done much marchin' and it was the middle of the night when we got out to the 7 Mile and we bedded down on rocks and out in the open and no mosquito nets, no nothing like that, we just about got eaten alive.

(30.00) How long then before it started to improve as far as that side of it was concerned?

I think we got tents...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification – this Side 2 of the Tape 1 recorded with Lawrie Howson on 5 November 1988.

Yes, just picking up again, how long before things started to improve.

It was quite some time actually because they didn't have any vehicles to get supplies to us and what supplies they did have to us, got knocked off with the weather, the tropics, with the sun and the all the tinned meat and vegetables and that type of stuff had all got blown and – it was pretty hard to say when it had improved I suppose it did improve a little it must have been nearly three months I would say to get to where it would have been acceptable.

How long were you there before the first Japanese air strikes started to take place?

I think the first one was on round about February the third I think – roughly around about February the third – we'd landed just after Christmas, we'd left on the twenty-seventh – about a month exactly, a month after we'd landed there.

Can you remember the very first occasion where you were and what you were doing when the first attack occurred?

Yes, I remember it alright and it was in the tent, it was night time – early hours – and these planes or plane came round just droned and droned and droned around the thing and it all got everybody on edge and ...

Did you know it was Japanese?

Oh well, we were told it was Japanese and because we didn't have any planes like that in any case, we only had something about two or three Wirraways and I think we had at the stage we had about five Lockheed Hudsons and that's about all we did have and a few drums of petrol and that was our entire Air Force. That drone around, drone around just about drove us all off our nut, so that was our official first one, I'm pretty sure it was the third of February.

Did it drop any bombs on that occasion?

Yes I think – it dropped some grass-cutters that from – heavy grass-cutter bombs – only two or three around the `drome.

Did it give you a fright?

Oh yeah, wondered what was goin' on because it was our first initiation into it.

So what apparent defence was there around the area at that time?

Only our rifles – only rifles what we had – rifles and some old Lewis guns we had.

Did that dismay you? Did you expect things to be a bit better prepared than that?

Yes, no. After, after – not at that time because you didn't know any better. You know, you'd know well this is the way they operated, well you accepted that. But as time got on that you start to learn and you realise things were up the putt.

Well, I gather then the strikes started to come more frequently and some of them got rather close for comfort.

Oh, too close, many a time it got close for comfort all right. The particular place where there – as a matter of fact it was me birthday, I think it was on the twentieth birthday, and how we got this air raid siren and they come over – they haven't come over then – we got orders to move to the other side of the `drome. I actually was in the ack-ack platoon and we'd just moved over and they come over and they blew the bloody top right off the hill we was on so that one was pretty close. We had a lot of those, at that stage we started to get about two or three raids a day then, from them on, and we had about 100 raids straight in about thirty days.

I gather there was one occasion where you were literally caught with your pants down?

Oh yeah, that's quite a story in itself too. It makes for a few laughs. I put that in the history book, as a matter of fact, and like I was in the ack-ack platoon, like every day or every couple of days you was detailed cook's assistant or something like that so anyhow come my turn to be cook's assistant and we fed the troops and I said to the cook, I said "Now we cleaned up I am going to have a bath" so we rolled out half a forty-four drum what we had there for boilin' water, so I got me bloody arse in that and me feet are hangin' over the side and soaped up and everything ...

(5.00) Paradise.

Paradise, yeah reckon it was great, yeah it was amongst the dust and all of a sudden hell let loose. There was bombs fallin' and strafin' goin' on, and fires in the kunai grass and I wondered what had hit me – I out of this drum and anyhow the planes are strafin' away and I dived into a trench and I'm up and down this trench as the planes are going up and down strafing and they'd come back and strafe the other way and I'm jumpin' up and down hidin' myself, trying to – anyhow turned out to be the shit trench, latrine trench, so out of that I got and up the hill I went and they into it again. They opened up again and tripped back over – had a rock and some smart bugger said "They got Smoky". They hadn't got Smoky, I happened into the gun pit up top and anyhow I finished up grabbing a machine gun up there and into it while I was in the nude. It was quite a laugh that one when you look back on it.

You didn't get another nickname you could have finished up with an appalling nickname.

It could have been "One Ball Paul" or something like that, couldn't I but anyhow it was a – but as I say you started to learn a lot, well at that stage you started to learn a lot.

Well what sort of things? What did you learn?

Well number one, that we realised that we didn't have any armament, not enough to do anything. So every time we got the chance and a plane crashed or one come in, one of our own come in smokin' or something like, that we'd go down to the `drome and we'd knock off with the guns because we only had, as I said before, a couple of Boer war or first world war Lewis guns and a rifle to each man with ten rounds, still the same ten rounds, and so we used to go down and knock off the guns – the machine guns – so we had, what was called 303s – the anchor ones they're .30s, it's much the same size as the 303, so we had twin .30s and we had the fifty calibre – that's the big long bullet – and we only fire about eighty of those because it was air cooled and – but for every man in the platoon we had more than a machine gun each in the finish, where we started with two old Lewis guns.

At the first part though where you mostly just had your rifles and ten rounds, were there any occasions when you actually hit aircraft simply by the sheer number of bullets?

Well it was hard to say, the only evidence of that is we had a squadron of Kittyhawks come in which we didn't know, they give the air raid signal, anyhow when they come in we into 'em with our rifles and whatever we had ...

Thinking they were Japanese?

Yeah, we didn't know what they were and we seen all these planes flying around with ANZ and all this sort of thing on, anyhow we brought one down in smoke – apparently the squadron leader went to our bloke – our colonel whatever it was – and got stuck into him about the incident and said, "Congratulate your blokes on their shootin'. I've been over in the Middle East and all this sort of thing and", he said "that's the heaviest ground fire I've ever been through".

What about the pilot?

The pilot was alright. He came out alright. But one finished up with a bullet in his head rest, I think was Jeffries and I think Jackson was squadron leader at the time and Jeffries and finished up with a bullet about three quarters of an inch away from skull in his head rest and we brought one of them down smoking which – he got down alright.

Well as you build up your armaments through pulling apart old planes...

Pilfering or whatever.

How did you finish up then with regard to shooting at planes, did you score any hits?

It was hard to say if we scored exactly because a lot of blokes firing at the planes, I think there was one or two planes brought down in that area and others went away smoking in the tails and things, but to be exact you couldn't say well I shot down that one or this one because so many people in the area still shooting at them.

What sort of briefings were you getting then about the nature of the enemy, the Japanese, do you recall?

None, because they didn't know any. We got no briefing at all and you know they come in when they come in strafing; they come in that low you could see the pilot's face. That's the best brief we got but from the authorities we got no brief. We got the air raid signal



and that was all. Our air raid signal was three shots and when you hear them coming, hear the drones, well that's the only briefing you got. Absolutely none. Because they had no experience, all these people running these – running the army had no experience. Bloody none at all and – I got no words, I'd like to swear me head off and call what some of these losers what we had were.

Well, how long then before you had a real sense as to the nature of the enemy you were fighting? Did that not really happen until you got into battle against them?

Not really, not 'til you got into the battle itself and that was quite a while after too. It's like everything, it takes time to learn and all the people with us didn't anything about it all, the authorities didn't know any better or whoever they were, or the leaders, they had no idea. They sent you into battle with the khaki uniforms on, instead of jungle greens and all this type of stuff and, of course, any idiot knows now that you don't go into the jungle with something that you can see with – something white on to go into the jungle to camouflage yourself – white or khaki or whatever it might be but all these learned friends of ours, our so-called officers and superiors above them, to me they were just a pack of idiots and shouldn't have been there. They should have been hung up for bloody war criminals.

(10.00) Was there any useful training, do you think, during that period?

No because, that's another point. We had very little training before we went away. We had practically none when we went there because we finished up unloading ships and all that time we become wharf labourers, we become everything. So there wasn't any room for training.

By this stage had you met members of other Army units because I gather there were attitudes towards the 39th that you weren't seen as proper soldiers and so on.

Oh well, that started here because when you was a militia – militia call up blokes they called them chocolate soldier and all this type of thing and that all come from the AIF contingents and...

When did you first encounter that? When did you first become aware that because you were a member of the militia you...

We became aware of that when we was here in Darley before we went away.

What was your first encounter with that attitude? Can you recall?

We didn't know actually what it meant – they come a say "Oh you're bloody chocolate soldiers", but after a while you found out what it was, what it meant was the call-up blokes were just chocolate soldiers and you didn't have the guts to volunteer and all this sort of thing, and that's how it come about.

Did it lead to fights?

Oh yeah, plenty – quite a few fights down – come to the bayonets and all this sort of thing at one stage.

Were you there when that happened?

Yeah, Yeah.

What happened from... how did the incident develop?

It only started through slanging matches and this type of thing and like most things it gets overheated and then the one starts on something and the others follow.

Just describe the event, if you can recall? Were you in a pub?

Oh no, this was at the camp. Also these things always happened at pubs – there's always fights in pubs but of course there was no tools of trade there, it was only fists, but you know if you stood up for yourself that was it, you can get in a get the best of it but usually there was more of them than yourself.

Were fellas badly hurt?

In occasions they were? I didn't get badly hurt but there was quite a few.

Why were feelings so intense? What was at the heart of it do you think?

I don't really know, maybe the powers to be started it so, whatever, you know. I don't know what was behind the whole thing, but we proved them wrong in the 39th, didn't we?

Well what about this particular occasion when you say bayonets were drawn? How did that develop? What happened?

That was in a fight at the camp. They pulled out their bloody bayonets out of the scabbards and going to have a go and all this sort of thing but it was stopped – that was stopped pretty early that. Turn out some throwing, all sorts of things that, boxers box on.

Would these tend to be scraps that would just most take place over a short time or were there occasions...?

Be only a flare up in a short time, yeah, but we'll stop pretty quick too, but the tension was always there. I don't know why, why it was started, why it was done, but to me I look back I feel it was done deliberate. It looks like to me it was done deliberate. Soiling a heap of blokes onto another heap of blokes...

To what end? I mean why would that be done?

I don't realise, I just got that feeling', general feelin' that AIF, okay they were something special; it's like the officers and the men. The AIF was something special and the militia was just a bit of the rubbish off the floor, you know. I couldn't put anything definite on it, but that was the feeling that was set up – the whole thing was set up.

Did that affect the morale of fellas? I mean did you feel that it a bit? It's pretty heavy stuff?

Oh no, I don't think so, not really that much, no. I think it did a little bit later on. With our fellas I think, we come out and we realised we done a fair sort of job up on that Kokoda Trail. They looked to us as a different kettle of fish. I think they would like to cut their tongues out for what they used to say.

So when did you first then get to know that the Japanese had actually landed in Papua New Guinea and was starting to move.

That was – don't hold me to dates – but probably round about June, June '42 I think. Round about June '42.

How was the news received? Was there a sense of anxiety or was there a keenness to meet...

Oh no, I think we just accepted it that it happened and they'd landed and that we were going over there and fight `em. Of course fighting was all new to us, you know, it's like going into the picture show until you know what it's about.

Particularly if you were so ill equipped. I mean that must have made you a bit anxious?

Well you still didn't realise you were so ill equipped. You know, pretty thick in the skull, you didn't know much, you were pretty awkward young kids and the average age of our battalion, I think, was about eighteen and a half, nineteen. So I don't there was too many brains amongst the lot of us.

(15.00) Well before your first personal encounter with the Japanese, had the fighting developed? Did you begin to see some of the results of that?

Yeah, the fighting had started and... I remember one occasion, my platoon – I was in the ack-ack platoon then – the corporal come up and he said he's been instructed to get seven volunteers to go across the Kokoda Track and block the gap.

Had you been up there at that time?

No, none of us, no-one had ever been up there and they wanted us to block this gap and he said "I want seven volunteers" and of course, once again, there was the usual volunteers, myself and a few of the others and we were goin' up to block this gap. They said the gap was only about twelve inches wide and two men could hold the whole army off up there and of course we wanted all to be in it, you know.

Was that deliberate misinformation in order to encourage volunteers?

No, that not what the corporal knows, it's what they told the corporal, that's all you needed – two blokes would have done it but better take seven with you and you block the gap so the enemy can't get through. It was only very narrow and you got to turn sideways to be able to squeeze through the gap. This is how bloody stupid it is but anyhow, we was all ready to move and anyhow they landed – the Coral Sea battle started – so we got word through that we weren't going to go over and block this gap, we were all going to go down to the `drome and hop on a plane and fly over to Kokoda. That was okay, so the plans were changed and we went down to the `drome, of course we couldn't over by plane, they couldn't land over in Kokoda, so we had to finish up walking over, to cut the story short but ...

Well before you started to go out, by that stage how much did you know what was happening with the Coral Sea battle?

Oh well getting reports through there was a fair bit going on of course, you heard it and you accepted what you was told and that was it. It didn't sort of sink in because, as I said, you still on the learning process. You're learning nothing till you sort of go there and once

you're in it, it's like I've been there and done that man. Well once you been there and done that man you bloody well know you've something. Until you do, you've learnt nothing.

So with the Coral Sea...

Words mean nothing.

Well with the Coral Sea attack then, it wasn't understood that this really represented a task force that would ultimately threaten Australia at the time.

No it didn't sink in, nothing like that would sink in of course looking back you can. As I said unless you been there man, it's the same old thing. Words are nothing.

So you say you were then told that you were going to march up to the Track.

Yeah, well we were goin' to walk – well we had to because the planes couldn't land over in Kokoda which they started. There was only two plane loads got over, so we finished up – well the Japs had landed at Buna then and so we fellas had to walk over.

What were the logistics of that? How far were you walking? What sort of equipment did you need to take? Did you need to take native carriers, and so on?

You had native carriers – not for a start, we only had a few odd ones, but not – you didn't have your personal carrier like a lot of them would have like to have them. No, you had your rifle or your machine gun what you had, you had some ammo – a little bit of ammo – and you had your big pack. You had anything up to sixty to eighty pound to carry. It was pretty hard going.

And how far was it?

Probably forty-fifty mile maybe it would be from Moresby to Kokoda as the crow flies but I think you'd add another forty-fifty on that for the ups and downs.

Do you remember the end of the first day and where you found yourselves camped and what you thought you were getting yourselves into?

The first day was a very short day as a matter of fact. Well, as I said before you don't know what you're getting yourself into unless once you been there. Anyhow, first day was Uberi I think, and that was a very short day. I think we only walked three or four hours. From then on it was anything up to twelve-fourteen a day. It used to go in stages each – there was villages along the way, they used them as staging camps type of thing and they could take us seven hours, eight hours, twelve hours.

What was the nature of the countryside here, how did it look?

In New Guinea?

As you were moving up towards the Track.

It was very junglified [sic]. Like it was a lot of tropical stuff, rain forests and jungle and the track itself – the track was only two foot wide. It was only a little paddy track really.

Were you concerned that maybe the Japanese might have infiltrated even down to there and...

No – never give it a thought till we got – never give it a thought until the first shot was fired personally.

So how long then did it actually take you to...?

Seven-eight days – I think it was seven days to be on it there. When we got there it was a place called Deniki, which is overlooking Kokoda. We stopped there a couple of days and get assembled and worked things out and...

How was the climbing just near that part? Was it steep, difficult?

Oh yes, very steep. That was about the end of the climbing at Deniki. God knows how many thousand – probably about, roughly about 7000 feet was probably the highest we got – 7/8000 feet.

Was it raining?

It rained practically every day up there and you was wet – well very seldom you was dry for the whole time. You know mud and wet...

(20.00) What were your feelings at that point? You must have been starting to have some misgivings you might have thought, or were you still keen to make your first contact?

No, still keen to get to the next village and get there the next day and that was the thing – to me. I don't think you could say that you were having any feelings about this and about that at all, what the nature would be because unless you been there don't know.

What about the local people, how did they react towards you? Were they friendly or...

Yes, they were friendly. They were friendly the boys were there and they was okay and there was quite a few with us and we did have some of the natives in the Army. What they call the Papuan Infantry Battalion. They had a group of those, they were alright and the police boys, they were in uniform. Yeah we got on alright with those, quite good.

So when you'd arrived at your destination you found that it wasn't a two foot wide pass that you could easily defend with just two fellows, I take it?

Oh the gap, the gap you talkin' about. No when we got there we found this gap and it was just unbelievable – you know one of these modern big planes a 707, or whatever they're called – one of those could have flown through the gap. That's how wide the gap was.

Who was leading you just then?

In what way?

Who was in charge of the patrol?

Oh, we had our own people in charge of the patrol.

[336] Did they understand what the reality was like or was it as much as a surprise to them?

Oh no they didn't know any more than the average bloke knew because they were all new there too, they hadn't been there before either. As I say the gap, he must have been a big bloke to get through that gap when a 707 could fly through it and as I say, that is what the idiots told us – it was only a foot wide. You could hold off an army there, so it gives you an idea how much the powers that be knew – and whatever have you. So that's the gap story. But...

Well what happened then?

Then we went down to – we come in at Deniki which was the end of the trail actually before it come out on the flat ground around the Kokoda area and we assembled there and then that's when we started to branch off and get into the real thing. We were taken down by – the platoon was taken down the back of Kokoda around the place called Oivi and we get round the ... – it's all flat ground there and you got banana plantations and different things and the tracks down there are a bit wider because they – the carriage, the carting the bananas, their trolleys and trucks and things and they were probably wide enough to take a car. So all on the flat as well so that's where the first encounters come – we come onto a couple of villages there and all hell let loose. Fixed bayonets and of course I really, that's when I knew that I was shit frightened. ...

What was the situation? Was it dense jungle at that point?

On both sides yeah, very dense. But we was warned that the – because a couple of our platoons had been in there and been warned that there could be Japs about and we struck a couple which we hid from because they come down. They said well don't knock them off because we open up on them the whole will be down on us, so which we did, we let `em go and till we got a bit further, we got into a village.

What was the point of that? Why...

If you'd opened fire and the shot, the couple of Japs walkin' down the track would have alerted all the other Japs in the area which was thousands of them, and of course only a few of us blokes. So you never shoot the section leader or the scout. If you shoot him – that's the idea, send scouts ahead, if they open up on the scout, well they know what's going on. They'll wait for you then and cut you off.

Was that difficult to sit there?

Oh yeah, very difficult, unnerving as a matter of fact. It was hiding behind a log and seeing these bloody two – two or three Japs just walk down there.

How close were they?

What, fifteen feet, if that – ten feet. That's about where we were, about the maximum. Just as I was lying behind a log on the side of the track and they're in the middle of the track walkin' down yabberin' away their head off – they don't yabber in English, of course.

Well, was that the first Japanese you'd seen?

That was the first ones, yeah.

Did they conform in any way with what your expectations were?

No, not really, because all we was really told that all Japs were all little fellas with glasses and all this propaganda stuff and whatever have you – all little four-eyes, that's all we were told and well you know, they were whipped into that way and that's what you believed. As we found out later that there was a lot of tall Japanese too. Just after that we come into a village, and of course as I said, they opened up on us and we opened up on them and fixed bayonets, and then it was on for young and old then.

(25.00) When you say it was on for young and old, do the memories of that particular part of your life still stay with you very clearly?

As it was now.

So tell me, what happened, for your personally. What was your own personal experience at that moment?

Well, personally at the time when they opened up and was screaming out "Take cover!" So we took cover alright and fixed bayonets and then I realised that's what war is. I started to realise that we got a problem, you know.

Were you hands shaking, were...

Yeah, everything, yeah, as I said before. Commonly called shit frightened, and if anybody wasn't there was something wrong until you got yourself together a bit.

And what happened, you fixed your bayonet, what then?

I fixed bayonet, and of course we didn't use it in that particular spot, but there was quite a bit of shootin' going on and whatever – shootin' goin' on all over the joint – but everybody was taking cover so in about three or four minutes flat, you couldn't see anything, you were just shooting at images or whatever. Picked one bloke off and then I – he was wounded and I got the dirty rotten job of shootin' him while he was on the ground in front of the...

Why did you get that job?

I don't know, the officer said "Righto Smoky", he said, "finish him off" and of course those pair of eyes lookin' at me haunted me for bloody years.

What had happened to the fellow?

Well he was only wounded in the legs and...

He could have lived then.

Oh easy, no trouble at all, but the officer didn't have the guts to do it. He can order someone to do it. So with one of my ten rounds I originally got issued with – armoured piercing bullet – well, a matter of fact, I had to put two into him – now this bloke lies on the ground, just watchin' you, waiting to get shot.

Was this the moment where you looked at the man and you were told to finish him off, where do I shoot him? Was it...

No, finish – shoot him, shoot him.

But for you when you were going to shoot him...

Oh I shoot him in the bloody head.

How did you feel at that moment?

Didn't. Bloody terrible. But I still done it because I was ordered to do it.

Prior to that had, there been any particular instructions as to how any supposed prisoners of war should be treated or handled?

No, definitely not, definitely not.

Was this because news of how the Japanese were behaving elsewhere had come down and there was a sense of hatred?

Oh, more or less – I gather that because in Rabaul and that where they used to them for bayonet practice and all this sort of thing and what we got through, take no prisoners and there will be no prisoners taken so you don't take any prisoners. It probably must have been true because I got the order to shoot this particular one that day, there.

Did he say anything to you, did he speak?

No, no, his eyes were rollin' and looking at you and everything. I suppose I would too if I was wondering what was going on.

Has this stayed with in dreams, or just...?

Oh yes, in the early days, in the first twenty years or so – well, I've been a nut case a couple of times and me nerves finished up – I was very bad with me nerves in the end of the war. But, yes, it certainly stopped with me alright – a long time after.

The notions of what's proper behaviour and the reality of course are very much to do with who are the victors and Australians generally, didn't commit war crimes. Yet I suppose if you'd been on the loosing side you would have been seen as a war criminal.

Oh, well whatever I suppose. The Australians – we can be mild and meek but we can be the opposite way too. I still think I don't think the Australians looked for trouble but when it's in the air well, you got to do it and you usually do it, for some reason or other.

How did you feel about the officer that had passed on that particular job to you because you felt he couldn't do it himself?

Well at that time, I don't know. But later on I had the same officer I had another run in with – I know how I think about him then, and how I think about him now. But at that time I was just ordered to do it and that was it. In another battle later on it was a bit different, over another incident. But at that time, as I said, I was ordered to do it and you done it.

What was the other incident?

This is way back a bit when we – I think we had got out of the Isurava – pretty tough spot in there and they plant us on the track, there was another five or six of us and we was pullin' the low side – that's the funny thing too when – everywhere we went they always



seem to put us on the low side of the track and the bloody Japs would come in on the top. Anyhow...

(30.00) Why was that? Was that bad understanding of tactics?

I don't know. It might have been very bad reasoning, I don't know why because I think, it was a damn sight easier to come down on somebody than having them come down on you. So anyhow, the runner was sent up to tell this particular officer and sergeant to get us out, because we were trapped. Anyhow he got up to the sergeant and the officer, and he told `em. Out the sergeant and the officer gets and we're bloody well left there. That's not the first time it had happened but this was the same officer that told me to shoot the Jap. Two days later we come in contact with the rest of the company, they went right down the mountain, right down to the bottom...

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification – This is tape 2 recorded with Lawrie Howson on 5 November, 1988.

You were saying that you'd been put into this bad situation by the same officer with whom you'd had a run in before.

Yes, I think I mentioned before that the officers and the sergeant were given the order to get us out because we'd been trapped and they took off and left a group of us there. Did I mention about me tin hat gettin' shot off?

Well, yes, yes.

I did mention that. Yes, I lost the top off my tin hat. All I finished up with was the webbin' sittin' on me head and that was shot off, and cut out was the rivet part up the top.

Did you think you were hit, as such?

No, no, didn't even know. We were trying to get through the jungle to get out of the place and anyhow, the officers, the Sergeant and the rest of the mob, we decided than about a day and a half or so later, whatever it was – we was brown about that but our little group, we, I think, walked about thirty or forty yards and we climbed up through the jungle back on the track right in front of the Jap's snouts and so we got out that way. So that was another incident with the same officer.

When you say you got up, got out in front of their snouts, how close away were they?

Oh it wouldn't be any more than twenty or thirty yards, we come out more or less amongst them.

Were you able to take up this with the officer that had...

Oh well there was another incident later on with him again about that too. Oh I better divert a bit and go onto that I suppose. When we eventually come out of the trail and we go reinforced we come to a place called Hombrom Bluff and they had us up there. They reinforced us up to about 750, I think, from down below. I think it was roughly about eighty-five blokes come out of the battle and – this is only approximate figures of course –

anyhow we doing some training there with us reos and they was telling the reos how to do this and do that and of course we been in there and had experience and the officers and the sergeant and all these people and, of course that used to get the better of me and he'd say we done this up there and done that and I said "Yes and you run like bloody hell too", and a few other odds and ends. I can't recall exactly what was said to him. So I got me marchin' orders out of that.

What do you mean by marching orders?

Well, I become what they called an "undesirable" because every time there was a loophole and something was said, and I say, yes, don't we forget when he was up the front and he done this and done that, because I was left for bloody dead, you know, there was four or five of us, so they finished up I was posted somewhere else.

Well going back to that first encounter though, after the incident with the wounded Japanese, what happened then?

In what way?

Well after there'd been shooting, you'd been told to finish off the Japanese, what occurred next on that particular day?

There were a few odd skirmishes there and then I was pulled out with another six or seven blokes and – there was seven or eight of us I think – and we finish we – we got told that the 17 Platoon was missin' so we finished up we had to go look for them and form an ambush of the Japs down on the two-way road.

Had you been trained in ambush? Did you know what to do?

No well, we virtually did – we worked out what to do, yeah, and so we stopped in this apex of the road there all the rest of the afternoon lying in wait for the 17 Platoon to come along or what, you know. Anyhow...

What was this period like? I mean it's one thing to say "Oh we were in ambush" but you're new to battle, it would have been very hot, humid...

Oh yeah.

Uncomfortable, insects, tension...

All sorts of things.

Describe it to me? How do you recall the period?

Well as I say it's a bit hard to recall. To put it in it's right context, you're all a bit bewildered after being in the battle for the first time and then you go on this ambush and you're only sitting around trying to, like hide yourself in the scrub waitin' for something to come along and you bloody fidgety and you wait, wait, wait, and okay nothing's happening and um – well that's about all. You can put up with the heat and the tension and the flies and the mosquitos or whatever. You just put up with it because it's part and parcel of the job.

(5.00) So how long did you wait?

Oh we were there till it was starting getting close on dusk that day and we – this 17 Platoon of ours didn't turn up – and then we heard this great yabba yabba yabba come up the track and here's about 200 or 300 of the bastards. Then we laid down on the track with our machine guns and we was going to open up on them and then of course and we got the word then, "Don't open up on them" because the rest of the battalion had gone around the back track because we had to get out because it was only a hit and run battle, so we got the order not to shoot them. We could have made a nice old meat market of it, so then we had to retreat back and pick up the battalion further back.

What was the sense of not shooting if you had the opportunity?

Oh well it was the same thing as I said once before about the scouts, if you shoot the scout of a Section comin' along the track or wherever, you alert all the others see and they go into hiding and they just pick you up. It's the same thing if we had have opened up on the big bunch there it could engulf the whole battalion and would have gobbled them right up so – I suppose it was the right move to make at the time even though it was a great opportunity to knock 200 or 300 of the buggers off. Three or four blokes we could have really made a good effort of it.

So if you withdrew at that point, what happened after that?

Oh we made our back to the unit through pitch black for the night. First time in my life I'd seen fireflies and we – rainin' like heck as it did up there that year, rained practically every day, I believe it was one of the wettest seasons on records – we picked up the unit oh maybe ten mile back along the track. We had a bite to eat there and a few rations and we put up there for the night.

In what sort of conditions?

Shocking, rained like hell and just sittin' there with a ground sheet over us as protection, that's all.

The mosquitos...

Oh everything, yeah, slush and muddy and you couldn't lie down and...

Hot or cold food?

Cold, cold, there was no lightin' fires there at that stage. You know that's another point there is the cook there we named "Gunga" – "Gunga" Hughes – and anyhow I was on duty there and heard the snores and I "Halt, who goes there" and it was bloody "Gunga" and he came out there and rustle around the bushes, you know – he was lucky he never got shot but he didn't. From that point on then I got picked out in another section, I had to go up to Deniki to see if C Company had been trapped, with another heap of blokes, so that was another episode. I went with a native policeman up there, he was well-known, he done a good job too, a chap named Crawlsonopa? I think he won a medal or two or something to that effect, and I went on to Deniki then and I finished up in C Company's strength. I'd been in a few different Companies from Don Company to Headquarter, Headquarter to the Don Company and back up to C Company and...

What was the cause of the transfers?

Well, transfers was just one of those things, they didn't matter where you were. Six of them had to go from D Company, well they pick out a number of blokes and if you finished up gettin', finding C Company whatever it might have been or whatever company, you would stay with that Company until eventually you got back to your own or whatever – that's if you got back to your own – so you finish up in different Company strengths and I finished up in C Company at that stage and there was quite a battle there, as a matter of fact.

Where's there?

With C Company. C Company at Deniki, that was one of the major battles at Deniki. It was the place – where I finished up in this place. I fired twenty-six magazines out of a Bren and I was given – matter of fact I was given a section there and I was – you wouldn't called commissioned in the field, I was given stripes in field up there, I become a corporal there. I think I might have made a note of it on the paper there, and I put twenty-six magazines through a Bren gun there into a great mob of Japs and I don't know it was – well I must have helped because the Japs ever come through our lines there they went right up the hill in front of me and right up round the top. So, I think I must have had a bit to do with divertin' the way they were going.

Can you recall your thoughts during that sort of period? Was there a sense of time drawn out, it'd seemed exceptionally long or was there a sense of being at the edges of your nerves or...

Oh yes, the nerve situation, you're always on your nerves until you're firing, it's like – once you are using the machine your nerves are okay. It's the waiting period, it's like waiting for a bombing raid. You're okay once they get there and start dropping them that's – it's the sitting around and waiting that gets on your nerves. It's the same thing when you're up the front line you just about go crazy waiting, hanging around and wondering what was going to go and all this sort of thing, but once you start pullin' that trigger, you haven't got time to be nervous.

(10.00) Before that first encounter was there any personal anxiety about whether or not maybe you would go to water that somehow or other you mightn't have what's thought to be necessary. Was that a concern that you or others would have?

No, I don't think so. Well I can see that now in a lot of cases but I don't personally – no I don't – as I said before unless you been there and done it, I don't think you can think of these things. You don't sort of think of these where you're going to be weak or strong or you reckon, oh you will do this and do that, but until you do something you don't really know. You've got to have experience to give an honest answer.

Was it a relief then to find that you'd got through it okay?

Oh yes, fantastic – even now you wonder how in the heck you ever got through it. In cases where you're firing a lot of shots and your pumpin' stuff through, your mind's more occupied with doing that than worrying about what else you're going to be.

Did men react differently in that sort of...?

Oh yeah

Men that you might have thought would have been very good and suddenly...

Oh definitely yeah. I put a lot of the officers in that field and you know when I thought they're the leaders, you know when you lead anything you always gotta go on show, you gotta show that you're a leader. When I'm given a job to be leader well you gotta – I guess you're bloody brave whether you're brave or not because otherwise it's no good leading others. Definitely, definitely, I put the officers in that category where they should have – to me – they should have been braver than others even though not inside because they're taking the money for the job.

On the other hand were there surprises? Were there some men who'd look perhaps small or quiet that you would never have thought...?

Oh yes, stacks of them, stacks of them. A couple of mates of mine were like that, who'd been shot about and then gone out and back to hospital and then jumped in the biscuit bombers and come, knew the trouble we were in and they were pushing tucker out of the planes to us and this sort of thing. Little blokes and as game as Ned Kelly.

By this stage as you'd gone through a number of these sort of fire fights and some of them very intense, had you begun to see personal friends wounded or killed?

Oh yes, you see, oh well a lot of them become your personal friends because they were your brother, or your brother, or whatever, you name it they were everything to you. You hadn't – you know you didn't have any separate thing you had just that. There was no God there, there was no mother, no father so, no nothing else. You personally become, you know.

Who was the first person who mattered to you that got hit?

One of the sergeants there – a chap we called "Bunny" Pulfer and he really mattered. He was quite a bit older than us and that really was a hell of a blow to me.

Well what happened?

He got cut down. He was in a section down in front of me and he got popped off you know and he was of these fatherly figures that helped everybody and but – he was only thirty feet away but I couldn't see where he got hit or anything like that or how he got hit. It was thirty feet, in the jungle you might as well be three hundred miles away at times – and chaps you like that; it gives you a bit of a nasty taste in the mouth when they go.

Did you see him after the...

No, no, no. No, he was fixed up – mostly the one's that was hit and that, if you're not the personally involved in the burial or something like that well you don't often see them again.

Were there people who were close to you, that you actually had to go with and bury?

Well, as I say they are all members of the unit so they actually become close, but some become closer than others. No most of them just close mates as you call them, fighting mates or whatever.

At the time would you suppress your feeling, your emotion, your ...

Oh yes, you finish up taking it as a job, you'd take it to heart a bit, but you just done it.

Did you ever cry? I mean were you ever touched at the time that deeply at the moment?

I cried more after the war than I ever cried. I never cried during it but I was touched, I was just chock-a-blocked up but I never cried. I don't know why, it was a pity I didn't. A lot of them did but – yes, it's very hard to say how you actually feel and really put right down to the nitty-gritty and say well I frightened or was I come to do this and do that because you're just chock-a-block and I think you get hardened that quick. You get hardened to things that quick – I don't want – actually really hardened – you tie you up in some sort of knot there, you sort of control yourself at that time and you're frightened some others will see you break down or something like that, well maybe anything. I don't know what it is, you generally get through.

(15.00) As people that you're close to then began to get hit, did it change the way you personally felt towards the enemy. Was there a sense of hate?

No I don't know about saying any more hating than it was but you just become hardened, you become hardened and you sort of got the way, I recall, its gets that way you don't care a bugger, you get that way you wouldn't care if you get hit yourself as long as you get it all over with and finished, especially when things get that tough, you know. To say all those other things I think, you're only going to saying what you'd be reminiscing on but I think you just harden to it. You're sick and you're sorry, you're wet and you're starvin' and you're hungry and all this sort of thing and half the time a bullet would have been – a bullet to the head would have been the quickest way out.

As then you were – the campaign continued in that very difficult terrain with mud and all the rest of it, were you often operating at a point of near exhaustion?

Ninety per cent of the time, yes.

Would you hallucinate, see things?

I don't think about that, I don't think you hallucinate and see things but you were starvin' and you was weak – I went in I went in about twelve stone seven, when I come out I was seven stone five, so I was – there wasn't much left of me, was there?

And over how long a period was that?

Three or four months. You know, you get a tin of bully beef to eat and a packet of dog biscuits, between about three or four blokes for twenty-four hours, it's not much tucker, is it? And you couldn't have any more because there wasn't any there to have.

What about the nights? I understand the Japanese were in the habit of calling out and trying to unnerve you by tactics like that.

They were calling out but I think, I only recall once, I think it was at Deniki where – well I heard names but there again I couldn't swear that it was actually them calling out. But we was given the warning, if anybody called, pull the trigger and answer after. Answer with

the trigger, don't answer anybody. So I couldn't enlighten you much on that, I knew it was on, but I can't recall whether I heard actually them singing out.

Sometimes I gather that the Japanese would actually infiltrate the lines during the night. Like identify where people might be on duty or whatever.

Oh yes, it was very close. That's natural because as before the track is only narrow and there's jungle on either side of it and you can be within five or ten feet and you wouldn't know who it was – may as well say "Is that you George?" You could say "yes" and you wouldn't know if it was George or it was a Jap if he could speak English.

Did you find yourself on duty where it'd be dark with the fireflies as you say, you're uncomfortable and you'd hear noises and wonder well...

Oh yes, oh yes, especially down at ... One of the hair-raising bits there on the nerves – that's worse on your nerves when you're sittin' there and you can't see nothing and it's as black as hell – it's blacker than black – even without the fireflies and there's black and black and you just can't see nothing and if you hear something go, well I don't think they can see in any case, it was too black. I remember once down in the front when I was settling in Doug Beulke, we were down in the forward scout down there and I tell you what, those two or three hours we was there was like two or three years I think.

Why?

Oh well, you couldn't see nothing it was just pitch black and you was just waiting for something to happen because we forward scouts and the forward scouts was the first ones to get knocked off if – because you're there to keep an eye on the enemy. If they start well the others will know what's going on, or one can run back and say they're around the corner or whatever it might be. But at night time well you just can't see nothing.

I gather there is one occasion where you thought Japanese were coming and there was a pig appeared on the scene.

Where'd you get that one from? Yeah, that was at Isurava. We come up out of Deniki as a matter of fact and there was a section there and – it was up in the sugar cane, bit of sugar cane up in this mountain – then anyhow the Japs were dropping a lot of mortars on us there and anyhow night-time came and we were standing to and a chap named Mal Ampfer – I heard this rustle in the bush – and before that day told us, "Keep your eyes open because the Japs could be comin' down the top end, down the valley". Of course we couldn't get down to get any water without them knocking us off. Anyhow, we was standing on duty there sort of thing, and being prepared, waiting, and then I said "Righto Mal cover me, here the bastards come". Anyhow the rustle come down a bit more and all of a sudden the dirty big pig come rushin' out the scrub. A great old laugh that was. But why the pig come out of course was because the Japs was right behind it, it turned out a damned good warning.

So what happened as they arrived?

We finished up having a decent old firing session.

Did you lose anybody on that occasion?

No not on that occasion, no we didn't – they'd a lost a few of theirs. Just after then we had to get out of there, we got caught up there – everywhere we went we got trapped because there was only a few of us. Yeah it was quite funny though, the old pig.

Did humour then play much of a part in...

Humour?

(20.00) Yes, and keep you going?

Oh, it's fantastic, yeah. Yes, well, wherever there's seriousness and there always seemed to be lot of humour come out of it and I don't know why, I think you find that everywhere. And so often we laughed about the pig story and also me jumpin' in that trench and it was only yesterday as a matter of fact they keep saying the garden of roses, the sweet violets, that's referrin' me jumpin' into the toilet trench...

Which you smelled when you got out?

Yeah, nice and sweet so, but a lot of those things you do, especially now-a-days you look back and you still laugh about them.

During that part of the campaign were you getting any sense as to how well you were doing or otherwise? Did you have a sense that you were in effect, in the path of the Japanese who were now intending to go down to Australia.

No we didn't. Well as far as I'm concerned we didn't know that we had any effect. None at all until later on or till it all come out, but, of course we knew we were getting cut down to size. I think we lost about 280 odd blokes or something, in about 450 whatever, and we were getting cut down to size and we started to realise then that we were retreatin' all the time in this ... and we're starting to learn, as I said before, you learn as you go along and you learn pretty quick in these circumstances – and we knew we was in trouble. But how much trouble we did not know. But eventually when we got some reinforcements that was a great help, that was wonderful to see fresh people walk in, cigarettes out and all this type of thing.

Well would it have made a difference to the way you felt if you'd got information "Look we think you're doing a great job, you're achieving this, and you've achieved that"? Would that have mattered or was it just a matter of pure survival and struggle.

I think it was only a matter of survival because don't know how good you was doin', we were going backwards all the time, but we were going back very slow. No I don't think it would have made any difference.

I gather the retreat from the Deniki area was a particularly difficult part of the...

Yeah, Deniki, Isurava, and all round that Isurava area and Deniki. Deniki was bad because this was the main part of the retreat – oh well the start of Kokoda too because that was across the flat – but generally Deniki, Isurava, through that way you retreat...

Well, why, what was the process? Was it a matter of trying to slip out at night or how did it work? How would you say...?



Oh no, we only actually retreated once at night as far as I can recall, that was Isurava. It come down a dirty forty-five degree precipice – oh, bloody well steeper than that – and where we had to hang in behind the bayonets and everything with one another in front of us because you couldn't see and if you fell, when you did slip you slipped down twenty or thirty feet at a time, hit something at the bottom maybe but that was the only night time that I can recall gettin' out because we got trapped, trapped and the only way to get out was walk through their bloody lines at night time because they couldn't see us and this type of thing.

How close were they?

It was hard to say, very close, very close. Could be five or ten feet, fifteen feet.

Had you had hand to hand encounters at all during the...

Not right enough to shake hands with them, no we didn't get that close, but that was close enough.

Then Isurava was again another particularly difficult part of the campaign.

That was a pretty hot spot, that one there, yeah.

What do you mean by that?

Oh well, there was a lot of fighting went on there and we was under a heck of a lot fightin', a lot of pressure and also this is where we got the reinforcements come in, the 2nd/14th and 16th Battalions and they wouldn't know whether those bloody Japs were but they soon found in the week, they was just about wiped out. We did last a few weeks longer. But when the AIF blokes come in they got wiped out pretty quick.

To that point just before the reinforcements arrived was there a sense that you were totally on your own. You'd almost been thrown...

Oh yes, as far as we were concerned we was – as a matter of fact I'm glad you mentioned that because I was thinking this the other day – at that stage we was asked to write letters and – I'll get a bit emotional now so – we was asked to write a letter – we did get some mail up and we was asked to write in between the lines and mark it on active service because this was curtains. It was about the last time we'd do anything, you know and, so that's what we did and ... As I said a moment ago I'm still get a bit emotional when I hit some of these spots, just like it was yesterday – I'll compose meself in a minute and ... Yes, so we wrote these letters and they ...

Who did you write to?

I just can't recall at this moment. I had a letter from someone and I wrote between the lines of that and then we wrote on dog biscuit packets and stuck it down with the gum that was on them and ... anyhow the mail come through, they got that mail down here, so ...

(25.00) Can you recall what you were writing, what you were saying?

No, no. Oh I think at one stage it would be lovely to have a nice big bit of fruit cake or something because we were starvin', you know. Still acting the goat then, as I do now, bloody stupid isn't it. That was one of the very tense moments there and the reason for that as I say, we were just about finished and there wasn't much left of the unit and we

looked like gettin' knocked off in any case and that was about that time the 14th and 16th Battalions come in.

Was there a feeling then that it was like you'd – your numbers had been decimated to the point that you were no of importance and therefore had been forgotten about.

No, it might have been importance but it was only a matter of time whether they were just going to run over the last few of us and clean us up, because as I said earlier we only went in with about 450 odd blokes, you know, and plus a few natives and it doesn't take much addin' up when you get your dysentery and malaria and all this sort of thing and the killed, the wounded, so it doesn't take for 400 odd people to get down to practically nothing, you know.

Apart from men who'd been killed, were there those that had disappeared who you thought had been captured?

Oh yes, a few disappeared, yes. But a lot – the ones that got captured I think they were captured and slaughtered later, there was only a few of those. But not many disappeared on the trail itself considering, as far as I can recall.

Were there occasions where men would be cut off, you'd think they were gone...

Oh yes, yeah, cut off many a time, yeah. But you know, you used to get out some way or other. It was like in the early days when we thought 17 Platoon were – they were cut off – and we thought they were lost but eventually they come out.

What had happened?

I couldn't tell you what happened. They couldn't get through somewhere and they took another track and went out in another direction.

Did you meet friends or fellows that you thought had gone, that was it, and then you found them again?

Oh yeah, well even when we got out of Isurava one night we – well brother-in-law actually – he was a runner and anyhow him and another chap, they dug a bit of a hole and lied in that and fell asleep. Of course when our mob got told to move out – there is where I said will we hanging on with the bayonets and that – to get, we walked past this Ron Robinson and another chap and anyhow we'd gone and he woke up and it was daylight and he was right amongst the Japs. So anyhow, they took off and anyway they got out and never again would he leave us, he said. He would never go to sleep on the trail again, so he got out fortunately. But everything was so close, was close – you were pretty lot safer there, I suppose there than being on the road sometimes.

Did it happen to you? Were you found that suddenly you were on your own or you were cut off?

Oh yeah, one time when were down at Deniki I was – this is where I done all this firing, the twenty magazines I put through – this is where "Tubby" Jacobs give me stripes in the field down there in his section and – as a matter of fact, by the way too, he nominated me

for an MM which – both of those things never got carried on. The powers that be never followed it through and I finished up with nothing.

Well why were you nominated for an MM?

Oh, for what I had done down there with the machine gun.

Oh what in particular – oh that particular attack where you...

Yeah, yeah, where I fired all those through. Anyhow I had this section and anyhow I come to fight rearguard and each time you come to fight rearguard each section, they stopped there for ten minutes and then they come back and then the next section they'd stop there for another ten minutes and so on, and so come to my turn to fight rear guard and stand to, so I said to the section I said "Righto we'll get either side of track" and all this sort of thing and you there, and you there, and of course brave me, huh, tryin' to put on a front in front of your troops and I'll get out in front.

Wouldn't there be a feeling if when you're told rear guard, that that's very likely to be it?

Oh yeah, no, no, you just there to do a job and you gotta fight rear guard to hold down the ... till the others got back and you gotta stand there for ten minutes and wait and so I put these chaps on the either side of the track and stopped there and it was the longest ten minutes of my life. So anyhow I said "Righto section, let's get out of here". So I turned around and there wasn't a bloody bloke in sight, they'd all shot through. I got up a bit further gettin' across a creek when the Japs opened up and I'll get outa that and I get a bit further up and there was a new colonel coming there, a bloke named Cameron, he lined all the machine gunners and get Bill Merritt out there, another officer with the machine gun company. Anyhow we got into the scrub there and we run into a couple of blokes and we said "Where are you goin'?" "We're going to get Bill Merritt out or try to". Oh he said he's gone up around the top so well I said thank Christ the way we went we got out of it out another track. Everything was virtually nearly a trap all the time.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

NOTE: TAPE 2, SIDE B IS BLANK

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A

Identification, this is Side 1 of Tape 3 of the interview recorded with Lawrie Howson on 5 November.

Lawrie just before we return to the Kokoda Track you mentioned as I was changing tapes here that there was one incident during a raid involving a goanna and a snake.

Oh yes, this is – we got an emergency raid there one day and we all went flying out of the tent and to jump in this trench and the blokes said "Gee I'm not gettin' in there", he says. "There's a bloody snake in there" and I said, "Well I'm gettin' in there" and another bloke got in with me and there was not only a snake but there was a bloody goanna in there as well. But I wasn't going to stand out in the open. It was safer to jump in there with the snake and the goanna. As soon as they dropped the bombs we was out, there was more of in and out of the trench as quick as a flash.

Was it a poisonous snake?

I don't know. We don't know, didn't stop to find out or what and there was quite a few of those incidents, you know.

As we were talking about the Kokoda Track the reality is that so many of the men were very young men, at an age now we tend to think of as immature or perhaps rather rough and inexperienced. What was the relevance of the youth to the experience? Did it have any particular sort of relevance to how men responded and so on?

Oh, I think so. Quite a bit really because with the youth of today and the youth of those days – as you know in those days we had the depression. When you was fourteen you was a hardened worker. You was virtually a man of town, a boy around town, but you'd get out and earn a living the same as the man next door to you whether he was twenty-six or twenty-eight or whatever. You talk about a boy today, you talkin' about someone who's about twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-five, all these sort of things, and it's quite a different kettle of fish. The mothers are still wipin' their arses at twenty-nine and thirty, where back in our day, the biggest majority of the hardened boys were – the soldiers and that they were pretty hard round about the fourteen, sixteen, eighteen years of age. Real hard, you know because they had to go out and do a man's work and you never had the tools what you got today. If you dug a hole in those days you would have to use a pick and shovel, crow bar, it wouldn't matter and you would work eight hours out of eight hours. You wouldn't have time off to do this and do that and go to the washroom and all those types of things; you put in your eight hours. Nowadays, by the time they get there and do this and do that I wonder how much they do put in. So that's the quite a bit of difference.

Going back to the conditions on the Track as you're retreating where you'd indicated that your weight was wasting and so on, to what extent was that interfering with your capacity to be an effective fighter?

Oh quite a bit because you just couldn't carry so much, so much gear and everything you'd done was – well you was exhausted actually from one foot to the next type of thing because well carrying what weight you could – well you had to carry and plus the mud and slush, it was gettin' worse as it went on, well you just becoming more ineffective that's all.

What about then of the native carriers who were also living in these sorts of circumstances and carrying men in and out? When did you first encounter the so called "fuzzy-wuzzy angels"?

Oh well we had those right through actually, but where they become the "fuzzy-wuzzy angels" was actually the name given to them for carrying out the wounded. A few remarked they were this and they were that and they was only conscripts, they were the rubble of the natives, but that doesn't matter, they treated the wounded good and that's how they got the name. But the most of them were carrying the tucker and the ammo up and this type of thing. But when they got to a situation when they got close to the line and firing opened up they just dropped things and run. Well I don't blame anybody for that because all the white people do those sorts of things as well.

What about their food and conditions? How were they treated?

They didn't have much either, they ate taro [sic] and different things and their native tuckers and different things. They might have been given a bit of rice or something but, they weren't given – they sort of lived off the land as they...

Among the more famous photographs to come out of that whole period are the photographs of the so-called Golden Stairs, which is a fancy name for what stands...

Golden Stairs because – I s'pose it's golden because it you got something to get out of there because it's more than, I'd say more than forty-five degrees steep.

(5.00) Describe it. I mean what was it? How did it look?

Well, how it was look? It's just one big – it looks like one big staircase. As a matter of fact you will see it on the front cover of the unit history, that would give you an idea what it looks like but to walk on it there was...

It was a series of steps cut into a ridge. Just how tall was the ridge?

Couple of pegs put in the ground with a lump of wood behind it and dug again and they would be about, oh, twelve inches high and about two foot apart and, I suppose this mountain that went up, it would be six or 7000 foot high and half of it had steps up it.

And it'd be filled with mud and then you'd get rain...

Oh yeah, mud and rain and all. Going up wasn't so bade because they was freshly dug and, as I said earlier, the track was very narrow and of course you hadn't had the troops across yet to stir it up. But on the way back I recall the track being about fifteen to twenty foot wide and these Golden Stairs there but everybody'd been walkin' down the sides of them and everything because everything's too hard to walk down where when you're walkin' down a mountain it's a damn site worse than walking up.

Did men slip?

Oh yeah, slip and ... I come down that one and with no boots on and the arse out of me pants and only lucky if I had half a shirt on and this type of thing.

This was at a point where supplies just couldn't get through?

Oh they got through, like under very definitely very few supplies, but by then at this stage, we had the – we had what we call our biscuit bombers. The aeroplane would drop a bit of tucker to us and that lightened a bit of the load off the 'boong' train – the native carrier train – and also the aeroplanes they'd drop bullets and guns to us. Course we never had any proper guns, and we only had toy bastards that were no good, then they dropped Bren guns and different things to us, Tommy guns and the cartridges. Well the cartridges we used to have to sort those because the ones that dented on the, when the cases hit the ground on impact – they all got dented, so you couldn't put those up the breech.

Were there accidents when supplies were being dropped that they'd land in the wrong place or men even got hit by them?

Oh yeah, quite a few of those. In one village a couple of natives got killed by dog biscuits because – the Army biscuit term for Army biscuits – and well of the ones I can recall and also they dropped a lot of – there's place up there called Myola, it was about the only

clearing up there, Myola Lake I think they called it – and apparently they dropped a lot of stuff there and virtually dropped it into the Japs. So they made a few mistakes there. But the guns and the bullets and stuff, we finished up getting those and they mostly dropped those over the villages where we were, a common village we knew. Of course we had to learn how to fire the guns up there. Like a Bren gun, well no one had seen a Bren gun so, as I said, we took old Lewis guns up and every time you fired them the bloody things would stop.

So you could find yourself in a situation where you might not have time to learn how to use them properly and you were involved in an attack.

Well we had that situation yes. It was touch and go a few times there. It wasn't so bad with the Tommy guns, they were pretty easy to learn and they had a couple of different types of Tommy guns, there was the gangster type one and the...

Well what do you mean by that?

The type the gangsters used to use, used to be a round magazine, they had another one with a straight magazine. It was two machine guns – Thompson machine guns for various names that's all. On top of that that's when we get the Bren guns. We got the Bren guns dropped to us there and we had to learn how to fire those. They was quite a bit more difficult than the Tommy gun because there was a few more parts in those and same with the Owen gun. The Owen gun didn't have many parts, that was good gun.

Which of those weapons do you feel were the best for the terrain and the circumstances?

Oh the Owen gun was the gun that turned out tops. The Bren gun was good; it was very powerful and very active. It was thirty-fourty feet away you can cut a hole as big as your ruddy head with them and accurate, but with those Brens you could fire a single shot or you could fire the whole magazine.

What about the Tommy gun, how were they?

They're more of a scatter gun, but they were a dummy bullet and they were alright, just like everything else, the bullets were too heavy and...

What about the 303 then, how was that as a weapon?

It was like the Bren gun, very accurate. Well as accurate as the bloke that was on the gun, how good a shot he is and that's the 303, the same in the – the Bren guns use 303 bullets. All our bullets were practically 303.

So they were interchangeable were they?

Interchangeable on the rifle and the Bren and the Lewis gun and a couple of others I think.

(10.00) Were there times when you'd find that you were so close to running out of supplies that you'd have to deliberately restrain yourself as to the number of bullets you could be prepared to use in an action?

Oh yes, that's right. Oh not specific about it but you know you had to watch, you know. They say sometime you better have her on single shot, you know, save the ammo as much as you can. But one place we got out of too, as a matter of fact, talkin' about saving ammo

was a place I think it's – well round about Deniki, yes Deniki, Isurava area, and it was every man for himself, grabbed some tucker and some bullets and grabbed as much ammo as you can and I come out with – I think it was 1100 rounds I come out around me neck, it was a lot of weight, I tell you, it was bandoliers, we used to have – bandoliers and I grabs about twelve tins of emergency rations and away I went. Let's talk about fires I think you mentioned earlier, and I got out of range a bit and how we was all wet and cold and how they ordered to light the fires. You wouldn't believe, really from here to the corner ... what 500 yards away we're lightin' fires to cook something warm and tryin' to dry the clothes, right in the snout of the Japs, but we did that.

Did they fire on you?

No.

Well, why not?

Well it was five hundred yards away. But they wouldn't know what was going on in any case, I wouldn't think so, and that was that. That is the honest truth.

Were there occasions where positions were over-run, where people did run out of ammunition and supplies?

Oh well plenty of time, yeah. If you haven't got `em you just can't use `em. Blokes run out of ammo, yeah.

Were you ever in a position...?

I always had enough myself. I have always been a bloody good pilferer, you know, even driving the trucks on the wharf I got me share of the grog and things like that and any goodies that's goin' round, especially if there was anything going to an officer's mess or something I'd knock `em off, but anyhow maybe I disliked officers. No I didn't run out at all, as I say I got out one, that skirmish there with 1100 rounds and would be about 700 or 800 more than anybody else got out with I would say.

With the way things were, the tension and the uncertainty and so on, were there ever occasions where local native people would blunder through a situation and be mistaken for Japanese and get shot.

No, I don't think so, not as I've seen it anyhow. I didn't come across it, the only ones that was in the position was the one's that was with us, like the PIB (Papuan Infantry Battalion) and the only other ones close ...

Well what happened there?

Oh well, they were soldiers same as us. They was attached to us. They fought the same as we did and if any of them shot through there was no difference from any other blokes shootin' through. You know, as the tough got goin' the goin' got tough type of thing. But no, they were alright, they was quite good.

Well accidents can happen anywhere, were there accidents?

Oh well, like the officer that promoted me in the field and that and nominated for an MM award, he shot himself. He was carrying rifles belonging to a couple others, you know

they were all too weak and this sort of thing, and he was carrying extra rifles and somehow or other one went off and put the end to his life.

Was he somebody that you cared about? Was he...

He was about one the best officers I – one of the best I struck was ... there – this bloke come from the Middle East and he's one of the AIF blokes and I really took to him. He – bloody big bloke and a good bloke with it and he treated us as, you know, he treated you as something and – well he worked in with you. He didn't act as an officer, were what we were used to officers doing, you know, they think they're someone superior and their shit don't stink when they farts. Anyway, the smell gives it away. No, he struck me as a damn good bloke.

There were occasions when American aircraft accidentally fired on people.  
Were you ever caught in that sort of situation?

We had a few of those, yeah. We had a couple of those, yeah.

Well what happened?

On Kagi, on the Kokoda trail we retreated back to roughly round Kagi, a place called Kagi, and we got there and the 27th Battalion was about to take our mob over then because, and anyhow we was there, anyhow they were supposed to be up dive bombin' the – or lettin' some bombs go off there on the Japs or whatever, do this and do that. Low and behold what do they do? Drop them around our area. That's where I got put out of action down there, I finished up got a blast from one them and finished up with inflammation on the head and fluid in the ears or vice verga [sic] or whatever it was and just about went off me whacker.

What was it? Shrapnel or the concussion?

No, just the blast, concussion, yeah. I finished up I – eventually they sent me out and – well sent out with – the whole unit pulled out, at that stage we pulled out but I finished up I kept going then went on to – we all kept going and went out and I think there was about eighty-five of us or something – I went straight to hospital. Before we got there we come out at the point where we went in and there was ... Oh, before I tell that, I must put this one in. The company you were talking about that Golden Staircase. I'm comin' down the Golden Staircase and I got no gun, all I got was grenades hanging on me pouches. I get almost down the bottom of it and I look up and I see a bloody red flag. I ripped the grenades off and fortunately enough I had hold of the pins and everything and then I realised it was the Salvo's.

The Salvation Army.

Mmm. It's another stage I get bloody emotional.

How close were you to actually throwing it?

I'd ripped `em, I had hold of them and then I realised then that it was the Salvo flag not the Japs. Soon as I seen a bit of red that's what it was because they got other bits of colours on their flag and I had hold of them and anyhow I still had to two pins hangin' on me. I put the pins back in and everything was alright.



But apart from that the Salvation Army would have represented home, comfort. Was that a sort of an emotional experience just in itself?

Oh yes. It's going a few feet further and they give you a cuppa coffee.

What did they say? Can you remember? Can you remember the moment when you walked up?

No, no I think I burst out crying, I think. They give us packets of tobacco and a hot drink or something like that, and a bit of cake. Then on our way we went. I wanted to get that because this deals with something on the other end of the trail before I went to hospital and I ask if I could have another bit of cake or something. Oh yeah, so they give us that and if I wasn't so emotional I could tell you in plainer words. We went on from there, we get up to the end of the Track and we come upon a funny mob there and anyhow they – cake and a cup of coffee and things, so I went back to the bloke behind the thing I said "Could I have a bit of cake" and he said "You had a bloody piece haven't you" and, I'm seven stone five! I think if I had have had a bloody rifle I would have shot the bastard in the guts, made him squirm.

Did you say anything?

Mmm.

Did you say anything to him?

I forget now, but this is what happened anyhow. I don't know. We.., I probably just turned away, I don't know what I done. But I go on a bit further and they – a couple of jeeps and that there and a 1300 weight truck and anyhow they threw a heap of us in that and get us down to the hospital.

That must have made you feel really good. I mean here...

I got bloody tears in my eyes now. The heap of blokes on the Track [emotional pause] excuses me. Anyhow one of them threw a bloody half a loaf of bread, the bastards, and we'd dive on it like a lot of bloody animals, you know. That's how hungry we were. We went from there and we went down to the – bung us in the hospital – got down to the hospital. I think there was three of us and they brought in a bucket of cocoa, a bloody bucket too, and I think there was a large bread cut up into sandwiches. (Sigh) That certainly went down well too.

Were there Australian nurses there at the hospital?

Not at that stage, no it was a bit too early for that. After we done all that, clean up and they threw us in the shower and cleaned us up, shaved us and whatever. They slapped me onto the table and bored a couple of holes in me head and a few other things the next day, whatever.

This was before the Americans had shot up the place or...

Yeah, yeah.

Why did they bore holes in your head at that stage?

With the inflammation all in my head and everything I was going crazy, you know,..... place of the pressure, let the pressure out – let the pressure out and all this sort of thing.

Was there swelling on your skull?

Oh yes, swelling and everything. I was going mad, going mad.

Well what do you mean by that? I mean ...

Well it was all the concussion I suppose, everything building up inside. Fluid ...

Were you incoherent? Had you lost sense of what you were ...

No I was still there, but I was getting to – you know, nearly the ravin' stage.

Was there pain associated with ...

Oh yeah, miles of pain, yeah. It was the build-up inside the head and – that's from the start of the American bombing up at, up there and still letting the – coming down and letting the bombs go at a couple of thousand feet and the bastards, they were up 1200 -10 or 1200 feet and they let them go up there and of course they didn't know where they were dropping. Like a lot of the Yanks they go out and drop their bombs out to sea and come back and say "I had a successful mission", so I think we got – they want a few fires up their backsides too but ...

(20.00) Did that affect the way you felt towards the Americans after that?

Yeah, because they supposed to in there the same as us now. They're very – crowin' how good the Yanks are, the Yanks are that – but when they come in to do the job they didn't do it.

Did you run into Americans after that? Were you able to tell them what you thought ...

Well, you couldn't help running into them but didn't help me like them at all and I've never liked them since.

Did you ever get involved in fights with them?

Oh bit of a big one in Brisbane once but that's about all.

[267] Well what was that? What happened there?

Oh it was just a brawl all in and everybody having a go. The Yanks were takin' all the Aussie sheilas and this sort of thing and of course this would start it off and not certain, you know, it's how blues start. Anything to say something and one started – the army might start it and you'd have the navy fighting with you and you might fight one another in the street one day, the navy, the army, or the air force, anything, but you're fighting with someone else well they all hop in together and give you a bloody hand.

How long did that last, that ...

It lasted a fair while, I don't know how long that one lasted, the big one in Brisbane, but you probably had heard plenty of reports of that one and I don't know how long it lasted, went on for a long time. A lot of people got hurt.

Did you get hurt – hurt anybody?

Oh well I probably might have given some bastard a black eye or something like that but then oh, that's right, got on the – we run into – I think it was Bundaberg or something on the train or something – and we finished up hoing a few bloody pineapples at them.

Grenades you mean or ...

No pineapples. We used to call grenades pineapples too, but no these were actual pineapples. We knocked them off – there was a troop train, we went on troop train and the goods train was on the next line with all these pineapples. So they were stopped on the side so we opened the door and we whacked a few cases of pineapples into the troop train. It was at the crossing somewhere, it started with the bloody Yanks saying something and anyhow we finished up aiming some bloody pineapples, knocking – whacking into a couple of them – that was only a very small incident.

That wasn't the occasion when two trains pulled up along side each other and ...

That's the one where we got the pineapples, it was yeah. But when we had a go at the Yanks, the Yanks, oh it was something to hold them up – hold the train up at the crossing and they said some bloody thing and anyhow we finished up aiming a few pineapples at them, giving them a bit of a whacking there.

How long did that go on for?

Only a few moments.

There was one train incident I think, where shots were fired. Were ...

I believe so. I don't know much about that at all.

Well what about the street incident in Brisbane. How did that end?

I don't know how it ended and I don't know how it started but it was one hell of a big commotion when we was there. We was only there for a couple of days, in any case.

At the end of it, was there any sort of sense well you'd fought and there was any sort of reconciliation or ...

Oh I don't think so. A lot of Australians don't like the Yanks for certain reasons, you know, and I think it's mostly because they don't follow you. Plenty of fire power, they got all the bloody say there and but when it comes to the nitty gritty, they bloody well let you down.

Well going back to your period, when you were in hospital, how long then did you spend in hospital there?

I can't recall now. I think it might have been about a fortnight or so. We were getting a bit worried there about them dropping the bombs on us at one stage but they never did drop them on there in the finish. They dropped some close to the hospital.

What, was there a feeling that the relations had deteriorated to the point where they might have almost done it deliberately or just that they were such poor bombers.

Oh no, not the Yanks didn't drop bombs around the hospital.

Oh, the Japanese, sorry.

The Japanese, yes, yes, yes. Oh no it was getting that way and the Japs were getting that close to Moresby at the time. I was lying in hospital, it was only a matter of, you know, it was only a matter of time they were going to overrun the hospital. They would have blown it to bits, you know, because it wouldn't take long the way they were going because as we know they didn't, the long lines of communications finished up stopping them the same as it stopped us, and the sickness and whatever.

Were you still there in hospital when it became apparent that the Japanese had run out of steam and were being turned back?

I had just got out, yeah. I just got out of hospital. I finished up in a recreation camp – or condep. [sic], or you can call it whatever you like, but more or less a staging camp it was where the troops were coming in and going out, and I was in that only for a while trying to recoup there, and drinking bottles or iron.

Iron, what's iron.

Liquid iron – it's a medicine trying to build me strength up. As I say I was pretty weak. I think I was only about, lucky to be 9 stone I suppose when I went to this camp. Soon built up a bit of weight once you got a bit of tucker into you and that type of thing.

How was the news received then, when it became apparent that the Japanese had finished their run and then were being turned back?

Well to me personally, it was a fantastic feeling. But there I didn't give up and it was going to be all over though either, but it was fantastic. I was, this camp I was talking about it was a silver staging camp type of thing where troops were coming and going out and you were still very much of it, because you hadn't long come out yourself and you was handling people that was just coming out from the front and blokes that's going down there, going to the front and this type of thing and driving trucks. Doing anything just to keep the whole setup going.

(25.00) Did you have friends who were still up there on the Track?

Oh yeah, right through, yeah.

Was it worrying knowing you were safe but they weren't?

Well, I don't know whether I was safe or not. I don't know whether I looked at it at that stage, I think just kept going and do what I had to do. No, I certainly thought about them when the others in there and they hadn't come out and they were in there in other sections of it, you know. Oh no, it's, I don't know whether you worry about it, all you can do is think about it and hope to christ they're okay and get out of it.

Did you lose any friends in that interim period?

Yes, I lost plenty of friends through there. Well friends I'd made. Most all of me friends were friends I'd made during the Army. As I said in the early stages I didn't actually have any friends so you joined the army – the whole thing, everything was new to you and you made friends very quick.

Was it harder then to be in hospital and hear about the loss of a friend there where you had time to think, than up on the Track where ...

No, no, it was much the same because you were sort of hardened to the fact and when one went, well you could expect anybody to go any time. Well you didn't know when you were going to go yourself, that's how it was. You expect to be gone yourself any old tick, so that's how it was. No, I don't think it was any harder at all, it's just – that was the – that's war and as I say you get hardened to it and you do certain things in war that you don't do any other time and you adapt to it as the circumstances arise.

Whatever stigma might have attached to the notion of militia and the 39th, it's apparent that as a result of the Kokoda action in the eyes of the regular infantrymen that you'd proved your worth? When did you first become aware that the attitude had changed towards you?

I suppose looking back, I would say it had to start at Isurava, roughly, where the 14th and 16th Battalions entered the fray. When they seen us they said "You poor bastards". (Long emotional pause.) Here we go again. Yes they come in there and it was – bugger it.

It's alright.

Pretty emotional. I think they tagged us with the ragged bloody heroes.

END TAPE 3, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE B

Identification this is side 2 of tape 3, recorded with Lawrie Howson on 5 November 1988.

Lawrie Howson, you mentioned before that as a result of your tendency to remind at least one officer of his shortcomings, you found yourself in a bit of trouble and became regarded as an "undesirable". How did that process work? What happened?

This is one of the reasons why I probably never actually seen a bit more front line service because I was actually shanghaied out of the unit and go on loan to another department and this is where I said I was on that camp – staging camp, or whatever you call it – and I was sent there as a worker on the working party with quite a few others.

Was this in effect as sort of punishment or something for your remarks?

A punishment and oh, and get rid of me away from – I was undermining him and reminding him of his downfalls. What a mongrel he was up at the front line as far as I was concerned, and a few others too.

Was the term 'undesirable' one that was used. Were you described in that way?

I do not know, I only got that later on because I know another chap he was an 'undesirable' too, so for the benefit of putting it in the history book, a bit of a writeup which I did a few years back, we called them being the 'undesirables'. There was quite a few put out in that way, but I was sent with this section to build up this camp to take the troops that was coming back from the front and also troops that have got to go out and this

is where I went in. I went in there and stayed there and anyhow, the 39th come out of action and there was rumours that we were going to go home and we enquired about what was going on. Then word come to us that if you want to come back to unit you would have to join the AIF. If you don't join the AIF, you won't be permitted to go home with the unit. I don't know whether I jumped the gun here but anyhow, I'll go ahead with this. So we threw the arms up and said you can go and get stuffed, we're not joining the AIF, what's the difference. We've been up there and fought and so it happened that they didn't let us go home with the unit, the ones that didn't join the AIF. Because if you go home with the VX number you're okay, if not, you don't go home. So that's what really happened.

Did you feel bitter about the loss of the identity of the 39th Battalion at the time?

Oh yes, well at that stage we didn't know it was going to be any loss of identity but that's what we all know now with the 39th Battalion come out with all those battle honours and I put it down that the powers that be blow me a few of the other officers all playing politics and they didn't want a militia battalion coming home with all those battle honours when most of their AIF units didn't come home with anything. So this is what – this is my interpretation of it and I'm sticking to it. But unfortunately when they did get home they, with all that good record and it's a pity, one stroke of the pen had wiped them right out.

Did that seem like a slur on the memory of the ...

No, when you look back I think it was all politics and when you got a unit like that in the war, join the 39th, look at what they're got going, all these battle honours and all this sort of thing and you think it's like joining a good football club, we'll join this one. You'd think people would jump into it and really make a good unit and they'd keep it that way because it's got a good name but they didn't, they just with one stroke of a pen they'd removed the order of battle and everything.

(5.00) It seems like that hurts?

Oh yes, it does, it was rotten, oh yeah because I felt that the unit should have been kept going for that reason because they done justice, went in there and really done the job considering we were only a bunch a kids, whatever and proved their worth and through some of these so-called officers and top brass, they cut us down like that and I reckon that's pretty crook, even now.

With your period of recuperation, how long were you hospitalised?

I was only in the hospital about four weeks, I think, but I finished up in this, when I got back to the unit, well I was still recuperating when I got back to the unit. I could only manage a walk about half a mile, I was pretty weak. More or less where I went to the staging camp, helping them to build it, I recuped there for the next six or eight months I suppose.

What was the attitude towards you then. Were your – was your state of health seen as a sound and honest reason why you maybe couldn't do as much as you might be asked or were you regarded with suspicion?

No, no, I done plenty but I – no, it was a state of health that put me out of – as it was it's become the undesirable because of my upsetting this officer.

No but I mean if you had other work details and one thing and another and your health still hadn't recovered I wondered whether that caused any problems?

No, I was – there was quite a few of us, there was about seven of us out there and different ones from the 39th and it was same with them as me, it just wasn't discrimination really that way. Well it's just they got rid of people that they didn't want there because it was upsetting them. As far as I'm concerned anyhow because a couple of the other chaps was there was up the front with me and they'd done their job.

How did you feel about the nature of the treatment you got as far as your recuperation was concerned? Was it adequate, was it good treatment?

Well at the time it must have been. I must have accepted that because they didn't keep us there long because they didn't have the beds. That's why we had to get out early because they were so many troops coming back from the front line wounded, so they didn't have the beds there to keep you there any longer than possible. So they just get you on your feet and away you go, you go back to your unit.

Have you had any subsequent health problems? Did your health break down later on, or ...

Oh yes, it been one – oh well it's been one continuous thing right up to this last year as a matter of fact. I been in the – I call the bughouse – you call it "Ward 7" or "Ward 8", it was a special one for special people when they go off their knocker. I been there a couple of times, been in Repat. hospitals here and there.

With your times in "Ward 7" are you clear about the period or were there times when you, as far as yourself are concerned, had even lost your mind?

No, I knew I was there, I knew I was there but ... This is, like I always said before, there was a period after the war – not straight after the war the trouble starts – it's quite a long period after. Where you gotta come home, and you just – you never had any praise and all this sort of thing and you go away a kid and you come back a man, you come back forty years old instead of twentythree or twentyfour whatever the case may be.

Tell us then about that return to Australia? What was the circumstance of your return?

Well actually just before I come back I was in a Army hospital unit – I finished up in the 101 Field Ambulance and just before the war finished they come around ...

Well what were you doing there?

Well I was a driver of an ambulance which become a hearse. I used to go up and bury the blokes up the cemetry and also I used to go down there and work in the morgue. Cut `em open down there and of course when they stuck the knife in that was it for the first turn but once you got over that it wasn't bad.

Was it a hard job, I mean was it something ...

Well hard on you because you was stickin' knives in people and cuttin' `em open, well it wasn't my trade.

Did you have any choice in the matter?

No, no, we went on duty and done it.

Did you object? Did you ever say that ...

Well you don't object, you only get shot if you object.

Well when you say you only get shot ...

Well shot or bung – you get put on the charge sheet – refusing to do duty, see and all this – you don't do those things in war. You're not in the bloody trade union or something. So when the autopsies were done on the – they say rip `em open or get the hacksaw and the coal chisel and they cut the top of their head off and take the brain out and cut a bit of that out and throw it in the bottle and cut out the heart with one big swipe of the knife and cut a bit off that and throw that in the bottle ...

Well what was the sense of that?

Autopsies on – mostly on the people that went bomb happy and things like and died. Then they send that down to the University in Melbourne for tests and see ... And after they finished you just throw everything back inside and then we helped to sew the gut and thing up and sew them up in a ground sheet and take them up and bury them in the cemetery.

(10.00) Did you ever find yourself picking up a body and it was somebody you knew?

No not in this case, no, no.

Did it happen to other fellows you worked with?

I don't know. It was only one or two that was doing that and it was pretty hard going on the nerves but one instance there too, we had a local bloke – white bloke, he was about eighty odd, roughly that – he belonged to the natives. He married a native, he'd been with the natives all his life and we had him in there and anyhow I was on duty in the morgue that bloody night and they put on a wailing match. You know they get this wailing up that they do when someone dies, and they wanted the body and they wouldn't give it to them for a while. It finished up we had to give them the body otherwise they were going to tear the place apart. That was a bit nerve racking too, and of course the rats up there, I reckon they was twelve inches long – great bloody rats about the joint.

What, coming and getting at the bodies?

Well trying to, yeah. Of course only a couple of old sheets of iron, they done them on and this type of thing. So I had quite a bit of a job doing that.

When you say it got on the nerves, what do you mean? How did it affect you?



Oh well, even now if I had to – you were to lie down and I had to stick a knife in your neck and rip you down the centre and something like that, it'd make you feel a bit funny. Most people would faint if they see something happen like that.

How did it affect you? Did it make sleep hard? Were you a jumpy person?  
What was the ...

Oh well, me nerves were really shot in the finish. Yeah, well it played hell with me nerves, yeah. But as I say when the knife went in first and they cut it, that was the worst part. It felt a bit like you're going to bloody faint but then you sort of got – you got a little bit hardened to it after. It's like everything else, it's another job in them days. Yeah, so from then on, anyhow they got the order to move – no we didn't. They come around and they said we want all riflemen, and anyhow I was the only rifleman in the unit and anyhow they said "Listen do you want to go to Japan on an Occupation Force" and I said "No bloody fear I've had enough of this joint". So I didn't take much notice then. You know that's how thick in the skull you can get after a while. So anyhow we get the order to move up camp – pull up camp, pull up the hospital – we're moving because I reckon oh we're going home. Well I said "I don't think you're going home. I've been and done that and I got that feeling we're not going home." So sure enough we get on the boat, so I says "Turn that way to go to Australia" and we go that way to Wewak. That's where we landed, we land at Wewak. So of course here's the guns going off and everything and I said "There you are you smart alics, we're going in there". So that's the closest I got to going in again.

Did you feel up to it? How did you feel?

Oh I had me strength back then.

But you were saying your nerves were gone?

I knew what I was going in for – at least I been in there before.

But you felt that you could face it?

Yeah, yeah. But I didn't want to. Don't get the idea I wanted to go in and do it but well I just had to go and do it if I had to. So the boat just stopped there in the harbour, stayed there the day and next night. Anyhow the next morning they pulled out. So that was on the – and I get home two days before the war finishes. So they knew the war was going to finish before because they'd already offered me to go to Japan, a couple – three or four weeks before in the Occupation Forces and as I say, and also they turned around at Wewak and instead of going in, we'd come back home. And I got home two days before the war finished, so it just goes to show you what they know and no one else does.

So how was the homecoming? Where did you arrive?

There was virtually no homecoming. We come home, we get on the boat as normally you would. You come like anybody else, you come and get on the train and I'm not sure whether we come in at Townsville that time, probably did. Landed it at Townsville and took about five days to come out.

Was there any reception for the boat?

No, no reception.

Any official ...

No, no official nothing.

How did fellows feel about that? Was there a sense of ...

I don't know. This is what I was thinking there a while back when they was heck and hell over this Vietnam ones, you know, there was no official this, no official that. I personally can't recall where we had any official march or any official welcome home really. We got welcomed from our families, naturally but that was it.

Well how did you feel at the time? Did you expect that there'd be some sort of reception?

Oh well as I say there again, you wasn't – well you wasn't expecting anything. You just wasn't expecting anything. Oh well there was a lot of rejoicing going on, well naturally. It's only natural but that's as far as it went. It took it's own course but there was no great official welcome or anything.

So you came down by train from Townsville?

Sleeping in the luggage racks, or anywhere you can get and of course rotten with ??? dysentery and all this sort of thing and you'd be sitting on the toilet half the way, crapping with axes as the saying goes and pretty rough conditions.

(15.00) Long trip too.

Very long trip and as I say no room for your kit bags and thing. Everything you had you either had it on the floor between the seats and the seat was taken up with all bums. There was no putting two seats on a seat that'd take four, four went on it, all these type of things.

Had you brought back souvenirs or stuff with you?

Oh not too many, I brought home a couple of bits and pieces, a couple of – one large piece of shrapnel – .... the gun box just over the top of my head from one of the raids. Oh, there wasn't much things to bring home, a couple of odd things. A small lacquer toy I got off the natives and – nothing really. Because, oh nothing, it reminds me too – because with your kit bags you can only put a certain – oh I bought a fair bit of tobacco home because you could buy tobacco for oh a dinar a tin – two ounces or something like that – brought a fair bit of that home – while we were up the front line, talking about kit bags, went up there so they has a depot for up to put all our kit bags in, that's for when you come back you'll be able to get your kit bags here so we put all our personal belongings and everything in it – everything in and of course when we come back from the front line there was no kit bags. They'd all been slashed and your own mob said whatever it is it doesn't matter how things are crook and how tough things are there's always some mongrels who will do the dirty. So your own blokes – virtually your own blokes cut your kit bags open and ransacked your bags.

That'd make you feel pretty browned off, I suppose.

Oh yes, and of course if it was members of another unit it wouldn't be so bad but I think they were members of our own unit that cut them open. I couldn't swear to that but, you know a lot of the kit bags were missing and cut.

Incidentally when you got back to Townsville and you began to see your first civilians, do you recall that – was there a sense of arriving and ...

No, I don't think – no I'd been home on leave and the whole country then was just chock-a-block with uniforms and that's how the place, the whole thing ran. You know it's not just go and see a waddy [sic] because you're seeing people all the time with their, you know, the public and different ones. Everybody wasn't in uniform, there was a certain amount of people in civvy street all the time and no, that didn't make any difference at all. I couldn't see that affecting anybody because you're full up with what you've been doing in any case.

As you were coming down in the train they used to have those signs alongside the railway line saying, you know, three miles to Griffith, tea and so on. Did those sort of signs sort of mean this is – now we're back home?

No, no, no but they were there before we went, they were there before we went. Oh no, just being back home was good being back home but the great thing – well the biggest thing I noticed when the war finished was the whole area was covered in one big lull. Everything went quiet.

Where were you at that moment?

Oh.

Were you in Townsville still?

I think I was in the Beaumaris Hotel.

Back in Victoria?

I think I was in the Beaumaris Hotel in Victoria, yeah. It was, yeah. I think was there with me brother in law. I'd just got home and – I got home on the thirteenth and I think the war finished on the fifteenth, or roughly around, whatever it was it was two days. Of course there was plenty of rejoicing going on, but as far as civilians, no you just – none gelled at all. You just went about what you was doing and you know, you're still chock-a-block with whatever is inside of you because you had so much of it. When you went through so much and you got a lot of build-up in there and it takes a lot of bringing it out and that's where I think I remarked before, where four or five years after the war is the problem time and then your wives and family suffer. They're the ones that suffer.

For you, where was the actual homecoming? You came in down by train, did you family come to the station or did you then go to meet them?

No, no, I come home and I got the local train and ...

Did they know you were coming?

No. Oh no, none of those things. All your mail was censored in any case but, oh no, no one. You wasn't allowed to write home and tell people you were coming home, all that sort of thing.

So what, you got to Spencer Street and then just caught a local train?

Yeah, a local train down to Clayton where I was living and that was it.

Well what was it? You got off the train – tell me ...

Well as a matter of fact I got off the train – I'll tell you this – and there was a chap there I knew – a local bloke – "Oh Smoky, gee how're you going". Welcome back, you know, "You're just the man we needed. We just started up the Clayton RSL" he said "and we want a couple more blokes to make a quorum" he says. I said "Well bugger Snow, I'm going home. I got to go home". "Oh come on" he says "I'll pay your dues". So that's how come I joined the Clayton RSL, which I'm a life member of. That was me first real contact with coming home, of course I sprung it on me family.

Tell us about the arrival home? You'd been away, your family didn't know you were coming. Can you remember the day, the moment?

No I can't, I can't actually recall it. That's really honest. There are certain things blanked right out and that – I just can't recall, I'm trying to put myself there. I just can't put myself there at the moment.

(20.00) Well, why do you think that is. Is it possibly because the arrival was such an emotional event after all that experience that it's just almost too painful even now to remember?

Yeah, I sort of shied away from it. It didn't want to face it. (emotional pause) I'll do that now too, because those things are hard to face and what we'd been through.

Were you able as you, as a little bit of time passed, to talk to your mother, your father, your brothers about things?

No, you don't – you was talking – even now I have trouble talking about it, you know. I get very emotional about certain things but I do talk with the members of the unit which has been through much the same thing and we discuss certain things and I have loosened off a bit and I have talked about things but never really opened right up. I don't think I'll ever be able.

How about your family? How do you think they saw you at that time? Was there a – you know even if you don't recall the actual arrival, was there generally a feeling of of `Yes you'd gone, and you'd done something for Australia, your country, you'd helped save the country?

Oh I think that was a fact, and ... I think they probably summed the situation up a bit themselves and just laid off and didn't ask too many questions.

You didn't have that kind of experience where some men would encounter somebody they hadn't seen for a few years and say "Oh good day, how are you going? Where have you been?" as if you'd never been away. Did that ever happen to you?

Oh no, not it was happening in other circumstances. I thought you was dead or something. Many a time I'd run into people and say "Christ I thought you got bloody killed at so and so", those sort of things. But no, not the other way about, being away, and you know. No it was – the whole thing is very emotional and so many people act so different and as I said I think done it in quietness. They didn't say nothing.

You said before that it was then difficult to readjust to finding your place again in civilian life. When did you first begin to think well now I've got to find something to do and begin to get a sense of where you were going?

That started very early when you had to go to work for a living, instead of fighting for a living.

How long before you were demobilised and so on?

Oh not long. I got out on roughly November the 7th, I think, in 1945. So it wasn't long after the war. I had a lot of leave up my sleeve, but as I said, I started in life as a market gardener and then I – my brother-in-law had a nursery business – and I went working there for a while. But I couldn't stand it, I only stood it for a while and ...

Well why couldn't you stand it?

Oh well, been running around giving orders and bloody – talking bloody bullshit and of course I'd just flare up. So then I went back to the market garden and doing a bit there, and of course no one had trades. Well, virtually you might as well no one had trades. If you did, when you could put in for rehab. trade, well I put in the painting and decorating or carpentering, which I knew nothing about either of them, and they was going to grant you six pound a week then and they give us a six month course and you was a fully bred carpenter or painter or whatever you were. But then – I got my – I got the call to go to do the course I – well twelve months before I'd – a couple of chaps I knew that was carpenters and they said "You can come and give us a hand to do some work." I said "Oh yeah, righto". It was right up my alley so I ... I enjoyed doing it and as I say when the call come for me to go and do me course, it was a two year wait. Well I said "you can go to buggery" I said "I know enough how to put a frame up" and so this is how I come to be a builder. That's what I haven't told you before, I'm a builder a by trade now and I learned right through that way. It was very hard. The whole thing was hard and as I say as time went by things just seemed to boil up inside more. I think, more private pressure you got ... You're confined to that one spot for four years or so or whatever it might be, with a group of blokes and that's all you knew and everything you relate to – even now today – everthing you talk about is a personal comment, it will be Army, something will relate straight back to the war because all your big experience is the war and everything you talk about relates back. Any discussion you get there you'll, in five seconds flat, you watch any Army mob or anybody that been through, I think like that, will relate back. Same if someone's been through a bad bush fire, like a bush fire, you relate back to that dramatic episode.

(25.00) Are there odd images that are stark and just sort of – you know, just flash into your mind that are there and are as clear and as sharp as almost the day you saw them.

Oh well, not so much of that now, they were. You know you had all these flash backs, you'd have these nightmares and this is about the chap I – first day in – shot on the ground and all. That really drove me up the wall. I nearly choked me wife God knows how many times, and nightmares, you know. But it's unbelievable what it does to you and as I say, it three or four or five years after maybe, is the worst time.

When you look at that sort of personal cost and the price which was part of doing your duty for your country, do you feel that your country did well by you?

I think the country done alright by me but I didn't do alright by the country.

What do you mean by that?

Well I think they're no better now than they were before, politicians are they? They're the bastards that cause war, they're the bastards that should fight it. Politicians to me – this is the whole trouble – they cause it. Doesn't matter where you go or what they do they cause everything as a matter of fact, and they're up on a pedestal and they've seen more wars I think that they think they should fight them and that's what they shouldn't do. As far as I am concerned, that's the way I look at it and I can't see any other way of looking at it. Other countries – another thing when have we ever fought a war of our own? When have we? You name it.

You don't feel that your war was a war for Australia where you were defending the country?

Oh yeah, I don't look at that one so bad as the one's like Vietnam or something like that. But okay I thought it had a bit of merit in it but in the others – but where have we fought a war which we started. Well the same as the war I was in well it wasn't Hitler that started the bloody war it was the Poms. They'd declare war on whatever, you know, and it was the Poms that ruined us and took all our best of the country blokes here and bunged them in and knocked them off. Whether it was the first war, second war it doesn't matter. No, I think the politicians should shot instead of the soldiers. And I'm not going to go back on that either. I'm still a very proud bloke of, as far as the 39th Battalion concerned what we done.

END OF INTERVIEW