Australian War Memorial

Sound Collection

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

ACCESSION NUMBER:	S01151
TITLE:	HENRY PARKINSON, 3RD DIVISION ARTILLERY, FRANCE AND BELGIUM - WORLD WAR I.
INTERVIEWEE:	HENRY PARKINSON
INTERVIEWER:	MARK BAILEY (GRANDSON)
RECORDING DATE:	18 MARCH 1992 & SUMMER 1977
RECORDING LOCATION:	AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL (1992) STOCKTON NSW (1977)

SUMMARY:

(INTERVIEW 1992) WORKING LIFE BEFORE JOINING ARMY; JOINING UP; TRAINING AT HOLESWORTHY; SAILING FROM AUSTRALIA ON THE "ARGYLESHIRE"; LANDING AT PLYMOUTH; FURTHER TRAINING ON SALISBURY PLAIN; TRANSFERRING TO ARTILLERY; SENT TO FRANCE; ARMENTIERES; SOMME; PASSCHENDAELE; YPRES; 1918 GERMAN OFFENSIVE; ALLIES COUNTERATTACK; ACCOMMODATION FOR TROOPS; CONDITIONS ON THE LINE; SALVATION ARMY; GAS ATTACK; GAS INJURIES; QUALITY OF GERMAN AND AMERICAN TROOPS. (55 MINUTES)

QUALITY OF AMERICAN AND FRENCH TROOPS; BROTHER PERCIVAL; ARMISTICE; FLU EPIDEMIC; RETURN TO AUSTRALIA ON SHIP "ARMAGH"; QUALITY OF FOOD ON SHIPS & ON THE LINE; WINNING THE MILITARY MEDAL; GERMANS SHELLING ALLIED GUN POSITIONS; RETURNED TO RAILWAYS TILL RETIREMENT; THEN TOOK JOB WITH BHP; MARRIED IN 1921; DEPRESSION; SERVED WITH VOLUNTEER DEFENCE CORPS DURING WORLD WAR II; AMERICAN TROOPS IN NEWCASTLE DISTRICT DURING WORLD WAR II. (27 MINUTES)

(INTERVIEW 1977) GERMAN PRISONERS CARRYING WOUNDED AND GUNS; SOMME OFFENSIVE; OBSERVATION BALLOONS; AWARDED MILITARY MEDAL AT GRAY; VILLERS BRETONNEUX; END OF WAR; RETURNING TO AUSTRALIA.

TRANSCRIBER: SUSAN SOAMES

TRANSCRIPTION DATE: MARCH 1993

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: Interview of Henry Parkinson, 107th Battery, 7th Field Artillery Brigade, 3rd Division Artillery, World War I. Interviewed by Mark Bailey (Grandson, Lieutenant, Royal Australian Navy).

Well, in answer to your question, Mark, after leaving school, about fourteen or fifteen I suppose, I had two cousins that were dairying up on the North Coast, about twenty miles out north of Byron Bay - a place called Federal. They had a big dairy herd up there, and they invited me up there - wanted to know would I like to learn a bit about farming. I duly went up, and we used to milk about ninety cows between the three of us - after I learnt how to milk. We milked about ninety cows between the three of us, and that was pretty heavy going - and no machines in those days. There were machines but they hadn't any machines. We did the whole of those ninety cows by hand.

That would be a very big job.

Then the milk had to be separated. In those days we supplied the cream to the factory at Byron Bay to make the butter. It was separated at the farm - a huge separator - and the cream was picked up by the cream carrier and taken into Byron Bay to be turned into butter. And, of course, the skimmed milk we used for feeding pigs and calves and things like that. Well, I was with them for quite a while. And then I had another cousin: he was dairying in New Zealand. He'd married a New Zealander and brought his wife over to my old aunt and uncle in Thirroul, down the South Coast: they were farming people all their lives down there.

So George got in touch with me and he said, 'Would you like a trip to New Zealand?'. Of course, I was only a young fellow then, about eighteen I suppose - seventeen or eighteen. I said, 'Oh yes, I'd like a trip to New Zealand'. So I finished up with the few cousins on the North Coast and came down here to Thirroul where George was staying with his mother and father and sisters - all the family. Their name was McAulay, and his mother was my father's sister: she was a Parkinson - she married a McAulay.

I'd been down there for a little while and he said, well, oh, I'm going home such and such a day, and he said, 'If you like you could come over and if you stay with us, come over and stay with us, say, for three months, well, I'll refund your fares and everything like that'.

So I went over and I liked the place very much. It was in the North Island New Zealand, and anybody that knows the North Island of New Zealand, it was out in what they call the Waikato District, named after a wonderful river that runs right through the north part there - the Waikato River. It was a beautiful valley - the [Wairanga] valley they called it - and the farming was most on English styles out there. There was a terrible lot of Scotch people that had farmed there for many, many long years. I went over there and I worked with George. He had a partner there and we milked there, and they had machines, which made it a lot easier for the milking, having the machines. Anyhow, I worked there for him for some while, and then, about 1913 - it was about 1911 or '12, I think, when I went over - and I came back home - I think it was about 1913 - might have been early '14 - just before

World War I broke out. Anyhow, I came back home, and one of the reasons for coming back home, my step-father had been killed.

He was a great man for horses when we lived in the hotel - he always had two or three nice horses - and he was driving up along what we call the xxx Cemetery Road, and a pretty high bank there, and this flighty horse - a sheet of newspaper blew along the road, or something. To cut a long story short, the sulky capsized off the bank when the horse shied and the old chap was killed with a fractured skull. Now, that left mum here or there with her husband. I came home then - I think the latter part of '13, early '14 - and I got work - I think I mentioned it before - I got work then with the railway department with the coal loading ships at Carrington. And I worked there then until I enlisted from there in 1915 to go away to World War I.

What prompted you to enlist?

What prompted me to enlist?

Yes.

Yes, well, at that stage - that was in 1915 - there were huge recruiting campaigns. Of course, in those days there was no conscription. The whole of the men that went to World War I went as volunteers on their own accord. And there were huge ... They sent men all over the country trying to explain about how things were bad at Gallipoli. And they were getting bad at Gallipoli because it was only in December 1915 that the ANZACS had to walk away from Gallipoli: they had to give it away. You know that part of history. Anyhow, things were looking pretty bad, and there were recruiting campaigns. In fact, I was only speaking to Ian - that's Louise's husband - they live out at Gilgandra - and his grandfather marched from Gilgandra to Sydney with a recruiting campaign. They started off in Gilgandra with a handful of men, and they finished up in Sydney with two hundred and fifty recruits, gathering the towns as they marched down towards Sydney. There were two or three of those. There was the Wallabies, the Cooees - and I think about three lots all together marched into Sydney like that, and they just enlisted as a main body, marching in from the countryside. Well, his old grandfather marched in from Gilgandra, he told me one day. I was talking to him - I knew his grandfather, a World War I man - and that's how he came in.

Well, then things got bad and I thought, oh well ... I did mention that screed that I wrote for the family ...

Yes.

... about - there was only my brother and I, and he wanted to go and I wanted to go to volunteer. Things were bad. Of course, mother had one child by the second marriage - Vera. She was about twelve then, I suppose, and mother didn't have the best of health. So I said to Perce, 'Well, I'll go. I'm the eldest.' 'Ah, no,' he said, 'I'll go. I'm the youngest.' Anyhow, we tossed a penny up. Tossed the penny up, and before it came down he said, 'What will you call?'. I said, 'I'll call heads to win'. He tossed the penny up and it came down heads. I said, 'Well there Perce, that's fair enough'. I said, 'You've got to look after mum in the meantime, and I enlist'. 'Alright,' he said, 'alright,' he said. But I tell in that

reading that the family have Perce didn't keep his word. He enlisted about ... oh, some months after, anyhow. We both went away.

What was your training like?

Training was pretty tough; training was pretty tough. As a matter of fact, up here at the graduation day at the dropping of the parachutists, when I went up as the graduation day guest of honour to present them with their wings, on the 10th May this year, after being introduced to the parade the commanding officer said, 'Would you like to say a few words Harry?'. I said, 'Yes', so I just compared our enlisting in those days, sixty-odd years ago, to what it is today. I said, 'We went into' - it's a huge camp now; one of the biggest camps in New South Wales, I think - 'Holsworthy'. I said, 'We were some of the first people to go into there', and I said, 'Do you know what we were issued with when we went in?' - I said, 'Two blankets and a ground sheet, and the ground was your bed'. 'But,' I said, 'later on we did get a palliasse of straw to sleep on in the mean time.' And I said, 'I suppose you all know what a bell tent is'. I said, 'Well, we got into Holsworthy - had fourteen men to a bell tent, all feet to the poles'. (Laughs) And you can imagine, if your bed was over there and you had to crawl over about three or four people to get to your bed, and they woke up, there was a bit of a rumpus.

So that's how we went in. The conditions there were absolutely primitive. Had a few sheets of galvanized iron up to ... like toilets and things like that. Of course, it did improve later on. And then, when we come to sail in the troop ship, we went overseas and our ship was an old, frozen meat ship.

Can you remember her name?

Yes, the Argyleshire.

Argyleshire.

Argyleshire. She was a Scotch ship, and she was just as Scotch when she got away as when we got aboard. As far as food was concerned, the food was terrific. We used to be put on cook parade - had to cook - and you'd wash the potatoes. How they washed the potatoes - they had a great big barrel. They'd tip a sack of potatoes into the barrel and put some water on and hose it round and hoy it out: and they never thought to pick out one that was a bit bad or anything like that. And they were all put into great big steaming trays, jackets and all: they were just washed and put into the steaming tray. Of course, there were one or two bad ones amongst them, that steam put it through the taste of the whole potatoes - things like that. There was plenty of food there, but it wasn't served up as it should be.

And, of course, we all had sore backs for a little while. We were down in the tween decks: had a great big staircase built to go down to tween decks, and we slept in canvas hammocks. Well, anybody knows what a hammock is, it's alright to relax in, but to sleep all night in ... For the first few nights, you know, you can't turn about like you could in a bed - things like that. That's where we went away, in the old Argyleshire.

And then we had ...

Well, in the ships, did you receive any training while on board?

Oh yes. We had physical training, physical training, but no immediate training - more physical jerks and things like that. And then, of course, we had to keep all the decks holystoned and cleaned. Do you know what holystoned means?

Yes.

Do you? Oh, well some people don't. Yeah, it was something like a big mop with a holystone on the end of it. Wooden decks they were; they weren't iron decks - wooden decks. You'd just have to rub these over and clean anything off, and then they were hosed down. We had to do that.

Some of the boys got a bit wide awake, and if they got a chance they'd break the handle on the holystone. And then they'd go back to the old ship's carpenter and he'd have to put another handle in it. Well, the thing got that prevalent that the old fellow woke up to them one day, oh, and he abused everybody that went back with a broken handle. Finally, I think, he nearly ran out of handles before we got over.

We had a long trip, Mark. We were ten weeks getting from Australia across that ocean. For a start, going up through the Suez we got word that the German U-boats were operating up there, and they sent us back to join a flotilla at Cape Town. We lay in Cape Town bay for quite a while, and finished up with about six ships and a war ship - the old Warspite she was, our old battleship. She was the escort for us, and she escorted us over. We were about ten weeks altogether because we were held up in Cape Town for a long time; we had to call into Durban. Anyhow, to cut a long story short, we had a long trip getting over. Finally we landed alright, of course: we landed in Plymouth. And then we did most of our training - extra training before we went over to France - at Salisbury Plains. There was a big military area there.

You have mentioned, a few previous times, that you found a barrel while at sea.

Oh, a barrel?

Yes.

No, no, I don't think so. We broke up a ... The Warspite broke up a derelict ship.

Did she?

Mmm. You might be getting mixed up a bit with grandfather Olsen, perhaps. They found a huge barrel of rum one time when he was in the old sailing ships - would that be it?

It might be, yes.

Could possibly be, yes. But we didn't have anything with a barrel, but the Warspite stood off and blew this ... and evidently it took a heck of a lot to smash her up, and they come to the conclusion that she must have been loaded with lumber - timber.

Was this just a wreck?

Yes, drifting, yes. Just drifting about in the ocean. Of course it was a menace to navigation. Oh, she must have fired about six or eight rounds into it before she broke it up. And that's what they told us afterwards - why she fired so many shots - that she was probably loaded with lumber. It took a lot to break her. And, of course, in those days the sailing ships carried a lot of the lumber on deck, too, and the shorter stuff down below was all lashed down with chains on deck. That's the only real incident that we had on the way over.

While aboard the ship did you manage to ... Well, it's pretty traditional that troops on ships get up to some mischief occasionally.

Oh, well, there was entertainment, more or less, all the time. They used to run boxing contests, and then there was concerts, you know - different fellows could get up. And with a crowd of troops like that you found somebody could play the piano, or somebody would play a trumpet, and somebody could sing. And then they used to get some of the crew boxing with some of the diggers, you know (laughs). They used to be great nights. Oh, and then there was wrestling nights. Some of them didn't know the first thing about wrestling, but it was a fair go, you know: there were no holds barred. You could grab - what do you call it? They had a name for that kind of wrestling, I think. Anyhow, it was a free go - you could do anything - there was nothing barred.

Wrestling for amateurs.

That's right, yes. Well, being stuck on a ship for all those weeks, you know, they were pleased to get let loose and do something. Oh, we had two or three parades about the food. We paraded up to the officers' mess, and things like that, about the food. And then one big parade there - they served up rabbit on one occasion, and first thing some of them got was tufts of hair and eyes out of the rabbit stew, you know.

Lovely.

The cooks had just chopped things up and ... There was plenty of food there, but they didn't know how to handle it, or they were too lazy to handle it - whatever it might be.

But they cooked their own very well?

Oh yes, there own would be very good. Anyhow, getting across, they wanted some of the provisions out of the forehold, and they stood up a working party under a sergeant, and the sergeant was a bit with the boys, and anyhow, we finished up purloining a case of sheep's tongues - and they were a bit of a delicacy. I mean, they broached this, and they couldn't just bring it up as it was, but we brought our greatcoats down, put three or four tins in each pocket. Finally they emptied the case and brought it up, and we used to have that with our meal.

And then we found a way to pinch the bread. The bread was baked there, and it was put in a great big ... up on deck, and there was about that much space - two or three inches space -

between these great big boards. You could see the bread in there, you know. Anyhow, some wise bloke got busy, and he got a bit of a crowbar, or something, got round the back of it and eased one of these planks off; and we used to go and get a bit of extra bread there. Things like that happened, but I suppose they happen in all sorts of troops.

Oh yes. On the Salisbury Plain, what sort of training did you go through there?

The which?

On the Salisbury Plain.

Oh yes, we did heavy training there.

The remainder of your military training?

We did heavy training there because they ... We had eighteen-pounder guns in Australia we trained on. First of all ... I was in the infantry first of all, when I went into Holsworthy. And then, finally, they were forming an artillery brigade, and an old colonel came down there and put everybody on parade, and he asked you what you did in civilian life. I told him I had been farming for quite a while. He said, 'Take two steps to the front'. Whatever he thought, he picked out, and we were all put into an artillery unit then, so actually we started new training.

What was your unit called? What was your unit?

107th Howitzer Battery. But that's after ... I was going to get back to that. When we got to Salisbury Plain they'd altered the ... each brigade carried a Howitzer battery instead of an all eighteen-pounder. Instead of the four batteries, eighteen-pounders, they had three batteries of eighteen-pounders and a battery of 4.5 Howitzers. They were a little bit heavier shell, and the Howitzer you could ... It didn't have such a straight trajectory as the eighteen-pounder, and you could ... It had a higher trajectory, and a bit heavier shell. So they strengthened the eighteen-pounder brigades with a battery. Well, our battery was trained on the 4.5 Howitzers, so I put into a special training school, and they brought training officers down from Aldershot. And Aldershot is the known artillery training place in Great Britain, England. Everybody is trained at Aldershot, and by gee, they had it off pat, you know - very good. And we got on very well them. There was a warrant officer, and a lieutenant in charge of the instructors; and the warrant officers were the instructors.

They used to take us out. Oh, you'd go out on a bitterly cold day. You'd go out with just iron rations and a thermos of water - not a thermos, a water-bottle filled with water - and you'd go out. You had breakfast before you went out, but just had iron rations for lunch, perhaps a couple of rounds of bread and a bit of cheese, or something like that, you know. We'd gallop about there and train out there till all hours - till it got dark and you couldn't see, anyhow. And it was pretty heavy going, but we turned out quite a good unit.

Then we had a gymkhana there one time, and each gun battery competing against the other. You know, it was a kind of sports day, but it was all in your training. The battery and the gun that I was on - I got a medallion somewhere there for it, on Salisbury Plain. We were the top gun of the battery.

Most rounds per minute?

Yeah, but we performed the better: it was all timed, you know - timing. You were given your aiming target, and had to set the gun, and get it levelled, and stand by ready to fire, kind of, you know.

Yes.

That's Salisbury Plain, yes. It was a bleak place - a huge, great big place. And Stonehenge - you've heard of Stonehenge in the history? Not very far from where we were on Salisbury Plain. But there were so many different areas of it: we were at what they called Lark Hill. I don't know why they called it Lark Hill because there wasn't a rise in it for miles and miles. Might have been on account of the larks singing, or something like that. But we were at Lark Hill. Oh, and there were two or three other places, but Lark Hill was the main artillery training area. Oh, and the Canadians weren't far away - they were training - and all different British troops. But it's a general training area.

And then, of course, that's where we went, from there across to France.

Were you part of the Australian Division?

Yes, oh yes. We were 3rd Division. We had five divisions over there all together. We were attached to a brigade. We were the Howitzer Battery attached to the 7th Brigade of Field Artillery - four batteries. Oh, we had good training, no doubt about that.

And you went across to France on a convoy?

Yes, yes, channel ships.

Where did you arrive in France?

At Le Havre, that was the main port, arriving in those days - Le Havre. Then we were all bundled into ... The men that had the horses, they were put into a train with the horseboxes and things like that, and they had to look after our horses on the way. I think we were about thirty-six hours in the train - if you could call it a train. But we were in horseboxes too - no carriages - and that deep of straw. It was about ten or twelve men to one of these little box things, and that's how we travelled up to the line.

When did you actually reach the line?

We reached the line; we went up from there ... There was an area they call Bailleul - a place called Bailleul - and that was the railhead for that particular sector of war front. We went from there to a place called Armentieres. Now, it was a kind of breaking-in ground for troops or units that were coming straight into the war. We were sent into Armentieres, and it was a fairly quiet sector, but you took up positions there and you got to know about active service, and things like that - what you had to do. And then from there you went on to different parts of the front where you were needed. We went from there on up to Messines and Ypres, and to the north, nearly up into Belgium - Ypres, Messines ...

And then on to the Somme.

Later on we went on to the Somme, yes, but we had this early part up there - and then went on to the Somme. Then we went back up to the north in another area, and then, finally, when they started the big offensive in 1918 on the Somme, that's the first time that the whole five Australian divisions had been in one action.

Well, with Armentieres, what were your impressions of the place?

Oh, smashed to pieces. There were still a few French people there; they had little restaurants - we called them a estaminets. You could buy a glass of beer, or you could get an omelette made of eggs, or something like that. Some of them are still there, and still being shelled, knocked about, but some of the old French people are still there, you know - were loath to leave their homes. But most of the buildings were smashed up. Well, we were just on the outskirts, more of a suburb part of Armentieres, if you can visualise that. We were in an old, broken down, terrace of houses, all smashed up and knocked out, and we set our guns up in there and had different targets from there. Perhaps you'd have targets onto, perhaps, a road that was used by the enemy for bringing up ammunition: you got different set targets. And then you'd have to fire so many rounds at different targets at different times.

Well, it differed then again: after you got away from there, of course, you got more activity. It was a kind of breaking-in ground to get used to your guns and get used to your sights, and all that kind of thing. Of course, we didn't get much of that over in ... we only had about two shoots out on a range at Salisbury Plains, at Lark Hill. But then, when you got over there you got things that just put you in action, and you knew just how to handle everything.

But everybody in your battery was sorting themselves out. Armentieres would be the place where you'd make your friends and find out who all the wags were.

That's right, oh yes. And we were only there about twenty-four hours and we had about four blokes killed.

Good God!

Yes. Sent a shell over and it went right underneath one of our guns: two killed and two wounded - that's right. Only there about ... might have been a few days. They must have got a target onto us, you know. That's the only gun that hit, but he used to throw a lot of shells in there.

And one of the amazing parts, in the town itself ... There is a lot of those small towns and villages had what they call the village square, or the town square. There was a clock up on top of whatever building it was there, and then it stopped at half past eleven, and that's when he first shelled Armentieres, and that was always called Half Past Eleven Square - known all over the theatre.

(Break in interview)

... they were the main things. Oh no, one or two ... one day there was an incident up there - I might have told you, I don't know, before, about the Australian sergeant cutting the German officer's epaulettes off and telling him he was a private. Oh, you can put that in anyhow.

Okay, we're recording now, so ...

We've enjoyed our lunch now, so we might be able to do a bit more talking. Grandma's just given us a nice lunch, and we've enjoyed that. Mark seemed to enjoy his, I enjoyed mine, so we've had a bit of a spell. So now we are just going to carry on and let you know a little bit more about France and Belgium. We finished up in Half Past Eleven Square in Armentieres. I went from there, on up to ... If my memory serves me right now we went on up north, up towards Ypres - Passchendaele, Zonnebeke Ridge, [Houplines], and places like that: they're areas that we went through.

After we got up around about Ypres there they decided, one day, to take us for a bath. We hadn't had a bath for about six or eight weeks, I suppose. So they marched us away. There had been an old brewery in this village, and they turned it into a bath house. They had cut the huge great big vats in half, and when you got into the vats, about up to your chest, and fourteen men to a vat ...

(Break in interview)

I know you told me the last time, you told me all about how you'd gone over to the war in France, but what decided you to join up?

Oh, I suppose a sense of ... it might have been for the Empire and king and country. It was all voluntary in those days - there was no conscription. We were all volunteers. Is that what you mean?

Yes.

Oh, I suppose, a sense of loyalty - you could put it that way.

It's always surprised me: did you know that during World War I Australia was the only country in the world that had an all-volunteer army for the whole war?

I'm not quite sure, but I have an idea they were. I thought New Zealand might have been, but I think they had a form of conscription.

Yes, I think they did, too.

But I wouldn't be sure about that point. But, as far as Australia was concerned, we were all volunteers.

I remember you telling me, also, about your trip across on the troop ship.

Oh yes. Well, I'll start away from about the time I had this ...

Yeah, sure.

This is Henry Parkinson speaking here. Having enlisted in World War I in 1915, when they were calling for volunteers throughout Australia. In fact, some of the men marched from Gilgandra and country centres, and picked up men on the way down to Sydney to go into camp, to become volunteers in World War '14-'18. I enlisted here in Newcastle, and my brother also enlisted, but he was invalided at home in 1917. But I went on.

We went overseas in what they call troop ships now: they were old ... The one that we went in was the old Argyleshire, and she was a troop ship - a frozen meat ship in the meat trade from Australia to London in those days. And we were all accommodated down in the tween decks - they converted these meat ships into troop ships - and we were all down ... we had hammocks hanging up at the ceiling. We had to stow them away after every night, and fold them up and put them in a great big bin. And then the big mess tables were underneath those, and that's where you slept and ate and whatever you had to do.

A mate of mine, we often used to, in fine weather, we'd swing our hammocks up somewhere on deck, but the only trouble there was that the boatswain would come along, about six o'clock in the morning, with a great big hose and hose the decks down. And if you didn't get out of his way, well, he wouldn't get out of yours. So, they are some little experiences and happy little thoughts.

Anyhow, we landed over in ... well, we were on our way to go up to the Suez Canal, but were turned back from there. The old Warspite was a warship in those days, and it turned us back from going through the Suez on account of enemy submarine craft. So they sailed us back down into Cape Town, and we all congregated in Cape Town: there were about five troop ships all together. And then the old Warspite came there and accommodated us round the Cape. We called in at Cape Town on the way round for coaling purposes, and then we landed in Great Britain - in Plymouth, if I remember rightly. And then we detrained from there up to what they call Salisbury Plains, because when we left Australia we had eighteen-pounder guns. During that time the army authorities decided to ... no, there were some eighteen-pounder guns, but they put a 4.5 Howitzer gun with every battery.

Oh yeah, so there was a heavy gun with each battery.

Yes, so that each battery had a 4.5 Howitzer that had a bigger trajectory than the little old pipsqueaks - eighteen-pounders - put it that way.

What was your battery?

We were the 107th Howitzer Battery.

107th?

107th Howitzer Battery of the 7th Brigade, Australian Field Artillery.

And how many guns were in your battery?

Altogether?

Yes.

Oh, there were three eighteen-pounder batteries and the 4.5 - that was in each division - that's combined. Three eighteen-pounders and one 4.5.

Which gun were you on? Were you on one of the eighteen-pounders?

No, we trained on the eighteen-pounders prior to coming away, but we were selected as the 4.5 Howitzer Battery, and we had to go training. We were trained by all the top gunners at one of the greatest gunnery schools in England. We were trained by expert gunners too from there. And rather a funny incident occurred there, too. They took the Aussies that had to ride the horses that drew the guns and GS waggons, and they took them to learn how to ride. They all enlisted as men that knew horses. Well, anyhow, the pommy sergeant major who had them there, all sitting, they had a little bit of a song made up about it. They said (sings),

Sergeant, sergeant, why are you angry with me?
Sergeant, sergeant, give back my stirrups to me.
I've been in the saddle for two long hours,
I stuck it as long as I could,

But I can't stick to the b___ any longer,
My so-and-so's not made of wood.

They used to sing that to him (laughs). Fancy trying to teach Aussies how to ride without the stirrups, you know - and they'd bob, bob, bob, bob. Anyhow, that's just one or two funny little incidents that happened.

I bet the poms weren't too impressed with that little song.

No, oh no (laughs). Anyhow, they treated us pretty well. When we went into this camp the major in charge of the camp, he lined us all up and he said, 'Now, some of you Australian boys haven't had a good name over in Bath'. He said, 'They played up a bit over there. You are under my control here now and,' he said, 'if you, as good Australians and good soldiers, will stand by me, I will stand by you'. And he did, too. He gave us a little bit of leave, if we needed anything, to go into the village, and all that kind of thing - which was much appreciated. I think most of the boys did the right thing by him.

Yeah, they'd tend to. What was the village called? Can you remember it?

Yes, Swanage - S-W-A-N-A-G-E. It was right on the coast, and they used to take us down there for a swim sometimes: the pommy sergeant major would take us down, and the waves were about that high. Of course, some of the lads would dive in and they'd swim straight through them, you know. And he had a big school whistle - he'd blow this whistle like hell, you know, to make them come back, incase they got waterlogged or something. But anyhow, that's the funny side - you've got to have a funny side, haven't you?

Oh yes.

In your army life.

For sure.

They're some of the things I can remember about. Anyhow, we went through our training up there - trained very well - then we went, of course, to France, and Belgium, and Zonnebeke, and places like that - all the main battles. We were in Ypres and Zonnebeke Ridge, Messines - that was up in the northern area. Then we went on to the Somme area and the Battle of the Somme. And there were some pretty fierce ones down there.

Yeah, I can imagine.

And that's where we went on. When we got out of the lines for a while - just relieved - we'd come into the camps behind the line. A lot of the French people came back there to live, even after their towns had been shelled - Armentieres and places like that. They all came back and tidied there old broken down homes up, and they all started little cafes.

To serve all the soldiers?

Yes, you could get a bottle of wine, as it was called. Most of the boys used to get a bottle of wine and use about two bottles of bock - that was a cheap kind of beer - and they'd mix it together and make not a bad little drink out of it.

They'd mix it all in one?

Yes. And then we'd order - oh, if there were three or four of you - what we call an omelette. And the old madam would bring in a great big flamin' omelette for four, or three - whatever it was - as round as that. And then she'd come in with a loaf of bread, and the loaves of bread - I can still see them. They were about that round, and she'd hold it up there like that with her hand, and a great big carving knife, and she'd hack that big lumps of brown bread off for you. Well, there were a few good night spots Mike. Oh, where did we get to ... that was in France and Belgium.

I know it's probably painful to remember the big battles ...

Yes.

... because, even in the artillery, were you right behind the lines? Or were you actually up in the front lines?

No, you never had artillery - there was always artillery supporting infantry. You sent down a barrage - it might have been a thousand yards, or whatever the land might require - and then the observers would report back by phone to the batteries whether they were on target, or whether they wanted to increase the range or lessen the range. They were really observers out there, and the batteries, they fired according to the observations that they got from there.

You were involved in the big Battle of the Somme?

Oh yes, we were there.

Did the German counter battery fire, or German artillery, ever take a toll of your unit?

No, no. I think they did capture one or two units of the artillery. and being outflanked, and all that kind of thing on the line. But other than that, we did a pretty good job. We lost a lot of men in those Somme battles.

Yes, the British lost sixty thousand there in one day, I think.

That's right, yes.

Incredible figures.

Oh, we lost a lot of men up in the other areas too - up round Ypres, and Zonnebeke Ridge, and Messines, and Folkstreetwood - places like that - they were just individual places we were at from time to time, until finally ... We might be finishing it a bit. But that's enough about those centres, I suppose.

We were shifted then. All the allied armies were put under control of Generalissimo Foch - he was a great French general - and he took charge of all the allied troops on the front. We are getting up to the 8th August in 1918 when he took over, and we started a big push - I think it was about four or five a.m. - was Zero Hour.

This is on the Hindenburg Line?

Yes, and every gun in the battery opened up at once - intensive shell fire - and that was really the 8th August 1918, and it was really the start of the finish because he had everything up to him. Once he got the Germans on the run they ... What helped him a bit was that they'd advance in some of those areas that fast - too fast really - and they couldn't keep the supplies up. When the allies counter-attacked we hadn't the supplies up to renew the counter-attack, and once they'd got him on the move, well, they kept him on the move.

Just before the big allied push the Germans had a great big offensive. What can you remember of that?

They did. That's where they broke through, and they took every Australian division from the north where the Germans broke through.

What did they do? Throw them into the line to stop the Germans?

Yes, to stop the advance - which they did. There was one stage he advanced ... the Germans advanced that fast that ... we were coming down from the north, and we were making for a certain point along the highway, and the British and all sorts of mixed troops were coming the other way. We were going, say, north, and they were coming south, just away from the enemy lines. And Brigadier Eliot, one of our Australian majors, he picked a lot of them up and steadied them up, and they said, 'Oh, major, the Germans are just over the hill, just over the hill'. And I can still see them: they were coming this way, a mixed up regiment, Scottish and Irish and what have you, and we were going straight the opposite direction. And finally we had scouts out and we met ... But this bombardier - Old Bomb Eliot they used to call him - they reckoned he salvaged about five hundred of them and got them into line to come the other way.

Must have been a good man.

It was disorganised.

I can imagine.

But that's where the Germans made a mistake - a big mistake. They advanced that far that once the British counter-attacked they hadn't the strength of supplies to beat the counter-attacks. And that was the beginning of the end as far as I can remember.

What was your battery doing in that time - just before the Germans were stopped?

Oh, well, we spent about four days travelling from the north to the south, till they got into position, and they put us into position, and the observers - observation post - gave us a

range for a certain ... and they shelled the enemies trenches, and all that kind of thing, to ease it up for our infantry to go in. That was the main purpose, I think. That was the start of the finish.

How did you used to accommodate yourselves?

Well, accommodated ourselves mostly in farmhouses, especially in the winter time it was lovely to get into a French farm house and climb up into the haystacks and sleep there. We had a travelling kitchen with us, of course, and he used to cook a few meals for us.

Salvation Army too, I suppose?

The old Army ... I've always had a lot of respect for them. They were coming over the lines - it would be muddy and wet and slushy, and there'd be a dixie of coffee or tea, and a biscuit or a bun, or something like that. And I'd always be very thankful - always have been. I've always respected them as a religious nation - well, people, anyhow. They looked after their brothers, which is one of God's orders: behold your brother as well as yourself. But anyhow, that part of it was very good on their behalf, and we all appreciated it very, very much.

Now, where were we now? We're back over the line. Accommodation, I think I told you, they just take us behind ... If we're coming over the line for a week, or something like that, they'd bring the horses and everything back to a French farm, and they'd billet us there. Some of the officers had rooms in the farm house, but the troops just had the big hay sheds and places like that. You just camped down there.

In the line itself, I know conditions had been very bad, especially during the winter.

They were.

What sort of conditions did you live in when you were actually out in the line?

Oh, we were just living in blown out dugouts, or something like that. The Germans had a lot of dugouts and things there that had been shelled at different times, and they evacuated them. We just used to dig in there and spread your blanket out. Other places, in the summer time, you'd go and gather a couple of old sheets of iron, or whatever you'd find. They had a lot of what we called sunken roads in France and Belgium - there might have been banks so high. Well, you'd get a couple of old sheets of iron, or something, and just prop it up on the side, and you'd camp in there.

Did you have any trouble with rats or vermin of any kind like that?

No ... oh, vermin were all lousy - you couldn't keep clear of vermin, no matter where you were. We went to one place in
Armentieres that had been a big old winery. They'd cut these great big barrels down - oh, great big things about six or eight feet across - and they'd cut them down to middle-high. There were fourteen men to a tub. You didn't know whether you'd pick another blokes leg up or your own to put soap and that. Fourteen men to a tub, and water and disinfectant in it. You didn't get too many of those, but then, once you got back into the line you were

lousy straight away because the whole lines were lousy with lice: no matter where you were, you were always covered in vermin.

(Break in interview)

Getting towards the big one, the battle of Messines. I was evacuated from ... We were in subsidiary trenches. That's a trench that's shrapnel-proof on the top. We were in this subsidiary trench - there'd been a lot of enemy action - gas shells and high explosives. We were relieved just for a while. We were in this subsidiary trench one night: it had been summer time, and we used to cut an old pair of long trousers off, just chop them off with the scissors, whatever you could get, and we used to make shorts out of them for the summer. And I can remember this, and I was sitting there and all of a sudden there was a blast. It had been a high explosive shell that would have blown both of us to pieces, but it was only a shrapnel shell, but it had a certain amount of gas in it. The liquid gas spilt onto our legs a bit, you know, and I could feel the pain: I didn't know whether I was wounded or what it was. So the other chap and I ... my eyes begin to sting and I could hardly see out of them, so the sergeant got us and he called the ambulance up ... the stretcher bearers. He said, 'You'd better take these two fellows down; see what's wrong with their eyes'.

They took us down to an advanced dressing station, and when we got in there the major - the doctor - that was standing there (said), 'Oh, hell'. Then he said, 'Get out, you reek of gas'. He said, 'Get outside for a while and then come back and see me'. Well, we did that and came back, and by that time I'd lost the sight of both eyes. So they eventually put us onto ... and that was the first sign that he'd sent so many men out of the line - out of action - because it acted immediately, and we were sent by hospital train down to Boulogne, in 1918. When we got there they just didn't know how to treat the blindness that we had: it was some kind of tear gas affair.

Mustard gas.

I hadn't been there two or three days and they were bringing up, hand by hand, from the hospital train in Boulogne up to this camp. It was a camp maintained by a very elderly Irish lady - Lady Gordon-Lennox. It was all galvanized iron, but she maintained it. They took us up there, and they were carting them up there hand to hand. That'll tell you how many were put out of the line with it - temporarily. But eventually, I think I was out of the line for three or four weeks. My sight came back, and I originally got back and joined my unit.

Were you issued with gasmasks after that?

Oh yes, we had gasmasks even before that, yes. Yes, we had the gasmasks, but, you see, if you are in action the damn gasmasks were so hard to wear. You had a tit in your mouth and you'd get all ... goggled up. But anyhow, I suppose they did protect a lot of men, but you had to be careful how you wore them.

Being just a normal soldier yourself, what was the general feeling about gas?

Oh, I think the civilian population were very concerned about it too, incase it got over into the villages, but I don't think it ever did, as far as I know. What we experienced was

mostly shell gas. I believe in some parts they did use waves of some kind of gas into the airstream, but we only got it whenever they used it in shells. It was a liquid kind of a thing: when the shell broke, of course, it spilt this gas all around the place.

What did you think of it? Did you dislike it as a cowardly sort of thing?

No, oh no, no. I don't think we ever looked at it from that point, Mark. We just took it as it came: it was there and you had to do your best if you were in amongst it. And, of course, it used to hang so deadly in the - what did they call them? - the woods, in those days there - we'd call it the bush - a lot of undergrowth, and the stuff would hang there for days and days afterwards. So you had to be careful, even if you went into areas like that, that there wasn't gas about, and you'd put your mask on while you were in there.

So if you were after firewood, or wood for your dugouts or something, you had to be very careful?

Oh yes, you did too, yes, yes. Any other questions?

Well finally, then, from there on I got back to my unit again, and it wasn't long then before we were dragged out of the line again and the 11th of the llth '11 turned up. We didn't have to resume then - we didn't go back in.

(Break in interview)

During the war the Australians were rated by the Germans as the best troops on the entire front.

They were good soldiers, yes.

What did you think of the Germans?

Well, some of them ... Now, there was what they called the Bavarian Regiments: they were very, very weak.

Yeah.

And they didn't seem to be the ... I heard it mentioned, even by some of our infantry, they didn't have their heart and mind behind soldiering. The Bavarians they called them. But then there was the 'Hindenburg type': he was all for slaughter, all the time. But I've heard infantrymen say, round about Armentieres, just holding the lines quietly there, there'd be days and days and days there wouldn't even be a shot fired when you got the Bavarians on the other side.

They just wanted to live through it.

Yes, that's right.

What did you think of the American troops, and the French and the British?

Oh, look, the Americans were good troops, but they were massacred. They joined us for experience - oh, we had sergeants and quite a number allotted to us to get actual warfare experience: they were attached to different units. And boy-o-boy, didn't they have some canteens. You could buy nearly anything from a lemon squash to a ... I don't know what. They were great canteens, and they followed them all around the place. I'm getting away from the story a little bit. They were allotted to Australian troops, and British troops, for war experience.

Now this is the part - I can still see it now. We went into position - to take a position - and they assisted us. Right o, we took the position and then they gave them a further position to take on their own, with the experience they'd had with us. Well, they went off to point A or point B - what ever it might be. And they made one big mistake that they didn't learn in the advance, because they didn't bother cleaning out foxholes and dugouts and pits like that, we used to call them. And the Huns and the Germans got into these places, grabbed their machine gun and got down into these foxholes, and the Americans didn't clean them out, they just kept going on and on. Finally they found that they had nearly as many Germans in front of them as they had behind them. They got in touch with our Australian infantry and artillery, and took us up into the line: we had to go and fight to get them out. And believe me, you believe me now: I can still see them on the sunken ...

(Interruption)

They took us along there, and the sunken road ... Look, I saw American bodies stacked up there like firewood, where they'd been slaughtered.

The casualties were that heavy?

Yeah, great big heaps of bodies lying on top of the sunken road. And they brought GS wagons along and took them all away to identify them, and all that kind of thing.

Was the American equipment better than your own?

Oh yes, all aluminium!

All aluminium was it?

Yes. Oh, we used to love to get onto a few dead yanks to get dixies and things like that - all aluminium - 'cause ours was just common old oxidized tin of some sort. But they were all aluminium. I'm going to get some treatment.

We were just talking about the American troops.

Oh yes, yes. I told you about those. Just go back a little bit and they put them with us for, as I said before, for war experience. They got trapped on two or three occasions, and they had to call the Australian troops back in to go and get them out. As I told you before, they made the big mistake of not cleaning up as they went on. They just thought, oh well, they were winning, and they'd keep winning - forgot about the German being down a bit of a foxhole with a flamin' machine gun. All he had to do after they passed through, he popped out and he was behind them. But still, that was a big mistake that they made and, of course, it was rectified eventually, but they had to get war experience. But they got it in a pretty bad way.

Yes, it certainly sounds as if they did.

Casualties, yes, they did too.

And what did you think of the French?

Oh, well, we had very little to do with them - very, very little. They were mostly on a left flank or a right flank - whatever they decided on. But, oh, they were good troops alright. I never knew them, you know, failing on a flanking movement. Of course, you didn't get all the results about flank movements, but you didn't get real details. It was like a lot of other things in the navy. A bit of a rumour would start round that the French were defeated on the left flank, or on the right flank: but mostly, I think, they were pretty good.

How were the French civilians reacting to your presence there?

What?

How did the French civilians react to the presence of so many Australians and British?

Oh, I think they were quite please to see us: you got a great welcome wherever you passed through a French village. And I believe they still look after the ...

Amiens?

No, no, up at ... oh, where the great counterattacks took place. It's history now - what's the name of it? - Villers-Bretonneux.

Villers-Bretonneux.

Villers-Bretonneux. I believe they still have the Last Post and Reveille sounded there at nine o'clock every night in honour of the Australians that died at Villers-Bretonneux. They come out with a bugle, and they blow the Last Post, and the next is Reveille.

Reveille.

Yes. I believe they still play it every night at nine o'clock. Two or three trumpeters take the job on, and they are still carrying it out after all those years.

It's a long time ago now, isn't it?

My word. And I believe the graveyards are a picture up there.

Yes, they are.

I've seen reports of ... some of our old diggers were financial enough to go back over some of those areas as tourists, you know. And they reckon the graveyards in Villers-Bretonneux were an absolute picture to look at - all decorated with flowers. And they blew the Last Post and Reveille every night there.

But your brother Perce, he was invalided back, wasn't he?

Yes, he was invalided back in 1917: he was home when mum died. Mum died in 1917. And he was invalided back home, and Aunty Trish, she looked after ... When mum died we were both overseas, of course, but Perce was invalided back home before mum actually died. And a great old aunt we had in Sydney, she, you know ... It was she that got Vera (Henry Parkinson's wife) away after mum died to an apprenticeship to the millinery, and that's where she and Gina started the one time, at a millinery factory up in Newtown that's still ... They've only just both retired, did you know? Yeah. They'd been thinking about it for a long time. My half-sister, she'll be seventy, age seventy-seven, seventy-eight. Still, they've always had this nice home at Epping, so they've retired finally and got rid of the little workshop.

What unit was Perce in? Was he in the artillery as well?

No, no, he was infantry - 35th Battalion.

35th Battalion.

Yeah, 35th Battalion AIF.

And was he injured in one of the attacks?

No, it was a sickness that brought him home. I just don't know whether it was an appendix or what it was, but he had surgery and then they invalided him home. I was pleased about that because he was invalided home before poor old mum died.

I remember you telling me once that you and Perce decided who was to go off to the war.

We did, we tossed a coin.

You tossed a coin.

An old penny in those days. I said, 'Will you flip it or will I flip it?'. 'Oh,' he said, 'I don't care'. He said, 'Here you are, here's the penny'. I flipped it up in the air and he called heads, or whatever it was, and I had to have tails. But anyhow, he won the toss. 'Well,' I said. He said, 'That means that' ... No, wait a minute now. He lost the toss, that's right. That meant that I could enlist overseas. But he never kept his word - he finally couldn't - he broke through and he enlisted as well as I did, a few months after. But anyhow, it was just a matter of tossing a penny to see a finish - both of us went.

How old were you when you joined up?

Oh, about twenty-three, twenty-four - something like that - round about.

But Joe Watson must have joined when he was about sixteen.

Sixteen years and Joe joined up.

Sixteen years old.

Oh, lots of blokes of sixteen and seventeen joined up, and some of their people tried to drag them out, you know, but I think Joe's people didn't worry - Joe told me then. He said, 'Oh, well' ... He enlisted from the country, I think. He was out in the countryside somewhere. Anyhow, that makes him a pretty young World War I man: he's only about eighty-three.

Who were some of the others in your battery that you can remember?

That I can remember?

Yes.

Oh, quite a lot of them, yes. You'll still see a ... in that room where we have the television at home there's a blown up picture there. Reg Hardwick - he's a dentist in Hamilton - his father, he was with our unit, and he was the magistrate in Newcastle for years and years afterwards, and I didn't know him just as Reg Hardwick. One day, when I worked at Cardiff, and we'd finished work and were sitting up on the station at Cardiff waiting for the train to bring us back from the railway workshops. I was sitting there - a chap walked over with white creams on, and he looked at me and he said, 'Aren't you Henry Parkinson?'. I said, 'Yes. Why?'. 'Put it there, mate,' he said, 'I'm Reg Hardwick'. And he was in the same unit. He belonged to what we called the signalers. They used to go out, and if you've got a broken communication line - it was a tough job. You had to go out and find out where the shell was breaking the wire and fix it up so you could keep in communication.

I would imagine that they would have had very heavy losses.

He was ... Woody and Hardy, they were known as - kind of twins - they were work mates. Woody was awarded the French Legion of Honour, and Hardy was awarded the Belgian Legion of Honour. They were the same ones as I got later on in years, in the showcase that I have - the two nice medals on the end - one from the French government and one from Belgium. Oh yes, they had a pretty tough job. So anyhow, he walked over and shook

hands with me. 'Good heavens above,' I said, 'fancy meeting you here'. He said, 'Fancy meeting you here too', and at that time he was the stipendiary magistrate at Newcastle. So that's how we met after being demobilised for some years. Oh well, that's the way of life, I suppose.

We saw the Armistice, didn't we?

Yes. What did you feel that day?

You couldn't explain it.

No, I imagine you couldn't.

We were to go back into the lines, we were out of the lines for a week or ten days, and we were to go back in again. And in the meantime the armistice was declared, so the old major was a bit of a sport and he got a GS waggon and sent it around to all the nearby estaminets where he could get a bottle of cognac, they used to call it, or something like that. And he got the old GS waggon to come back and we just celebrated in the raw kind of thing.

Celebration from the heart.

You had to get a glass of whisky or a glass of beer, or whatever it might be. But he was a bit of a sport, the old major. He sent a GS waggon out to commandeer whatever he could so the boys could just celebrate. That was a great feeling son.

Yeah, I can imagine it would have been. And what happened in the few weeks after the armistice? What happened to you? What did you do after the trip back into the line was cancelled?

We were placed in billets. We had an upstair billet of an old French-Belgian farmer - six of us in the room upstairs, with our sleeping gear - and we camped up there. I can just remember being carted away from there with that pneumonic flu that swept the world about 1918. We had it badly over there, and I can just remember being picked up. One of the chaps that was camped in our room - he was what they called a stretcher bearer - a bit of a medical man - and he could see I was pretty crook. So he got in touch with the authorities, and a great big ... Tell you how bad it was, they had a great big army tents up there - huge great big things you could nearly drive a GS waggon through them - and they were full or Canadians, men that had been - not demobilised, but still, put into areas. They reckon they died up there like flies with that pneumonic flu.

Where was this place?

Wait a minute now. It's a coal mining centre - a great coal mining centre.

In Belgium?

Yes, up in Belgium.

Is it Mons?

No, no. It's rather a longish name - I think it's got some kind of 'ville' on the end of it, but the name just wont come back.

It's not of great importance.

No. As I told you, they had big hospital tents up there when this flu broke out in the troops that were still out of the line after the armistice. I think it was worldwide too. I remember Vera telling me one day, they had soup kitchens in Stockton, and she and Aunty Dot - we used to call her - they used to go out with hot soup. And there were many, many houses they went into - there was nobody there that could cook or do anything. They called themselves the 'dinky-di's', and they went out with hot soup and stuff like that, into the homes where this pneumonic flu was.

Did many people die?

Oh yes, yes; it took a lot of people off; my word. I still remember that cold place.

And where did they take you after? Did they send you back to England?

Eventually they evacuated ... After I got better from the hospital they put us into holding camps in England. We were down at a little place called ... No, we went to Swanage during our training. It's one of the waterside areas. There's be holding camps set up there waiting for your call to the ship. We had nothing to do there - just mucked about - the cook kept up pretty well fed. You could have leave out to the nearest village, nearest town, and that kind of thing. And we just stayed there for weeks and weeks and weeks, until they had enough troop ships organised to bring us back home. So I got back home in May 1919. Same old accommodation to come home with as we went away with.

What was the ship you came home on?

It had a real 'Irish' name ...

Araluen?

No, no, no. Amahea - A-M-A-H-E-A. It's a real 'Irish' name. Yes, we came back in the Amahea.

Did you come back in a convoy, or just in the one ship?

Oh no, no. You could all be different. I think ... I've still got the card somewhere in my wallet at home, with about eighteen at the mess table, and they all signed it and what unit they belonged to. It's pretty well faded now. But we all signed this plain card up, just for memories of one another, coming home. Oh no, the coming home part was pretty good: the food was a bit better too, coming home, I think, than going over. They had very poor tucker going over.

What sort of food did you eat?

Going over?

Yes.

I'll tell you. They used to take a couple of the troops out to be slushies, up for the cooks. He'd tip about half a bag of spuds just into a barrel of water, and give you a little hard broom, and you just had to swill them round and that. he took them straight out of that and put them in the steaming pans. Well, if a bad spud or two got through you could taste it in all the others. The food wasn't cooked well. In fact, we had a bit of a burial there one time. They had some bloody cheese there, I could smell it from one end to the other. They put it on a bit of deck slabbing and left it outside the officers' quarters and just slid it over into the sea. Somebody made a bit of a speech about burying a man at sea. Oh well, there are funny parts - you had to make a bit of fun out of it.

True. What was your food like when you were in the trenches - when you were up on the line?

You had your own little cookhouse there, and I think it was all brought up as dry rations. I thought all you had to do was just open a dozen tins of bully beef, and something like that, and put a bit of vegetables in with it - and that was a meal.

In other words, you wouldn't have been very well fed at all ...

No, no.

... from a nutritional point of view.

No, no - mostly bully - most tinned stuff - bully beef. You always had a spare ration kit with a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits - you know, just ordinary things like that that could save life till you got fed.

I know you won the Military Medal. Do you mind just describing how you did that?

Yes. Well, that was at a little place called Bony - B-O-N-Y - near the Hindenburg Line. The sergeant was blown to pieces along side of me.

Was he?

Mmm - Max Gillespie - I can still see him. Bloody great big sheet of ... high explosive shell must have got him under the tin hat and nearly sliced half his head off. He fell down like a (slapping noise) ...

Like a falling tree?

Like a falling tree. But another little chap by the name of Jimmy Nichols - I was a bombardier - and I said to Jim, 'Well, we've lost our sergeant' - there was only the three of us there. We kept that gun going from ... I think it's got the date on my recommendation at

home - it was about September 21st - it was about four or five days. We kept in action just with a bit of a skeleton crew. Both he and I got awarded the Military Medal for attaching to duty during that period of time - it's got the date on it.

Were you with your battery at the time?

Oh yes.

Was there much left of the battery?

Oh, not a great lot, no. I think he blew about two of the guns out. Yes, I think two of the guns were blown out and a couple killed, and quite a number wounded, the same time that he blasted us nearly out of the ground. He was using pretty heavy shells too - Howitzer shells.

Did you ever see any of the heavy artillery hit like that?

Yes I did, in one place only. It was not far from Messines - we used to call it 'Plugstreet Wood' - and they had a battery there with sixty-pounders - great big long barrels on them. And they had a battery four there, behind the line - a bit of camouflage on it - and all of a sudden he must have got a direct range onto them. You had to see it to believe it. He blew one of those sixty-pounders clean out of the ground - turned it upside down. He must have had heavy shells to do that.

The long barrel sounds like an ex-naval gun. They must have been very heavy.

Yes, kind of, they called them sixty-pounders. I think they were a pretty fast projectile, you know. They were a bit like an eighteen-pounder - something like that - a big barrel on them. Yes, I suppose they'd be using that type in the navy too, wouldn't they, in those days.

Did you ever see any captured German artillery?

Oh ... only men, that's all. Could never see any of their guns.

I thought they might have shown them to you to show what they looked like.

Oh no, they just left them lying there in the mud and slush - whatever it was they blew them out.

(Break in interview)

I came back and they offered me a job back in the railways. I thought, oh well, I'll xxx. So I went out to Hamilton sheds then - they had the steam sheds there then for the locos - and I went out there as a cleaner. And from that, if you stuck it out, you could become a fireman and then a driver on the old steam trains. But I never got that far with it. I went back and finally got a job with the ... The railway workshops were near Honeysuckle there - used to come down to the punt.

Oh yes.

Well, those big old buildings. Well, I came back there and they offered me a job in the railway workshops. So I took that on, and that's where I retired from eventually. I retired from there and took an easy job with the BHP as a security officer.

What year was that?

When I went with BHP?

Yes.

Oh, it would be about ... I was there for about ten years, I think.

It would have been about 1930?

It would be some year ... it might be a bit later than that. Around about that time, anyhow.

And when did you marry grandma?

I married grandma on 30th October 1921 - that's our anniversary.

Almost just after you came back from xxx.

Not long, yes. I met Vera and we palled up. In fact, I was staying ... When my brother met me coming off the troop ship in Sydney, he said, 'Well, I'll take you up to Newcastle'. He said, 'I know people up there that could give you board and lodging'. He said, 'When I'm ashore, in port, I generally stay there'. So that's how I come to meet dad and Mrs Olsen: they had the old Royal Hotel down near the shops in xxx. So I got my ... 'Oh yes,' Mrs Olsen said, 'Henry can come here. He can share a room with Tom [Falon]' - they only kept about four boarders. So I shared a room with this other chap and got to know mum a bit, and were married in 1921. So that's it.

It must have been very hard when the big depression hit in 1929.

Oh yes, that was pretty tough.

How did you get on, because you had only been married seven years?

No, I'll tell you what's happened to us in the railway workshops. We were cut down ... I think, first of all, we worked five days and then had two days off, or five weeks and then two weeks off - something like that.

Yes.

Broken down. Then it got a bit heavier. It was just enough to struggle by on. A lot of people lost their homes. But in the meantime I got married, and we got a loan from the war service homes, and we got a nice little three-bedroom cottage in Adamstown. And then I went to work from the railway workshop to the railway workshop. I used to get the train at Adamstown station, straight out to Cardiff.

So we battled through the depression, just about. I had to put my cards on the table. I wrote away - they were very good - I wrote away to the War Service Department, put my cards on the table, and told them what I earned each fortnight - had to pay a bit of superannuation - all that kind of thing. They sent me back a very nice letter. They said, well, you kind of put your cards on the table, and we understand your financial position, paying a home off and rearing a family; and you've got behind, somewhat, in your re-payments. They said, we are going to cancel those re-payments for the time being, and just put it onto the whole lot that was still owing. So that's what they did.

That was very good of them.

And we battled through that way. We finally got it payed off, and sold it, and then we bought the old place in Stockton. Six hundred quid I think we payed for the old place then, but we spent a lot of money on it, and I did a lot of work on it myself with the help of some of the boys. Anyhow, that's been my lifestyle up to there, Mark.

I imagine, in 1939, when the whole thing started up again - another big war - I can imagine you felt very bad about that.

Well yes, in a way. But they had what they call a - what do they call it? - oh, a kind of a home guard, and I served up on the Merewether hills with the anti-aircraft guns, especially at weekends. It was shared out kind of work, and you got a little bit of pay for it. I used to go up there of a weekend and man the anti-aircraft guns up at... during World War II. They had a name for it.

Volunteer Guard?

Yeah, Volunteer - something like that. I've still got a little discharge from it at home in the box there.

Yes, I've seen it.

Volunteer Defence Corps - something like that.

That's it, Volunteer Defence Corps.

I think that's what it was, yes. Oh yes, well, I did what I thought I could do - the right thing - and it was a little bit of extra money coming in: you were paid for it.

And I suppose, being an ex-artillery man, they would have welcomed you.

Oh, yes, they were pleased to have you. Oh yes, we were alright up there. They had great big tents up there, and plenty of blankets, and the food was good, and all that kind of thing.

Did you see much of the Yanks during World War II?

No, not individually. I think I told you about the two experiences we had with them, learning for battle tactics.

I mean during World War II.

Oh no, no - I'm sorry, no I didn't, because we weren't in Stockton then. But the Stockton people had a lot to do with them because there was a big camp of them up there at Annandale, around about there. They had a big American camp up there, I believe. But we were not so much in touch with them then because they mostly travelled through Stockton and things like that - catch the ferries and the busses. Oh, I think everybody in Stockton got on pretty well with them: yeah, they were pretty well liked in World War II.

END OF TAPE A - SIDE B - END OF INTERVIEW 1992

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A - INTERVIEW 1977

Identification: Interview taped summer 1977 at 71 Hereford Street, Stockton, a port suburb of Newcastle, NSW.

Where we finished on the other, do you mean?

Yes, when you were going into action, up near Armentieres, or wherever it was; where you mention the trench raid and the German officer.

We are on the air again Mark, and I think I was speaking about the area up in Passchendaele where we had some big raids. The infantry had raided some of the enemy trenches and brought back quite a number of prisoners, some of them wounded and some not wounded, but just prisoners; but a lot of Australian wounded coming back. Some were walking wounded, perhaps a blow on the arm or head or something like that, but they could walk, and they had to find their own - not find their own way, they knew the way back, but with an escort. Then there were a lot of stretcher cases that had to be carried back from the forward dressing station, where we were, to a bigger dressing station where they had more medical attention there before they were sent further back behind the line.

We were pretty short of stretcher bearers of our own, so the sergeant in charge of the group began to gather some of the German prisoners to carry some of the stretcher cases back. There were some German stretcher cases and a lot of Australian stretcher cases, and how the sergeant - there was a German officer there and the sergeant approached him about picking up a stretcher and helping to carry it back behind the line and he just point blank refused, and with a very black look he told the sergeant he was a German officer. That didn't make the sergeant too happy and he just seemed to think for a little moment and all of a sudden he got a brainwave, I suppose, and he whipped out his jackknife that the German officers carried. Like our officers, they carried their rank on the shoulder, on a

little epaulette on each shoulder, and the Australian sergeant whipped out his sharp jackknife, cut one off his left shoulder and cut the other one off his right shoulder and said, `Now you're a German private, pick up a stretcher', which reluctantly the German officer did. That was one little episode; there were dozens of things like that that went on.

In another area where we were in a bit of a jam too and some of our guns got off the Corduroy Track and practically were bogged. I heard afterwards that it was illegal, it should never have been done. But this lieutenant gathered up a lot of German prisoners and put them on to the drag ropes of the gun to drag it back on to the Corduroy Road where it could go back into action. I believe it happened, but it would be a breach of war regulations if that's what you'd call it. You couldn't use prisoners to manhandle guns to shoot back at their own enemy. But still, I suppose there were a dozen and one things done like that during World War I that no officials knew anything about. So that's how things went along there.

We were relieved from there eventually and we came back down towards the south again. We got back on to what they call the Somme River area. It was a pretty tough area down there too, and they were at this stage beginning to prepare for a great big offensive. The German army had come forward and taken miles and miles of country that the British had held over a period and it was like walking into an area that had had very little war enacted in it. A lot of the British army were coming out of the line. Germany had started a big offensive, and in the long run it proved that the German army came along too fast with their advance. They routed a lot of these British troops there because on the way down - we were on the way down with a forced march to this area, and a lot of the British troops were just coming out of the line and going the opposite way. Of course, naturally, it was a narrow road and we asked if they'd been relieved. They said, `Jerry' - they used to call him Jerry - `Jerry's just over the next hill'. That put a bit of a nasty taste in our mouth but anyhow our officers sent out scouts.

They weren't just over the hill but they had upset the British defence and there were lots of them coming out of the line but, we kept on and on and finally the scouts came back with the report that they'd sighted the enemy at a certain position. Anyhow, we dug ourselves in and made ourselves a fairly safe area and waited for him to come on. That's where the big offensive started, from there, on August, 1918.

They had hundreds and hundreds of guns. I think I have some particulars somewhere. But anyhow, apple pie together. I think on that morning I saw about eight observation balloons which we had in those days. They were fastened by a big heavy wire, the balloon to a heavy wire, and on to a truck or tractor. There was a basket underneath the balloon for observation purposes and they'd have an officer in there observing. A German plane came over with incendiary bullets and he had about eight of them alight in five minutes.
Up at the area (Williamtown RAAF base) the other day - I'm going back a bit now when we decorated the parachute troopers up at Williamtown - one of them said to me, `Did you have any parachutes in World War I?', I said, `No, the only parachutes we saw in World War I were these men in the observation balloons and they had to save whatever observations they had'. They just grabbed those and had a little parachute and they could just drift down after the balloon was set alight. That's the only time we ever saw them. Anyhow, to get on with that story, we steadied them up finally and that's when

Generalissimo Foch took over, the French Major General, he took over the allied fronts and things began to move. But then there was still a lot of heavy fighting to go from there on.

During the advance we got into a little area not far from a village called Bray and we had a very tough time there.
Finally, we were relieved from there and came out for a little while. Then we went back into another area. Finally, we had the big battle of Villers-Bretonneux. Australia played a very prominent part in that. There were also British and French troops on the flanks. Saving Villers-Bretonneux like that, from there if he had taken and held Villers-Bretonneux it would be a downhill run right down to Amiens - that's one of the big coastal cities of France and it practical been on the English Channel, which would have been curtains for us pretty well. But anyhow, there was a lot of hard fighting there and they saved Villers-Bretonneux eventually with counter attacks and counter attacks by both sides. Finally, he ran out of steam and we held the area.

They had a bit of trouble on one of the flanks; the French were routed a bit there but they straightened that out and that was really the beginning of the end from then on. There was a bit of fighting but they kept moving out and moving out. Finally, we were relieved from the line a few days before the armistice was signed. We were supposed to be out of the line for a week's spell or something like that.

I think it was on 11th day the Armistice was signed, we were to go back on 12th, that was the day after the Armistice was signed. We didn't have to report for duty, everything was cease fire and we just held fire, stood there in that position for a while until we were sent up into billets up in Charleroi, part of Belgium, and we were put into billets there. I contracted that 1918 flue up there, along with thousands of others. I survived it but many others didn't survive it.

From there, finally, we were billeted in a little house - there was only the old father and his son. His wife had been killed during the war somehow by shell fire and he made us very, very welcome. We had the upstairs part of his little house and every time we walked in or walked out they always had coffee on a little stove day and night. You could have a cup of coffee whenever you walked out and whenever you walked in. It would be about Christmas time 1918, and we weren't far from Charleroi - it was quite a big town. There were six of us billeted in this little house upstairs. So we went into the village and we bought a roast of beef which was nearly prohibitive, the price of it, and we got a couple of bottles of wine and a few goodies that we could pick up and brought them back and we gave the old fellow and his son a Christmas party. They enjoyed it although they couldn't tell us back. I had the flu and was taken away from there with the flu, and finally got over that and was transported back to England.

All we did then was put into a camp in the south of England to wait for a troop ship home. Finally, we got our troop ship, got aboard and sailed from Southampton. We got a great send-off from all the ... It's a great Navy port, Southampton, and all the whistles were blowing as the Australian troop ship sailed out for home. We got a great old send-off from the Navy and all the ships that were in port. They knew it was a ship going home and believe me it was a great feeling to be coming home.

I will never forget arriving back in Sydney on a beautiful May morning. I think it was about the middle of May and something like a bit of weather we've been having lately, Mark, nice sunny days, and to sail back into Sydney Heads and drop anchor in Watsons Bay; that was something that I'll always remember and never forget.

So briefly, whatever we've been through, I've only been too happy to do it for you, boy. I know that you're about the only grandson that's interested in these kinds of things. You take an interest in my books that I have on World War I, ANZAC books and France books and Air Force books and Navy books. I think Mark's been through most of these and I think one of these days I might have to hand them over to him as a souvenir. Anyhow, thanks Mark for your trouble. Mark has had a little bit of trouble with the recording, but he's like a good soldier. He stuck to his guns and he battled through and changed his tapes, and went on and on and on and finally we've got through to this session. I thank him very much for your time Mark, and your trouble to come over and tape these few particulars of your old grandfather.

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A - END OF INTERVIEW

3/94