South Australians at war – transcript of extracts – OH 169/5

Extracts from an interview with John Bowditch, in which he discusses his experiences as a prisoner of war during World War Two.

TAPE 2, SIDE A

From there I went to Greece and saw a bit of active service there. I was wounded in Greece. That was another story. I learned never to volunteer. Two other fellows and I volunteered to go with an officer up to get further instructions, I suppose. I don't know, you don't ask a lot of questions. Anyhow I know I volunteered to go on this and while the officer was up talking to the big wigs, the Stukas came over and the other two boys and I popped down on the ground and one each side of me, actually touching, and when the fellow finished dropping the bombs these two boys were dead and I was just wounded, but I got up and walked away. Marvellous isn't it, how I got out of it. I always say the Lord must have wanted something out of me. I don't know what I've offered very much, but I was spared anyhow. It's turned me against war that - you know it's really turned me off because I lost - - -. I think I said earlier that I lost my parents in the war. Anyhow I was taken prisoner in the hospital - I couldn't get away.

Whereabouts in Greece?

In Athens - I was in hospital in Athens. But it was a bit traumatic getting there. When I was picked up wounded, the Germans were all over the place and I was sort of left behind. Somehow - I lost run of things - but I eventually woke up in Athens hospital. Everybody seemed happy enough and all of a sudden the Germans just walked in on us and the war was over as far as I was concerned. From Athens we went by boat to Salonica, up through all the Greek islands - at least it's a beautiful tour. At Athens I got my first experience of what not to do. We'd been on the road walking for quite a while and we were allowed to sit down. The Germans came along and said, "Raus, Raus, Raus". I said, "Oh get stuffed you big German bastard," and I got a bayonet prodded on my bum and I've never forgotten that. I always learned, "Don't answer

back to somebody". (laughs) But I didn't think he'd know what I was talking about, so I learned something anyhow.

We were loaded on to a train and we were taken on what they called a propaganda tour. We went to Sofia - - -. Well we went to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Poland and to Germany, and we were stopped every now and again to show what was going on I suppose, to the people.

To show that they were capturing Australians?

How they were winning the war I suppose. Then we were put in a big camp and sent out on working parties.

Where was the camp John?

In Ober Silesia. It's now Poland but it was Ober Silesia there. And we were sent out into working parties, although my first working party I went to work in the Black Forest cutting pine trees down, which wasn't too bad. The food wasn't real good but we were fortunate we got Red Cross parcels with good food in them - very good food. Then from there I went to work in a sugar factory, which wasn't too bad. But you could see the treatment the Jews were getting there - Jewish people, you know, they were never fed. It was pathetic. You'd see them all at a chain, each one coupled to each other, while they walked to work and walked back. It was terrible.

From there I went up into Poland to a place called Katowice[1] and worked in a coal mine, and I was in the coal mine till I - almost till the war ended. I never enjoyed them. But the coal mine - I must tell you about the inside of the coal mine. Down about a - they said it was a thousand feet down - a great big chapel, it always impressed me - cut out of the coal, and St Barbara. Apparently she's the patron saint of miners. I found the Polish people great people, marvellous people, what they had to put up with. I think through that my faith in the Lord increased no end. I'm not a religious fanatic or anything like that, but I became a very staunch believer. You know, I thought "Somebody must be looking after me," because things - - -. But the sad part was, as far as Gwen and I were concerned, for four and a half years she never got one letter from me, and yet other people - - -. And we could never understand why

[1]Formerly Stalinograd

she didn't get a note from me. We were allowed so much writing and she never got one. Actually the Red Cross contacted me, while I was a prisoner of war, to say, "Why don't you write to your wife?" and I had been writing to my wife, so that was one of the mysteries of the war.

Anyhow the war was over, sort of. What happened? When the Russians were getting close they put us on the road, and we were on the road for about four months. That was pretty rough because there was no food and no accommodation, no nothing.

Were you with Australians?

Mixed. South Africans, Australians, English, even Indians. You know, all sorts of people.

Were they all from the desert, from Greece, or where they from all over?

No, no, we had some that were more recent prisoners of war, you know, that you could find out how the war was going. It was interesting because the clever boys, they always got - - -. We always got our news through by - - -. I never asked questions as long as we could hear, but we always knew how the war was going. We knew when things were going good - you know, you could tell. Oh, and the German soldiers, the ordinary soldiers - there was nothing wrong with the ordinary soldier. You know, you'd meet man to man. I know we used to get a cigarette issue and I didn't smoke so I always used to swap my cigarettes for bread, most times with a German. They're supposed to search you but they'd know that this fellow's good for a cigarette so they'd let you through with your bread. So that was all right.

So the German guards, you really got on fairly well with them?

Oh yes, providing you - - -. As I said, I learned early in the piece not to argue with the bloke with the gun. Had a funny experience at a place called Katowice. I was going into the hospital - I had a big boil on my hand - and I had my Australian hat on, and a German soldier came up and said, "Anybody from South Australia here?" because he knew - - -. And I said, "Yes I am". "Yes," he said, "I come from Nuriootpa. My grandparents are in Nuriootpa and I came home for a holiday and got conscripted because I wasn't naturalised Australian". So he was really fed up.

That's be a bit rough wouldn't it?

A bit rough on him, yes. Yes, that was funny though wasn't it, to meet somebody like that that knew where Nuriootpa - - -. And he must have known because he Nuriootpa. Well you wouldn't think a German would know about Nuriootpa would you?

He spoke pretty good English?

As good as I did. Although he was being very careful. He didn't make a great big conversation, you know. Then what happened then?

You were three months walking.

Three or four months on the road, yes.

That was pretty grim wasn't it?

That was grim yes. I finished up at Munich. The day we were released I was at Munich.

So who would have released you? The Americans wouldn't they?

The Americans released me. We made our way back to Frankfurt. I always remember Frankfurt because Frankfurt was flattened - so was Dresden. But I remember Frankfurt particularly because the bulldozers had been through to make way where the buildings were knocked down, and they had notices stuck up, "toten unter" which I found out meant that there was dead people underneath the - - -. So I can see the war perhaps in different eyes to what everybody else does. I could never be bitter, and I feel I have cause to be bitter because I lost my family. But I saw what our people did to them too.