



---

## South Australians at war – transcript – OH 644/3

**Interview with Mr Les Thompson recorded by Rob Linn at Clovelly Park, South Australia, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2002 [interviewer states 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2002 at outset, but corrects this at commencement of Tape 2] for The State Library of South Australia South Australians at War Oral History Project 2002.**

---

TAPE 1 SIDE A

**[Tape ID comments]**

**Les, could you give me some personal details first? What's your full name, please?**

Leslie John Thompson.

**And where and when were you born, Les?**

2<sup>nd</sup> December 1951 in North Adelaide.

**And tell me about the family you grew up in — who your parents were and what they did.**

My father worked in the retail trade up in Queensland. My mother died just after my sister was born, and my sister was brought up by my uncle and auntie. And I left here and lived up in Queensland, and stayed there until I enlisted in the Army.

**What was your father's name?**

Leslie Roy Thompson.

**And your mother?**

I don't know.

**So did you see much of your father in those days?**

Yes, up until the time I joined the Army, and then I only saw him whenever I got back to Brisbane.

**Had your father had any involvement in the Second World War, for instance?**

Yes. Both my father, my uncle and also uncle on my mother's side had had service in the Army during the War, in the Second World War.



**And did your father ever talk about it much, Les?**

No. I didn't know anything about it. I only found out about family involvement in the War after I'd come back from Vietnam.

**Is that right?**

Yes. So it was never brought up, I never knew anything about Anzac Day or anything until I joined the Army, and that was when I found out about Anzac Day and what Australia had been involved in during the War. They didn't talk about it at school or anything else like that.

**In Queensland they didn't?**

No, not at all. Not that I was aware of, anyway.

**Can you just give me a very brief outline of your service — no, sorry, we won't do that now. Just coming back. So you were educated in Queensland.**

Yes.

**And the primary and secondary school?**

Yes, primary and secondary.

**What level did you go to?**

I went to Year Ten, and then went and tried to do a trade, but I didn't find much [to] like there and I always wanted to be a soldier, so I joined the Army when I turned seventeen.

**So you were actually in the Army itself, were you, at that point, as a regular?**

Yes. Yes, as a regular.

**So what's the path — a very brief resume of the path you had through the Army?**

I did recruit training and then I went to the School of Army Health to do intensive training for service in the field. And then I went to 11 Field Ambulance and then I was transferred to 9 Battalion with them as a company medic until December 1970, when I got marching orders to go to Vietnam, to 17 Construction Squadron. So early in 1971, around March-April was the time I arrived in Vietnam, and was given an opportunity to choose between an artillery and an engineers regiment, so I joined the engineers unit. That was 17 Construction, which was based at Vŭng Tào and Nui Dat and out at Bridge 6.

**And what rank would you have held at that point?**



Lance-Corporal.

**And did that change at all?**

Only — no, not until I got back to — couple of years after I got back to Australia.

**Well, let's go over your training and your time in Vietnam in detail, Les. Just tell me a bit about Kapooka and at Healesville, which were the first stages you had.**

Yes. Kapooka was in the summer that I did recruit training there, and that's out near Wagga Wagga, and it's pretty dry and hot in the summer months. And then, when I went down the School of Army Health after finishing recruit training, which went for, I think, about twelve weeks or something like that, and then School of Army Health was another — I spent about six months down there and then went and did further training at 1 Mil. Hospital at Yeerongpilly (Yeronga) in Brisbane. After that then I went to 9 Battalion, they'd just come back from Vietnam and they were the youngest battalion in the Australian Army. I was a company medic there for Bravo Company, and (dog barks) worked with them until we had to go, I got my posting order. (female voice in background, break in recording)

**Les, so you're in the 9<sup>th</sup> RAR —**

Yes.

**— and it's early 1971, you're off to Vietnam.**

Yes.

**Is that correct?**

Yes.

**Can you just give us a really detailed account of those years in Vietnam?**

I was over there seven months, because Australia started pulling the troops out of Vietnam, so I came back in about November in '71. I served — I went to 17 Construction down at Vŭng Tào, and then I relieved up at Nui Dat and also out at Bridge 6, which was a bridge that they were putting out just a short distance from the Bria[?] markets. I was out there one night and it was a battalion of North Vietnamese soldiers came within two clicks, or two kilometres, of the site, and there was only probably about twenty blokes in the Bridge 6 site. So that was rather an interesting feeling that you got the next morning when you found out that there was — just how outnumbered you would have been if they'd decided to come any closer. I saw a lot of the blokes I'd served with, 9 Battalion, back in Australia, they'd come over and I used to see them down at the hospital, all injured, and dead bodies when they had bought the dust off then to 1 Aust. Field Hospital in Vŭng Tào. And then I used to also look after the civilians that were round in the 17 Construction area, treating them for any minor medical things. It was like living in a cage, that you



were within a perimeter most of your day and night except when you went into the city, and then you came back, so you virtually became like a caged animal, just living and working within the same area, just a bit of an escape to go into the city or if you went up to Nui Dat. So even though we weren't at the forefront where most of the battalions and that served, we still did see the end result of the war. And I realised early in the piece that the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, had nowhere to go and it just wasn't going to win the war, so they would have finished up back with nobody really protecting them a short period down the track.

**Can you try and remember back, Les — this might be difficult — but to your first two to three or four weeks when you hit Vũng Tàu?**

Well, Vũng Tàu, I landed in Vũng Tàu before I went down to Nui Dat — correction, I landed in Nui Dat and spent a couple of days up there before I was transported back down to Vũng Tàu to take up the regimental aid post — that was the only one outside of the Field Hospital at Vũng Tàu that I used to operate and used to look after the engineers and also the Australian Training Team with medical treatment and also medical supplies. Vũng Tàu was just a large area that had a perimeter wire around it, and it was just like a little suburb that you'd have in Australia, except that you were behind the perimeter wire all the time. And I think really the first couple of months, it was like going into a different world. You had trouble trying to come to terms with the reality that you were actually over there. Back in Australia, knowing that you — when I was with 9 Battalion that I was — I would have been happy to go back overseas with them, but I think the reality doesn't hit home until after you've been there for a while, and it's — and coming from very involved with the Church, I found what was going on there very hard to accept, and that a lot of innocent people were getting hurt and faced an uncertain future.

**So in Queensland you'd been heavily involved with the Church?**

Yes.

**The Methodist Church?**

The Methodist Church. I was in the junior boys' — leader of the junior boys' group, in the senior boys' group, I was a Sunday School teacher and also a church member. I had aspirations at one stage of becoming a minister for the Methodist Church, but when the opportunity came up to join the Army I joined the Army.

**Did your father have a background of Christian faith?**

No, not really. He never really practised religion, or my stepmother. Why, I can't really say why I went to church in the first place.

**So that was your own actions?**

Yes, my own actions from it. And even then, when I was there nothing was really brought up in Queensland about my family. Both sides — my father and mother's side, that I had relations that had served in the Second World War, but whereabouts



I'm not too sure. So then I went to Vietnam not really knowing what it was all about, but it soon became apparent just how much war affects the situation that you normally live in.

**The regimental aid post that you were talking about at Vũng Tàu, Les, was that a type of paramedic post, or what was it?**

Yes, it was a paramedic post. Mainly a regimental aid post in the Army was where they went and got First Aid and checked out before they were sent off to the hospital. We had medicines, but the training I had was a bit more than just a basic medic. It was a new — when I went to Healesville they'd just changed around how you got trained as a medic, so I used to treat most of the blokes for various injuries. If I couldn't handle it I used to send it to the field hospital. So you used to see a lot of them, and also I used to get called down to the Peter Badcoe Club which was only a short distance from the RAP, at the R&R centre.

**How do you spell Badcoe?**

B-A-D-C-O-E, I think it is. And there it was quite a few veterans that were serving over there had lost — had gone troppo and I used to have to go down and talk to them and get them out of the room and get them sent to the hospital. I'd come across a couple of blokes I'd served with in 9 Battalion back in Australia that had gone troppo, and so I went down and talked them out, and then they went to the hospital. I never heard of what happened to them after that.

**When you say 'gone troppo', what do you mean by that?**

Oh, suffered from PTSD, had a breakdown, just couldn't handle the situation any more.

**So what's PTSD?**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It's a pretty common name that most people understand, but it used to be in the early wars 'shell shock', 'battle fatigue' and some other names I don't — so just PTSD had been around for a long time in the forces, even back to about Napoleon times or Roman times, they had soldiers that would suffer it under the stress of battle or going to a battle.

**So, Les, thinking about the troops themselves who were at the front line, you obviously spoke to them. What did they describe to you that it was like?**

Well, you really didn't talk about it. You just talked about how much booze you drank or how big a hangover you had. You kind of — you sidetracked it or just didn't want to talk about it. So it was more the fun things you got up to, what somebody else had done that was funny, and then talked about home. That was about it. The only time that the action of war came in was when you were talking to the wounded, and they used to just say what field that they got injured in, or then, when they were in 1 Field Hospital, and that was about it.



---

**So you weren't just in the RAP, you were also in 1 Field Hospital?**

Ah, I used to go down there because I knew a few blokes down there in the dental section and also working in the Field Hospital.

**I wonder, Les, could you describe maybe a day or a week in the life of your work as a paramedic at the RAP?**

Most mornings used to — I used to live in the — was quartered in the same little building that the RAP was in. I used to get up, have breakfast, do the sick parade, which was a parade for anybody who was sick, wanting medical treatment. I used to sort out if any had to go to the hospital or just needed basic treatment, and then used to help the Australian Training Team out — they used to have a small group there — for any medical supplies they may have needed. And then I'd head off down and see the blokes down at the Field Hospital. That was basically the same routine day in and day out there, except when I went up to Nui Dat, then I'd go out to Bridge 6 sometimes, and the same routine would be carried out at Bridge 6. So you're just basically there waiting for somebody to get injured, to fix them up, and then they either stayed at the area where they working or they were sent off to the Field Hospital or the Field Ambulance, which was up at Nui Dat. The Field Ambulance used to look after the less serious ones, and the serious ones used to be sent to 1 Field Hospital for treatment.

**So the injuries were right across the ambit?**

Yes, there were injuries from virus of unknown origin, which was more or less a stomach complaint, being shot in the shoulder or various other parts of the body, malaria and various other complaints. So they didn't keep them too long in 1 Field Hospital because there used to be a medevac flight back to Australia once a week, and they used to get them out of there and bring them back.

**So any type of injury at all they would be flown out?**

Well, it depends. If it was, say, just a sprained ankle, you would have just been on light duties until that came better, but if it was a shotgun wound to the body somewhere, a lot of the times you used to be medevaced back to Australia because it was too hard to clean the wound up and get it fixed up, being over in Nui Dat or Vĩng Tàu, because Vietnam was a very humid country to live in and that didn't go well with trying to heal up open cut wounds.

**Because the bacteria would spread so rapidly?**

Yes. We had a couple of Australians that got caught in an ambush and they couldn't get out for three to four days, and when they got them back the body had decomposed and the bodies were all in this webbing, the rounds — belt of ammunition for the machine gun, so it didn't take long for disease to set in just from the humidity.

**And this was pretty much a constant experience.**



Yes, yes, just dealing with the sick and injured. And also blokes that didn't go troppo but were starting to show signs of PTSD, but they really didn't want to take it any further. They just wanted to be a 'real man' and carry on, because it was frowned on if you went to seek too much medical help.

### **Frowned on by whom?**

Oh, by the peer group and the hierarchy from NCOs up. It was sort of like just a general thing through the Army, that they'd accept — they still wouldn't quite accept it even if you'd just gone in there to get a couple of Panadol's for a headache or some minor treatment, and that went on even back in Australia and also over in Vietnam. They just thought you were malingering and you were a bludger. They just really put it on you because you had to come down and get some treatment of some sort.

### **Was there any difference at all between the way the regular soldiers coped and the National Service conscripts?**

Not really. Probably, being — I was nineteen, I was just over nineteen, when I went to Vietnam. Probably another year might have made a bit of difference, but I don't think so. All it was was Nashos, most of them were a year older than the nineteen year-olds, so it affected all of us in the same way. Some of the National Servicemen aren't showing up with PTSD until later in life, and there have been some younger veterans, including myself, that got a War Service Pension as a TPI, or the special rate, at a very younger age. But it just depends on what time in life that it's going to come to the head and then you've got to get treatment, so that's just the way, the nature of the PTSD. And then after you get home, you then — with your children and your partner, they start to suffer from PTSD because of the pressure that they're under day in and day out with you having PTSD.

### **Before we get back to looking at PTSD and its role in your life, Les, when you were at the aid centre or at the military hospital, did you only deal with Australian soldiers coming in?**

Yes, only Australian soldiers. I'd seen some dead bodies outside the operating theatre, they were Vietnamese, but I can't recall whether they were actually Vietnamese civilians or North Vietnamese forces. So they were the only really dead bodies that I'd seen were there. But when I did see some of the blokes that I'd served back in Australia with, that they'd come back and they were very good in sports, I felt a great loss because of their brilliance in playing sport, that it would be very hard for them to really play again because of the injuries they'd suffered. It did have a bit of effect, or a fair bit of effect, that way. And that was why I just had trouble coming to terms with serving there.

### **Well, could we talk now, Les, about the trouble you did have serving there, and how that started to manifest itself?**

Well, my PTSD started over there. It started to come in shaking of the hands, then, when I got back, I just continued on, back in Australia. I never sought help for it, but I always had trouble fitting in back in the Army, handling civilians, handling a



relationship in the family, so it carried on. And at twenty-nine I was granted TPI, which is a fairly young age, so since I've had the TPI I've been doing voluntary work for various organisations and the ex-service organisations in Victoria, Queensland and South Australia.

**TPI means you're also restricted on what you can earn, is that correct?**

It's on how many hours a week you can work. You can't work any more than eight hours' paid work. So TPI stands for totally permanently incapacitated, so you receive that pension for the rest of your life. But it probably makes life a little bit easier with what you get, but then living with PTSD is a battle in itself. You battle every day just to get through the day.

**In Vietnam itself, before you perhaps knew what had struck you, what were your ways of coping?**

I used to just hit the booze and binge drink just about every night. And they used to have five cent nights, five cents for a nip of spirits and five cents for a stubby of beer, so the beer wasn't that dear over there compared to Australia. And that was really all, except when they used to put the movies on and we used to sit down and have a beer or spirits while we were watching the movie, and that seemed to be the way everybody over there coped. And it was encouraged by the Army to have it and rest, and it's a way of controlling the troops, keeping them — calm them down with the alcohol. So it was — yes, it still goes on to a degree in the Australian Army, in the forces, now, which is rather a pity. But now they've got debriefing and a lot more specialised people that can do problems with soldiers, the service personnel, these days that are having it, and there's a lot more professional psychiatrists and doctors and more aware of what PTSD is all about. But even back to — or only up to about fifteen years ago, they really were able to put their hands on and there was more people you were able to go and see to get treatment for PTSD. There was none then when I got back from Vietnam into Australia, or after I'd got out of the Army.

**So what time of a morning were you beginning your work in Vietnam? At the aid post?**

Oh, it could be any time of the day. I was on call twenty-four hours a day.

**So most afternoons, though, when would you hit the bar?**

Oh, that would be about after half past four and you'd have a couple before tea and you'd have tea and then you'd go back drinking again.

**And you were twenty by this stage?**

Yes. No, I hadn't — I had returned back before I turned twenty.

**So you were still nineteen.**

Yes.





---

**And most of the fellows around you were that age?**

No, there was sort of like — they were probably more Nashos that were the — they were in their twenties or close to twenty-one, and there were still some other regulars which were in there from nineteen onwards. So they all did the same, so it just wasn't related to one particular age or regular or National Serviceman.

**What I'm getting towards, Les, how do you actually cope with your work as a paramedic (laughs) if you're pretty shook up with hangovers all day.**

Well, you put on a brave face and pushed through with the hangover or if you weren't feeling a hundred per cent. You just pushed through it and not show them that you were suffering from it. Because being a medic in the Army, particularly in a close-knit unit, they trusted you to do what was told you, that you wouldn't blame it on to somebody else, and trusted you to treat them. So you couldn't show them that you weren't capable of looking after yourself and then trying to treat them.

**Did you ever have any times of rest and recreation during your course there?**

Well, normally after — once you'd done six months you were due then for about a five day or seven day R&R, and that was either outside of Vietnam, in Thailand, back into Australia and probably Malaya, whereas some still stayed in Vietnam to have their R&R. It just depended on the person.

**Did you take it?**

No. It was cancelled because we were pulling out. And I was, at the time, ready to go on R&R, but they said no because they were pulling the troops out of Vietnam.

**So this is early '72 by this time?**

No, this'd be still early — this was about October '71. And then we sailed back on the *Sydney* with another couple of units and did it — we were the last ticker-tape parade through Sydney of the Tri-Services March.

**What was the journey on the *Sydney* like, coming home?**

Well, it was fourteen days, and you had to do things to keep yourself occupied. I was still working down in the sick bay and playing cards with the doctor. I suppose it was a good time just to unwind and try to relax and make yourself happy to come home. And they only gave you two cans a night; there was no open slather on the alcohol.

**So was that a different scenario for you?**

Well, yes. It was sort of like by that time the alcohol wasn't enough to keep a lid on things, so you just again plodded on the best way you can.



**So where were you going to all the time, Les, with your thoughts and your concerns? Were you always recapping what you'd been through with your mates who'd been wounded, or the sights of the bodies? Was that coming back to you all the time?**

Oh, both of them. And then just the thought of the South Vietnamese just waiting for the inevitable with the North Vietnamese taking over the South.

**Did you meet many Vietnamese people?**

Yes, I met quite a few. In our unit, at 17 at Vungers there was probably about twelve civilian workers that worked in the unit, and then of course you'd meet them in town, and when you went to other units they were around there. So yes, we had met quite a few.

**And what was your relationship like with them?**

I just got on with them and didn't really consider or look at what my feelings were about them. They were there, there was nothing you could do. We were sent over there to help protect the South Vietnamese and that's what we did. But you couldn't really tell whether they were friendly with the North, and that was always the time, so you were a little bit suspicious of them, purely because you didn't know what they were up to. We used to have a lot of kids that were raiding the trucks and that.

**This is Vietnamese?**

Yes, Vietnamese kids. So yes, you were wary of them all the time.

**Did you have any preconceptions about the Vietnamese people prior to going there?**

No. The little bit they said down at the Battle Efficiency course at Canungra in Queensland just gave a very brief rundown of what the people — — —. (tape ends)

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

**[Did you have any preconceptions about the Vietnamese people prior to going there?**

No. The little bit they said down at the Battle Efficiency course at Canungra in Queensland just gave a very brief rundown of what the people] were about and what the war was about. So yes, there was not that much information given out.

**And how did you as an Australian actually find them (laughs) when you were there? You said it was hard to trust them, that's number one. But I mean you must have had that feeling, from what you've been saying to me, that the case was hopeless, almost.**



Well, to me, I just felt it just suddenly one day, I thought, shit, well, their future's not that great. Yes, probably the ones in the unit, at 17 Construction in Vũng Tàu, I was probably fairly close to them because I used to talk to them every day and things like that. But that was all, it wasn't going into great lengths of conversation with them.

**So you never actually got to see their culture in action much?**

No, no. Only when you drove up to Nui Dat, went up to Bridge 6 and just saw them going about their daily routine, and then when you were in at Vũng Tàu, in the town, you used to see them going around about their own little business.

**So beyond the encampments it was mainly peasant economy?**

Not in Saigon or Vũng Tàu. Vũng Tàu was more of a capitalist thing, very much so, and probably twice as much in Saigon.

**So were they catering more for the mass of American troops, is that — — —?**

No. Well, we weren't close to the American — there was an airfield with American 'planes on down in Vũng Tàu — I don't know whether it was the Vietnamese that flew them or the Yanks were flying them. It was probably out further up, around Nui Dat and that area, where a lot of the Yanks were, Saigon, so — — —.

**Had you ever had any contact with Asian races prior to going to Vietnam?**

No, no, I didn't come across any in Australia, so it was a first time experience with that.

**And no negative thoughts as such?**

What, when I went across?

**Yes.**

No. I mean, as I said, when I went through the Battle Efficiency course it still didn't dawn on me what I may have faced. Yes, I was just probably in neutral up till about three months after I'd got over there, and then it started to sink in that it's not an overseas travel, you're smack dab in the middle of a war, and I think that's when it started to hit home.

**What about the Americans? Did you mix with them at all?**

Yes. One time we had a couple I met when they were in Vũng Tàu and we brought them back to the mess and they bought some Australian beer. So we must have got on fairly well back at base, but the Australians didn't really want to do too much with the Americans when they were out on exercises or out on patrol.

**Did they give a reason for that?**



Yes. Just because the Americans were more of a nuisance than a help. They'd play the radios, chew gum and all sorts of things, and just weren't as stealthful, quiet or silent as the Australian soldiers.

**Was that to do with their training or just attitude?**

I just think they thought they were invincible because they had so much manpower and so much air superiority that they didn't think that they could come to any harm. And that was the way the Americans were.

**So, Les, if I'm hearing you right, increasingly during your time in Vietnam you realised that this wasn't a joy trip, that you were actually in the thick of something that you hadn't anticipated, even though you were in the Army. It had never been explained to you in this fashion?**

Well, I mean, they did say — you knew you were going across — being in the Army, you knew you were going across to — you know, you had a chance of going to Vietnam, and that was a war zone, a declared war zone, so you knew you were going to it. But I don't think it really sinks in until you got over there, and that was — some probably came to the realisation sooner, they might have been out on patrol and that and come under enemy contact, or just out in the fields somewhere.

**So once you had that realisation, did it show itself? You said one in binge drinking, but were you angry about it?**

Oh yes, I started to get angry that I wasn't serving out in the field, that I was helping at Vĩng Tàu most of the time. And it didn't seem like it was fighting a war at times because you were just in this enclosed compound. And really it was a different world, and being caged up you then start to act like a caged animal, because you just couldn't go very far and you had to get approval to go here and go in the city or go up to Vĩng Tàu, so you were pretty restricted on your movement. But within the camp you had no problem.

**So the more you felt those emotions of being restricted, the more het up you became? Is that the way of it?**

No. There was a couple of things happened when I was over there. Father didn't write to me. When I got back I asked him why and he said, 'Because you didn't send any presents over.' And then I got a 'Dear John' letter. So with the combination of those two, as I went on I didn't want to go back to Australia.

**Now, when you say a 'Dear John' letter — oh, from a girlfriend?**

Girlfriend. A 'Dear John' letter was just when she writes and tells you to piss off because she doesn't want to see you any more, and that did happen quite often. It happened in most of the wars that Australian soldiers have been involved in. And it hits you more in a war zone than it does back here in Australia because you're hanging on to the country you came from, Australia, and then you're suddenly in



Vietnam. So it's a very culture shock, and very eye-opening at times because you'd never experience it back in Australia.

**So had your girlfriend been linked up with the Church in Australia?**

No. No. I knew her from primary school. So we were going out for a while before I went to Vietnam and then she just found somebody else. But that wasn't uncommon for veterans in Vietnam to get 'Dear John' letters. And then normally you used to go and drown your sorrows in a binge drinking session.

**I mean, in one sense, I guess, it would have been par for the course in Australia if you or others had been here, but to actually get the letters in that environment is just compounding how you feel.**

Yes, it is. Because prior to going across, when there was a lot of protesting and that when I was up ..... in Queensland, we had to go and guard a couple of Army Reserve units because they'd been trashed by university students. So you started to get a bit angry at parts of the Australian citizens of doing just senseless damage, and you really didn't — it still didn't seem to gel what they were fighting about, but because you weren't interested in what they were doing, or you could see that they were damaging property and not gaining anything from it.

**So you just felt, 'Well, I don't want to go back to this country'?**

Well, yes. Because of not really having your father writing to you and a girlfriend saying, well, piss off, it's — yes, you really don't have anybody to come back to in Australia, so when you're in that way it's probably, even though it's not very comfortable, but it's like a comfort zone. You're in there, you know what it's — you've finally worked out how to work within the system and what was going on and all that, that yes, you're far better off feeling comfortable back in the comfort zone where you were and knowing what you were doing and things like that, compared to coming back and trying to restart again in Brisbane — or back in Australia, I should say.

**So without that interference from your father and your ex-girlfriend, do you think you could have coped pretty well if you'd stayed on doing what you were doing?**

No. No. By that stage I'd been heavily into the booze. Yes, I can't really say whether it would have or not.

**So would you have called yourself an alcoholic by that time, Les?**

Yes. Yes. Because I used to be doing it every day. And nobody — if you were found lying outside your door, nobody would say, 'What a dickhead because', you know, 'he got drunk again and didn't know what he was doing.' It was just, 'Oh, you have a hard night?' And that was all that was said. But that was the way everybody went, and it was condoned and nobody got into trouble for it.



---

**In hindsight, how do you feel about it?**

What, the drinking?

**Yes.**

Yes, from what I know now, that I think it was naïvete, that I didn't think anything was happening or damaging your body or organs with consuming that amount of alcohol, but now, knowing what I do know, it was stupid.

**Les, could we talk now about your life back in Australia after your service in Vietnam, and what unfolds for you almost on a daily basis?**

Well, I came back to Australia and then went back up to — I was still with 17 Construction, but they were part of an engineer regiment at Enoggera, and I was put back into 17 Construction, and that was the unit within the regiment that was full of all the mishaps, misfits and that, all the troublemakers from non-Vietnam veterans. And you just had trouble coping with dickheads in the Army and out in civilian street, and trying to find — you just couldn't kind of settle down, you just kept — how would I put it? — trying to adjust, but every time you tried to adjust it just caused the problem to get worse. So you're still drinking and then getting into trouble.

**How did you feel about the ticker-tape parade when you first returned on the *HMAS Sydney*? This was in Sydney or Brisbane?**

Yes, Sydney. Well, just before we landed it looked like we weren't going to be able to land anywhere, because the waterside workers were banning any landing part for the *Sydney*. So that was the way, and the girlfriend, the ex-girlfriend, we had trouble receiving letters from them — no, sorry, it was from me that the letters were held up for a couple of months, and there was nothing wrong, it was just that the person doing it just didn't want to deliver the letters.

**What, because you were serving in Vietnam?**

Yes.

**So a postal worker, in other words?**

Yes, yes. No, he was a contractor. Yes, you just felt deceived again that they were doing these type of things, when you got back. I remember getting back down in Preston, and I joined, became a member of the Preston RSL, that's in Melbourne, and the first Anzac Day that I marched I went back there, but nobody in the RSL wanted to have a bar, to talk to you or do anything, just left you on your own. And I thought, 'Well, if that's the reception I'm getting from the RSL, it's not worth the hassle.'

**This is World War Two veterans you're talking about?**



Yes, yes, and other veterans, but most of them were World War Two.

**What, Korean and Malayan as well?**

No, I didn't see any at that stage. So they may have, but it just — you know, nobody came along. Rather disappointing.

**Well, let's return to this compounding of how you feel. You couldn't take people who you thought were fools, and did that evidence itself in anger?**

Yes, in being very short with dickheads who just really didn't know what was going on or were doing stupid things. And I think, going back, you had less tolerance because you had to tolerate so much in Vietnam, and what you were taught and how you were trained, when you went to Vietnam, mistakes weren't accepted, you couldn't make mistakes. So therefore if anybody made a mistake in the Army, when you came back, if it was a stupid one you just didn't have any time for them and let them know that they were stupid and they've got to pull their socks up and not make mistakes. So that was the way it was, and even after I got out of the Army it still — — —. I joined the police force, and that helped a bit because it was regimented in similar lines as the Army, but not to that degree. But you still had trouble handling idiots.

**So you stayed in the Army for six years after you returned?**

Yes, six years. No, for about — I got out of the Army — oh, probably another — I got out at twenty-three, so probably another three years after.

**Had you been married by that time?**

No, no, I hadn't been married. So — — —.

**So there were no familial problems at that point?**

No. Yes, there was a lot of Vietnam veterans that met their wives after they'd come back, so there was no way to say, 'Well, this is how bad you were before you went' or 'This is how you were before you went and this is how you are after you come' — — —. Plus at that time you didn't have any psychiatrist or doctors, or even the Repat[riation] Hospital were very backward in trying to help people with battle fatigue or PTSD.

**And, Les, when you returned, did you try and make contact with the Church again?**

No. No. Since going to Vietnam the only time I go to church is for a funeral or wedding. I just don't have any faith in the different religious orders, Catholics or — — —.

**So would that be one of the biggest changes, from Vietnam?**



Oh, that and still drinking heavy and smoking a lot more, and then just having trouble getting on with life is the big thing. It's a day-to-day struggle for me to get through the day.

**How did you ever have social relationships, then, to meet a woman and to be married, in the end?**

I suppose that I used to be a pretty wild lad when I came back, and partied hard and did a lot of things there and actually lived life right on the edge. And then, of course, coupled with that — well, you didn't worry about not sleeping because you didn't want to sleep anyway because of the flashbacks, so you thought, 'Well, great. I'll just go to parties and party hard.' When I did get married, that soon busted up and the result of the marriage, there was two children, a boy and a girl, which I hadn't seen for fifteen years.

**You haven't?**

I hadn't seen [them] for fifteen years, and it's only been recently that I met both my son and daughter, but the son doesn't want to have anything to do with me, and I still get on reasonably well with my daughter.

**And do they live in South Australia?**

No, they live in Melbourne.

**Right. So when you were saying you were having flashbacks, Les, what was that to? To the Vietnam experience?**

Yes, the Vietnam experience.

**So the wounded friends and the bodies, was that more or less what you were having?**

Yes. And trying to run through jungle, just running because there was something after you. That was mostly the ones I remember.

**Now, how long did they carry on for?**

Well, they still happen if I get too much stress. If I keep reasonably a less stressful life they still come from time to time, but not as much as when I'm under stress. Yes, so it's just the same thing, so I don't think you ever get rid of.

**Les, just working it through, so you went from the Army into the police force, is that the right move?**

Yes.

**Now, when did you join the Postmaster General's Department?**





Oh, that was only for a short time between the Army and the police force. That was straight after I got out of the Army, and when I saw an advertisement for recruits in the police force I just thought, 'Well, I'll put in for it.'

**This is in Melbourne.**

Yes, in Melbourne. Then that came through, so I decided to go to the police force.

**And how long did you last in that for?**

I lasted probably about five or six years. And what happened there is, yes, I just came under increasingly a lot more amount of stress so the PTSD was getting worse, more heavy binge drinking, and that was mainly spirits and high alcohol-content drinks. Yes, and not really — having trouble with married life.

**This is with your first wife.**

Yes, first wife. So service in Vietnam has — my actions and that — has affected quite a few people, as far as partners go and my own children. I'm finding it a little bit easier now for my grandkids, but I think the reason why that is I don't have them every day and don't have to worry too much about them for any great length of time.

**So you eventually married again, did you?**

Yes. Yes. Divorce and married again. There were some that I had, long-term relationships, but they didn't last and I think partners had trouble trying to understand what was going on. And it is, it's very hard to live with somebody that suddenly goes from very low to very high. Like just switching the light on: suddenly — you're down low, and then next minute you're lighting up the room because you're so high.

**How many children did you have by your second wife?**

Two.

**Two?**

Yes. Oh no, the first wife I had two and no other children. I'd always, in the back of the mind, the sub-conscious, that all I wanted was a house with a fence and a couple of kids. But when the first wife was pregnant, my greatest fear — I lived in fear for nine months until the daughter was born, because I'd handled chemicals over in Vietnam, that the chance of her becoming deformed was quite great, and that was an enormous amount of stress. I was worrying all the time, because I knew that I would have been better off not having kids instead of having kids and having them with deformities or disabilities.

**Could we talk about the chemical handling?**

Yes, I was using malathion — I think it was, I learnt later that it was malathion.



## **Malathion.**

Malathion, yes. I think so. It's for mosquito control — well, that's what they said it was. But it didn't really have the name of it on the can, it was just a jungle, olive green can with white writing on it, and you used to put it in a fog machine which used to convert the liquid into a fog, and you used to go around water and in the blokes' living quarters and all round the place. You never wore any protective clothing, and nobody told you to dilute it so you were using it concentrated, so if anything went wrong, pipes blocked up, you'd actually blow through the pipes or suck on the pipes and you'd be breathing the fog in and you'd have it saturating your clothes and on your skin, things like that. And after using it you always felt sick for a couple of days afterwards. So you didn't seem to worry too much about it, it was just part and parcel.

## **How regular was that usage?**

(dog barks) Fairly regularly. At least once a month they were doing it. And then there was a water supply, just down from the RAP there was a dam near, they used to use the water for the water supply ran in the — for Vĩng Tàu, and I used to have to use the fog machine down around the banks of that. So the blokes were drinking residue of the malathion, because it would drift back into the water supply. But nobody seemed to worry about, you know, the safety margin of things.

## **So how did you know there might be a risk of abnormality amongst the child that you — — —?**

Only after I came back and started with Vietnam Veterans' Association in Victoria, which was the only association looking after Vietnam veterans at that stage, and I was on the committee there. Then that was when the Agent Orange Royal Commission started, and then we found out more about malathion and some other chemicals that we used over there.

## **It would be good if we could backtrack to how you actually became involved with the Vets, Les.**

Yes, I got involved with — I was with Legacy for a while, just after I got out of the — when I was early stages of police force, in Melbourne. And then once I got too busy I couldn't help Legacy any more, I resigned from that. And then, later down the track, just before I got divorced, they came around to see me because I was putting in a claim for DVA, for a disability pension, and through that, and then I thought with the help they gave me I'd come back when I was reasonably healthy to help them in the office, because they were short. So I was there for probably about two years.

## **With the Vietnam Veterans?**

Veterans' Association in Melbourne. Then I moved up to Queensland and I was involved with Legacy again and TPI Association. Then I left Queensland and came to South Australia, to Adelaide, because my sister lives down here and I wanted to



find where my roots were, and tried to find it. Still don't feel that I've found my roots, but I probably never will.

**Do you get on well with your sister?**

Yes, yes. She's fairly busy, so we see each other several times a year, that one.

**Just going back to Melbourne again and Vietnam Veterans, tell me a bit about the people you were working with on that and their problems, and the way that they were looking at life themselves.**

Well, we were crocks looking after crocks, because everybody on the committee were Vietnam veterans or partners of Vietnam veterans, and we were trying to look after their welfare and also put in their — help them with their claims to DVA, and trying to find experts of specialists that were able to help us with the PTSD. So nobody was still about at that stage, so a lot of the doctors were wiped out by supporting the Vietnam veterans, because it didn't seem to register that they were an expert in their field and there was a lot of hostilities to anybody in the medical professions that were helping the Vietnam veterans.

**This is hostility from society or from the Army?**

From society and also from the medical profession themselves, and also DVA, Department of Veterans' Affairs.

**Is that because of the unpopularity of the war itself?**

Well, part of that, and also what we were claiming was a lot were claiming because they'd been exposed to Agent Orange and other chemicals, that they were seeking — they were sort of blaming everything on the chemicals they were using at that stage, and most of it was PTSD, really, as far as I can see. They didn't want to admit that they had PTSD at that stage. They much preferred to say, well, they were exposed to chemicals and these chemicals caused all these things, which a lot of the signs from the chemicals were similar to PTSD. It wasn't till about fifteen years ago that the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service was set up, and it was even probably just under fifteen years ago that they started to really get into it and have the medical profession into it as well and send the veterans to either a good doctor or a good psychiatrist or some other medical expert who had the interest of the veteran at their heart.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B: TAPE 2 SIDE A

**[Tape ID comments] So, Les, you said it's only fifteen years ago that the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service was even established.**

Yes. Originally it was going to be — they talked about starting it and staffing it with ex-Vietnam veterans that would help the veterans themselves, but the government changed its mind and put a lot of people that weren't veterans into running the thing, and that made it a lot harder because a lot of them wouldn't trust anything



other than a veteran. But they persevered and they got a lot more medical information coming from the United States that said, 'This is PTSD and this is what it does.' But they'd only kind of — in the last fifteen years, really, put a proper name to it like PTSD. And the treatments weren't as severe, because the DVA used to use — with people with PTSD and depression, they used to use shock therapy on a lot of them, which a lot of the veterans it doesn't seem to — from the veterans I've seen who have had it, it doesn't seem — it seems to make them worse. So even the Repat Hospitals up until — well, ten years ago they embraced all the notions and all the things about PTSD, and the treatment you get there is a lot more different now.

**In your own case, Les, how were you treated for your problems?**

Well, I didn't really start getting — I was just given tablets and nobody really knew what the best way to deal with it.

**This is anti-depressants?**

Well, I'm not too sure — yes, it was then I was very suicidal and suffered depression, but a lot of it I didn't realise it was depression, I just thought it was anxiety state that was causing it. So that went on, and it wasn't till the counselling service came on board and you started seeing them, and then able to see other medical people to help you with it. And it was always, as I said, up until ten years ago they tended just to give you tablets to handle it, but now they've got it in that you can use the tablets but if you can get by with just talking to a psychiatrist or a psychologist, or with the counselling service, a lot of that time sort of like stops them hitting the wall or getting worse.

**When you were involved with the Vietnam Veterans' Associations in Victoria then in Queensland, did you find that a lot of the work you were doing was political, or it was more the social side?**

Well, it was political because they wanted this inquiry into Agent Orange, but that was normally handled by the national body, they were the more political part of it. So I really kind of didn't go too much into that; I was just more into the welfare of the thing. But I think it was both ways, to try to get some public acknowledgement that there is a lot of problems with Vietnam veterans because of the way the war was and the time and the different way of fighting the war compared to Malaya and Korea, and particularly the First and Second World War. I think any wars will cause the problems, however it's fought — even some of our peace-keepers come back with PTSD. So it's just war itself that causes these problems.

**What was different about the Vietnam conflict to you, that made it different from the earlier conflicts, in warfare terms?**

I think mainly because there was a distinct front line. You could look out the front and say, 'Over that line, that's where the enemy is.' Whereas with Vietnam you had no front line, there was no known front line, and the North Vietnamese soldiers or the guerrillas or the ..... would stay behind — — —.



---

**What was the last word, the — — —?**

Oh, that was the South Vietnamese ..... There was the regulars, then there was the Viet Cong, and I think that was it that they had. But they would cross what would have been a front line and came in and intermingled with the community behind your back, so you didn't really have a — you had to watch your back as well as your front. So the airport at Vũng Tàu, just before we left, had got rocketed a couple of times, so it was just to show that it didn't matter where you were, you were always within a chance of coming under attack from the Vietnamese.

**So, in a sense, did you not know who the enemy was?**

Yes, that was right. You just didn't know because they all dressed the same, and they didn't have any — oh, I mean, if they wore black pyjamas, well, you knew they were VC, the Viet Cong. They all wore the same hats and they wore virtually similar clothes, unless of course you were fighting for the North Vietnam. And they'd wear — the regular soldiers in North Vietnam, they had a uniform to wear and so did the VC, but if they put the same clothes as the population did, there's no way you could tell because they all looked the same. That was the hard bit, not knowing where anything really was in the perimeters and boundaries that you had to protect and look after.

**And you felt that just as strongly as a paramedic?**

Yes. I mean, we were behind the wire so we knew what was in the compound, whereas the Vietnamese weren't in compounds. They were on the move and everything else, so — — —.

**Then coming back, Les, to your aftermath in Australia with the Veterans and their welfare work, did you talk about these things with the fellows that you were trying to help?**

Yes. In the earlier parts a lot of them didn't want to say too much, they just weren't comfortable with it, and it seems that a Vietnam vet has to hit the wall before he'll admit that he's got a problem, or pretty close to it. And even then they won't delve too much. But a lot of them we get now — I'm State President with the Vietnam Veterans' Federation now and also Welfare and Pension Officer — that a lot of them, we get them to bring their wives in, and that way the wives will either back up or say, 'No, you're far worse than what you're saying you are.' And it tends to be with most of the Vietnam veterans, they — or veterans in particular — they always won't say what happens on their worst day. They'll just say, 'Well, I'm okay now and I had these problems,' but they don't remember that it's everyday occurrences and causing a lot of problems with the kids and the wives. They're all now — any wife of a veteran — or most veterans, I should say — and the children all suffer PTSD or some form of PTSD, because they just live with it, live with it, day in and day out, day in and day out.

**What are the type of things you're getting told by wives and husbands coming in about the stories of their lives?**



Well, no, not really. It's just how they're feeling, and more or less saying, well, they lost all these jobs because they can't handle dickheads. They got into fights, they got alcohol dependent or cigarette — they're heavy smokers of cigarettes, get moody and all sorts of things. They don't socialise as much as what they do unless it's with other Vietnam veterans.

**So they pretty much stick to who they know.**

Yes. I'm more comfortable with Vietnam vets — well, with veterans, but a bit more so Vietnam veterans — than socialising with the family and other friends.

**Because you know they understand where you've been.**

Well, yes. The friends I've got now are only a small number. Most of them are Vietnam vets, and some of the others are best man and his wife and my wife's family. But I have trouble getting on with her son, her children, but they were fairly old when — they were in their teenage years when I met her, so that's only natural, being a stepfather. But yes, it really mucks up the way you look after kids and bring them up and things like that. Because there wasn't much back then even just to say to you, 'Well, this is the way of looking at treating — to bring up and treat your children,' because even if it was true and they had it back even fifteen years ago, you wouldn't take it in because that type of thing's grey area, it's not black or white. It's not the way you were brought up, and all sorts of things.

**Les, dealing with Australia when you came back, how did you feel about things like the Moratorium Movement and the anti-Vietnam war people who'd caused such a ruckus in Australia while you might have been overseas, or during the times you were back and still in the Army?**

Well, a lot of us thought the population in general were three types. They were the ones that didn't like you, then there was ones — the other part was that they liked, they accepted Vietnam veterans, and the third lot, they'd sit on the fence and they'd go whichever way was the most vocal or whatever. So you really didn't have a great deal of support from the public. They just seemed to be divided on it.

**How did you feel politicians were looking after your interests?**

Well, I didn't think anybody was looking after my interest, because there wasn't. I was the only one who had to look after my own interest and try to get through life the best way you could. A lot of frustration, because you always kept getting sick. That's the bad part about PTSD. You can go a couple of years you go fine, and then you hit the wall again and then you go back. And it doesn't matter how many courses you do and what type of medication, you're still always going to hit the wall.

**This is emotionally, you mean?**

Emotionally and physically. So you're back in hospital again, and things like that.

**So there are physical disabilities that come with it.**



Oh yes, yes. Yes. Loss of interest, become very lethargic, you just vegetate all day, you have suicide thoughts of harming yourself, killing yourself. Yes, that just goes on whenever you come under stress. But a lot of it's a slow build-up with the stress. You can't realise it, and then suddenly one day it'll just all explode.

**How do you think the work of Vietnam veterans has actually helped Australia? This is turning things on its head, Les.**

Well, what the Vietnam veteran ex-service organisations have done is they've made it more into the face of the population and saying, 'Well, hey, listen, they're not two-headed monsters or anything. They're veterans like the First and Second World War veterans.' They had all the support of the community but we didn't have the support, so it may have been a lot different if we had the support, and they would have been pushed to start trying to look for a cure or help for the Vietnam veterans. And the DVA has moved away from just shoving you into hospital and things like that, so they more actively have encouraged going to counselling service or going to psychiatrist and staying at home as much as possible, because it just becomes such a huge cost every time you go back in. And you're in there for a couple of months at least. Or even longer, it just depends how bad you are. But some have just given up the ghost of living and they just merely survive, and they won't do anything and they just sit around and vegetate.

**Do you come into contact with them?**

Yes, I come in contact with my job as the State President of the Vietnam Veterans' Federation, that with doing pension or just welfare, that there is a lot of veterans who are travelling hard with PTSD. And there's still a lot that won't accept that they're — there's still a lot that have — as much advertising and everything else, and the great grapevine within the Vietnam veterans' community, still doesn't touch a lot of these veterans who have gone to ground and disappeared. After I got out of the Army I never wore my ribbons again until I was in the police force and was told I had to wear the ribbons, and even then I only wore it when I was wearing the police uniform. And it took me a long time to march back into Anzac Day marches. And a lot of veterans — that's similar with most other veterans. A lot of them just prefer not to wear ribbons, not to be notified that they're a veteran, for the fear of probably still copping the shit that they copped when they came back — — —.

**This is from the general community, you mean?**

Yes, from the general community because of the impact it had on you. A lot of them just came back late at night, midnight, came in the back door, so to speak, and then dropped you off in Sydney or Melbourne or Brisbane and say, 'Right, piss off home.'

**This is the Army?**

Yes, that was the Army. And like with me, when I was still in the regular army, all the blokes I served with, when they came back from Vietnam, were spread to the four corners of Australia. So they brought you back and then, instead of letting you stay with your mates and probably overcoming it and staying in the Army, they just



dispersed them all and then of course you're on your own. And then you were put with all the other troublemakers because they really didn't know what to do with Vietnam veterans.

**Did you have any idea that you shared the turmoil in your life with the likes of fellows who'd been in the Second War in POW camps up in Burma, and that sort of thing?**

Kind of didn't really think too much on those lines. Probably seeing them sick is probably — you have a bit of empathy for them then, but because of the treatment we got from them in the RSL we still viewed them as part of the enemy, and it still goes on now. There's a lot of — there's a huge gap that I don't know if it will ever be bridged that was caused by the RSL not supporting us, and they only supported us when the big publicity stuff went on with the Agent Orange. And then, with our class action, they didn't want to have a bar of it until we were given money and they stepped in and waved the flat and said, 'Well, we should look after the money for you,' and the government went with them.

**The class action, how did that come about?**

Oh, it's just that we got a lawyer that was willing to join in and make a huge class action about the chemical companies. And we had enough veterans who — I don't think there's too many Vietnam veterans that don't suffer, or if they haven't — if they aren't suffering at the moment, probably maybe down the track. But then there's some that may not suffer — probably cover it up too much or put it back of their mind too much. Or, as I say, it may be when they're in their seventies, eighties, that they're starting to realise that they need the help then. (dog barks)

**Have you any idea, Les, of the number of people now connected with Vietnam veterans in Australia?**

Well, there's a couple of thousand in South Australia, and then you've got a lot more in New South Wales and there's a lot more increase — strong Vietnam veteran community in Queensland. Victoria I'm not too sure of, or Western Australia. So yes, we're doing more, we've got a radio program — oh, Vietnam Veterans' Association has got a radio program. We do social groups and barbecues and healthy activities — bike riding, model making, leadlighting, things like that, which gives them a social outlet because most of them still don't go to RSLs, won't attend functions if they're still held at the RSLs.

**And what hopes have you now got for the future, Les.**

Well, our hope is that we can see more of the veterans that are in hiding and suffering, so that we can get some help for them, or show that there's people out there that are looking after them. Plus you get a lot of public support to a degree now, but it's still very guarded, the public help you get from it. But there is several areas in the broader community that do support you.

**When did that first become evident?**





I'd say once it came — there was more news on treatment, then the morbidity study into Vietnam veterans, the children coming out with disabilities, how they're committing more suicide at a higher rate than the general public, Vietnam veterans have got a higher rate of suicide than the general public. So there's a lot of things there that stand out compared to the general public, so that's the way it goes there. I'd like to see it that we can expand more and have that going on for a lot longer, so that the veterans have got something that they can feel part of and go there for social activities, or go and see them for anything regarding their welfare or problems they're having at home with getting in and out of toilets or showers or baths, and helping them get it through DVA.

**What sort of response are you getting from DVA these days?**

Well, in South Australia it's a very good rapport that we do get from DVA and the ex-service organisations. We've got several meetings that are held at DVA and you go to there. And they have initiatives like at the moment they're pushing for a healthier life, so they're more into preventative stuff or getting away with as many drugs as possible. It's not to say that — they don't suddenly cut all the drugs out or want the vets to go off it, but they're encouraging more healthy ways to handle the thing, which wasn't there and hasn't been until the last ten years, really — the push hasn't been on to do it.

**Are you noticing a difference in the veterans themselves, in that they're responding more positively?**

Yes, they tend to be. Still a lot more coming out of the woodwork that live over in the Peninsula areas and that, but some live around the corner from another vet. But I know a bloke over the back fence, I didn't know he was a Vietnam vet until I ran into him, but he knew *I* was because he saw the stickers on my car. So yes, because I think the way society is, that you don't really associate too much with the neighbours, I think that's where the drift has caused that problem to a degree. But we still get some that they may turn up to some party or function and they meet somebody else they know who's a Vietnam vet and they start talking, and that's how we get them to come in. And some will stay on for the social activities and the health, you know, the bike riding, *et cetera*; others will just remain a member and you don't see them from year to year except when they pay their membership. But they're each of them an individual and each act a different way.

**Well, thank you very much, Les —**

That's all right.

**— for talking to me today. It's been a great privilege to hear your story. Thank you.**

Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.