



---

## South Australians at war – transcript – OH 644/4

**Interview with Colonel Peter Scott recorded by Rob Linn at Glenside, South Australia, on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2002 for The State Library of South Australia South Australians at War Oral History Project 2002.**

---

TAPE 1 SIDE A

**[Tape ID comments]**

**Peter, could you give me some personal background, please? Where and when were you born?**

Well, firstly, Rob, I'm a Victorian. I was born in Melbourne on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 1929.

**And who were your parents, Peter?**

Well, my father was Francis Keith Scott, and my mother Jean Agnes Melville. She was a Sydneysider, and my father was a Melbournite, and his forbears arrived in the Port of Melbourne – Port Jackson in 1840, and settled in the Western District near Colac.

**And what had your father's occupation been in his lifetime?**

Well, he was a clerk with the Adelaide Steamship Company, but his service there was broken during World War Two, when he went over and served in Egypt.

**Had he served in the First War as well?**

No, not as old as that. He was born in 1901, so he was just at school, at Caulfield Grammar, whilst World War One was on.

**So he served in the Middle East.**

Yes.

**And was that for the duration of the War? Did he go to the Pacific at all?**

He was over in the Middle East for about two years – he was on 1 Corps Headquarters – and he came back and then was up in Thursday Island for about a year, and then he served the rest of his time back here in Victoria.

**Now, what about your own education, Peter? That was in Melbourne?**



It was in Melbourne, and I started my secondary schooling at the Brighton Technical School. And at that time it was during the War, and I was very mad keen on the School Cadets, and when I decided that I wanted to go to the Royal Military College my father came home from the War and said, 'Well, the best opportunity for you to do that would be to go to my old school,' which was Caulfield Grammar. So I ended up at Caulfield Grammar and applied for Duntroon from there, and was accepted into the January-February intake in 1946.

**I'll come back to that in just a minute, Peter. Did you have siblings at all, brothers or sisters?**

Yes, I had one sister, who was about eighteen months older than me, and she served in the latter part of World War Two in the Army Women's Service — AWAS, I think it was.

**So was she in transport or something like that?**

No, she was — I think she was a clerk somewhere. I'm not sure exactly what she did.

**So she, too, had experience.**

Exactly.

**Peter, could you give me an overview of your career then, please, your military career from the time you entered Duntroon through to your retirement?**

Well, Rob, it spanned thirty-seven years to the day. I spent three years in the Royal Military College, Duntroon — that was the last of the three-year courses at that college. I graduated into the Royal Australian Infantry Corps, and my first appointment was up in Japan with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, in 1949. I spent eighteen months there, and the battalion was preparing to come home from Japan when the Korean War broke out, and we then changed our training to prepare for Korea. I was accidentally wounded during training for Korea, so the battalion went to Korea and I went back home for medical treatment and convalescence, and it was about twelve months before I went back to the battalion in Korea. So I then did a year in Korea in 1951 to mid-1952, came home to Seymour and was at the School of Infantry, where I met my wife and married her. And then I had various — — —.

**Peter, just a quick question. Does that mean your wife's family, then, were also in the service?**

No, no. Her family wasn't in the service. They were living in Seymour, and I met her during social activities at the School of Infantry where she was a guest on a couple of occasions.

**Thank you.**



All right?

**Please go on.**

After we got married I went over to Bendigo to work as the adjutant of the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, and from there I came back to Puckapunyal, where there was National Service training. That was the first National Service training scheme, which ended in 1957. I was then selected to go to the staff college in Quetta, which was run by the Pakistan army.

**How do you spell Quetta, please?**

Q-U-E-T-T-A, which is in Baluchistan, which is the western — sou'western province of Pakistan.

**And what rank were you holding by this time, Peter?**

At that time I was a captain. And we had twelve months up there. And came back to Queenscliff in Victoria, where I was a staff officer for the Australian Staff College. From there we went to Sydney, where I worked as the Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General of the 1<sup>st</sup> Task Force in Paddington. I was there for about eighteen months, and then I became a lecturer with the Army Team of Lecturers. My job was then to visit all the schools in New South Wales and try and persuade students in Years Eleven and Twelve to apply for, and enter to, Duntroon. A secondary task at that time was also to encourage students to go to the Army Apprentices School in Balcombe, as it was at that time. Then I went to Woodside in South Australia as an officer with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment. It was being raised at that time because of the effect of confrontation in Borneo with the Indonesians. I spent about eighteen months there and then was selected to go, instead of Borneo, to the United States, and I attended the American Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where we spent a year. Came back to the Australian Staff College where I was an instructor for about eighteen months, and then was posted back to Woodside to command the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, and to prepare it for its second tour of Vietnam.

**What year was this, Peter?**

This was 1969.

**And you were a colonel by this time?**

I was a lieutenant-colonel at this time. As the CO of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion you're a lieutenant-colonel. And I had three years with the battalion, including a year in Vietnam, which was 1971. After that, I went and worked as the Military Assistant to the Minister for the Army, Mr Andrew Peacock, and later Bob Katter, and at the end of that we went to Pakistan again, and I was appointed the Defence Attaché for Pakistan and Afghanistan. And we spent two and a half years there. I came back to Sydney as the Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Military District in Paddington, New South



Wales, then a short tour in Melbourne with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Divisional Field Force Group, which was a reserve unit, and then finally to Canberra where I spent my last five years in Personnel Branch. And I retired on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1983.

### **As a full colonel.**

As a full colonel. I was a full colonel when I went to Pakistan as the Defence Attaché.

### **Well, Peter, talking about some of those experiences now in detail, could we begin first with your time in Japan, please? What are your strongest memories of that time in Japan?**

Well, it was during the latter half of the Occupation of Japan, and I suppose my strongest memory would be that we didn't have very much association with the Japanese. We had Japanese working in the very basic tasks in the battalion, but we were still really just there flying the flag. We did our normal training, the battalion was only about half strength, but our main task at that time was to fly the flag and to be seen still in Japan. The battalion was in Hiro, which is just, I suppose, north-east of Hiroshima, and we used to do training there and then go up to Tokyo on a rotational basis. We used to provide the Australian element of the guard in Tokyo, and we were guarding, on a ceremonial basis, the British High Commission, the Canadian High Commission and the Imperial Palace, Japanese Imperial Palace. So I suppose my main thoughts and remembrances of that place was that everything was done for us. As an officer we had Japanese house girls, the staff in the mess and in the Ors' messes, sergeants' messes, were all Japanese, drivers were Japanese and I suppose one could never expect to have another occupation like it, because it was just so (pause) — oh, I don't really know what the word would be, but it was — you just sort of — it was such a *different* environment that one could imagine here in Australia, that it was just so enjoyable and played golf and played sport and, as a young officer, you know, you didn't have any other worries other than looking after your platoon and having a good time.

### **Were there any preconceptions about the Japanese people themselves that came as an aftermath of World War Two in Australia?**

I don't think so. I think that a lot of soldiers were married to Japanese and eventually were able to bring their wives back here, and they've assimilated into the country here. I don't think there was a great amount of animosity against the Japanese at that time — not in my circle, anyway. And I certainly was a serving officer at that time and getting on with my job, so I don't think I could really say there was any.

### **Thank you, Peter. So, in hindsight, then, it must have been (laughs) most enjoyable, by the sounds.**

*Very* enjoyable, yes. Wish there was another occupation that I could go and (laughs) become part of! It was people looking after your every whim and looking after your clothes and ironing your clothes and pressing them and washing them every day,



you know. You know, you had your clothes set out for you on your bed, and your bed turned down at nighttime. It was really just a wonderful experience.

**Peter, could you now describe to me, in as great a detail as you could, please, your time during the Korean War? You said that towards the very end of your time in Japan the flare-up occurred and you went into training. You were wounded for a time, and then in 1951-2 you were back in Korea. Could you tell me about those experiences, please?**

I suppose I was very disappointed that I was injured during training for Korea. In fact, I had an argument with a grenade and it won, and consequently I was forced to come back to Australia for twelve months. And then, like all eager young people, we want to get back to the war, so eventually I went back twelve months later in July of 1951, which was just a few weeks after the new commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Hassett arrived.

**That's H-A-double-S-E-double-T.**

E-double-T, yes. Eventually General Hassett. And there were great changes in the battalion at that time, because this was about the time of rotational effect taking place after people had done twelve months' service in the battalion or about twelve months in Korea, and after all the casualties that they'd had in that first period there were continual changes. But the battalion was still very much under strength in July, and I was appointed as a platoon commander — 3 Platoon A Company — and, for the next three months, we were based on what was called the 'defensive line' facing the Imjin River, and which we patrolled over that river in company and battalion strengths.

**Sorry, the river?**

Over the river.

**Yes, and what was its name, please?**

The Imjin, I-M-J-I-N.

**Thank you.**

Imjin River. Very, very wide one. And it used to flood very, very quickly so we had to be very careful. And in fact, on one occasion, we did do a battalion patrol across the river and it rained and rained and rained, and I can remember sitting in my [slit trench] and it was full of water. And we had to wait twenty-four hours, for us to be able to get back across the river. That was to see whether the enemy was on the other side. Well, we didn't meet him, so he was well back from the Imjin River. But that was a very interesting experience, and for three months I was a platoon commander, and in that time I just virtually got to know my whole platoon of some thirty-odd soldiers. And I was then appointed to the position of Intelligence Officer, which was on Battalion Headquarters, and we started to get ready for a big operation in October, which the Americans and the United Nations wanted to



straighten the line. At this particular time there was a great bulge leaning down towards the south-east, and the peace talks had started, and the United Nations wanted to straighten the line, so it was decided that the 1<sup>st</sup> Commonwealth Division, which had just been formed in July, would be undertaking this task and the main task was given to the 28<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which consisted of two British battalions and the Australian battalion, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, of which I was part. And this operation became known as Operation Maryang San — or the Battle of Maryang San, Operation Commando. And all our efforts in the next few months were directed towards training and getting ready for this, and this was held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October for the next six days. It was a divisional attack, of which the brigade had the primary task, and as it turned out the battalion in fact captured the two main features — one which was called ‘Little Gibraltar’ or Point 355, and the second one, which was deeper into North Korean area or the Chinese area, was Point 317.

### **North Korean, Peter?**

No. In fact, I corrected myself there. It was Chinese. The Chinese had intervened into the war in late 1950, and then we were facing the Chinese continually after that. So the operation was a huge success, due mainly to the inspirational leadership of one Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Hassett and the soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. They were able to capture their objectives. They did suffer about twenty killed and about eighty wounded, I think was the figure. So it was a very, very dramatic and intense operation, probably the most intense since the Battle of Alamein, I would say, in Egypt during World War Two. And I continued on as the Intelligence Officer for another six months.

### **At Maryang San, could you just describe the terrain, please?**

Well, if you’ve been watching the terrain in Afghanistan in the last few months, it was very similar to that. There was very, very little vegetation, the mountains were very, very steep, very rugged, very open and very, very difficult to move over, particularly for soldiers. They had to — you were sort of going up one step and falling back two, and if you had your pack on your back it was very, very difficult to move over. Very hard to dig in, and very hard to produce any overhead cover because there were no logs or trees or anywhere around that. The ground was like that over the whole of Korea, except for perhaps in the valleys where there was paddy fields, where the rice was grown. And it was very, very cold in winter and very hot and dry in summer.

### **And if I’m right, it was so intensely cold and with so much snow that you were struggling to survive, it was so rough.**

It was very, very cold and there were a number of injuries, self-inflicted injuries, because people just couldn’t take the cold. And I can remember even sharing a tent with the adjutant, that we used to have a wash each day and you’d take the top half of your clothing off and wash it and then put it back on, and then take the bottom half and wash that. It was so cold that you couldn’t really stand out in the nude or have a shower, any conditions like that. The clothing that we had were, eventually, provided by the British Army, so it was pretty effective when you had it all on.





**And the nature of the fighting there, Peter, was it very much aerial combat — sorry, aerial bombing of positions as well as infantry work?**

Yes, the United States Air Force and the Australian Air Force were taking part in the war. Our particular Operation Commando, we used the air forces to bombard the Chinese positions as often as we could get them to do it, and it was very, very effective.

**Were you using ground artillery as well?**

A lot of artillery. In fact, most of the time that the battalion was operating it had the whole of the divisional artillery, which would have probably meant — oh, probably sixty [artillery pieces] — I'm just guessing now very quickly — [including thirty-six twenty-five pounders and all the mortars that were available in each of the battalions, plus the fire of the tanks, the Centurion tanks, twenty pounders, and the medium machine gun. So we were able to put a tremendous amount of firepower onto the ground, and we could direct it because we were sitting on a hill and the CO could see where the enemy was and where he wanted to fire, and so it was very easy to direct the fire onto the position that you wanted.

**So once you actually got your artillery into position you could do what you needed to with it?**

Exactly, yes.

**But it must have been pretty difficult getting it there in the first place.**

Well, they moved, basically, into the valleys and re-entrants, and they didn't have to be pulled up mountains or anything like that. They sat on the flat. And they could fire over the mountains and were directed by forward observation officers with the battalion. So they didn't have to go over the mountains; they went around them or up the valleys.

**Now, to flatten out the bulge that was on the line, that must have involved an enormous amount of infantry combat and some extraordinary bravery at times. Could you talk a little bit about that, Peter, and the fighting?**

Well, I was with the CO, next to the CO, for the whole of the battle, and you could see the soldiers actually climbing these various mountains and fighting their way up, crawling their way up, to the top of all these hills, and they were just a series of hills — they were one after the other, and they seemed to get bigger and taller and steeper the whole way through. The Australians, which — I suppose I'm biased, but I think that it would be recorded in all of the history books that they were just unbelievable, their achievements, and their guts and their determination and their ability to overcome the Chinese on firstly the Point 355 and then secondly, which was our main objective, which was deeper and higher into the Chinese positions, which was Point 317 or Maryang San. It was a series of phased attacks by various companies in a wide sweep from the east to the west rather than frontal, and we were rolling them up from the east through a series of hills, mountains, and they



were suffering many, many casualties. The company commanders and platoon commanders were getting wounded and some of them were killed, and it was automatic that the next fellow in line just took over and kept the platoon or the company going, under very, very adverse — not only physical conditions, but also under enemy fire the whole time. The other difficulty was that, in the valleys, there was — in the morning, there was a considerable amount of mist, and this meant that you didn't really know where you were going and you hoped that you ended up in the right position. But the soldiers themselves excelled themselves, and they were absolutely marvellous in what they achieved.

**And did you have very good relationships with the troops, as officers?**

Yes, I think we did. You had to work for it, of course, and you had to earn their respect, but I think that most of them were very, very young officers and many of them were fresh out of Duntroon just twelve months before, and they excelled themselves. They were fantastic leaders and a lot of them were decorated for their exploits and their leadership during that operation.

**Peter, how did you view being part of a United Nations force in that area?**

Well, I think that it was very important. It was very — I suppose, very proud to be part of the first United Nations action, and we were part of the Americans and the Turks and the British, and we were very proud at being part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Commonwealth Division, which was the first time it had ever been formed, and we had British and Canadians were there as part of the division. We didn't have much to *do* with the Americans, because they were on our flanks and I certainly didn't have anything to do with them. But — — —. (tape ends)

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

[I suppose, very proud to be part of the first United Nations action, and we were part of the Americans and the Turks and the British, and we were very proud at being part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Commonwealth Division, which was the first time it had ever been formed, and we had British and Canadians were there as part of the division. We didn't have much to *do* with the Americans, because they were on our flanks and I certainly didn't have anything to do with them. But] I suppose that we, as young sort of officers, were just as keen and eager and proud as the previous soldiers that had been in World War Two and World War One.

**Peter, what of your views of the Chinese? Were they a very dedicated enemy, if that's the way of putting it?**

Well, I think they were very professional, and they were there in strength — you know, there were hundreds of thousands of them in North Korea. But we found that in our Operation Commando that the sustained firepower that we were able to put down, plus the determination of the Australian soldier, he was able to overcome them. And we were faced with a regiment, a Chinese regiment, at that time, and just one battalion with all the fire support of the division was able to overcome them. However, once we were on this particular feature they certainly didn't sit back and





just let us sit there unaffected. They were certainly probing and they certainly wanted to get that feature back, and they did a number of counter-attacks which were repulsed by the Australians, and unfortunately eventually they did, about a month later, after the British had replaced the Australians on that feature, the Chinese were able to mount an attack of sufficient magnitude that they were able to recapture all that ground. So we were very despondent over that, but nevertheless, it was just one of those things. But the Chinese were determined and they were very capable, and were able to regain the ground that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had taken.

**How did your experience in the Korean conflict affect your view of your involvement in a military career?**

Oh, that's difficult to say, because I suppose a number of us from the battalion came back to the School of Infantry at Seymour, where we were used as instructors to impart our knowledge, I guess, from Korea. And I suppose that that experience, and how you did things, always stuck in your mind and must have influenced you in what you did and how you trained and how you did things in future, because it was a very salutary experience. And I went from that to adjutant of a CMF battalion in Bendigo, and I certainly had a big influence in the training of that battalion there.

**Just seem to — hearing you talk about your CO in Korea, it seemed to me that some of what he was on about had obviously been picked up by you in the way he dealt with his troops and the way he approached the war there. Would that be true?**

Absolutely, and I've written an article on that for one of the Army magazines. He was a tremendous influence on the battalion, and I would say an influence on the way in which we approached our military activities in the future. He was a very, very inspirational leader. He was awarded an immediate DSO for his work and leadership in Operation Commando, and he subsequently became the Chief of the Defence Forces, a full general, General Sir Francis Hassett. So I think everybody that served in his battalion learnt from him and still revere him in very high esteem.

**Was that through right down to the lowest ranks?**

I would say without a doubt, without a doubt. Everybody, I would say, if you could love anybody he was loved by everybody because he had such concern for his soldiers and he was so able in getting them to do what he wanted them to do, and they did it instinctively and because his orders were so clear and concise, and I think that — *I hope* — that rubbed off onto me when I was CO.

**Peter, on returning to Australia, and even during your time in Korea, what was the attitude of the general public towards you and serving over there? Did they know much about the war?**

I don't think they knew very much about the war in Korea at all. There was the odd article that appeared in the paper when there were a lot of casualties or when there was a significant action took place, but on the whole I don't think anybody that was not connected with somebody in the Army and was in Korea probably didn't realise



what was going on. It was just so small, too far away, there was only seventeen thousand soldiers that ever served there, and I don't think that the majority of people realised what was going on. And certainly we've always considered it to be, as far as the Australians were concerned, the forgotten war.

**So was there very little public recognition at the time?**

Very little public recognition. Very little.

**And has that carried on over time, or has it become — changed lately?**

I suppose that, over time, it has become a little bit more aware, particularly with the construction and the opening of the Korean Memorial in Canberra a few years ago. I think that probably has helped to make people realise that it was a significant event, it wasn't just a peace-keeping operation, it was in fact a full-scale war.

**How did your own family respond to your participating in that? When you returned, did they want to know everything that had gone on? Were they concerned?**

Well, my family was my mother and father, who lived in Melbourne. I was in Seymour. I don't think I ever spent very much time with them after that, and I don't know whether I did talk about it at all. I don't think so. I suppose my father asked me a few questions, but I don't think one talked about it. One came back, was full of our new job, and when we went on leave and perhaps we stayed overnight there we were too much out having a good time at the races or going out with, you know, parties at nighttime.

**Peter, after your time at Seymour, you went to Pakistan to take some training over there, and you'd been married in the meantime. Could you tell me please about your time in Pakistan, what that involved?**

Well, Pakistan has an army staff college, like all Commonwealth countries and most other countries have a staff college, which is for officers of about the captain to major level, which is designed to give them a year of training to prepare them for future appointments in their own army, whether it be as a staff officer or as a manager, or as a commanding officer or a leader. And we went there because there was a reciprocal arrangement between Britain, Canada, America, Australia, and we sent officers to each other's staff college. So I went to Pakistan. And it was in fact, I would say, described as a 'hardship posting', because it was up in Quetta up in the mountains of Baluchistan. My wife followed me after giving birth to our son, so we had two children over there — two very young children. It was — luckily, the course was basically the same as England or Australia or Canada, because we were all speaking the same language. We virtually had the same type of tactics because we were all brought up on British Army tactics and training and, from that point of view, it was very similar to Australia. But it was an isolationist position, and perhaps the only time that we ever got out of Baluchistan was to make a trip to Delhi with the American student and go down to Chaman, which was through the Bolan Pass to the border with Afghanistan, and we were able to look into Afghanistan at that



time but weren't allowed to cross. But it was very interesting from a social point of view. It was challenging. From a food point of view it was also challenging, because my wife had to use produce from the local market in Quetta, and also we used to try and get whatever we could from the local canteen. We did in fact take over with us a rather large quantity of groceries and wines, but unfortunately we lost most of those when they were unloaded in Karachi and what wasn't stolen was broken when a sling broke. And I was in hospital with the mumps at that time, and my wife was home in Australia having our son, so it was rather a traumatic experience. (laughs)

**When you say it was a challenge socially, do you mean with the Pakistan culture?**

Yes, with the Pakistan culture, because they of course didn't change because we were there, and we had to try and understand and adapt to what they were doing. You'd go to a Pakistani party and the men and women would go in at the front door and the women would go to the right and the men would go to the left, and that was the last that we'd see of them until we were coming home. Women would sit in a circle, the men would sit in a circle, and we'd drink mango juice and eat curry, and it was interesting in a different way of life, and it was — we enjoyed it, but it was hard work.

**So there were no fermented drinks, given their Islamic background, is that right?**

That's right.

**Was there still a hangover of the British Raj in that?**

I would think that certainly there was a big influence from the British Raj on the Pakistan Army, there's no question about that. In fact, I would say throughout India *and* Pakistan. And in many ways it was very good, because we were influenced by the British as well. But in many cases they were more British than the British, and it was very interesting to see, but they lived the same way, except that they had their Muslim religion to adhere to and they certainly didn't deviate from that if they wanted to get on.

**Did you find that it was a very extending time for you culturally, in understanding what it was like to live with a culture so vastly different?**

I don't know whether it was that difficult, because we were living in our own home and living our own culture with, I suppose, a lot of servants. And that was the influence that primarily we would have had, using servants to do everything — and they were all trade unionised, one wouldn't do what the other was supposed to do — and I think that my wife enjoyed that because she enjoyed the interaction with the servants. We had a lot of social activities with our British, Canadian, American colleagues at that time. There was a Quetta Club, where we could go and enjoy the normal European social activities. It was basically when we went to a Pakistani house that you really noticed the difference and experienced the difference of a different culture.



**Peter, so you return to Australia for a time after this, but then are posted to the US, is that correct?**

Yes.

**And that was to Texas, if I recall?**

No. That was to Kansas.

**To Kansas.**

Yes, to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to the American Army Command and General Staff College, which also was a course similar to the one that I did in Quetta.

**So you were instructing there, is that — — —?**

No, I was a student.

**And what year would this have been?**

This was 19- mid-'65 to mid-'66.

**So at that point were the American — well, the American military were already involved in Vietnam and had been for some time, and Australia too had had instructors in Vietnam by that time as well for some years. Would that be correct?**

Yes. The Australians were over there from 1962 with the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, and as I was going to America our first commitment of an infantry ground force, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, was going to Vietnam. But certainly the Americans had been in Vietnam for virtually the whole of the '60s, and when we were there in Fort Leavenworth I suppose the most significant thing that we noticed was the number of funerals that were taking place in the military cemetery there, which we used to drive past to go to work.

**So this was as a result of Vietnam, was it?**

Exactly. This was the first time that any of the casualties from a conflict overseas were brought home. I don't think they were from Korea, I'm not sure. Certainly the Australians were buried in Korea. But I think that from Vietnam on, all the killed were brought home to America or to Australia, in our case.

**Peter, at Fort Leavenworth, were you aware of what was going on in wider American culture, or was it fairly closed?**

Well, it was a fairly closed environment. We had seven hundred students there, and it was go, go, go all the time. And I found that we did have a social group that used to look after all the overseas students, but it was a much bigger operation than what we have here in Australia, or even in Pakistan. [The] Pakistan student body was



something like eighty, I suppose, and the one in Australia was probably fifty. So this was a huge difference, and that was the cultural difference as far as we were concerned or I was concerned. I'd just left a battalion which had just been raised, which meant that we had four battalions in Australia, and I went over to America where they never talked in battalions, they spoke of brigades or divisions or corps or field armies. So it was a big learning curve and a big mental change — you had to think very big and think very wide. As far as outside of Leavenworth is concerned, I guess we knew what was going on, and certainly the war was hotting up in Vietnam at that time, but I was quite amazed at the college that spent very little time on the type of war that they were — being conducted in Vietnam.

**Was that unimportant to them?**

I don't think it was unimportant, but they wanted to go through all the various types of warfare, and I suppose we would have spent just as much on training, staff training for a nuclear war as we did for unconventional war.

**That seems extraordinary.**

Yes.

**Did you find it a little difficult working with the Americans, or was it fairly straightforward?**

No, no, you had to certainly adapt, and we certainly had a three week pre-course introduction, I suppose one could call it, to just get attuned to the American formations and organisations and vocabulary, but it was still a little bit slow for a lot of us to learn. But they have different terminology, they fight their wars differently, and so therefore, in order to come away with something, you had to understand what they were doing. I found that you had to do a lot of reading, you know, they're great writers, and if you listen to them you find that they talk *ad infinitum* about a certain subject, and you have to do all the reading in order to understand what they're talking about.

**When you say their methods of fighting war are quite different, could you just enlarge on that, please?**

Well, their method of operation is to go in with as much firepower as they possibly can from the air and from the ground and also from the soldiers on the ground, without really knowing what is there; compared to the Australians, which I think that we were much more economical, and we had to be because we couldn't afford to fight the way that they did. And I think that the South Vietnamese started to realise that they couldn't keep up with the way in which the Americans were fighting, and were more interested in our economical way, if I could put it that way, of fighting. We only fought if and when we knew where they were, and certainly there were times, perhaps, when we used a lot of ammunition. But it seemed to me that the American way of doing things was to obliterate a complete area, without really knowing exactly what was there and where they were.





**Peter, without — you may not know the answer to this, but — and without meaning to be derogatory in any sense, that was very much the experience of Australians in the Second War too, wasn't it, with the Americans in the islands, that they brought an *enormous* amount of equipment and firepower into play, but in fact when it came to the crunch they couldn't use it all? Do you know anything at all about that?**

Well, from what I've read it is very similar, yes, and I would say that the Americans have not changed their way of fighting — perhaps they are a bit more now with guided missiles, and they're not using as many troops as they are now, but they're still using their technology to demolish targets and with these guided bombs and things like that that we're seeing in Iraq and the Gulf War and in Afghanistan, they're certainly using less troops now. But I would say, up until the Gulf War, there's certainly the same method of operation in World War Two existed in Korea and in Vietnam.

**Was there any training at Fort Leavenworth for jungle warfare at all in your — — —?**

Oh yes, there was. There was a section of it. But this was all staff training; it wasn't physical training with troops. That was done out in the units and at the School of Infantry at Fort Benning.

**Was this training to actually help you to adjust to working with Americans later on, was that part of it?**

Yes, I'm sure it is part of it. The reciprocal transfer of soldiers between countries is designed to promote understanding between the countries and how they operate, so that in future they can in fact work together much better.

**Was this a twelve month secondment that you had?**

Yes, it was, yes.

**And were your family with you at the time?**

Yes, yes.

**That must have been pretty demanding!**

Well, it was, it was a very full-on program the whole time because if you weren't working you were socialising, and there was very little time to spend with your family. My family enjoyed it, and we did get away on a few occasions to see a little bit about America, particularly on our way home, but it was a very intense period, and I suppose that that was designed to get the most out of the twelve month course that we were attending.



**By the time you get home, Peter, Australia is really very much in the thick of Vietnam. Was there a certain urgency in the Army at the time to get troops over there, or was there any political leverage that you knew of at the time?**

Well, I came back in mid-'66, and at that time the Australians were building up their forces to the maximum that they had there, which was about '68, I think, to a brigade of three battalions. So I don't think that — no, let me correct that. I think that the impetus and the influence of the Americans for the Australians to commit more troops there was certainly there, but also I think that our experience with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion operating with the 173<sup>rd</sup> US Airborne Regiment, which was up past one of the bases they had outside of Saigon, was such that we were very frustrated in working intimately with the Americans, and therefore we wanted to really separate our forces from the Americans and have our own area of operations, so that we could work as the Australians worked and not as the Americans worked. And I think that that was the big influence in moving into Phouc Tuy province and to building the Task Force up to a three-battalion level.

**And that was done with the blessing of South Vietnam, was it?**

Oh yes, it would have been, it would have been.

**Peter, I might just leave this tape here and go to another tape to change over at this point. Thank you.**

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B: TAPE 2 SIDE A

**[Tape ID comments]**

**Peter, we've talked a little about your time in the US and your training and experience with the Americans. Could we come now to your involvement with the conflict in Vietnam, and firstly how it came about that you went there?**

Well, I came back from America in August of '66, and the Australian commitment to Vietnam was certainly reaching its peak then in the next year or so, and I was one of the few lieutenant-colonels at the staff college that were very, very anxious to get command of a battalion. And I think all our waking hours were directed towards that aim. (laughs) And finally I was appointed CO of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Royal Australian Regiment in 1968, and I took up my appointment in February 1969, and that battalion had just come back from its first tour of Vietnam. And, of course, I was very, very anxious and keen and thrilled to bits, and we moved over to Woodside for the second time, and I was with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion then for the next three years. The first two years were training, and the third year, 1971, we spent in Vietnam.

When we arrived the program was that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion would replace the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion in October of 1970, and so we were all working towards that way. And in the first year we were very, very low in strength, not a high priority, and we did mostly individual training during that first year.



---

**This is at Woodside.**

This is at Woodside. And then, at the end of the year, we were started to build up strength again, and in early '70 the National Servicemen started to arrive because the government's policy was that we had to have fifty per cent National Serviceman and fifty per cent regular soldiers. So they started to arrive, and — — —.

**Can I just stop you there, Peter, and ask was that a difficulty for you, as a regular Army person, taking on the conscripts?**

No way. No, it was — we welcomed them with open arms, because that was the only way, in fact, that the battalion was — and the Australian Army was able to raise nine battalions, through the National Service scheme. And — no, we welcomed them. And they were well-trained, they had done their normal basic training and corps training just the same as every regular soldier was, so, although they came in for two years, the first three or four months was basic training and advanced training for them, so they came in just as well-trained as a regular soldier. So from my point of view we were very eager to get them, to bring our battalion up to strength and to start training really seriously for our tour in Vietnam.

**Did the conscripts mix well with the regular troops?**

Well, I like to think they did. They were accepted, and I suppose there was some feeling in some ways that perhaps they weren't going to be there very long, but I like to think that there was never any problem with having them, and I never struck any animosity between the regulars and the National Servicemen. We had a number of National Service officers who, after their basic training, or during their basic training, they were pulled out to do a six months course at the Officer Training Unit at Skeyville, and then they came to the battalion as second lieutenants. So we had a number of young officers from National Service training as well as a lot of soldiers from National Service training. And they integrated beautifully, never any problem, and we were very proud of them.

**Please go on with the core of your — — —.**

So about, oh, March-April [1970] I think it was that the government decided that they were going to start winding down from Vietnam, and the battalion that we were to replace in October was not to be replaced, and therefore our next departure date was February of 1971. So we had to adjust to that, and luckily we were able to — in fact, I suppose from any social point of view and family point of view we had Christmas at home, (laughs) which we weren't intending to have. So it enabled us to do a very, very thorough training period in 1970, and the National Servicemen rolled in every couple of months, and we were at full strength by about October. So we were then doing our final training in November, went on leave, did some more training in January and just brushing up on our normal individual and collective skills, and we went to Vietnam in February of 1971.

I suppose the main difficulty with Woodside was its isolation from the rest of the Army, and it made it difficult too for our training with tanks, which were based in



Puckapunyal in Victoria, armoured personnel carriers, which were based in New South Wales, artillery, which were based in New South Wales, and helicopters that were based in Canberra. Army helicopters were based in Oakey in Queensland. So there was a considerable amount of training lost, I suppose, in travelling, particularly when they came to us, and likewise when we went to Puckapunyal and Queensland. And we did our jungle training at Canungra in July-August, in the middle of winter, and that was very, very cold up there in Canungra. But everybody was enthusiastic and were very, very gung-ho about the whole thing. And I suppose the other disadvantage of Woodside was the fact that it was very cold in winter, and trying to train in a very cold environment for a very wet and jungle environment was very, very difficult in Woodside. But I think that, in the end, after two years of training and working up to leaving in February of 1970, that the battalion was as well-trained as any other that had ever left Australia's shores.

**Peter, were you aware of the anti-war movement at the time, both in America and Australia, and was that having any impact on you and the troops?**

Well, yes it was, because in May of 1970, there were a number of anti-Vietnam moratorium marches around Australia, and there was a big one in Adelaide in early May of 1970. And unfortunately I had given soldiers an extra day's leave that weekend. What we did was once a month we had a long weekend, and it meant that the soldiers could go interstate and see their families. So this was just programmed very early in the year and unfortunately it just clashed with this moratorium. And so the soldiers were down in Adelaide and had sort of been socialising in the hotels for a few hours that day when they saw a few North Vietnamese flags being waved around by this anti- — this moratorium march. And so they got involved and a few fisticuffs were thrown, and a few of the soldiers were arrested, and the first I heard of this was on the news, because I had taken my family over to Seymour in Victoria to see my in-laws. And consequently I was ordered back that night to Adelaide, and the only thing I could do was to leave my family in Seymour — I had driven over there — leave my family in Seymour, get on — a car took me down to Essendon and I flew over to Adelaide. I spent the next two or three days sorting out the problems of the soldiers being involved with these moratorium marchers, and I had to dispense some justice, which subsequently was dismissed by our commander here, but that didn't worry me very much — I think everybody in the end accepted it for what it was — and then I had to take a couple of days off and go back and (laughs) pick up my family in Seymour. So yes, it did affect us. And I suppose it made us even more determined that we were going to do a good job over there.

**Did you have any views about the Vietnam War yourself?**

Look, from a professional soldier's point of view, we were very eager to get there and to do the job that we were trained for. I think, on reflection, that it was a losing battle right from the start, but when we were — I mean, I was — the ultimate in any professional officer's career was to command a battalion or a regiment in operations, and that's exactly the way I looked at it, and certainly I wasn't too worried about whether the war was right or wrong. We were getting a lot of feedback from the Task Force over there as to what was being done and how it was being done, and we were using those lessons to the best effect in our training in Australia. But no, I don't think at that time we were too worried about — and I



certainly wasn't worried about — whether the war was being conducted right or wrong. The only thing that probably we were a little bit apprehensive about was the decision and the subsequent chaos, I suppose, of the decision to lay a minefield down the eastern side of a mountain range which was called the — oh, let me think — the Long Hais, because the Vietnamese were supposed to cover these mines by fire, which they didn't do, and the VC lifted them all and our soldiers suffered very, very horrendous casualties and lost — a lot killed and a lot lost their legs and other limbs from our own anti-personnel mines. So, on reflection, that was probably the worst effect that we had in our own area of operations. But the battalion was very eager to go there, the National Servicemen and the regulars were just as keen to get there, I didn't have any problems with anybody not wanting to go.

**Well, Peter, tell me again about going there. Was the journey done by ship?**

The main contingent of the battalion went by *HMAS Sydney*, which was a converted aircraft carrier into a troop ship, and that took them, I think, ten days. I was in the advance party and we flew over. And we were over there about ten days before the main body arrived, so that there was an element from each platoon, from each company, from each specialist platoon, so that we had about a week there with the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion to just get acclimatised, to understand what was going on, so that they could very quickly teach and impart that knowledge on to the main body when they arrived, so that they could then start operation very quickly.

**Where was headquarters, as such?**

Headquarters in Phouc Tuy Province, which was a province that — — —.

**How do you spell Phouc Tuy, for the tape?**

P-H-O-U-C, T-U-Y — two words — and this was a province which was south-east of Saigon, and which held the port or contained the port of Vũng Tàu, which was a seaside holiday resort for the Vietnamese from Saigon. It was only a few hours' drive down there, and I think, as well as it being a rest and recuperation area for Australia, it was also for some Americans and also for the Viet Cong. Our enemy used (laughs) it as their rest and recuperation area as well. So Phouc Tuy Province was the province which was allocated to the Australian Army for its operations and its operations alone, so that we could get on and conduct the war in *our* way and not be influenced by the Americans. That doesn't mean to say that we didn't do operations with the Americans or that they didn't come in and help us, but we were able to do that on our own.

The headquarters of the Australians in Phouc Tuy Province was constructed and established on a hill which was called Nui Dat, and that was in the centre of the province on a route which went north-south, and the administrative base was set up in Vũng Tàu, which was about two hours' drive away south of the headquarters base in Nui Dat. And the whole of the Task Force was based in this Nui Dat area, and they had to build it into a fortified base so that they could live and defend it. And perhaps the only real threat that occurred to that was in August of 1966, when the battle of Long Tân occurred with D Company of 6 Battalion, and something like two





hundred and eighty enemy were killed and the company lost, I think, nineteen killed. But that was a threat to the Task Force base which got as far as Nui Dat 2, which was perhaps an hour, an hour and a half's travel to the east of the Nui Dat base.

**The Nui Dat base, was that pretty much a compound, if you like?**

Yes, it was a big compound, and it was built big enough for three battalions, and it had an airfield in it which was constructed so that the 'planes could land on it and also helicopters could use it for operations.

**Peter, what was the war experience of your battalion during your time in Vietnam?**

Well, I think that, as we arrived in February of 1971, there was a determined effort to give more responsibility to the Vietnamese army, and therefore the area that my predecessor had — which was 7RAR — had towards the south and south-east of Nui Dat was handed back to the — or handed over to the Vietnamese, so that they looked after all the population areas and the approaches to them. So there was another battalion there that had the western half of the province, and 3RAR was given the responsibility for the eastern half of the province, but north of the populated areas. And our task at that time was to patrol in that area and to stop the VC from interrupting and interfering and influencing the Vietnamese-populated areas. And we did this by patrolling — patrolling during the day, sometimes at night — mostly at night we would set up ambush positions. But generally it was patrolling by day, every day, and it was usually for about five or six weeks at a time that the companies would go out. And they would be given an area of operations and they would just search by day, continually by day, every day, and I would go in and visit them as often as I could, usually every five days, because they could only carry five days' rations. Five days' resupply occurred every five days, and that gave me an opportunity to go in and see how they were going and to give them any new orders that I may need to give them. But generally speaking that's what they did, and it was very effective.

We didn't have a lot of contacts. There were a few fleeting contacts. There was always artillery mortars and armed helicopters, called 'bushrangers', that we could call upon for support. There were about five significant contacts during our term.

**Peter, could we revert to talking about the contacts that 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had with the enemy, please?**

Well, Rob, there were five main contacts that we were engaged in, spread over the nine or ten months that we were there. And the first one occurred very, very soon after we arrived. What was happening was the battalion was conducting some in-theatre training. What they were doing was learning to use the helicopters and the fire support and just for a few days getting acclimatised and accustomed particularly to the helicopters, because they were a big influence on the Vietnam War. And on the second — we arrived in — the main body arrived at sea on the (pause) — oh,



about the 25<sup>th</sup> I think it was of February, and we started (recording speeds up for a few seconds) in-theatre training on the 27<sup>th</sup> February —

### **This is 1971.**

— 1971. And on the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> March, D Company was in a harbour for the evening when they were attacked by an unknown number of enemy, and we suffered two killed, which was a very severe blow to the battalion because I think it shook us up completely and made us realise that we were there for serious activities. One of the young platoon commanders and one of his corporals were killed with an explosive charge that had been thrown at them, and this particular action went on for a number of hours and artillery were called in, the helicopter gunships were called in, and it was a very big — had a big effect on the battalion, to lose two soldiers.

### **Was the enemy always the Viet Cong for you?**

Yes. Well, no, it wasn't *always*. Later on we did strike the North Vietnamese army, but initially it was the Viet Cong and basically it was a battalion called D445, which was a regional force battalion, and that was sort of the regular part of the Viet Cong in Phouc Tuy Province, that was their area of operations. So we suspected that they were involved in that, trying to give them a bloody nose and tell them who was boss in Phouc Tuy Province just shortly after we arrived.

The next one was on the 20<sup>th</sup> March, when a half a platoon was moving along a track and they heard some noises and they went to investigate and they struck elements of D445 in a bunker system, and the platoon commander was killed. And he didn't die immediately, but he was hit in the head and died shortly afterwards. And that was quite another traumatic experience for us, because we had a half a platoon, which would have been about fourteen men, engaging what appeared to be an enemy force in bunkers. So they had the ascendancy — they were in the high ground, so to speak. And the difficulty was that the soldiers had dropped their packs in order to investigate this particular situation, and they were separated from their smoke grenades, which were used to indicate their position so that the helicopter gunships could come in and strafe the enemy. And so this was quite traumatic for quite a while. I was flying around in my Bell helicopter trying to drop smoke grenades to these soldiers.

### **So you were in radio contact.**

I was not in radio contact, flying above them. And we just couldn't seem to get the right place at the right time, and we didn't ever get the smoke grenades to them, and so they were sitting out as sitting ducks for quite a long while. And so it took a long while to get to them, because the other half-platoon was a couple of thousand metres away and the rest of the company were a couple of thousand metres away, so we converged on them from all directions with tanks, APCs and the other platoons of the company, and it took a few hours to get there because of the terrain. Anyway, the main result of that was the platoon commander was killed.



Then we got some information from radio intercept that D445 was bivouacked in a — — —. (tape ends)

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A: TAPE 2 SIDE B

[Then we got some information from radio intercept that D445 was bivouacked in a] an old haunt of theirs on the Song Rai River — now, the Song Rai is spelt S-O-N-G, R-A-I — and so I was given a couple of extra companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, that were there, so I had six companies, and we commenced a search-and-destroy operation. And one of the companies that was given to me from 2<sup>nd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> struck D445 Battalion in its bunker system. And the ensuing battle was quite — very, very concentrated. We got a lot of casualties out of that. There was a fellow in one of the helicopters was killed, he was shot at from the ground. Incidentally, going back to the 20<sup>th</sup> March, there was a co-pilot of one of the helicopters was killed in that particular operation from ground fire. So back to the 31<sup>st</sup> March, and it was very intense, and we had tanks there, APCs, couldn't get them across the creek, the Song Rai, and so we had to rely on — it was very close quarter fighting, and in fact on this particular occasion I was flying around trying to drop some smoke grenades again, (laughs) and my helicopter was shot down. Luckily, the pilot and I were unhurt, and we were able to land on the friendly side of the Song Rai and marry up with the tanks. And eventually we — we had put companies in cordon positions so that if the enemy decided to run we would capture him running, but unfortunately he was able to escape this cordon, and we did get a couple of casualties, but I suppose our — we were rather — our pride was a bit dented here because we had quite a lot of troops on the ground and he still was able to escape.

The next engagement was on the 7<sup>th</sup> June, which was up north of Phouc Tuy Province into Long Khánh Province, and this was a brigade, or a Task Force operation of three battalions — or two battalions, as they were then — plus the Americans. The Americans were coming in to establish a cordon in the north and north-east. One of the other battalions, 4RAR, was cordoning to the south-east, and my task as a battalion was to approach from the west. And once again we were operating as a result of enemy wireless intercept, and we were advised that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 33<sup>rd</sup> North Vietnamese army regiment was in this location. So this was the first time that we were up against the North Vietnamese. And we found them on the night of the 6<sup>th</sup> June, same day we'd flown in into various landing zones. Some of them had flown in, some of them had gone up by trucks up the main highway, some had gone in in APCs. And that first night, 5 Platoon of B Company discovered the bunker system. The enemy didn't know that. So I ordered that they withdraw — it was about five o'clock at night so there was no way I was going to get involved in a night operation — and so they were pulled back until the next morning. And this was the first time where we had used marker balloons. We found that the smoke grenades weren't very successful in very, very high forest, and it tended to be blown away, and we felt that we ought to try these marker balloons. And what had to be done was to fill the marker balloons with water — a little box with water, which set off the crystals which produced some vapour that went into the balloon which then made it rise to the sky, so that we were able to put these marker balloons up so that the gunship helicopters would know exactly where we were, and so that they — — —. (telephone rings, break in recording)



---

**This is just to start again, talking about this particular contact.**

So this enabled the helicopter gunships to fire the next morning in front of the marker balloon, and this probably turned out to be the most intensive operational day that we had during the whole period that we were there. The enemy certainly wasn't running on this occasion. He was sitting in his bunker system, which we found and discovered, and then advanced very, very silently against the next morning, and he fought very tenaciously. I had to bring in the tanks on one flank, the artillery, helicopter gunships, everything that I could produce to try and overcome this particular enemy opposition. And I think really what happened was that he left a small force there which allowed the rest of the regiment to bug out. And in fact we also found about thirty bunkers in that particular area, plus another thirty adjacent to it which had been occupied by the D445 battalion, so they were obviously assembling there for some major operation against the Task Force in Phouc Tuy Province. So that particular battle, another officer from the field regiment was killed when he was directing artillery fire. We had a number of casualties. A helicopter was shot down that was trying to drop resupply ammunition, and it burst into flames, and a few of my soldiers actually went into the flaming helicopter and rescued the crew, for which they were awarded gallantry decorations. And the enemy escaped once again, but we had in fact, I'm sure, effected a lot of casualties, caused a lot of casualties to him. So that was the most intensive day, and after that, for the next three or four days, we were searching for him and destroying the bunkers that we had discovered in this particular area. That was called Operation Overlord, or the Battle of Long Khánh, spelling of Long Khánh being L-O-N-G, K-H-A-N-H.

So the Air Force also lost a pilot in that particular battle. So the Royal Australian Air Force helicopters weren't coming out of this (laughs) very well in this year. In fact, they lost more helicopter pilots in this particular year, supporting 3RAR, than they had over the previous four or five years. And I think that was because the enemy were tending to shoot more at the helicopters as they were hovering overhead.

The last and fifth operation that we — significant operation was on the 31<sup>st</sup> August, when a platoon, once again, was searching for the enemy and came across a bunker system. And it was raining, and it was mid-afternoon, and once again I told them that they weren't to go any further, that they were to do some reconnaissance, put up a balloon so that we knew exactly where they were, and for the first time we called in the American Air Force for air strikes before we went in and actually searched the camp the next morning. So that was all right. The balloon went up, the patrols had found exactly where the bunker system was — in fact, they were lounging around having their tea when the last patrol went in to have a look and see what was happening. Next morning at dawn we had the air strike, which of course — would you believe it? — missed, so (laughs) I was sitting up in a helicopter watching it and they missed by quite a few metres. And I called in another air strike and they didn't do much better, and so we went in after that and of course the enemy had flown again. But they'd left everything there, and there was probably a platoon of D445, we estimated, was in that particular area — in bunkers. So I wasn't very impressed with air support after that.



But that was the five significant operations that we had. There were many more fleeting operations, and I can only say that the difficulties that the soldiers had — when they were patrolling day by day, and ambushing night by night — was only remarkable, because they were tired, they were bored I'm sure, because nothing much was happening for days and days and days at a time, but they certainly did themselves proud and they were certainly conducting themselves as everybody else in the past had ever conducted themselves in the Australian Army.

**What was the greatest difficulty of this type of warfare, Peter?**

Well, I suppose probably what I was just talking about, and that is the fact that you were patrolling for days and days on end, and you never knew whether an enemy was going to pop out from the next tree and fire at you. And you could do that for days and days and days. And the forward scout was probably the most intense purpose and the most affected person that existed in all the platoons, because he was the one that was heading and likely to be the one that was going to strike the enemy first at any one time.

**In your knowledge, had Australians ever fought any warfare like this previously?**

Oh, I would say that they probably did in the Owen Stanleys in New Guinea. I would say that it was the same type of warfare, except that perhaps it may have been a little bit more of a front line in New Guinea and the islands, whereas this, they could pop up anywhere in Vietnam. But certainly I would say that it was very similar to New Guinea.

**When you say they could pop up anywhere, Peter, does that mean that part of the difficulty was that you never quite knew who the enemy was?**

Well, in a way. If you were operating near the civilian areas you had to be very careful that you didn't fire at them, because a lot of them were dressed in black pyjamas, just the same as the VC. The VC were — that was their uniform, if you'd like to put it. The North Vietnamese army had uniforms but they were khaki, dark green, so they were easy to distinguish. But certainly you had to be sure that, even somewhere out in the bush, you knew that if somebody was in black and carrying a weapon you could fire at him, but if he didn't you had to be very sure that you weren't shooting at civilians.

**How did you find working with the Vietnamese themselves, Peter? Was that always difficult?**

The only time that the battalion worked with the Vietnamese was with a village chief of one of the villages which was called Xuyên Môt, which was X-O-Y-E-N M-O-C, and he was a major, and he had this company of regional forces, and I used to fly down and see what he was doing and whether we could do operations together. But I used to go in there and see his troops lying around and sitting in hammocks and, you know, really not doing the sort of things that (laughs) we would expect our soldiers to do, and we really didn't do any operations with them at all. We would





prefer to operate on our own and we knew where we were and what we could do and how we could do it.

**One thing I'm interested to know from your perspective, Peter, is how were you affected by the stream of injured men and the deaths that occurred during both the contacts and just the normal reconnaissance?**

Well, it was always traumatic. The battalion, the whole battalion was affected by the two killed just within a week of being there, and I think that that pulled everybody up to make them realise that this was a very serious business. And certainly it was only three weeks later that we lost another one, and he was a very popular officer, and I think it was very emotional to me, because that meant that I'd lost two officers in the space of three weeks. And I think everybody was affected by it, everybody — certainly if a fellow was killed, and I know that the platoon commander who took over in the platoon where the two were killed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March, he had quite a difficult time to command that platoon, and I think — I just heard the other day that he's still very much affected by that.

**What do you mean — affected emotionally?**

Emotionally, yes, emotionally. Because the platoon was very, very adversely affected by the particular casualties that they had, and not only did they have two killed but they had two wounded. And the platoon that lost the platoon commander on the 20<sup>th</sup> March was also very, very badly affected by it, but they got on and did the job and went on through the war and did it in a very, very distinguished way. But the fellows that were wounded were all part of the team, and if anybody was hurt then everybody was very concerned for them. And unfortunately, those that were seriously hurt were flown out to Vũng Tàu where the Australian Army medical team were. If they were able to they were flown out to Australia, and some of them were returned to duty there, but if they went back to Australia they never saw them again. And I think that was a big problem, that there was no sort of breakdown from being in a war to being in peacetime, coming back home. And a lot of those soldiers probably didn't see any of those until we had our reunion last year, thirty years after the war. So yes, it would have affected them seriously and adversely.

**And yourself, Peter, you were obviously affected by the death of your officers.**

Yes. I was very affected by both deaths — I think we were all affected by the first, but it seemed to me that so soon I'd lost two officers that I'd got to know very well, and just by force of being in the officers' mess, you know, you tend to get to know them more. And the second one had married and had a child, which really he had never seen, which was a big blow for the family. But I suppose I was lucky, in that when I came home from Vietnam I went on and did other jobs in the Army. I went from one job of commanding a battalion to another job, to another job, and so I was always doing something different, whereas — and a lot of the regular soldiers would have been the same way. But the National Servicemen who came out of Vietnam would have come out of Vietnam one day, into civilian street the next day, and not be accepted. You know, they were ostracised because they were in Vietnam. I mean, the fact that they were sent there by the government had nothing to do with it. And they



weren't accepted into the RSLs for a long, long time, and that did affect them — affected them very, very seriously and very psychologically, because, although their families obviously were very pleased to have them home, the rest of the community weren't, and that was tragic from their point of view.

**Did you see that turmoil at the time in these people or were you away from them?**

No, I must admit that I was away from them. I think that my wife saw more of it whilst we were in Vietnam and subsequently. She experienced it up in Woodside through her association with the civilian community. But after Vietnam I must say that I was — I went to Canberra and then I went overseas back to Pakistan for two and a half years, and really I had to get on with my military job, and I didn't really come back in contact with it again until I went back to Canberra in the late '70s.

**Having actually achieved a field command, had that satisfied you, if you like, for that part of your career?**

Oh yes, from a hands-on soldiering point of view yes, it certainly did. I didn't expect to do anything better than that in my subsequent career.

**Peter, in the hindsight, would you want to replay that Vietnam time over again?**

And do it differently?

**Yes.**

Not the operations in Vietnam. I was very satisfied and very happy with what we did. I feel that I was — I'm ashamed to admit that I wasn't aware, nor did I take the necessary steps to become aware, of the physical problems that a lot of my soldiers were experiencing after that war.

**So it's the aftermath more than the conflict itself —**

Yes, exactly.

**— that you feel — — —?**

Very much ashamed of the fact that I didn't follow it up, I didn't do as much as I should have. Trying to make up for it now, but a lot of it is water under the bridge, unfortunately.

**What have you seen yourself of the soldiers and the effect it's had on their lives?**

Well, I suppose more so since I've come back to South Australia, which was about twelve years ago, I've become more involved with the soldiers because of the social activities that the battalion has been organising, and reunions. And the thirty-year



reunion that we had last year has enabled me to see much more of the soldiers that I served with, and I'm much more aware of the effects that tour of Vietnam had on the regulars and the National Servicemen. And some of them I know now much more than I ever knew in Vietnam, and I'm always very, very much concerned about their welfare, and I'm surprised at the number of soldiers who have become TPI, a lot of them psychologically, through Vietnam, and that is a very, very serious concern. And I think if I could just mention one point that is relevant to that, and that is that one of my soldiers that I was speaking to on Anzac Day just three days ago, his son was in the Army and he went to Somalia and then did a year in East Timor, and he's affected psychologically just as much, if not more so, than the fellows that had their service in Vietnam. And that, I think, is very, very worrying.

**Peter, thank you very, very much for sharing with me today your life and experiences in the Army and in conflict. It's been a real pleasure to be here and participate. Thank you.**

My pleasure, and I'm very proud of the — particularly the soldiers that I served with in Vietnam, every single one of them. And I'd just like to make the point that, although there were fifty per cent regulars and fifty per cent National Servicemen, that as far as I'm concerned, and as far as everybody in the battalion was concerned, they were all one body of men. They were equal to the task and there was never any dissension as far as I was concerned between the two. They were all famous and fantastic fellows.

**Thanks, Peter.**

END OF INTERVIEW.