South Australians at war – transcript – OH 644/5

Interview with Mr David Ennis recorded by Rob Linn at the Daw Park Repatriation Hospital, South Australia, on the 6th May 2002 for The State Library of South Australia South Australians at War Oral History Project 2002.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

[Tape ID comments]

David, what's your full name?

David Peter Ennis.

Where and when were you born?

Well, I was born at Prospect in South Australia and just after I was born I moved down to Dudley Park and that's where I spent most of the time, in a Trust house down there with Mum and Dad, yes. She was there — Mum was there for forty years.

Tell me about your parents please, David.

Dad was a driver, he started off with John Drings with the horses, and then later on he moved to the trucks and he was sub-contracted out with truck to different firms such as, you know, D.J. Fowler's, Milne's and things like that, and his life was — you know, all his life he was a driver. And Mum wasn't on paid work anywhere on the way, but she did start one of the first kindergartens in South Australia down at Dudley Park, at Simpsons, at the playground there and the hall, and so she kicked off one of the first kindergartens.

What were their names, David?

Dad was Douglas Kenneth and Mum was Dorothy Alice.

And tell me about your siblings.

Yes, right. I got two sisters, and they're both still alive. I've got five brothers — one died a couple of years ago through cancer. And yes, and they had a wide range of jobs altogether from press operators at Simpsons. My eldest brother spent time in the Navy, another one was in accounts with the Barley Board, so a wide range of jobs.

David, did your family have a history of war service?

No. During World War Two Dad was classified as protected industries so he couldn't go, but he was a member of the Territorials, and I can remember as a kid him going off on weekends and so forth to parades and training and that sort of thing, you know? But he didn't see any active service as such?

And were they church people, David?

Yes. It was different, because Mum was Church of England and Dad was Catholic, so no religion was forced on us. So we had a mixture of Congregationalist, Methodist and (laughs) what have we in the family. But now, I suppose there might be — I think I'd be about the only one that still — you know, of the dregs that still attends church regularly.

David, tell me about your education and then the occupations you went into afterwards.

Right. Education — I was in second year at Thebby Tech, and my youngest brother, Andrew, got polio, so that was the end of my schooling. So I didn't get my Intermediate through Thebby Tech. I finished up going to the old School of Mines at night school and done that. So my first job, I started off as a junior porter at the Railways, and I was there for a few years, and then as a counter hopper with Myer Emporium and done some work with Hotpoint Australia, you know, in electrical stuff there. But when I — I was called up for National Service under the old scheme where it's ninety-eight days back in 1958, and from there I always wanted to become a doctor but the education wasn't there, the finance wasn't there. So I finished up after National Service joining the regular Army.

So were the medical courses in those days really a matter of finance?

Yes. You had to pay your way through. There's no such thing as Austudy and that sort of thing those days, and if you didn't get there it's awkward. But still.

Can you tell me about your service record, David?

Yes. As I said, I done National Service only for the three months up at Woodside, and from there I went into the regular Army corps enlistment. And you might have got a hint I went into the Medical Corps, because that's where my interest was. And I served six years in the Medical Corps. When I first went up I went over to the Army School of Health in Healesville, where I went through corps training and posted to 2 Field Ambulance, and I was there until '59. And after an accident where I had a hernia I was transferred out of Field Force into a normal unit — actually, I was posted to camp hospital at Kapooka for six months or so while the hernia healed itself up, and then I had a 'phone call — the OC had a 'phone call one day and said, 'Have him ready for four days to be in Malaya.' So that was the start of my active service.

What year was that, David?

That was in 1959. And then after the Malayan service I got posted back to the armoured regiment where I completed my six years in the regular Army, and then on discharge I started at the Repat, but I also joined the Army Reserve, which I was a member of the Army Reserve until 1978.

And what about ranks in that time that you were involved?

I finished up with the rank of Warrant Officer Class 2 in the Reserve. I was a Corporal Acting Sergeant in the regular Army. They were going through the situation of changing from the Pantropic[?] scheme to others which they do with the Army at different times, and ranks were temporary until they worked out how many they wanted at what rank.

Well, David, could we talk in some detail now about your time in Malaya? So coming through the story of Malaya, could you tell me first did your families have any views at all about your being involved in the Army?

Yes. Dad — though Dad didn't see service he said I should have been in a fighting corps if I was going to be in anything, and not in the Medical Corps. And my answer to that to Dad was that I believed that if anybody's going to serve their country and take those risks of war or emergency or whatever the case may be, somebody should also be there to take the risk to help if they get into strife. So anyhow I won that and I was in the Medical Corps. But I think in the long run Dad got his way too, because arriving in Malaya I was soon to discover very quickly that there was no such thing as a non-combatant unit, a non-combatant corps. The Communist Terrorists at the time there did not recognize the Geneva Convention, so therefore when you went out on operations you didn't wear a red cross because it stuck out and made a good target, and you were actually armed. So — — —.

Your father got his wish.

He got his wish in the long way, I think, yes.

Well, I'll come back to Malaya in a little bit of a time, but I'd just like to explore your father and your parents as a whole for you. Was that pretty much within your father's character, to want you to be in a serving military outfit?

I think, yes, I think it might have been the fact that — I don't know, I'm only surmising or guessing here, but I think he really, during World War Two when he went to join up and they stopped him because of the business he was in, I think he was disappointed that he never went. So the opportunity, I suppose, was that 'Is my son going to do what I wanted to do, and he's taking the easy way out?' (laughs)

Did your Mum have a view, David?

No, Mum didn't seem to have a view. Mum was the quiet — she didn't say much, she was, you know — — —.

So how about when the time came for you to go to Malaya? Did your family have any views on that at the time?

They wished me well. They were concerned. And of course they were like me — we didn't know much what was going on in Malaya because there wasn't a lot hit the papers, what was going on. And even today a lot of people don't realise what was going on, and yet we had a full battalion up there, we had a couple of squadrons of Air Force personnel plus the support teams, so there was a lot of Australian personnel up there.

RAN were in there too, weren't they?

Yes, they were there too, involved. So all the services were involved in it, but heard very little of it back home.

David, did that apply to you as well that you'd heard very little about it?

I heard very little about it, and it was a bit of a rude awakening, I suppose. I was a twenty year-old kid when I arrived at Singapore to go down to Taiping, where the unit I was being posted to, that was a Commonwealth Field Ambulance, to see that the train at Singapore was like the old Western days. The sleepers, you know, where they're just the curtains, you know, the bunks with curtains, wooden bunks, that's all they were. But the interesting thing, it was being pulled by a diesel made at Islington here in South Australia under the Colombo plan. But in front of that was a steam engine that was armour-plated, that had to check the railway line in front of the main train before — in case there had been mines or anything landed on the railway line. So it was, you know, and the odd Bren gun on top of the carriages. That was a little bit saying, 'Hey, what have I come to?' But still, yes.

At this time you weren't married to Maxine?

No, I wasn't married at that stage, no.

David, let's talk in detail about your experiences there, and you've just given a very vivid picture of coming to Singapore. Was that on ship that you — — —?

No, I flew up by Qantas, by normal domestic flight. There was two of us on that flight, the other chap was going to Kuala Kangsar, which is the — he was a reinforcement to one of the battalions up there, as an infantryman. They were on the same thing and they were using domestic flights.

Describe Singapore for me at that time.

Well, I was only there the day. It was a — you looked at Singapore and the conditions of the locals and the kampongs, which are villages, and what they lived under, we were told beforehand that, you know, it was nothing like Australia, that respect of it. I believe nobody's mind was great enough to imagine the conditions they were under, where the monsoon drains was their washing way, the ducks swam in it, they bathed in it, and it was also their running toilets. It was just incredible.

And you'd see a small hut which you might think three or four live in it but you'll find about thirty-odd, and they roll out these mats and sleep on the floor. The conditions were very crowded and very poor, and it's a shock to see that — at that stage it was a Third World country back then — the conditions they were living under.

Were you prepared for that in any way?

No, not really.

What about the climate and the environment? Had you been briefed on that?

No. I got told it was warm, and it was. But that wasn't too bad, because when you arrived at your unit you were on restricted duties and they slowly built you up to get acclimatised first. You weren't — when you first arrived they never put you on, you know, eight-hour duties at once. They built you up bit by bit, you know, to get you used to the climate. But it is a big difference. The humidity was the greatest thing.

(laughs) And you hadn't been prepared for that, really, at all.

No. No, not really. Not when you leave New South Wales in May when it was frost and so forth, and (laughs) next minute you're up in the tropics, yes, it was a bit of a shock.

You were only in Singapore for a very short time, as you said.

Yes.

Where do you meet up with your unit?

On the train — we caught this train down into Taiping and we travelled all night to get to Taiping. Taiping is in the state of Perak — that's the north of Malaya Peninsula, as it was then, and yes, that was 28 Commonwealth Brigade Headquarters, also. And yes, so that was that, and I was met at the train and off we went to the unit. And the unit consisted of only a handful of Australians, because it was mainly British, and most of those British personnel were National Servicemen under their scheme, which was a two year term that they served.

Describe for me what the camp was like there, at Pera.

Right, the camp. It was huts made out of — with big asbestos roofing on it, you had wall panelling on the outside. You didn't have windows; you had shutters like horse stables, and the odd fan in the hut. And of course you had the old typical army-type iron bed to sleep on and you had to use the mosquito nets, otherwise you were eaten alive every night and it was law to use them anyhow, because of the malaria. And yes, it was a bit of a shock.

I wanted to ask you about the malaria, and this is probably a (laughs) good time to start, before we get into anything else. It was very prevalent up there.

Yes. Yes, we started taking — as soon as I knew that I was going to Malaya I was put on a course of paladrin[?], and you had to take them every day, before we went up there and all the time we were up there, and then I had to keep going — I'm not quite sure, but I think it was for another twenty-one days after coming home, keep taking them, the paladrin.

Did you use any type of skin lotion as well?

Oh yes, you also had to use your insect repellant. As from dusk, you know, sleeves had to be down and all that sort of thing, and normal protection. So you left as little bit as possible of any skin sitting there for the mozzies to have a go at.

Were you affected at all by it, Dave?

No, not that side, but it was uncomfortable having the sleeves and that down when it was very humid of a nighttime. So, unless you were on duty, you would go and lie on your bed and strip on and lay under the mosquito net. (laughs) That's the only time you didn't have to have your sleeves down.

Well, I guess even the nets weren't foolproof.

No. No, no. No.

Did many fellows up there suffer from it?

Yes. There was quite a few — quite regularly there was mild cases of malaria. Very rare to have a major case of malaria. They used to also use swing fogs around through the area which would clean out the mosquito breeding areas too, you know. And I often wonder, we used to blow all this stuff right through all the scrub and the secondary jungle and that around camp to kill off the insects, and I wonder what effect it's had on the guys themselves over the years, too, because we just didn't know all that stuff.

Would that have been DDT or something like that?

Something like that, yes, yes. So Dieldrin and things like that, yes. It was — so it's most probably caused some effects somewhere along the way.

David, let's talk now, (laughs) having found out how badly you obviously slept, (laughter) talk a little about the involvement itself. Just as background, the Malayan campaign, in essence, had been going since 1948, at least for the British.

Yes.

Australian involvement had come in the early '50s, and I think the major forces were put in about '55?

Yes, about that, yes.

So you would have come in not that long after.

No. The Emergency — they classed it Emergency — was still going. The Emergency finished in ’62 — sorry, late ’61, early ’62, so you were still involved, and most of your time you were training, if you weren’t up along the Thai border, ... I was put mainly in the — when we were back in camp, in the training wing as an instructor. They discovered that, way back, I was a member of the St John’s, and so I got myself involved as one of the instructors on the First Aid courses. We would run First Aid courses for Malays, Gurkhas and British personnel who weren’t medics, and so yes, I got involved in that and that’s what I’d be doing back in camp if I wasn’t on operations. And that was very interesting, working with the different nationalities that were up there.

Well, could we explore that a little bit more? (engine — lawnmower? — approaches and recedes) How did you find those nationalities? You’d come from Australia with no previous experience of other cultures?

No, not really, I didn’t have any other cultures. But I suppose it didn’t — they had a lot of different cultures, but I respected it. I suppose it was most probably my Christian upbringing, that in all my life I’ve tried to take people as I meet them, you know, not what other people say about them. I try to draw my own conclusions on people. But I found it very interesting, especially the regimentality that the Gurkhas had inbred into them. And yes, but I still couldn’t get over — it took me quite a while to adjust to the conditions the Malays were living under, you know.

Well, could you describe that again? Was it different from Singapore?

Yes. It was different. It seemed to be — down in Taiping and round that area it seemed to be a lot more crowded in the kampongs, and the kampongs seemed to be, I suppose I can say, more of a slum kampong. You know, they were dilapidated and I think if it wasn’t for the services that employed a lot of (sound of creaking door) the people, you know, which helped them financially, it would have been a concern. But yes, the kids were lovely (door is closed) — but all kids are, aren’t they? But yes, it must have been hard for them, and yet we often think for other cultures, but I’d like to — it wasn’t part of this service, but it’s later on which reflects back on that, and it might be time to mention it, if it’s okay with you: when I started at the Repat here and I was involved here in staff development, they were doing a nurse refresher course for staff that had been out of the slipstream for a while. And we had a lady from Malaya who hadn’t been out but she had to do the seventeen-week course, and if she passed she could be registered in South Australia. And part of the course — I used to speak to the nursing staff on war experience so they’d appreciate the background of this hospital in relationship to the veterans — and over a cup of tea this young lady said to me, ‘You seem to know a bit about Malaya,’ and I said yes, and I mentioned to her that I was involved in training the band of the 7 Malay Regiment before it went into the Congo. And she said, ‘Oh, my uncle was in that.’ So she came from there. And I mentioned about the Communist Terrorist uprising. But her report back on that was that, ‘I was a kid running around a kampong, and that was life. We never knew anything other.’ So there’s an example, you know. We often look at something and think, ‘Well, they’re having a real hard time,’ but to them that

was life, and I never found that out until many years after I'd come home, from a person, you know, (creaking furniture) that was involved in the kampong as a youngster.

Did you ever contemplate the, if you like, the British Empire culture that had been created there at all, and think of the Malays in regard to that and how could they have been kept like this? Or was that just not in your thoughts at the time?

Oh, no, you could see that definitely with the British setup, IMED[?], there's no doubt about that, and the way a lot of the — especially the way a lot of the British forces treated their *ahmas*.

You'd better tell us how do you spell *ahma* — A-H-M-A, is it?

Yes.

Who were they?

They're the — if you were married in Malaya, if you're an officer you had a cook *ahma* plus a house worker *ahma*, so you had two, but if you weren't you had a *ahma* who done your bits and pieces around your house. But they would have them working twenty-four hours a day, making them live in and do everything, and they really abused them. And yes, it's not the way that I agreed with going.

So was the Australian view quite contrary to that British view, was it?

Quite a bit, yes. But I think it also spoilt some marriages. I came home on leave and got married and took Maxine back there in 1961 — well, she was two weeks behind me — and we had to have an *ahma*, that was military regulations. And we got Penjala[?], who was a Tamil, lovely person, and she never knew much, couldn't speak English, but we enjoyed working through that with her. And Maxine would only bring her in until lunchtime each day, and the main thing she would do was my greens and especially the starched ones, you know, but Maxine still done the cooking. And Maxine done a lot of work at the local — or the military hospital, and also the local civilian hospital, because she was a qualified dental nurse at the time. And she'd also go down and write letters for people who couldn't write because of injuries. And most of the — in our area up there, the married quarters at Lake Gardens, the Australian wives would play cards all day, and because Maxine wouldn't play cards, well, 'You won't have any friends.' And I have heard that when the guys come home the wives still wanted to live in that sort of thing and they didn't want to do the housework and that sort of thing, and there's lots of pressures on marriages when they come home. But I was lucky enough I didn't have that problem at all.

What was that suburb called, Lake Gardens?

Lake Gardens, which is a little place — yes, it's married quarters set up especially for the Australian and the British area.

David, would you mind telling me then, if we could now, in some detail about your field experience, and what it was like to be there?

Yes. You had to carry everything into the 'J' or the jungle, as they called it — we nicknamed it the 'J' — and so everything that you carried — and it was very rare to have any air drops in to you so, if you were going in, you took everything and it depended on your length of time. The jungle was very thick. I reckoned you could pass somebody three foot away and wouldn't know they were there. You could quite easily hide. You couldn't — when you went out on operations, you couldn't have a decent bath in a river because the soap and the humidity, you could smell the soap downstream five or six kays, so you'd given your positions away. So they were all non-soap washes, sort of thing, and a shave without lather. So it wasn't good. You didn't wash your clothes. Sometimes you had fresh clothes dropped in to you — depended on the length of time you were there — and you had to bury your others. Though, as I said, the medical corps was supposed to have been a non-combatant corps, you were armed, and you carried a weapon — depends who you were with, attached to at the time, because I served with the New Zealanders on the Thai border, and I also spent [time] with the KOYLIs, which was a British unit, just before coming home.

What were they called, Dave?

The KOYLIs — the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. They were a British battalion. And so they would arm you because of resupply of ammunition and that sort of thing. And we had very little weapon training going to Malaya — the only prep or training I'd done was at National Service, and I never touched another weapon until I was — you know, marched into Field Ambulance the first time I was going out, and I was given a Stirling and I'd never even seen one before.

What's a Stirling?

A Stirling is an automatic sub-machine gun, very similar to the old Owen gun, except the magazine was curved, the curved magazine, it was all metal, it didn't have a wooden butt like the OMC, and you could fold the butt down into a hand grip at the front if you wanted to shorten the weapon. Fired nine mill[imetre]. So yes, so wherever you went. And when you were on operations up there you always slept with one hand there, sort of thing. You never had a real solid sleep when you were on operations, just in case you were ambushed or fired upon. And you didn't really rest until you'd get back to your own base camp at Taiping to unwind completely.

How were the operations run, David?

They would have patrols — it was all on patrol work. There was no — other than an exercise which I done before I come home, where the whole brigade moved as once, battalions were given areas to go and look after, keep patrols on. They had a base camp and they would go out from there on shorties and so forth. They would set the odd booby trap by setting out catchments of rice, hoping to catch the CTs, the Communist Terrorists. And doing that they would mainly be doing that by using some kampong in the area, so that in itself, I suppose, was putting the civilians at

risk also that were in there, that had nothing to do with the CTs except the CTs were coming in and taking away their leaders and, you know, if they had a school teacher or anybody that's educated, disposing of them one way or another — I don't know whether they were all killed or whether they were used by other means as labourers or what. But — — —.

How did you know that was happening, David?

Well, it's the reports and you'd hear that from other people in the kampongs. And of course, if you heard about — if the reports came back from a kampong that that's happened, well, naturally there'd be troops put into that area and do patrols of that area and see if they can catch up with them if they're known to be, you know, working in the area. But it's — — —.

Were the CTs mainly Chinese Malay?

Yes. They were the — I'm led to believe that they were the people that were actually working with the Brits during World War Two against the Japanese in the guerrilla warfare, and then afterwards they become their enemies, so it just shows the whole pity of war, doesn't it — who's your friend today is your foe tomorrow.

And the people in the kampongs, were they mainly Tamil, or — — —?

There was a mixture. There was the Malays, the Chinese Malay, and there's Tamils.

So on a standard operation, could you describe for us — again, in detail — exactly what was involved for you, and what might happen along the way?

Right. For me, being a medical, I had to carry my own medical equipment and that was — — —. (tape ends)

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

[So on a standard operation, could you describe for us — again, in detail — exactly what was involved for you, and what might happen along the way?

Right. For me, being a medical, I had to carry my own medical equipment and that was] in a rucksack, because you had to carry everything on your back. You had to carry all your own food, your ammunition and your water.

How much would that weight, or be involved in volume?

You'd be looking at, often, around the eighty-five pound mark that you were carrying. And it was quite heavy and quite restricted your movement through the jungle. When we first went up there we had the old thirty-seven pattern webbing, which was the stuff that was used during World War Two, but we were issued with the British forty-four, which was much superior, which made it easier to carry. I think if your webbing fits you and you're a lot better, you can carry the weights better. And you would also — when I was in charge of a section, a couple of times I

was in charge of a section of Field Ambulance when the whole battalion went out, for example, 2 New Zealand, and so we carried more gear but we spread it out amongst us — you had to be aware of where you were going so that you could, if something was to happen and you had to do emergency evacuation, the quickest and shortest route out for the people, so yes, you had to know your map reading, and your medical training, what to do in a case.

Were the tracks through the jungle established ones?

Some were and some weren't. I suppose to underline one of the examples what could happen, I mentioned the KOYLIs earlier, it was the last exercise I done, and that group of infantry or that battalion had only been there for about five weeks in Malaya, so they were just really through their acclimatisation area. And they put them on a major exercise, which I thought — and I was only an NCO anyhow — was a bit too soon, but that's all right. That was just before I come home, so I'd done my tour and had a little bit of experience. And one of the chaps — and I don't know how he got in the Army in the first place — had an epileptic fit out in the jungle and he finished up with a fracture to the base of his skull. So we had to evacuate this character out, and quickly. And I spoke to the OC and he said, 'Well, take your Field Ambulance section, take them out.' I said, 'Well, that's — no, I don't want to do that. You give me some guys to help carry [him] — you've still got to have your medical coverage.' And only two of us went, medics went, with this guy. And for that particular exercise, the Australian battalion had cut through tracks from a kampong to the reassembling area of the brigade, and the OC was going to leave a guide at the kampong for us to pick up on these tracks. So we got the evacuation and we finished up, we got to a large kampong area where there were some Field Force police that were able to call in the chopper and we got this chap out and evacuated him and then we got back to the kampong and it was dark, and there was no guide left. And I had a young British officer with me, and it was his first time, and then he started to — wasn't quite sure what to do. And I said, 'Well, let's sleep.' I said, 'The guides have told me to have a look around in the morning, see if we can find the track.' We didn't find the tracks, so I said, 'Okay, we compass march.' I knew where they were supposed to have got to each stage, I had the compass bearings to match. And apparently, afterwards we discovered that the battalion had got through that kampong area, they forgot to leave a guide, but they never got to the area they were supposed to [have] made on that leg, and we would have passed them by about seventy-five yards to the side, because we done a straight bearing. We got to the reassembling area something like eighteen hours before the battalion, but what made it awkward for them, I suppose, was the fact that the OC discovered he forgot us, reported it to Brigade Headquarters, and then there was a panic that there was a section of KOYLIs missing and they set up spotter 'planes and so forth. And we were told at the start to treat all 'planes as enemy, so we took cover. And that was what went on. But we got to the reassembling area. So that was my (laughs) last exercise in Malaya. But there are some silly things done at times just through forgetting.

Were you involved in any actions at all, Dave?

Yes, on the Thai border in about late 1960. It was one of these kampongs where they'd set up some rice to get involved with the CT, and it backfired a bit. Instead of us ambushing them, they ambushed us. And yes, it was something I haven't really

talked about — I haven't even discussed it with Maxine. It's things you put at the back of your mind, the result of that. But it still comes —

....., David.

— yes, you try to — I don't think you deliberately do it, but you put things to the back of your mind. And I was only saying to somebody here a couple of months back, because, you know, I'm one of the volunteers at the Repat museum, which we record diaries and so forth, and I was saying that what I like about the diaries from World War One and World War Two [is that] they were written at the time. Often we tend to, when we retire, say, 'Let's write about our experiences,' and they may not be factual in the way — — —. The reason I say that is that this particular ambush that went wrong, about eighteen months come back — from the back of my mind, which I'd forgotten all about it — well, I thought I had. And I could remember having to take cover, not knowing if anybody was hit around the other side of the ambush or whatever. You're trying to protect yourself and also protect the troops that were with you. And I was trying to remember who else was involved, and I couldn't remember them all. So I'd say that, if I was to record that today in writing, I may mention somebody that wasn't involved or miss somebody out that was, so therefore it wouldn't be factual history. But I can well assure you that you grow up very quick when you get in those situations. You, afterwards — we were lucky enough, we got out of it without any fatalities, and actually without anybody with gunshot wounds, but there were injuries where people took cover and wherever they jumped. You didn't look for a nice soft landing, you just jumped behind whatever was there. So there was some injuries. But we were one of the lucky ones. But even that, you stop and think, 'What am I doing here? Would I have really shot that guy if he'd come out?' The things that you didn't finish it, but you'd be actually killing somebody or attempting to kill somebody. And I suppose what you do is you're looking at the gun, and I suppose if the gun was pointing at me and I could see the person with the gun, well, yes, I would have shot to kill. I did fire rounds involved in that. It lasted for about forty-five minutes. And then there's the apprehension when we're doing the head count to see if everybody was there and everybody was all right. And I think that forty-five minutes, I grew about thirty-five years.

The terrain on the Thai border was mountainous?

Yes, very mountainous, very junglefied, very thick. Yes, it's very close contact. For example, the long barrel rifles were a hindrance. You had great difficulty, you couldn't swing them around because the barrels were too — that's the normal SLR, which was the Australian weapon at the time, and that's why a lot of them went for the OMCs and so forth. But yes, it's mountainous. And of course you take cover and you've got all this gear on your back, and you try to roll that off so you can move quicker through the — you know, if you've got to make a dash for it — get rid of all your surplus weight, still hanging onto your supply of ammunition and rations. So yes.

Dressed in jungle green?

Yes, in jungle greens, with canvas boots which weren't much cop to you because, if they done any booby trapping around, the rubber-soled canvas boot was just — you know, gave no protection for you. But the reason we were using those was the fact when you're walking through rivers and that they dried out very quickly so you had less footrot and that sort of thing, which often the other boots caused. So yes, we were in jungle greens. There was no flak jackets or anything like that.

And tropical rainforest conditions?

Yes, it was, it was during the wet season. And I know that it was — you know, that particular day we'd had quite a bit of rain overnight, everything was wet and slippery, and then that afternoon, in about an hour after the — in about, oh, about twenty minutes after that skirmish, we had the normal afternoon rain came in, and I suppose in about an hour or so we had three or four inches of rain.

So that's (laughs) seventy-five to a hundred mils in pretty quick time.

Yes. And that's enough, without guys that were bruised, and we had a couple of sprained ankles and things like that, and you're trying to get out of the place. It would have been hard on those that were injured.

So is this just your medical unit that's affected, or — — —?

No. We had a section of Field Ambulance attached, but there was — all up, there was a platoon of what's-the-names, so all up, in the skirmish there would have been approximately sixty-five, seventy people.

David, if I've sort of heard it right, the idea of the ambush from at least the British-led side was to plant rice —

Yes.

— in a kampong —

Kampong.

— or former kampong —

Yes.

— because the CTs were pretty hungry —

Yes.

— I assume. They'd come to get the rice and then be fired on. Would that be — — —?

Yes, that was the idea. We would set up an ambush. But somehow or other they found out and we were setting up the ambush when they hit us.

So you were in an open area?

Yes, we were just in the kampong area there. And then we broke out of that area, of course, as soon as we can for our own protection. And it doesn't take long to step out of a kampong to be into the jungle area, because they don't clear for hundreds of yards around. You'd come across the jungle, then what we classed as secondary jungle where it's all grown back again, with the kampong in the centre of it. So it's not like being in a paddy field or anything like that.

Could you tell where the firing's coming from pretty quickly?

It's a bit awkward when you can see it coming around in about three hundred and sixty degrees, because when you set up ambushes you try to cover the whole radius. So yes, we were really lucky to get out of that.

I gather that the CTs were very well trained as far as their knowledge of the jungle went.

Yes.

But their use of weapons was pretty ineffective at times. (laughs)

Yes, but then again you got the guys — see, you've got to look at this, too, is that the jungle they knew like the palm of their hand. You look at the length of the war, and most of those Communist Terrorists were in from the start to the finish. With the battalions of the allied forces, they were up there two years at a time. Twelve months of that I think — I believe, anyhow, talking from my own experience — was being acclimatised and getting used to the terrain and that, so you're really efficient, a hundred per cent efficient, for twelve months only of that two-year term, whereas the Communist Terrorists just carried on their efficiency. And I think that's what prolonged the war so long. It didn't seem to be the situation of, for an example, the unit I went to, we were going out in dribs and drabs. It wasn't, you know, which wasn't so bad, because we had a nucleus of chaps with experience to pass on the experience to the newcomers. But with the battalions, when you're changing a complete battalion over and leaving just a few logistic people to do the handover, you've lost a lot of your expertise. But it's only through the New Zealanders that we got out of that ambush. Those guys really knew what they were doing and they got us out of it.

So they'd been there for some time?

Yes. They were, they were a nice bunch of groups, yes. But they also, that particular day, they were very well-trained, very well-disciplined, and it was their efforts that there was no — you know, and they protected us. Because they're the experts with the weapons. Because you've got a weapon in your hand it doesn't make you an expert, but the infantry guys are trained and they are. All you are is an extra bit of scare power at times, yes.

Was there a difference in the techniques that the Australians or New Zealanders used, as against the British?

I don't know so much about the techniques, as such, but I think the depth of professionalism, the New Zealanders and the Australians were well in front because of their training, and they were all regulars — they'd taken on the Army as a career — whereas a lot of the British were under the National Service Scheme. And that's not taking from our own National Service guys that served in Vietnam, because I reckon they done an excellent job, but on the Malayan front I think they were, because a lot of the National Service guys that were attached to — you know, in the unit I was in, they just didn't want to be there, so instead of saying, 'Okay, I'm here for x amount of time, let's get in and get it over and done with, I'll make the best of it,' in most cases that didn't happen with the British National Servicemen.

In what ways did they show their lack of appreciation of being there?

They didn't seem to want to progress in their training. There was, you know, the opportunities there for them to be promoted, get further up the ranks and so forth, which meant a little bit extra money for them, and that sort of thing, but they didn't seem interested in doing that. It meant taking on some responsibility so no, they weren't really interested in that, they just wanted to get home, and if they could work a way out to get home before their time was up, well, a lot of them would take that. And yet, again, you would find some exceptional National Servicemen that said, 'Okay, I'm in, I'm representing my country and I'll do the best I can for it.'

With your own side of medical help and the people who worked with you, what was the most common thing you were called to do? What type of injuries were you finding?

Most of them were bone breaks or bad lacerations. And I was very lucky. One of the — there was a Brit National Serviceman who was a medical officer and a lovely guy — Maxi used to — he demobbed in Malaya and he migrated to Australia, him and his wife. His wife was also a doctor.

What were their names, Dave?

Steele [?], Dick and Janet Steele. And Janet came out when Dick got posted to Malaya and she worked at the Taiping Hospital, and she had six degrees, and when she offered her time voluntarily, you know, the Taiping General Hospital just grabbed her, the General Hospital, because if you were one of the locals and went to the Taiping Hospital and were admitted, all you would get is your medical treatment. The family had to come and feed you, the family had to wash you, the family had to bring in the linen and everything for your bed, and to get somebody with the training that *she* had was just amazing. And there were some of us at the Field Ambulance would go and volunteer a day here and there, and they just welcomed you with open arms. But Dick said to me one day, we were talking there — we were both off-duty and we'd only just finished and we were having a beer, which you shouldn't be on, you shouldn't be having a beer with officers, but Dick just repelled that sort of thing, he was one of the boys — and we were just talking

generally, and we're talking about the training the Australians get, like the Med. Assists were much more advanced than what they were getting with the Brits. And he said, 'But what you need to know is how to do suturing,' he said. And he says, 'So I'll teach you if you like.' I said, 'Okay.' So he actually picked up a piece of fruit which was about the size of an orange and he threw it on the ground the same as you would with an orange — you know how it will split everywhere — and he said, 'Now stitch it up.' And it gives you the tension on the skin and of the flesh and that sort of thing, because if you put the tension wrong you can pull through the skin and that. So he taught me suturing, which I found very handy in the scrub or in the J, because all you could do otherwise was to use butterflies, which were like little Elastoplast band-aids and try to hold the wound together. So you were — which helped save some infections. But that was most of the sort of things. You occasionally had to chopper somebody out that was badly injured and in most cases then you had to cut an LZ, a landing zone, which wasn't — and that was often — that could be five kilometres from where the accident happened, because you'd pick where the scrub's not so thick, because to clear an area for a helicopter in the jungle's not easy. But yes, so fractures and lacerations would be the most situations.

With the lacerations in those tropical conditions, infections would set in pretty quickly?

Yes. Yes, it would, that was one of the things up there with any infection, you know, up there. And so you would — you know, when you cleaned the wound and that sort of thing you would have to, if the location permitted, you would actually boil water to do it, because even though you used these tablets and so forth to make water drinkable and that sort of thing it didn't work on all cases, because if the river water — if there's water rats round you were open to leptospirosis, which was caused through water rats urinating in the water. So therefore the only way to get through that was boil it. So I always had a supply of boiled water for wound washing, for that sort of thing, so you would clean them up the best you can and suture if required. I wouldn't be doing any deep muscular suturing, but if it's a flesh thing, then yes, I would.

So were there any times where there were really quite dramatic actions and people were killed or badly wounded that you came across?

I wasn't involved with anybody that was killed, but injuries — going back to this last exercise again, and I suppose it really underlines how it can happen — we were going, it was classed as an air portability exercise, and it was where the whole brigade was going into action. Never had enough aircraft, so we had Studebakers marked as aircraft, and we went going down by road — Studebaker trucks were the aircraft. And we stopped outside KL on the pass, there was a pass going into Kuala Lumpur, and it was a place the convoy would never stop. And I had this gut feeling, 'Why are we stopped, what's wrong?' I pulled my vehicle out and I went down the road and found out that a truckload of Australians had been put over the side of the pass and the truck had rolled down the bottom of the ravine. So I sent the chap who was in the vehicle with me back to get the section down, and a result of this being — it was a very serious accident. The Gurkha driver who was driving the vehicle was badly burnt, and he was burnt ninety-eight per cent of his body. The only part of him that he wasn't burnt was his groin. The Australian officer in the front of the

truck was also badly burnt. We finished up with seven back injuries with queried fractured spines — I don't know the results of X-rays and that with those. We didn't have enough ambulance vehicles to handle it because we only had [ambulances with] a bit of a stretcher frames and each one of those Land Rovers could only take two people. So I requested and got a truck emptied and they emptied a truck off and we put them in, and it was actually at this site that I got my fingers rapped. We had a National Service chap with us, medical officer — and I won't mention his name — who was involved there, and he just stood on the side of the road, I think he'd never seen anything like it.

He was British?

He's British, and he didn't know what to do, and I just went into action. I administered morphine — we had stillettes[?] of morphine, looks like a tube of toothpaste with a needle in. You could undo them, they were all sterile, and squeeze them in. And those that required morphine and it's medically right to do so, I gave it to them and recorded it. So when we'd cleared the area and got them in the truck and that, I said to the medical officer that I was taking the whole section through to BMH Kenrara[?], which was the British Military Hospital in Kuala Lumpur. He said, 'You can't take the section,' and I said, 'Well, I'm sorry, they can't handle this influx. We'll go,' I said, 'and if we put them in where they want them and let them get on with their work.' He said, 'You can't do it.' I left the medical officer standing on the side of the road, so he charged me for insubordination and, as he put it, 'illegal use of morphine'. But I was qualified to issue morphine. And the result of that was that the charge sheet was torn up by the commanding officer, the British commanding officer, and the medical officer got posted to another unit. But sadly, both the Gurkha and the Australian officer died days later.

From the burns trauma?

From the burns one, yes, those that got burns. So the two died, that was the only two deaths, but it could have been more serious than that. I don't know the final outcome of the troops that were in the back of the truck that we evacuated and that there, whether any of those finished up being medically discharged from the Australian forces.

David, you've mentioned morphine. What other drugs did you have at your disposal at the time you were working in Malaya?

Mainly you carried your morphine, your normal analgesics, stuff that can be used for coughs and colds and diarrhoea and that sort of thing, your sulphurs, and they were all done up in a pack in little aluminium tubes, and you were trained what you would use for what, and of course checking to make sure nobody was allergic to sulphas.

That's S-U-L-[P-H]-A.

Yes.

So you had sulphas. Did you have penicillin?

No, I didn't, but the medical officer carried penicillin if you were lucky enough to have a medical officer with you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B: TAPE 2 SIDE A

[Tape ID comments]

David, we've been talking about the types of illnesses and injuries that affected troops, and we've gone through that horrific situation at the accident where the truck rolled over the embankment and the fellows were both burnt and had terrible back injuries. But some of what might be called (laughs) more mundane illnesses — although they're not mundane — you mentioned the gastric illnesses. Was that as a result of food or water?

Yes, most of it's caused through water. The food was — what we got wasn't bad when you're on operations because they were one-man ration packs and they were processed in cans and that sort of thing so you would heat them or even eat them cold out of the tins. But no, meals were pretty well-balanced with that. And back at camp, well, if you're on fresh things you can always get a chance of something not being (laughs) right — you know, because something's gone off like a banana or something in a custard or something, but really that wasn't that way so much.

Other than operations, what type of food were you served at camp?

Fresh rations. We were on — because we were attached to a British unit, we actually got paid an extra nine-and-three a day, because the British ration scale wasn't the same as the Australians'. They used to tend to go for more potatoes and that sort of thing, whereas we had a lot more meats in our ration scale — well, we did have, anyhow, those times. So we got given that extra dough that we could supplement our meals. But they'd be the normal meals that you have. Chicken and savaloys. Oh, breakfast, there'd be about eight different sorts of spuds on your plate for breakfast, and that put me off the first morning. But no, the meals were generally quite — — —.

(laughs) Eight different types of spuds!

Yes. They reckon there's a hundred ways of cooking a spud, and the Brits can only do it ninety-nine, and the hundredth way is edible, and they can't do it that way. (laughter) But they'd have them mashed and they'd have them chipped and they'd have them baked and they'd have them boiled and — you know, just a variety of them on the — — —. And that's what they made a living on, was the — — —.

Fritters and everything.

Yes. (laughs) Seeing them all on the plate for breakfast first time I went for breakfast there, the first morning, that was — I wondered what I'd struck! (laughs)

So they had cooked breakfast?

Yes, in camp, yes. Cooked breakfast. You had cooks. And we had one cook with us who was an Australian, but he was cook in the officers' mess so we never seen him. He should have been cooking for us, but — Paddy White from Tasmania, he was a great cook and that's why the officers grabbed him and wouldn't let — — —. Paddy thought it was all right because he was getting free beer and everything else too. (laughter) Keep him happy.

The officers ate better than the regular troops?

I don't know so much. They paid more, they paid mess fees to bring it up. I think the big difference is that they have wines with their meals and that sort of thing, you know, the upper class sort of thing, as there was class in those days, but it doesn't make much difference. If you look at — as far Australians are concerned, you look at the ration scale as per person. Whatever it is you'd all get it. But if you're paying mess fees to supplement with something a bit different, so you can have caviar or something, that's, you know — — —.

I'll just get back to the (laughs) illness side of things in a minute, but on the diet currently — you mentioned about wine being served in the officers' mess. Was there much of a problem with alcohol in Malaya?

Not really. Not really. You know, you didn't — you'd relax when you're on leave, I suppose, and have a couple of beers, extra beers or something, but I didn't see it as a concern in the unit I was in. Okay, it was somebody's birthday, you know, they might let their hair down a bit, but in most cases there wasn't — I didn't see it as a concern. But most people, I would say, would at least have a beer a day, which at home they mightn't have a beer a day. You'd generally go to the mess and, you know — or to whatever club you're with, whether you'd be at the corporals' club or the sergeants' mess or the officers' mess — and you'd have a drink.

Did you ever try local food, indigenous food?

Oh yes, the *naherns*[?] and the *beherns*[?] and that sort of thing, yes. You would only go for the stuff that's really cooked, and we talk about Chinese meals today, don't we — don't take it home in doggy bags. But that was good. Most interesting, I think — you might be interested in talking about foods. I done part of a jungle survival course and I was given this plate of meat to eat, and it tasted a little bit like — a little bit more richer than chicken, between a goose and a chicken, I suppose. And it was only after I'd tried some of this meat that they told us what — all of us tried it — what it was, and it was actually monkey. They didn't leave a little arm lying on the plate or anything like that, but it was done to let you know that they are edible, and if you're out in the jungle and if you've got nothing to eat, well, it's good to know what *is* around. And there were plenty of monkeys. So yes, I have eaten monkey, which was a bit of a strange — — —.

Were they the smaller type of monkeys that are in Singapore?

Yes, yes, the smaller ones, yes. So it's — so yes. But the other food was good. Actually, I liked the local food up there, the way they cooked, and when I come

home to Australia afterwards I couldn't eat the Chinese meals and that here because there's so much substitutes in it. But now it's different, because they grow a lot of it here now, and of course by air they can fly it fresh and you get it here. But yes, often, way back, I think they used to use cabbage stalks often for bamboo shoots here. But once you try it up there and get on the actual stuff, with no substitutes in it, it's beautiful.

So you had that regular contact with the locals, did you?

Yes. Yes. Yes, at Taiping — Taiping was quite a big city — well, not that you'd class it as a city — it had bitumised roads and all that sort of thing. And we had on camp, we had an Indian bloke there that had a hut set up where you could go and have a meal, sort of thing, if you wanted some supper or something like that and they'd cook that up for you, or you could go into the markets in town. And you might go to the markets and you might have a bit of leave, you'd go into the markets in town, you might have a beer at the hotel and go down the markets for a feed. But you would always have — the rule of thumb was, have hot food.

David, tell me about the markets in Taiping, the whole feel of the place.

Well, it's (pause) — it was the first place I thought we could learn something from. Fish, for an example: even today, we go to our fish markets here in Adelaide and there's the fish laid in the fridge with ice around him, or whatever, all gutted and cleaned. In Taiping, there's your fish swimming around in a pond. So you say, 'I'll have that one,' so you knew it was fresh. Your crabs were the same, and they'd actually tie the crabs up, their claws and their hands[?] are back, and you'd have a half a dozen like a handbag, and you could walk them home, take them home and cook them, so your crabs were fresh. And if you had chicken, well, the chicken was fresh, and they would dress the chicken there and then for you. Because you wouldn't buy anything in the market that was just, you know, any chickens that had been pre-done and hanging up there, because there's likely to be anything in them. But if you done them, if you wanted some chicken from the market, you could select your live one and you watched them clean it and you took it home.

Apart from the food side, what else was for sale?

Oh, you had all your different silk shirts and ties and clothing and knick-knacks and watches and cameras. Lot of the guys in camp, if they wanted to do something on an afternoon and they were off, they'd often go to the bazaar area of the market and you'd barter. And they'd spend some time bartering down to get an article at a price they wanted, and the guy agrees, and they'd say, 'Oh, we don't want it now.' But that's filled the afternoon (laughs) for a couple of hours while they bartered, you know! It was a bit of a bartering sport, it was a bit of a way of passing time. But no, there was some good stuff up there — and then, of course, there was some shoddy stuff. We had a —

Cheap?

— yes, cheap, yes. We had a tailor in camp and he was very good. He would make you made-to-measure stuff.

So would he bring his bolts of fabric in?

Oh yes, he'd have that all there, he had it set up and you'd go and select what you want and he'd make them and measure you up. Matter of fact, I got him to make a suit for me when I come home, before I come home, and some shirts. And the only thing they couldn't do — well, *he* couldn't do, anyhow — they couldn't make buttonholes. So they'd sew the buttons on as normal but they'd have press studs at the back, so that it was all press-studded down and it appears that they were buttoned, and all they were press studs with a button, you know, in the front but no buttonholes. So they didn't do buttonholes.

I've never heard of that. (laughs)

Yes. So it was amazing.

So what was your appreciation of that local culture — or lack of?

It taught me to be thankful what you've got and what you get. It also taught me the joys of sharing, sharing with people who haven't got what you've got. They seem to be a stronger family binding in their culture than there's often in our cultures today, I believe here in Australia, because they've got to work together to survive. And it's there. And yes, so it's — and I think it came back, what did come back when I seen this [was] my grandmother. And I often think of the saying she told me when I was a kid, and I don't know why she told me. We often — because, as I said earlier, there was eight kids in the family — we often got hand-me-downs at Christmas, it might be a bike that was my brother's has been painted up for me or something like that. And I must have said something, because Grandma said to me, 'Be thankful for anything you get, because — — —.' And the saying she told me was: 'I complained because I had no shoes, until I saw a person with no feet to wear them.' And this was so reinforced in Malaya and it stuck to me throughout life, and I think because of that I've made so many friends — I don't put people in little boxes. They're all humans and they've all got so much to offer.

David, with Malay people, was there any consciousness on your part of them suffering under the CTs, or were they like the little girl you mentioned a while back, who just — it was life.

Well, if you see somebody crying their eyes out because her husband or her eldest son's been taken away and she doesn't know if she'll ever see them again, that's suffering. So there was suffering. But the little ones, apparently the CTs wouldn't do anything with the kids. Later on in life, if this person lived to later on, it may have affected her as she got older, but of course if she was a kid running around in '61, she — and of course it was all over before she would have been a teenager — so I don't know. It may have changed her life later on, as she got older.

David, was it '60 or '61 you returned to Australia to marry?

I came back in early ’61 on leave and got married, and took — well, as I said, Maxine was a fortnight behind me.

Now, when you came back to Australia, were you asked questions about what you’d been doing? Were people interested? Or was there just no reporting?

Oh, no. They were interested, my friends and so forth, in the CYF, which was the Congregational Youth Fellowship, which I was a member of beforehand, and matter of fact we had an evening when I come home, and we spoke about it, and I cooked, I prepared a *nasi goreng* that night so they could all try some Malay cooking. And I brought home some of their coffee — the coffee was beautiful, it was like velvet in texture to drink. It was just beautiful. So no, they were interested. And even talking to Maxine before she went up there and trying to explain to her that it will be a shock when she sees kampongs and the way some of the locals have to live and are forced to live, and she didn’t — it was still a great shock to her when she got up there, even though she was definitely pre-warned of some of it. But yes, it was — — —.

Did you talk to your parents about life there?

Yes, I spoke to Mum and Dad about it. I don’t think there was interest from the family side of it as there was on Maxine’s side of the family. That may have been the fact that their daughter was going up into that area, and is it a safe place to take her, sort of thing. And if I didn’t think it was safe enough for her up there, you know, back in the Taiping area, I would never have taken her, because when I got the posting there was the opportunity — we could have got married before I went up there and I didn’t want to do that and I wanted to see what it was like, because I (telephone rings) felt too much about Maxine to risk a marriage. And it’s worked out great because we’ve been married forty-one years and still together — it’s lovely. (laughs)

David, there were plenty of other wives up there, you said —

Yes.

— and did that — were they all Australians or New Zealand, British?

A mixture. Yes. If you were a regular Army person in the Brits, you — because they move all around the place in the British Army, the Rhine and so forth — you got married quarters and your wife went with you. If you were an Australian or a Kiwi, you could take your wife with you if you were serving more than twelve months. I still had fourteen months to serve when we got married, so Maxine was up there for approximately fourteen months — well, it was a bit over, actually.

Was it different for you returning again?

Going up there? No. I was excited because the fact being that I could get out of camp when I had duties — if I was off of a nighttime, I was not on duty, I could go home, go home and share some time with my wife, which was different to being in camp all

the time. Living in a twenty-bed dormitory, sort of thing, and no privacy. Yes, so I was looking forward to it.

Look, one thing I'd like to ask you, which is aside from the personal marital side with Maxine and your companionship, is more to do — coming back — with your experiences in operations. And you mentioned earlier the medical officer who (laughs) made life difficult for you, but the charges were torn up. Did you have many issues at all with the chain of command, or did you just see — normally, did it work well?

Normally it worked well. I think, really, giving this chap the benefit of the doubt, I think he was just shocked and didn't know how to handle it, and that was the situation. And, as I was saying, it was just before I was due to come home, it was the last exercise I done. I think this was in about — I think in about five weeks after this I was on my way home, my tour of duty had finished.

This would be 1962.

Yes, it was in '62 that this happened. So yes. But no, I got on extremely well with my respected rank, and that's the way it works. But I also took on the responsibility of my patients and that's what it was in this situation as far as I was concerned, it was the only thing I could do for the benefit of the patients. You couldn't just put a heap of guys in the back of a truck and send them off with no medical coverage. If any of these guys started to vomit or haemorrhage on the way back, somebody's got to be there to, you know, to control that haemorrhage or to assist them. And that was — they came first, and that was all there was to it. So I made that decision and I took the section with them, and I said, 'We will support these guys', and we went. And my own OC was — he complimented the whole section, but I was the only Australian with the section; the rest of them were all Brits. They gave me a British section for that exercise. So yes, it's — that's what it's all about, isn't it?

David, off the tape we were talking a little about a sortie that you were about to be involved with that didn't eventuate — that was to do with some action on the Laotian border.

Yes. That was a bit of a shock, caused a little bit of trauma, I suppose. Maxine had been in Malaya about a month and we were — the brigade was given mobilisation orders to stand by to move into Laos. And there was a lot of action, and in twelve hours there were so many vehicles being repaired and coming out of workshops, I think they put more vehicles out in twenty-four hours than they had done in about six months previous. The Australian battalion was up at the Thai border, it took them three days to fly them in but it only took them twenty-four hours to fly them out, and we were all mobilised to go into Laos. And we were — the advance party, some of the advance party — because under law we couldn't leave from Malaya itself; we had to go down to the state of Singapore — that was under the SEATO agreements.

That's S-E-A-T-O.

Yes, the South-East Asia Treaty Organization. And so the advance party of our unit had gone down on its way to Singapore then it was called back, and then it was on again, off again — the old story: greatcoats on, greatcoats off. In the end it resulted that we didn't go into Laos, and in hindsight we discovered that the Brits didn't want to be involved in Laos. I think it may have had some effect on the Vietnam War and that whole area, because by making that move and not doing anything, we did demonstrate to the Viet Cong and so forth in that area that sooner or later they're going to get outside interference. So they got themselves a little bit more organized for a couple of years, and in about '63 it all started to go mad again. So yes, that could have — it may have shown a bit of — may have been a different outcome, and I don't want to go into the politics of it because I'm not that educated in the politics of war in that respect.

Prior to this Laotian incident, had the incursions of the CTs lessened at all, and was it trailing off for Malaya?

Yes, it was trailing off. Yes, we were getting to the end of it. We had it just about beat. It was just after that that they had the celebrations of — I can remember driving down to Penang and went over this big bridge on the highway with a big banner with 'Victory Over Communism', and they had celebrations at Penang and so forth at the — what they classed the end of the Emergency, though they still had patrols and so forth out to make sure that the — mopping up, sort of thing, or whatever, and there wasn't a resurgence. But yes, that was just after that, sort of thing, yes.

Are there any other memorable incidents from your time in Malaya, David, that you can recall at this stage?

Yes, the friends you make stop with you. We had a lovely — we've got lovely friends in England, Bob and Phyllis, and they — Bob got posted to the unit as the British pay sergeant. The day he got posted his wife took very ill and was put in a BMH commanding[?] and isolated, they didn't know what was wrong with her. And he had a little eleven month-old child. And Bob had no *amah* or anything at the time, and the RSM wouldn't give him leave, and 'You've got to do the pay,' sort of thing. And nobody in the unit, you know, the British personnel, offered to help him. And I went home, and Maxine's got the gift of being able to pick me if I'm not happy, and she said, 'What's the matter?' I said, 'These Brits,' and I said about Bob, and she said, 'Do you know where he is, where he lives?' I said, 'Yes, I've got a fair idea.' So we went down to the British quarters and we found Bob. So we finished up, we looked after Julie. Bob would drop her off during the day and he'd come and have tea with us and bath Julie and then take her home and then drop her off the next morning, and a great friendship's built up. And we ring each other, you know, quite a few times throughout the year and we had Bob out a couple of years ago, but it was only a short time, he was only here for just under three weeks, but he's planning to come out for twelve months. But he's got a bit of cancer which looks like they've got it under control at the moment, so another six months or so Bob could be out. But when he went home from Malaya, he got posted to the British Army at the Rhine and he lost our address, and all the letters we were writing came back. And through the Red Cross Missing Persons' Bureau he found us, because that's what the friendship meant to him, and renewed it. That was good, because all the letters we

had back — we had a shoebox full — we sent them all over to him as parcel post and said, 'You can catch up what we were saying.' But it's lovely, and all their kids and that write to us, and his grandkids, and we're classed as uncle and auntie, you know. It's really lovely.

Did his wife survive that?

Yes, she survived that, yes. Phyllis is still alive. Actually, we were only talking to them about a fortnight ago. And they're both retired now. But Bob's still 'saving his pennies up', as he said, to come out. And yes, it's great.

Well, what about your Australian colleagues, David?

Yes. I haven't seen much of them over the last few years because they were all over — all throughout Australia. It wasn't like during World War Two, where battalions were raised in different states and so forth. We had a mixture. There was only one other South Australian that was in the unit when I was up there. There was a couple of others down the battalion, but there was only Graham Hatchard[?], and I don't think Graham's with us any more — I heard a whisper that he'd passed on, but I don't know that he has or not.

David, you finish your tour of duty up there and it's been — what? — two years, pretty much?

Yes, just over two years, it was, yes.

Coming back to Australia, you said when you returned, before you married Maxine, that there was an interest, particularly amongst your youth group friends. Were Australians thinking more about Asia by the time you got back, or is that something you can't recall?

No, I don't think so. There seemed to be — you know, they were still interested when we came home, you know, what Maxine thought and what we'd done, but there wasn't a big interest. I don't — no, wasn't a big interest. People still didn't know what went on up there. Matter of fact, I can remember going to as family reunion on Maxine's side of the family, and I wore my Return from Active Service badge I had on that night on my sports coat, and one of the South Australian top judges who's now died, who was related to Maxine, took me aside and said, 'You know it's an offence to wear that badge when you're not entitled to it?' And I said, 'I'm sorry, but it's been issued and it's an entitlement.' So there was that level: they had no idea that there was troops on active service in Malaya, and it was an active service situation.

And this was a judge?

This was a judge. So back here there was a lot of people didn't realise, and still don't realise, that — you know, it's very rare do you get, even amongst the RSL when they talk about South-East Asia, or you get these speakers who talk about Anzac and that, the forces — you know, they mention Korea a bit more now because of the

anniversary that took place, but that was the 'lost war', the forgotten war, and Malaya was the same. So really there's a lot think that nothing's happened since World War Two until Vietnam.

I wanted to ask you about the RSL's attitude, David, and I don't mean this to be jaundiced or anything — how did they treat you, as a returning veteran?

Well, that was no problems, you could join the local club and that was okay once you had your Return from Active Service badge, you had that, because they're all numbered. And also you had your medal. Actually, the General Service medal, which was the Imperial issue for Malaya, they were issued to us while we were still up there — once we'd completed the set amount of service you got them up there — so there was your proof. And the RSL check on your — anyhow, they would have to check, it's only natural. Anybody could walk in off the street otherwise, unless you do some documentary evidence that you have actually seen the service and join up as a full member. But no, they were okay. There was no problems in the RSL I went to, and as I move around the countryside, you know, always welcomed at the RSLs.

So they were welcoming.

Yes.

Did they talk to you about what you'd experienced?

Yes, they were interested in Malaya. A lot of them said, 'Well, we didn't know, don't know anything about it — didn't even know we had troops up there.' So yes.

And I suppose some of those had actually been in very similar parts of the world in their World War Two service.

Yes, that's right, a lot of the chaps. And this is where today, when I talk to specially some of those that were taken — — —. (tape ends)

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A: TAPE 2 SIDE B

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Yes, that's right, a lot of the chaps. And this is where today, when I talk to specially some of those that were taken] at the Fall of Singapore, a lot of those returned POWs, and we can talk about the terrain and different areas, and I appreciate when they talk about the conditions they had to live under and that — you know, the tropics and thickness of the jungle and what they fought under and that — and I can

appreciate that sort of terrain and what they went through. And they appreciate my side too, I think, yes.

David, just thinking — it's only just a handful of years after you return that the Vietnam conflict explodes and that has a major impact on Australia. Do you think the experience you had in Malaya and others had in Korea impacted on Australia at all?

No. The reason being, I think (pause) — no, it didn't, on a lot of Australians it didn't have an impact. And I think the reason being that, if we have a look at World War One, World War Two, quickly, that there wouldn't have been a family that didn't have somebody involved in that. It might be an uncle or a nephew, but all families were involved. We then have a look at Malaya and Korea, it didn't touch a lot of families. And then when we went to Vietnam, which became the National Service war, you know, it affected everybody a lot more because they didn't know whether their marble was going to come up and everything else, and it's a lot of others, you know. And if you're lucky enough — — —. And also it became the lounge-room war, it showed the horrors of war, because whatever happened this morning was on the telly tonight. And the sad thing is that, as I see, is they took it out on the soldier, not the pollies — you know, these guys that come home for a bit of leave and they'd be spat upon or blood thrown over them, or red paint. So yes, it had a great effect on them. But as far as Malaya and Korea, people didn't know about it and it didn't affect very many families.

Were you out of the Army by the time the Vietnam moratoriums and that type of thing happened?

Only just, yes. I came home and I served another two years with the armoured regiment as a medical personnel, and then I finished my time, but I was on the regular Army Emergency Reserve, so any time in the next five years I could have been called up for Vietnam. So what I did do is I joined the Reserve, and I think really that if I hadn't joined the Reserve I would have been itching to get back in again, because I did enjoy my term in the regular Army. And the only reason I got out was the fact being our eldest daughter — I had one child then — and at one stage I had three postings in twelve months. As I mentioned earlier, my education I had to fight for and do it at night school, and I always said to myself that 'I'll educate my kids, and then if I can get them a good education then it's up to them from there on. I can't guarantee jobs for them' — nobody can these days. And that was the reason I got out, because you go from state to state and the education scheme changes, so that was the only reason I got out. But being in the Reserve, which I stayed in for — oh, about fifteen-odd years after coming out of the regular Army, it kept me out of the regular Army. (laughter)

David, in hindsight, what are the lasting memories of your participation in the Malayan campaign?

I feel strongly that it was worth it, it was for the benefit of the country. For me myself, it gave me a greater appreciation of humanity and how fragile humanity is.

It's given me an insight of never to take anything for granted, things can change too quick, and to appreciate life. And most of all I think it's deepened my faith.

You mean your Christian faith?

My Christian faith, very much so. And it's helped me to take people as they are. I believe we today tend to put too many people into little boxes. You know, you can look at people that have got many, many disabilities — physical disabilities or mental disabilities — and those people have still got things to offer if only you put the disabilities aside and look at people's abilities. Everybody's got gifts and a talent that they can share. And we have — Maxine and I have — a lot to do with people with disabilities, and get a lot of enjoyment and made a lot of love and a lot of friendship out of it. And I think really that's from seeing how Malaya was and people were hard up, and yet these people still kept smiling and they still kept supporting each other. So they had an inner strength that back home in Australia we didn't need, because we were and we are still the lucky country, and often we take too much for granted.

If you hadn't been to Malaya, David, you wouldn't have ever seen, perhaps, that Asian experience at the time you did before they became developed countries.

That's right, that's right.

Were you aware of the Colombo Plan at the time?

Yes. Yes, I can remember doing a little bit on the Colombo Plan at school, it talked about it, but it was a great shock to see this diesel locomotive pulling an old, you know, an old sleeper (laughs) with just wooden bunks out of history. The old and the new, definitely.

Were you aware that students were coming in from Malaya and Singapore into Adelaide?

Yes, they were doing then exchange, yes, and the exchange was getting people learning under the Colombo Scheme.

So what are the enduring pictures you have of that part of Malaya that you were in, in the kampongs and that type of situation?

The enduring things is the children. They — smiling eyes and faces, the curiosity, and it was just like going in to the children of a lot of our Aboriginal settlements, there's so much in them alike. And the kampongs and the way they lived, it was so simple, and there was no — there seemed to be no situation of people walking over the top of people to get on, except on the Communist Terrorist situation, they all shared and so forth, and that really taught me a lot, their culture of caring and sharing with each other. Most importantly, not complaining. Okay, you've seen the upset when the husband was taken away or something like that, but no, generally it was — and they were appreciative of what we were doing.

How did you ever communicate with them, David? That's something I should have asked earlier.

Well, a lot of it was English. I picked up a little bit of Malay — lost it all now because I haven't used it. I picked up a little bit of Gurkha and when we were running the different First Aid courses we had a translator working with us. But the Malay you picked up was market Malay — you can do that with expressions or pointing and talking and facial expressions, body language — but a lot of them could speak English, because they were under British rule for so long.

One personal question, David: did that experience actually unsettle you for a time when you returned to Australia?

Yes. Yes, it did. I still had difficulty — well, when I first got involved with it and started coming home I still had difficulty that how could any group of people be so vicious and so nasty to their own fellow countrymen, basically, because these guys were — lived in Malaya, these Communist Terrorists, for many, many years, and how could they be so vicious to a family unit? So yes, that took — — —. And I suppose, in the last couple of years, it's started to come back again, you know, things seen and things done.

When you say 'started to come back again', do you mean in your mind?

Yes, in my mind, yes.

What, reliving that time?

Yes. Often when you — you might pick up the paper and read something about something that's happened in Malaya or Singapore politically, and you might think, well, was that the right way that they should have gone about it? What was that? You know, I thought we spent a time in Malaya to prevent that happening — though the viciousness is not there as far as violence is concerned, but I think politically there's still a little bit of that persuasion, without going into any depth or any situations, done between different prime ministers, deputy prime ministers, whatever, leader of oppositions and that sort of thing. I think it's still run by the big stick.

Have you been back to Malaysia since?

No, I haven't. I'd like to go back. I wouldn't do a guided tour; I'd like to go back and just wander back through the areas I'd been, seeing the changes. And what I believe now is the (sound of passing traffic) little road that used to go — well, it was a two-lane highway, bitumised — that used to go from Taiping where you could go through to Penang, there's just a huge freeway now, you know, which means that a lot of the kampongs and rice paddies and all that would have disappeared, and a lot of the jungle would have been cleared, and the rubber plantations, I suppose. But no, I'd like to go back and have a look and see the changes and what progress has been made. Or regress, whichever the case may be! (laughs)

David, have you been back overseas since that time of service?

No, I haven't, no.

Now, last though, has your time of service in some way helped you and Maxine to actually do the work you're doing here at the Museum at the Repat Hospital?

Yes, it definitely has. It's given us an understanding that there's no glory in war, it's given us an understanding also the fact that, over the years of Australian history, military history, that many, many Australians have made a lot of sacrifices at war, and we need to learn about and help people to learn about the sacrifices that have been made — and, most importantly, why were they made? And I feel that, if that can be done, perhaps today's and yesterday's and future generations may then be prepared to talk about disagreements. It may even be in a school situation, where a couple of school students have got a disagreement. Sit down and talk about and discuss it, instead of going behind the lunch shed and seeing who walks out after — behind the lunch shed afterwards. And we need to learn about the sacrifices, because it's our heritage.

When did you begin building this museum up, David?

1992 was the start of it, when the hospital here celebrated fifty years of care to the veteran community and we had a re-enactment of the transfer of patients from Keswick Barracks to here, where 105 Military Hospital was built. And so that was the start of it. And I was working in this hospital then — still on the staff — and a lot of the old vets — because they were talking about, at that stage of the game, of the hospital closing, being sold off or whatever, or being part of the Flinders hospital or wound up — and a lot of the vets that I met here at the hospital, a lot of the patients, used to say to me, 'They don't care what we went through. They're even taking our hospital away from us.' And I used to say to the chaps, 'Look positive, we'll go to the state, it's another government change, we've had a lot of federal government changes. But most importantly, if you keep using it, it'll still be here for you and still be yours.' So when we had the opportunity to — and because I opened my mouth saying, 'We can't lose this heritage', and we got a little part of this building to start a museum off, that was one way of saying, 'Hey, we *do* care what you went through.'

And what was this building that we're in now?

Well, this was — way down the other end, where you first come in, that was the post office, and that's what we started off with. So originally, during the Army days, this was the post and pay office, the building, and it had extra walls and that in which have all been taken out as we've grown over the time. And it's great. The first aim when we started was to preserve the history of the services, you know, in relationship to the hospital, but the thing I didn't think of was the school children and that's the greatest goldmine we've got, because we have school groups through here. We get diaries — we've got diaries from the Boer War and World War One, World War Two, and we transcribe those on the computer and print them off, because otherwise we can put them under glass and you may read one or two pages,

and they'd still deteriorate even using low UV lighting, but by putting them out people can read the whole library and we loan them to schools a semester at a time through teachers. And then we preserve the original diaries and put them away in what we hope is a fireproof area, so they will survive.

And what's been your aim over the last few years, David, with this unexpected influx of children? (laughs)

Well, we've got more volunteers. We're growing bigger, we want a bigger area. It was a dream whether it would take off in the first place. At the moment it's set up as a military area, a navy area, and an air force area and a prisoner of war area. The next dream would be able to see it set up — and it may not be me that does it, but we've got other volunteers now coming on — but view it set up in campaign order, which for those doing research it would make it a lot easier and a lot better. If they want to go and learn about the Boer War there it would be. But it's different to the Keswick Museum because it's the three services. Keswick is a military museum. And it's just amazing. And the thing that it has done already, I suppose, is some of the stuff we've got here, memorabilia here, was on its way to the rubbish dump. And just a quick little story, if the museum never does another thing it's done one great thing: we'd only been open a couple of months, and we've got a visitors' book. The chap come in and he said, 'Do you get many through?' And I said to him, 'Yes, quite a few.' I said, 'There's a visitors' book there, but not everybody signs it.' He said, 'I'll sign your book,' he said. Well, he went over to the book and he started glancing through the first couple of pages, and he opened it up to the page where it was for him to sign, and he just stood there looking at the book. And Maxine said, 'Are you sure you're okay?' He said, 'Yes.' A couple of minutes later he's still looking at this one page, and we queried again was he all right. He said, 'I thought this old bugger was dead.' And it was a mate of his and they'd done the training together in the same unit, they were injured in the same skirmish and evacuated, but they went two different ways. And the chap here had put his suburb in, and he'd only been in a couple of days previous — he was an in-patient and he got discharged, he was given a discharge the next day — so this guy went through the 'phone book and he contacted this guy and it was his old mate. And his old mate thought *he* was dead too. So he rang and said, 'Yes, it was my mate,' and he said, 'We're going out to dinner on Friday and talk about old times.' So if we've done nothing but [bring] two old Diggers back together, it's been worth it. Yes.

And finally, David, the responses of children and teachers — has that been changing over the last few years?

Yes. I believe it started in — if we take the wider thing, 1990, with the return to Gallipoli, seventy-fifth anniversary. And 1993 we brought home the Unknown Soldier and laid it rest. 1995, which was just magnificent, 'Australia Remembers'. The amount of education that's going into the schools now, being levelled at both the primary and the secondary schools, and the money that DVA is spending on that, is just amazing. I've been lucky enough to be involved in some of that at a committee level. And the children, you can see them progress. The local school over here, for an example, we get them in Grade Four, and then by the time they reach [Grade] Seven the type of questions and the research they're doing, they're so maturing so much, and then we might get them again in Year Ten in the high

schools, and the chap will come back again because they know it's here for the community and see them mature — it's great. I believe they're never too young. We had a young girl — and I think this demonstrates we can't say, 'You've got to be so old to start learning' — over at Colonel Light Gardens school. I said to the two teachers who were bringing their classes across — they had two composite classes at Four and Five and Six and Seven — and I said to them this year, 'What are you doing for Anzac?' when they were coming. And one was doing with their classes controlled book work and the other one was doing their own — they had to do their own research. So I said to Barbara and to Philip, I said, 'Look, select a student from each of the classes on their project. Now, look at effort. I don't want the best, I want effort.' I said, 'Too many times kids struggle and they don't get recognized for their effort.' And I said, 'We'll do something.' So we done up a certificate for them and a couple of — you know, 'Their service, our heritage' badges, and 'Australia Remembers' and done up a little goodies bag for them. And when we went over to present these to the Fours and Fives, and we walked into the room, and what Peter had said to the students beforehand, 'You've learnt about Gallipoli, you've looked at the videos and you've read some of the diaries and you've visited the museum,' and that sort of thing. 'Just imagine what it would have been like that first morning.' So that was the seed he planted. And so he said, 'Who wants to read out their assignment?' And all the kids wanted to, and they were all so eager — it's a pity that we couldn't recognize all the children, but financially we couldn't. Anyhow, he selected a boy and a girl, and I don't know whether it was a Grade Four and a Grade Five or, you know, whether it was equal opportunities, but he selected two, and they weren't the winners of the awards. And this young girl, she wrote this beautiful story, and it's just a quick one. I'd like to tell it to you as I remember it. She was Duffy, she was a donkey that belonged to — that Simpson found. And she said she used to walk the beaches of Gallipoli and she had this cave she used to sleep in when it was wet and cold and shelter in it. And early hours of the morning she got woken by these strange noises, and she put her head outside the cave and all she could see was see the rocks and the dirt going in the air and these big flashes, so she was frightened so she stayed where she was. And then this man came in and patted her and she felt comfortable with him, and he took her up the hills and there was men laying on the ground covered in this red, sticky fluid. And she said, 'He put some on my back and we took them to the beaches and we done this over many, many times and many, many days,' she said. 'And then one morning,' she said, 'there was this horrible noise again and then my friend was laying on the ground covered in this red, sticky fluid.' Now, that was from a Grade Four or Grade Five primary school student. And I got a lump in my throat when she was reading that, and I still get one when I talk about it, but to me it demonstrates that children will start learning if the opportunity's given to them at any age.

Thank you very much, David.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.