



South Australians at war – transcript – OH 644/1

Interview with Mr Don Stewart recorded by Rob Linn at Legacy House, Adelaide, on the 19th April 2002 for The State Library of South Australia South Australians at War Oral History Project.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

South Australians at War Oral History Project 2002. Interview with Don Stewart at Legacy House, Adelaide, on the 19th April 2002, tape one, interviewer Rob Linn.

Don, what's your full name, please?

Donald Martin Stewart.

And where were you born?

In Adelaide.

In what year, Don?

On 6th June 1945.

And tell me a bit about your parents.

Well, my parents were older than the average. My father was about fifty when I was born, and my mother about nine years younger. Dad had been a soldier in the First World War. He'd been quite badly wounded at one stage, but he'd survived, and my mother — Dad was born in Melbourne and my mother had been born in Scotland.

What were their names, Don?

I was named after my father, Donald Martin Stewart, and Mary Joyce Stewart, *née* Clarke.

With an 'e'?

With an 'e'.

Again, what was your father's occupation?

The last, I suppose, twenty years of his life he was a clerk in the Commonwealth public service, in the Commonwealth Employment Service, actually.



And were you brought up around Brighton, is that right?

Yes. From about 1948 I moved there, the family moved there, into a new house, and we lived there till I ended up in the army.

So you would have gone to Brighton Primary, I guess?

Initially Brighton Primary, and then they opened a new primary school at Paringa Park, which was very much closer, and then I moved on to Brighton High School after Year Seven at primary school.

So would Paringa Park be Somerton Park today, more or less, or is it different?

I'm not sure what its name is. I notice there's still a school there, but I've not really — I think it might be still — oh well, it's Bowker Street, Somerton.

Yes, I know exactly where that is. That's where there's quite a large school ground there, if I remember.

Yes.

And you did Leaving Honours at Brighton High?

Yes, what was then the fifth year of high school.

And went on to South Australian Institute of Technology.

Yes. I started work at the beginning of '63, in January '63, as a draftsman in the Design Division of the Engineering and Water Supply Department, and as part of that arrangement I was to do a higher certificate in drafting, and after about a year I changed that to a Bachelor of Technology in Mechanical Engineering, and I was there for a total of two and a half years in that drafting job, part-time student, before I was called up into the army.

So could you just give me — initially, at least — a brief overview of your army service, from when you were conscripted, through?

Well, Rob, I was called up in the first National Service intake, and I think I reported on the 30th June 1965 and went to the Recruit Training Battalion from Keswick Barracks, Recruit Training Battalion at Puckapunyal. And then I was selected for officer training, and after about ten days went up to the newly-established Officer Training Unit at Scheyville near Richmond, just outside of Sydney. And that was a just under six-month course. And then I was posted to an infantry battalion in Brisbane, 2nd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, and was there for about five months, most of it down at the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra, south of Brisbane. And they needed a reinforcement officer for the infantry battalion that was then in Malaysia, and I was posted at very short notice to go up to Singapore



and then the garrison at Terendak near Malacca, where I spent only a few days and then found myself in Sarawak of the old British North Borneo.

After that service I decided to sign on into the army, and to stay with the battalion, because after our operational service in Borneo we came back to Malaysia for about — to Terendak Garrison for about a year, and it was then that I decided to sign on because our battalion had been warned to go to Vietnam and I wanted to really stay with it. So I did that, came back to Brisbane, re-trained the battalion with an influx of then a lot of National Servicemen, and we did a year in Vietnam and I, again, stayed in and then signed up for full-time, as a permanent commission in the army. And so after that it was sort of service in Townsville as an *aide-de-camp* to the general in Brisbane, two and a half years up in Papua New Guinea with the Pacific Islands Regiment out of Port Moresby, back for the first time to Adelaide for about two and a half years with a battalion at Woodside — 3rd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment — and that included a trip, as a company commander, taking a company up to Air Base Butterworth as the Butterworth Rifle Company, and six months instructor at the Officer Cadet School, Portsea. And then to a posting in Canberra, and a year at the Staff College at Queenscliff, back to Canberra and then a year at — for a couple of years, and then a year with a peace-keeping force in the Sinai, the Multinational Force and Observers, and back to Canberra on promotion to Lieutenant-Colonel. And I was then sent to the United States for a six-month management course at their Defence Systems Management College near Washington, and I came back and for three years was a project director with an army material project. Getting near the end. (laughter) Joint Services Staff College for six months after that, and then an appointment in the staff in the Development Division of the Headquarters of the Defence Force, and finally to Adelaide for four years at Keswick Barracks, where I ended up Operations Support Branch Head and the Army Representative for South Australia, and then retired about five years ago. Did a little bit of work with the Reserves, but really the last five years I've been here with Legacy, employed by Legacy.

Oh, thank you very much, Don, for that overview. That was very succinct. I'd like to just talk to you a little bit, before we go into that in more detail, about your family's attitude to conflict generally, particularly war. Your father, you said, had been injured in the First War. Did he ever talk about that at all?

I was fifteen when he died, and in fact that was the start of my involvement with Legacy, where my younger brother and I were helped by Legacy as children — well, teenagers, anyway. But yes, he seemed to have a fairly positive attitude, but he didn't really talk a lot about the First World War. He'd obviously had a difficult time. I remember he thought he was going to lose his leg — he was badly wounded with a shell fragment in the leg in 1917 and, rather than lose the leg, apparently, an American or Canadian surgeon reassured him they'd do their best and he still had the leg when he died. But he also signed up in the old Garrison Battalion here in Adelaide during the Second World War, so he must have had a reasonable sort of positive approach, I suppose, to defence matters.

So even in the Second World War he was helping round Adelaide in various tasks, I guess.



Yes, yes. I think it was only for a couple of years, you know, probably came in about '42 – probably when the panic was setting in a little bit when the Japanese came into the War, and I think he only did about two years. He finished up a lieutenant in the 4th Garrison Battalion.

What about your mother? Did she have any strong views on the subject at all, Don?

Not that she ever conveyed to me, but I think she was a bit – when she realised what my potential involvement was she was a bit concerned, but she certainly didn't express it to me.

Now, on a personal level, you had applied for Duntroon prior to being conscripted.

Yes. I'm not really sure why, but I'd always had a sort of interest in the army. We had a sort of great-great-uncle that had been a British general in India, and I'd read about him and, you know, the family had a photograph of the old chap up on the piano, type of thing – well, mantelpiece, wherever it was. And so there was always that – in fact, I was named after him, as had my father been so named. And I'd applied to go to Duntroon, but my academic results – with what I know now, they were very wise in not accepting me, because, with my sort of only modest, probably, success at Leaving and even more moderate success at Leaving Honours I would have had great difficulty doing the academic side of that course.

At the time, Don, that you had left school and about the time you were coming into the conscription, did you have any views regarding Australia's involvement in Vietnam yourself?

No. Of course, when conscription was announced – and it must have been late '64 or early '65, perhaps – the Australian involvement there was pretty minor, in terms of manpower, anyway. And I just saw it as a – I guess, something different. I think I was becoming a bit bored with being a draftsman, and this regime of rushing down to what's now the Uni of South Australia to try to do these lessons, you know – I think we were given fifteen minutes' travelling time to get down there, so we were very little time off work, and it was really four nights a week, I think, there for quite some time, and I think I viewed it as an opportunity to do something else. And of course I'd had this general interest anyway in the army, and it only became really apparent to me when I got to the recruit training that there was potential to do an officer training course – although maybe somebody had mentioned it to me beforehand, I can't really remember.

So would you say generally across the community, Don, there was much response to Australia's involvement in Vietnam at the time that you were conscripted?

From my perception I don't think there was. I don't remember – certainly don't remember any campus rallies or, you know, the sort of things that I understand occurred three or four, five years later. And I don't remember much really negative



in the media, either radio or newspapers — although I probably didn't read the newspapers as much as I do these days.

So it was at a time, then, by the sounds, that you weren't terribly aware of any opposition to it or any support for it either, in one sense. But pretty quickly afterwards you seemed to go into some very intense training at Scheyville. Would that be some months after you first came in?

Oh, no. That was within about ten days.

Really?

And it was a very demanding six month course. They compressed the then one year Portsea officer training course into six months, and had taken out all of the detail that wasn't essential to being a young platoon commander. So the looking to the future, future promotions, those sorts of nice-to-have initial training aspects had been really pared right out of the course, and they made it an extremely demanding course which sort of started at reveille at, I don't know, six o'clock and finished at ten o'clock at night, five and a half days a week. Well, more than five and a half days, because there was sport on the Saturday afternoon as well. So it was really quite demanding. It was a serious challenge to sort of get through the thing. And about two-thirds of the — I think it was about a hundred and ten of us did the first course, and about two-thirds graduated.

So that's about a thirty per cent drop-out you're talking about.

Yes, about a third.

Do you think it equipped you with the skills that were necessary for what you came into in the future?

I think, initially, surprisingly well. There would have been — again, knowing what I know now — there would have been a lot of scepticism about the ability of these six month-trained officers to take command of an infantry platoon, which is about thirty-odd men — or was thirty men then. Oh, it still is thirty men, I suppose. (laughter) But it was surprisingly effective. I think the course probably — as I stayed in the services, I found probably that there were some aspects of the training for the longer term that were probably not there, but then they didn't pretend they were in the first place. But things like staff college and various other career training courses filled in that gap. But yes, I think it worked surprisingly well. I think a lot of people were really quite impressed that it worked out that way.

Don, after that intensive course, as you said earlier, you went to the 2nd Battalion RAR in Brisbane, and then later were transferred to 4th RAR in Borneo. Now, could you talk in some detail for us, please, about what you experienced in Borneo, and why you were sent there in the first place?

Well, Borneo came as a complete surprise to me. I'd spent months running around the bush areas, 'jungly' areas, of the Queensland—New South [Wales] border,



Wiangaree State Forest and Leaver's Plateau and whatever, with the — operating out of the Jungle Training Centre, and then back to Brisbane. And I was buttonholed one Friday evening over a beer, when the Adjutant of the Battalion said to me, 'How soon can you be ready to go to Malaysia?' And I'm sure he looked at his watch as if it was going to happen straight away, but I said, 'Whenever you' — as junior second lieutenants always do — 'Whenever you say, sir,' and he said, 'Well, tomorrow week.' And so that was it. I spent the rest of the week getting inoculations and getting organised, and was back here in Adelaide for five or six days, I think it was, pre-embarkation leave, and then on a flight to Perth and the first class air fare to Singapore and the Qantas champagne flight. It was most impressive. And I got up to Malacca and the garrison, which was the big 28th [Commonwealth] Brigade Garrison at Malacca — at Terendak Garrison, sorry — three infantry battalions and the full — all the elements of an independent infantry brigade. And — — —.

This is British Army, Don?

This is Australian, New Zealand infantry battalion, British battalion — the 1st Battalion Scots Guards — and a mixture of other Commonwealth artillery and logistics and a big hospital there, schools for the children. It was brilliantly set up, really, it was like something out of the — what I've read of the British Raj, and a cantonment in India somewhere. And I only spent about four days there, although people were interested to have a look at me. I was paraded before the British Brigadier — he wanted to — no, correction, it was an Australian Brigadier, who obviously wanted to see what one of these National Service officers looked like. And I was joined by another officer who actually had the room next to me at Scheyville, then we were training, and the two of us went down to Singapore, where I had my twenty-first birthday overnight in Singapore at the British Mess there, and then across by RAF transport to Kuching and vehicle down to the Battalion at a little place called Bau, which is about — I suppose about thirty miles south of Kuching, a little bit back from the Indonesian—Sarawak border.

That's spelt B-A-U, is that correct?

Yes, that's right.

Why was it perceived necessary at that time for there to be troops along this border?

Well, this was the — some years before, the — and I guess it was part of the pull-out of the British forces east of Suez — Malaysia was formed, consisting of the peninsular Malay states plus Brunei — correction, plus Sabah and Sarawak and, initially, Singapore. It became Malaysia. And President Sukarno of Indonesia adopted a 'crush Malaysia' policy, which became known as 'Confrontation'. And prior to this there'd — or about the same time, I suppose — there'd been a revolt in Brunei which is, of course, between Sabah and Sarawak, and that had been put down very promptly, by very prompt action by the British troops. But this flowed on, and our first commitment there was an infantry battalion drawn from the Commonwealth Brigade, 3rd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, and there were some Engineers and a Special Air Service [squadron] as part of that initial



contingent, and then 3RAR went back to Terendak after its tour of duty and 4RAR, which had been raised here in Adelaide on I think the 1st February '64, was raised specifically to be the Fourth [Regular] Australian Infantry Battalion. We only had four regular battalions — we only previously had three, but this was the fourth one, and of course the first one to be raised in Australia. The other three were raised immediately after the [Second World] War for the British occupation of — Commonwealth occupation of Japan.

And 4RAR was then planned to do a tour of duty starting in late April, it must have been '66, and they were short a couple of officers. The fellow I replaced had had some serious illness, some sort of tropical disease, I think, and he'd gone home and they were short a couple of officers, and that's why they needed a reinforcement. I suspect there was an element there, too, of, you know, 'It'd be nice to have National Servicemen up there' at the time, because by this time National Servicemen were starting to serve in Vietnam. They replaced the virtually solely regular infantry battalion that was up there, 1RAR, with 5RAR and 6RAR, and formed a Task Force based in the province, in Phúc Tuy province, and so we two [officers] and about forty soldiers were the first to join the — on operations in Borneo.

Don, you were part of A Company, is that correct, with 4RAR?

Yes. I became a platoon commander in A Company.

What exactly was it, the job that you were given to do?

Well, I was appointed to be a platoon commander in A Company, one of the three platoon commanders, and our company at that stage was occupying one of the three forward bases at a little jungle fort called Gumbang, which was about a thousand metres back from the border and had a rifle company dug in in bunkers on this very steep little feature, and there were a couple of 105 Howitzers there that used to fire, and there was a mortar section, I think, as well. And we had a helicopter pad and all the resupply was by helicopter. And so the job was looking after this infantry platoon. I was really only there for about six or seven days, just really becoming acclimatised to the thing. I'd previously had about three or four days at the battalion headquarters being briefed, and generally I think letting people see what one of these National Servicemen looked like. I'm sure they must have been — well, initially a bit concerned to see what sort of training these people had had.

But all of a sudden, after about eight days, there was an incursion by some Indonesians across the border, and we were all reacted very promptly, and we didn't actually go back to Gumbang after that, about fifteen days of running around the scrub.

This is very mountainous terrain?

It is, yes. That was my almost abiding memory of North Borneo, the unbelievably — to me, unbelievably steep hills with ridgelines, really, that ran across the border, and there were invariably tracks running along the top of them that the locals had used. There were villages here and there. The border wasn't very well delineated at



all. And of course the locals had been crossing the border area for years; they didn't necessarily see it as a border. We had a couple of land *Dyaks* [*Ibans*] with us — border scouts, as they'd been recruited as — and they worked with our platoon for a bit. We were there about three months, we had these two chaps with us. They couldn't speak any English except the type of English that the lads taught them, which wasn't very helpful to them. But they were excellent. They seemed to have some sort of a mystic bond between themselves — the soldiers swore that they could communicate without talking.

Were your relationships with them very good?

Well, we all seemed to get on pretty well, yes. I mean, it was very difficult to communicate, but they certainly knew what they were doing. They both had their manhood tattoo under their neck, a lizard tattooed on their neck. Both seemed very keen to take 'a head'. The older chap claimed to — his father had taken 'a head' during the War, but we tried to communicate with him, it was never very clear whether it was a Japanese head or a British head, but it might have been anything. It was probably gilding the lily a bit, but these two seemed very enthusiastic, and they didn't get a chance while I was with them, that's for sure.

Don, in this, your first overseas posting, what attitudes did you have to the other nationalities you were working with?

I think it was terribly, terribly new to me. I remember Singapore and one night in Singapore, it was all dramatically new. But as far as Borneo was concerned, that initial stage, I mean, with the exception of the two chaps — Manuk and Mikai, the names just come back to me — with the exception of those two chaps, really there was very little contact with the locals. We'd go into the villages and sort of introduce ourselves, or try to, to the village chief, but there really wasn't much communication because of the language problem. Others in the organisation, you know, the doctor and the medics and whatever, used to go out and do 'medcaps', they called them — try to help, you know, just minor treatment, hearts and minds, trying to keep the locals on-side and letting them know there was a presence, but we didn't get too involved in that.

As a young Australian, did it give you a different appreciation of your own country?

Oh, I think dramatically, because once we got back to Terendak we were there for about a year, and we did a number of big exercises with the British Army, far bigger than anything we'd be able to do in Australia, and of course one was out on the town, the local town [Malacca], I had some leave up in Penang — which I must admit was largely full of Americans on R&R from Vietnam. I remember sharing a — I came back by train, I remember sharing the compartment with a Chinese businessman and sitting over a meal with him on the way down, you know, it was quite new to me. It certainly opened my eyes a little bit.

Do you mean in a sense gave you an appreciation that there was a world more than you'd known?



Oh, I think so, yes, yes. And since then, of course, I've travelled a bit more and got a much better understanding.

So you were about a year at Terendak?

After that, yes.

After that. And then — — —.

And it was at that time that I — the battalion had been warned that we were going to Vietnam in May of '68, and so it was either plan on returning early to be discharged, because my two years' National Service was starting to draw to a close, or, if I wanted to, sign on. And the other chap I mentioned and I both decided to sign on, and we went down to Singapore for an interview together and were duly given a five year short service commission in the Army.

When you say an interview, Don, do you mean interview with the Australian Commander in Singapore?

Yes, the Australian Brigadier.

So what's your path, then, into Vietnam?

Well, we came back from Malaysia. I think I got back here in Adelaide the night six o'clock closing ended, and I had my first legal drink in South Australia.

That was '66, wasn't it?

I think it was, yes. I just have that memory of going down to the pub that Saturday night and that was the big day. I think [South Australian Premier] Don Dunstan had brought in [the end of] six o'clock closing, the TAB and was it Lotteries, or something? And so, after some leave here, back to Brisbane and the Battalion then received — a lot of people moved out of the Battalion then, but many of the senior NCOs and officers stayed, which was very fortunate because the camaraderie and the family feeling that we'd built up in Malaya and Borneo was in many ways retained. There were a lot of new regulars and National Servicemen posted in, and then we started a very intense training regime culminating in a couple of battalion-level exercises, and in May '68 I went up with the advance party by air, and the main body of the battalion went up in the troop carrier, *HMAS Sydney*.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

[There were a lot of new regulars and National Servicemen posted in, and then we started a very intense training regime culminating in a couple of battalion-level exercises, and in May '68 I went up with the advance party by air, and the main body of the battalion went up in the troop carrier, *HMAS Sydney*.] It was about a twelve or thirteen day trip up there, I think. And so we all left roughly about the same time, but we had a couple of weeks to get the lay of the land and prepare to



take over from the battalion that, coincidentally, had been 2RAR, the battalion I'd left to join 4RAR a couple of years before.

Don, even though you were once again into intense training, had you noticed a change in community attitudes towards the Vietnam War?

Yes, I think so. Again, we got out a little bit, but really the emphasis was on [training] — you know, we'd be away at weekends and whatever. But there was certainly more dissent and opinion out there. It didn't seem that it was so much directed at Australians, but I certainly remember that sort of attitude growing in the community.

Don, at that point, setting out for Vietnam, did you have a strong bond between the members of the mob that you were with?

I think as a group, yes. As a battalion. We'd managed to retain that, even though there were a lot of new people in it. We'd only really, I suppose, had about nine months concentrated where we'd all been together as a group. There were very few changes, you know, at the last minute. So yes, I think it's true to say that. I mean, in an infantry battalion that's the — the whole basis is teamwork and people being able to rely on each other, and clearly when that doesn't apply then that's it. It's not equipment-related in a battalion; it's personnel and people getting on with each other.

I wonder if you could, in detail now, just tell us about the Vietnam experience that you had.

Well, I was a platoon commander until December '68, and then I was given a job, a group of five of us were formed into a little what they called a 'Mobile Advisory Team', and we spent about two and a half months in a village called Dat Do, which was one of the larger villages in Phúc Tuy province where the Australian Task Force was based, and we lived in the compound, the Vietnamese compound, with the American advisory team. There was an American major and his small team there. Our five virtually doubled the strength of that. And we stayed there until we had a rather unfortunate incident and the team was withdrawn. And — — —.

That was an incident with the Americans?

Oh no, no, no. No, no, that was a contact with the local — I assume it was the local VC. And then I was back at the battalion and had a few odd jobs around the place. I finished up being the Embarkation Officer, (laughs) which was a new experience for me, but it fitted in well with my next employment, because I became the Assistant Adjutant of the battalion when I was finally promoted to First Lieutenant when we got back to Brisbane.

I wonder if we could go back to when your battalion's arriving at Nui Dat, I think it was, wasn't it, you were straight in?

Yes.



What's the actual war experience of the unit from that point?

Well, the battalion conducted a — I mean, initially it was a lot of little working up exercises, so, you know, each of the company — it was a very — it became a fairly structured thing. They wanted to ease people into the experience, so when we arrived, because we were there a couple of weeks beforehand, we went out on a couple of patrols with the people we were replacing, couple of ambushes and things like that — I don't think there was too much activity. Although there had been, just not at that time. And then we — each of the companies did a work-up patrol of a limited duration, I think, and then the battalion — a simple, relatively simple, operation, getting used to working with the numbers of helicopters. And the main differences from training were really the fire support available and the co-ordination arrangements, which were very important at the higher level, but didn't really make much difference at the platoon level except that you knew you had plenty of fire support if you required it. And then the battalion went into a series of almost month-long battalion operations in concert with other elements of the Australian Task Force. And though by then there were three infantry battalions and a squadron of tanks, plus some armoured personnel carriers there, so it was a pretty — it was a big, independent brigade in sort of current terms.

Can you describe Nui Dat to me, Don, please?

Well, it was in the middle of an old rubber plantation. There was a hill there which is where the place derives its name, Nui Dat, *Nui* being the term for hill or small hill, or something like that. And they'd built a short take-off and landing runway. I don't know what it was, it must have been about probably two thousand metre runway, and they could only — couldn't use larger aircraft into it, but they'd use the short-range aircraft, and also they had light observation helicopters there and little Porter [fixed wing] aircraft for observation. And the battalions were all positioned around this airfield with the Headquarters units in the centre. There was a wire perimeter right around it with Claymore mines set in it, and there were — while we lived in tents with sandbags around it to protect them against mortar attack or even small arms, all the companies had outside their tent lines weapon pits so that they could actually defend the place if it was attacked. The artillery was set up so that it could fire, you know, it wasn't all in one place, so you'd have some artillery at one end of the camp and some at the other so they could fire in support of each other, and similarly the mortars. So it was a big camp. Certainly by the time we got there when it had been expanded to take the Third Infantry Battalion and the [squadron] of Centurion tanks.

So how many people in total do you think would have been there?

Well, if everyone was inside, which would never have been the case, I suppose it must have been three and a half thousand, it must have been close to that.

Don, what opinion did you have of the South Vietnamese troops and the Viet Cong themselves?



Well, I think people — everyone felt a bit sorry for the South Vietnamese troops. They had to stay there and we were there for a year. I didn't really have much to do with them except in my little job, living in the village of Dat Do, where we saw them a bit. But they — only a small number of them were regular troops. There was an artillery section of medium guns right next to us, and we used to have a bit to do with that group, particularly the young lieutenant, who seemed to speak a smattering of English. We used to help him adjust the fire for the Americans down south, which was a bit of a problem in itself, trying to adjust those guns. But there was the regular army and then there was the Regional Force, and these were locals that had been recruited to serve anywhere in the province only, so they would never be all that far from their families. And then there were Popular Force, which were even more poorly-trained and poorly-equipped, the sort of third echelon, and these were really the village guards, and they were formed into little platoons. And our job in this Mobile Advisory Team was to try to help them with training. And so we were allocated to assist one Regional Force company — Regional Force were in company groups and the Popular Force were in platoons — and we had three or four, I think it was, platoons of Popular Force to assist. But I remember asking the platoon leader of one of these Popular Force platoons how was it that he was the platoon leader, you know, how long — try to find things to talk about — 'How long have you been involved?' 'Oh, quite a number of years' — I forget what it was, but I remember saying to him, 'How is it that you've become the platoon leader?' And the message that came back through the interpreter was, 'Well, he's the only one of the original lot left now, and so (laughs) he's the leader.'

But I felt very sorry for them, because I mean there were we trying to encourage them to take an offensive spirit and attack and whatever, but of course they had to live with the problem and many of the people — I mean, Dat Do was a big village of eighteen thousand people, and (laughs) who knows how many Vietnamese sympathisers and, indeed, members of the VC, VC cadres, were actually in the village.

Were you aware of the historical basis for the conflict, Don?

I think so, in a general sense. I can remember us doing a little bit of research, reading a little bit while we were up in Malaysia, when we first realised that we were going to Vietnam. And we were certainly aware of the division of Vietnam into north and south, and the fact that there were supposed to be elections, and generally the way it had gone. It was a little more difficult knowing — being all that aware of exactly what had happened in our little part of the world, which was very much a discrete province. We knew generally that the French had had problems there, that certain areas were quite heavily mined, and that it stemmed from the days of the French involvement before '54, when — about when they left. So I think we probably were generally — I think we understood those broader issues, or everyone had been briefed on it, anyway. I mean, we were all given the little handouts, you know. The Americans had produced a publication which showed what the various forces, badges of rank and something about them, so everyone was given one of these little booklets. How many people read it — — — . But yes, it was all there, and we'd certainly — I mean, part of the training had been briefings on what we were getting ourselves in for, and some of the background, of course.



How did the Viet Cong conduct their type of warfare in the terrain?

Well, it depended who you struck. I mean, there were locals and little cadres in the various areas, and then there were battalions of VC, and then battalions of North Vietnamese, which were — and the sort of level of combat ability and danger to us, if you like, went up in that ascending order. So if you had set an ambush and you struck a North Vietnamese company, then there'd be a hundred — eighty to a hundred of the enemy, and so an infantry platoon taking on that would have been in serious trouble. And I think probably that occurred, although I don't remember it occurring. It certainly didn't occur with me, anyway. The ones we met were all a local force or regional troops, and relatively small numbers.

And what type of combat could you expect, Don, with those local forces?

Well, I mean, it would either be — with a small group it would be them walking into one of our ambushes, or just a contact almost at random, by accident, and a couple of our people would get a chance to fire a couple of shots at them and they at us, and they would normally realise that they were up against something far more than just one or two people and very quickly withdraw. Or they would try to ambush us — and we, of course, tried to ambush them — in which case, you know, anyone caught in the ambush was a fair chance they'd be killed. There were activities later on with the enemy actually attacking a fortified position, like a fire support base, Coral and Balmoral, with 3RAR and [1RAR]. In fact, that was just as we got there, just before we got there, I think, that occurred.

So this is near Nui Dat, is it?

No, that was actually quite far to the north, and I think just north of the province border. They were, I think, building these — they built these fire support bases to support operations to stop the North Vietnamese moving in towards the sort of — what would it be? — the north-eastern route into Saigon. And these fire support bases, we, everywhere we went, we always went with artillery support, and sort of the range of artillery at about ten thousand metres, so you would move a battery of guns out into the bush somewhere, clear it all, protect it with some infantry, maybe put some mortars there and a command element, and fortify it, dug in, with barbed wire around the outside, and then that artillery would be able to support out, say, ten thousand metres in any direction — infantry patrols and whatever. And then, if you wanted to move further, you could go further. So you could always get on the radio and call for artillery support, which was a standard procedure. In fact, we usually had an artillery bombardier — a corporal — and his radio operator with the platoon headquarters as part of the platoon. It was usually the same chaps so, you know, they fitted into the organisation pretty well.

Did you see a distinct difference between the ways the Australians looked at the combat and the American view of how they would conduct a combat?

I think I really only became aware of that more after the event, and with my reading since. I've since read that the Australians were criticised for not being more aggressive, and then we tried to avoid walking on tracks, so you could easily be



ambushed. And on the odd occasion when it did occur, we were often — well, not often — occasionally ambushed. And I was in an event like that, where a fellow platoon — or one of the other platoons in the company was ambushed and two men killed and six wounded out of a group of ten. It would be quite devastating when it's done effectively, as this was. And so you could be really caught out. And we had followed the — the Australian Army doctrine had been developed in New Guinea in the Second World War, and refined with the regular army then in Malaya, in the Malayan Emergency, and then all our training for Borneo and subsequent to Borneo just general training in Malaysia, was used to this jungle patrolling and how to cordon an enemy campsite and attack it and to do it quietly and with stealth, and then use maximum firepower to achieve it, as opposed to the approach of just run at the problem and really encourage someone to attack you — which was the problem, of course, with the French in Dien Bien Phu. They set it up and then couldn't handle it.

So, Don, in one sense the Australians were very much their own masters in Vietnam, would that be fair to say?

Yes, and I think that was — that probably, having thought about it since, I think that probably reflects the very sound planning that the senior military officers conducted when they set the thing up. Initially our [Australian] battalion up there was part of the, I think, the [US] 173rd Brigade operating as one of the battalions of the American brigade, but when we created our own Task Force, our senior people, who would have learnt the skills, I suppose, of coalition warfare from their superiors in the Second World War and then from their experience working with the Brits in Malaya and Borneo, it seems to me they were very wise in insisting — well, I assume they insisted — on taking over responsibility, or majority of the responsibility, for a province — admittedly working to an American general at Headquarters Two Field Force Vietnam. But it meant that we were able to operate the way the Australian doctrine and tactics dictated, and it seemed to work.

So did the process of command work very well, then, do you think, from the Australian point of view?

I really don't know. I mean, from my perspective there weren't ever any problems. What I saw was a platoon commander either — well, on the end of a radio. We were always well-supported by our superiors, even we got into a bit of trouble you'd still be — you'd get the support you needed.

Was there that typical relationship between the Australian soldier and his officers, still, in Vietnam as there had been in the First and Second Wars, of the fact that, although you're in a chain of command, you were also people, if you like — (laughs) had your own personalities?

I guess so. I guess it was a little — it was *perhaps* a little different. I mean, the First World War was very much a, you know, we were starting from scratch there and it almost got down to the people electing the officers. Perhaps a little less so in the Second World War, when there was a bit of tradition built up and there were a few more permanent people that had come through the system. And certainly by the



time we came to Vietnam, the Army was a tiny organisation until it had this massive influx of National Servicemen to fill it out. We went from — well, four battalions to nine. And of course there were other elements in the Army as well that had to expand to co-ordinate that. But I guess the relationship between officers and soldiers — it's a personal thing. I'm sure some do it an awful lot better than others. I mean, it's always difficult. I've always thought probably the most difficult combination is at section commander level, you know, the corporal trying to supervise his group of eight or nine soldiers where he's got to live with them all the time and establish that relationship of being a *real* leader.

Don, we've just been speaking about your role with the platoon and one or two — well, one of the least profitable actions from the Australian point of view where you had a couple of men killed. What about when you were appointed to the five-person advisory [team]? You were working with Vietnamese soldiers, is that correct?

Yes, although, just to correct that point, the two chaps that were sadly killed were not in my platoon, they were in another platoon, but we were closeby, sort of thing. Sorry, the Mobile Advisory Team — yes, well, that was an unfortunate incident where we went out one night on an ambush with one of the Regional Force platoons to generally be there — if there were Australians or Americans with these platoons it meant there was usually fire support available, so they were quite happy to have people like ourselves there. And so three of us went out with one of the platoons to set an ambush to stop anyone coming from the hills to the south of Đât ĐỎ, while we were out in the paddy fields, open paddy fields, stop people coming into the village. But sadly I found out later that they'd been doing pretty much the same thing on a fairly regular basis so that it was fairly easy to predict that it would happen again, and therefore do something about it. And this night, after we'd been there about an hour, an enemy group ambushed the ambushers, and we had to withdraw, but unfortunately one of the men with me, one of the three Australians — there were three of us — one of us was killed, so that was — they decided to withdraw the team after that. But briefly — they put another team in a month or so later, actually, just before we came home.

Don, in these type of skirmishes, is it mainly small arms fire we're talking about?

Yes, this was. Fortunately, I was able to call in some mortar support from our company base the other side of the village, and the enemy group, whatever they were — I mean, you could only hear them, there were probably only a couple of light machine guns and a section of people, I suppose. But they promptly left when a significant amount of mortar fire was brought onto them.

Just for those who will be listening to this later, Don, what are the emotions that run through you when you realise that you've been caught in an ambush yourself?

Well, I suppose it wasn't an ambush in the traditional sense, but we'd been caught out, there's no doubt about that, and the Vietnamese with us, probably very



sensibly, decamped to the rear! (laughter) And it was dark, although there were a few flares fired, and our little group withdrew. We were in the open, if you can imagine paddy fields with paddy bunds, and it was the summer, the dry season, so there was very little water, and we were able to cringe behind these paddy bunds as people were firing. But, I mean, you know, initially it's sort of surprise and then 'What the hell are we going to do about it?' And you see the odd — hear the rounds going by, and whatever, and so you'd — well, in this case, we withdrew a bit and some of the Vietnamese stayed with us while we returned a bit of fire in the general direction of where you'd see the muzzle flashes. But, sadly, one of the — my corporal was hit and he died straight away. By the time I crawled over to him he was dead. And then, unfortunately, the rest of the Vietnamese left so there were just the two of us and the dead chap.

Basically left in No-Man's-Land.

(laughs) Yes, it was a bit uncomfortable, there's no doubt about that. But we managed to — that's when we managed to get the mortar fire support and that basically solved the problem. The mortars were very efficient, and — — —. In fact, it draws on the point I was making earlier about the family. A chap I was talking to on the radio that night was the company commander from the Horseshoe position [company base], and he was very supportive and got onto the job, but in fact there were some problems getting clearances to fire or something, and he very promptly solved that problem, so it made a big difference.

And were the communications at that time excellent?

They were. We were lucky. The only problem would have been if the radio had been hit. But it wasn't, and I managed to get the fire orders over the radio, so that was — it worked surprisingly well, actually, and the mortar section was brilliant. When we finally sort of — we had to carry the body of our — oh, I don't know, seemed ages — when we finally got back and next morning went back to the Horseshoe to send the chap back to the logistic area, another chap and I bought the mortar section a carton of beer to (laughs) thank them.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B: TAPE 2 SIDE A

[Tape ID comments] Don, we've been discussing the casualty rate for your battalion. How many was it again?

I think for the year we had eighteen killed and about eighty-four wounded.

But you were saying that there was a greater risk of some rather than others being in that position.

Well, I suppose — I mean, everyone was potentially at risk, but certainly the chaps that were in the infantry sections — or the specialist platoons as well, the pioneers and whatever — who were actually out there patrolling and actively looking for the enemy, and therefore you could say 'looking for trouble', I suppose, they would have clearly had a greater chance of being injured. So you get the situation of the — when



a battalion of seven hundred, eight hundred men, if there were a hundred casualties — you know, the one in eight — probably for the ones in infantry sections the chances of being wounded or injured were probably one in, I don't know, five or so. I remember one of the young soldiers in one of the other platoons in my company contracted malaria, and we had a rule then that if you got malaria it had to be investigated, and I was appointed the investigating officer from another platoon. And I remember talking to this fellow and I sort of got to know him, and subsequently, when I went down to join this little Mobile Advisory Team, I heard that he'd been wounded and I managed to get down to Vung Tàu, where our hospital was. And he'd been a — he was one of these very conscientious chaps, but he'd been used as a forward scout a lot in his section, and there were three sections in a platoon, so if you're patrolling for some time then the platoon commander rotates the sections so for a while one section's leading and then number two and then number three and so on, to give everyone a share of the workload — and the danger, I suppose. Because leading, particularly if you're moving anywhere near a track, the fellow up front is the one whose life's definitely on the line, and if he's not a quick-witted, alert person with very good reflexes, then of course he's putting everyone else at risk as well as himself. But this chap was an excellent sort of fellow. And he was almost pleased that he'd been shot. He had a round through the femur of one of his legs, and when I saw him he looked awful, strung up in hospital in some sort of traction arrangement with this leg. But he was quite relieved that he was going home, that he'd been wounded, because he'd convinced himself he was going to be killed. He'd had a number of — apparently a number of contacts. I wasn't working with him at all. And I went out and got him a set of ribbons so that he could wear them on the 'plane home the next day or whenever it was he was going back on the Air Force transport.

Don, what about R&R in Vietnam? What was the experience of that for you and your troops?

Well, everyone was entitled to, I think, two days — two lots of two days, what they called 'rest in country'. The Australian Amenities organisation had set up a nice little leave centre at Vung Tàu, which was the logistic support base, and it had a swimming pool there, they had a club they called the Badcoe Club, named after the officer who was awarded the Victoria Cross in the early days of the Vietnam conflict — Major Peter Badcoe.

That's B-A-D-C-O-C-K, isn't it?

No, B-A-D-C-O or C-O-E, I — Badcoe. He was a major with the training team early on. In fact, I was present at his funeral in Terendak. We buried him at the little cemetery at the Terendak Garrison and one of the companies of our battalion provided the guard. He hadn't been — — —.

This was in Borneo?

No, this was in Terendak, before we came back from Malaysia.

Oh, really?



And he was — there were just a few buried. I subsequently went back and found the grave, and by then of course they'd announced that he'd been awarded posthumous Victoria Cross, and they had the — it was all nicely done up — gravestone, grave looked after. There were several other graves there, largely, I think, from the Emergency days. See, it was only in Vietnam that they started bringing the Australian bodies home to Australia. Prior to that they'd always been interred wherever the — generally, anyway — wherever the death occurred. But that Badcoe Centre was excellent, because it really let people wind down and carry on a bit and drink lots of beer and get into strife. And then everyone was entitled to one seven-day — I think it was seven days — trip R&R, and you could go wherever the — this was part of the American, big American system, and you'd go wherever you like. There were about — oh, I don't know — eight different venues, cities, and you sort of put down for them in order of priority, and the married ones that wanted to get back to Australia would go to Sydney with all the other Americans. And I remember going to Taipei, and that was before it became — China recognized by Australia.

So was that an amazing experience, really, for a young fella?

Oh, I don't know. I'd been to Singapore before, and I didn't really see anything of Saigon, so I'd been in a big Chinese city, I suppose, before. Was all highly organized by the American system, you know, there were all sorts of people trying to sell you things and buy rubbish, and I remember buying lots of records that were obviously pirated records, you know, long-playing records — you never see them around these days, but they were all sorts of vague colours and — — —. Yes, but it very quickly went and we were back at Nui Dat before you really knew it.

Exposed to commercialism for a short time! (laughs)

Oh, extremely so, yes. I remember being really disappointed. We hadn't seen any women around the place, and boarded the Pan Am flight out of Tân Sơn Nhất airport in Saigon flying to Taipei, and expecting to see all these young air hostesses like the ones you used to see at Ansett or TAA, I think it was probably, in those days. And obviously the equal opportunity and whatever had got to the Americans long before it came here, because the women on the — or maybe they did it deliberately, of course — but the women on the flight were much more mature women. They were, to us at age — I don't know what it was, twenty-three or something — they were ancient, you know. They were probably thirty-five or something, I don't know. But I distinctly remember being seriously disappointed when I sat down and looked at all these young hosties. But things have changed.

(laughs) I'm glad to hear that, Don. Don, were there any more activities in Vietnam that you'd like to recall at this time?

I don't know about 'like' to recall. I mean, our operations, particularly as a platoon commander — the experience — in many ways I was very fortunate to have that experience with the Mobile Advisory Team, because it was actually living, effectively, with the Vietnamese — and, for that matter, with the Americans. I saw my very first computer printout there, where somehow they had decided that this computer printout could show the status of every house, every family, in the



eighteen thousand people in this village, and they'd somehow — and I don't think I'm exaggerating — I think they'd somehow decided which houses were pro-government, which houses were anti-government and which were to be decided. And it seemed to me, based on that, they were making management judgments, and I was told that they had a printout like that that covered the whole war zone. Now, whether that's true or not — I've not seen that written anywhere subsequently, but I don't pretend to have tried to research it. But I remember that was the first time I'd ever seen a computer printout, and — I mean, I didn't know what I was looking at, I suppose, but that was how it was explained to me by the American, I think it was probably the major or maybe one of his two captains. And subsequently, of course, I found that with computers the more rubbish you put into them the more rubbish you get out of it. So there was no way in the world that they could have known what the attitude of these individuals were in the village. We almost, at the end of our stay there, we almost had a better idea, in some little parts, who might have been more friendly to us and who wasn't. And if you were walking through parts of the area you got a feeling whether they were positive vibes or negative vibes. And that night that I described a little earlier, that ambush, before we were ambushed, while it was getting dark, we actually 'propped' in one of the little houses right on the edge of the village and had a cup of tea with the family, just the platoon commander and we Australians and one or two others, and that would have only been about — oh, I don't know, five, six hundred metres away from where we set our little position up. So in many ways it was a great experience to actually see some of these people, have a chance to meet them. I was a little disappointed: if I'd been a better linguist and had learnt a little bit of their language it would have been excellent. But certainly the time as a platoon commander was probably the most challenging, because you were constantly concerned for the security of your people. Many ways I've often thought it's easier for the commander at that level, though, because he's constantly concerning himself about issues and security and whatever, whereas the individual soldiers have got nothing much to think about apart from just doing their basic job, which you can easily get very bored at, looking into the scrub, looking for something, waiting for something to happen. You know, for the platoon commander there's something to take your mind off the security issue, I suppose.

Don, looking at your time in Vietnam overall, what were your feelings about the Vietnamese people, and/or the Americans?

I think, as I mentioned before, I felt a little sorry for the Vietnamese, because they were caught in this — between a rock and a hard place. They had to fight a war, but we were going home. In the end everyone went home and of course left them to it, and we saw the result there. The Americans — I mean, everything was massive, it was more the sort of big picture, and I think the execution at the lower levels would have been dependent on whether there was a very competent person there or not. In some cases, obviously they were good, but — and some of the Americans I saw — and I hasten to add only this very small group, so my experience is not indicative of the Americans — — — . I mean, they had the same problem we had: they had massive increase in their army to handle this. They dragged people from all over with some of them very limited training, others in a very narrow area, and all of a sudden they were out by themselves trying to make broad decisions. But I mean we got on very well with them most of the time, I think.



Don, what about the experience of coming home from Vietnam on the *HMAS Sydney*? Could you talk a bit about that, please, and then what you found when you came home first up in Sydney?

Well, we came back on *Sydney*. The *Sydney* had been up there and had delivered — I think they brought our replacement battalion up, and so we went home on the ship, and it was just a winding down. But in many ways that was a very good way to come back. We came back as a group, we were all in our company and whatever groups, and we had two weeks to — you know, there were movies, obviously you could have a beer. Not that there was much to do, but they — — —. And when we got back, we got back into Brisbane, and we lined the ship and they had a band to welcome us and all that. Of course, all the families were at the wharfs at Hamilton there in Brisbane. And then we marched through the city and went out to Enoggera and back to the old base and handed in our weapons and got on the 'plane and went on leave, and I came back here to Adelaide with — I don't know, a dozen or so other South Australians, and we had leave and then those of us that were going back to the battalion — many of the National Servicemen, that would have been the finish, but went back to Brisbane and sort of carried on. But the reception in Brisbane, it was timed, I think, for a lunchtime or morning tea or something — no, it must have been lunchtime — and there were people seriously welcoming us back, or seemed to be. There were a lot of people there. I remember marching up the main — well, one of the main streets there behind the band. They were playing that well-known Australian tune, you know the words to it, 'We're a pack of bastards!' (laughter) People singing that as they went up the street. There were people throwing bits of paper out of the office buildings, the odd toilet roll — I remember seeing a couple of toilet rolls as well — but generally it seemed an excellent welcome. In fact, it's the only time I've ever written to the news — well, during my Army career, anyway — written to the newspaper. When I got back to Adelaide here I was so impressed I actually wrote a very short note saying, 'As one of the members of the battalion that marched through the city last Friday' or whatever it was, 'I'd like to thank people for the great welcome.' And I said something about it was nice to see the welcome because it wasn't all that apparent that the work that was being done — of the *soldiers*, as individuals — was as appreciated as perhaps it seemed to be on that day.

You had malaria at the time, didn't you, Don?

I somehow got malaria just after I got back here, or it manifested itself. So I spent about five days in Daw Park Hospital before going back. Malaria was a real problem during our time. There were hundreds of people with it, and they had to — we were taking a suppressive night and day, which had been the standard practice in the Army for years, same as we did in Malaya and Borneo — and it was simply not suppressing it. Because a lot of our patrolling moved through old camps that had been occupied by Viet Cong and their supporters, I suppose, and whatever the various strains really — literally — decimated the companies, it was a real problem. And they decided to issue another drug to combat it. Now, it seemed to slow things down, but I was very surprised to come back to Adelaide, and just before I was due to go back to Brisbane with the Army I found I had malaria, so I reported to the hospital, spent a few days there.



Don, apart from the warm welcome you had in Brisbane, when you came back this time, did you notice a type of reluctance in the Australian community to accept the soldiers who were coming back, or was it not that obvious?

Oh, it was certainly *more* obvious than it had been before. But it never seemed to be all that dramatic. It's always interested me that people were venting their political concerns on those in uniform rather than at the political level, and I must admit I had never personally encountered any antagonism, any personal verbal attack or even physical attack or anything like that, and I don't really know of — well, any specific cases. But there was certainly discussion in the media, and I know of — have read of incidents and whatever. There was one very early on when one of the battalions coming back, somebody threw paint or something over the battalion commander, and I think that might have been the first — very early on, anyway. But it was certainly there. But it never seemed to get, to me, to the same level as it did in the United States, and I've often thought that maybe that was in some way due to the astute management of the Australian effort by the military people in Vietnam. If there'd been a lot more casualties, as there could very easily have been with a more sort of 'gung ho' approach, we probably wouldn't have achieved any more but we'd have probably had a lot more casualties. And that, if it had been fifteen hundred dead instead of five hundred, maybe things would have been different then — and probably rightly so.

Don, in hindsight, have you ever had cause to question Australia's participation, or rethink your time there at all?

I think probably — I've often thought about it, and, you know, with a bit of sadness, of course, at the lives that were lost, both ours and the Vietnamese. But I suppose history will — and perhaps we're still a little close — make a judgment on just how effective the combination of our foreign policy and defence policy of those days, what the practical impact was into the future in South-East Asia. I mean, you can see us moving into South-East Asia a lot more just of late, and that current exercise we're just about to almost conclude in East Timor is probably an excellent example of that, where it's been very successful and well-executed by professional people. At the lower level, I think the Army did a very difficult job, but really did it very well. Morally whether it was a just war or not, I suppose you've got to make these decisions in hindsight based on — it's very difficult — *easy* in hindsight, sorry, compared with the situation of the day, when people seemed to genuinely believe in the domino theory and that Vietnam was going to be a domino and fall to the Communists, and it did anyway, of course. But as it turned out it didn't have the dramatic effect that people predicted. I mean, there's all the stories about supporting the Americans and — well, I really don't have a (laughs) judgment on any of that. But it's certainly a thing I've often thought about.

Don, could we turn away to Vietnam to a more latter-day time in your military career, and that was as part of a peace-keeping force in the Sinai? How did that come about for you?

Well, I was posted to a job for a year in the Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai for calendar year '64, really.



'94?

Sorry. (laughs) '84, what am I saying?

'84.

'84. And I was the — Australia had a contingent of helicopters up there, eight Iroquois helicopters in a squadron setting with two New Zealand helicopters, so it was an ANZAC squadron. And there were a number of [Australian] Army staff officers and an [Australian] Air Force fellow on the headquarters of the force, which was basically a brigade group, independent brigade group, positioned in the zone of the Sinai which ran between the present Israeli border, which was the old Mandated Territories border of Palestine, which, interestingly, I, doing some research, saw had been in part surveyed by TE Lawrence, Lieutenant TE Lawrence, before the First World War.

Quite correct.

And I actually found that in a document that I was doing some research while I was there. But our job was to basically keep the Israelis and the Egyptians apart, I suppose. I mean, there were security zones which were structured to give confidence to the peace treaty which came out of the Camp David meetings with [US President] Jimmy Carter and the Israelis and the Egyptians, and our force of the three infantry battalions and some engineers and helicopter squadron — two helicopter squadrons, because the American battalion had a helicopter squadron as well — and some fixed-wing aircraft and a small flotilla of Italian converted minesweepers really patrolled these areas and monitored what was going on. It was a most interesting year. We were living in what had been an Israeli air base, fighter base, in northern Sinai, not far from the Rafah terminal, which is the sort of entrance to the Gaza Strip, which of course now is sort of held by the Palestinians. And they'd destroyed the tactical part of the — the operational part of the airfield, the runways and whatever, but we had our aircraft operating off the taxi ways, and there were about — well, the whole force was about three and a half thousand, and more than half of them were based in this northern base, and then there was a southern base down near the Straits of Tehran which is where the little Italian three-ship flotilla was monitoring what was going through there up to the ports of Aquabah and Elat.

Did you find that a very different time from Vietnam?

Oh, yes. There were only a couple of minor security incidents. It wasn't a — it was very much peace-keeping. You know, the essence of peace-keeping is having an agreement and then setting in place a means of making sure, giving both sides confidence that the other side is keeping to the agreement, and that's how this thing was structured. And from my time there they certainly seemed to comply with what they'd agreed to do. But our force was there to give that level of confidence, and it seemed to work very well. It wasn't a United Nations force, though, because apparently they didn't think they could get that through the UN General Assembly, so the Americans agreed to set this thing up and it was just really the three countries, but they had, I think, eleven different nations as part of the force. And



unfortunately, with the change of government in Australia, it wasn't part of the incoming government's policy to support non-UN peace-keeping operations, so they pulled our helicopter squadron out. I think — that was just after I left, and I think a Canadian helicopter squadron took over from there. We're back in there now, though, in a slightly different role, mainly Army, I think, and have been ever since.

And, Don, I think it was prior to going to Sinai, you were also back in Malaysia, is that right, at Butterworth?

Very briefly, yes. I came to — after service in New Guinea I came to the battalion on posting here in Woodside, and we've maintained a rifle company, largely for training purposes, up at Air Base Butterworth, which is on the mainland of Peninsula Malaysia opposite Penang [Island]. And that was originally a British base, and then it was handed over to Australia and then to the Royal Malaysian Air Force. And when we were there it still had operational Australian Air Force units. There were two squadrons of Mirage fighters — I think it was 3 Squadron and 77 Squadron. And the maritime patrol aircraft used to stage through there and they'd do exercises as part of the Five Power Integrated [Air] Defence System, the headquarters of which was at Air Base Butterworth as well. So we provided a measure of a presence there, but we also used it as a training exercise. But it was an excellent sort of independent experience with about a hundred and twenty of us for three months, and a good experience for a — well, good experience for everyone, actually, because we trained here and prepared ourselves for it, so it was a good short-term objective to get ready for this thing and, you know, telling people about the Malaysian population and issues. It was very rewarding.

Don, on a more philosophical level — no, actually, more personal level — looking back over your years with the Army, particularly your Vietnam experience, was that transforming, in a way, for you, or not?

I'm not sure about transforming. I think probably the most physically and mentally demanding was the little officer training course, the six months, when one really felt almost ground into the dirt with that. It was hardly academic, but it was — there were things to learn, theory, and exams, and yet there was a very demanding physical regime and really no time. So it was pressure all the time. And it was — I think we all sort of banded together with the attitude of, you know, 'We're not going to let the so-and-sos grind us down,' type of thing. And it was only by working together that you could get through, because once you got a bit behind or you got some sort of punishment like extra — I don't know, there was some dust on your bedside table or something, you'd get an extra drill for that, and next morning you'd have to be up — you couldn't get out of bed — well, you'd be in strife if you were caught, you get out of bed any earlier, so you had to have everything ready and then onto the parade ground with all your gear on, you know, just like the military have done for years. The only difference with this was they ramped down the time frame and ramped up the pressure a little. And I think it was probably very well done. It was one of the best — even with all my subsequent years in the Army, it was one of the best-organised things — — —.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A: TAPE 2 SIDE B



[you'd be in strife if you were caught, you get out of bed any earlier, so you had to have everything ready and then onto the parade ground with all your gear on, you know, just like the military have done for years. The only difference with this was they ramped down the time frame and ramped up the pressure a little. And I think it was probably very well done. It was one of the best — even with all my subsequent years in the Army, it was one of the best-organised things] I've seen. I don't really remember — maybe they were very good at hiding when things went wrong, but I don't really remember anything going wrong. Maybe I was too sort of focused and determined to get through to even notice, but that was probably the most demanding. And then I think the Vietnam — Borneo and Vietnam were really very similar, except for the threat, the enemy threat, which was — you know, there were only a couple of contacts in Borneo. I mean, my platoon didn't have a contact in the few months we were in Borneo, whereas we had a number of minor contacts and a couple of — well, one slightly bigger one — — —. So I think that probably — I think probably came away from it all really feeling pretty — well, confident's not the right word, I suppose, but feeling that if I've been able to handle this, sort of thing, I don't think there's anything really — I don't feel I need any challenges any more, sort of thing. That's possibly overstating it, but that was a bit of a feeling I think I had.

Don, what about your family's response after you'd come back from Vietnam? Did they ask you questions about it?

No, not really. My father, of course, was dead. My younger brother — I suppose we must have talked a bit, but I wasn't really home very much because after leave I was straight back. My mother — yes, a little bit. Funnily enough, when we were in Vietnam it became a bit of a fad. Little tape recorders had only really come in a year or two before, and I bought two little tape recorders and sent — little reel-to-reel tape recorders — and sent reels back home, and my mother and brother and his girlfriend or whatever would talk on it. And I actually found one of these a couple of years ago and we had it done [copied onto a cassette tape], and fortunately it was my mother's voice — because she's long dead now — but it fascinated me, the sort of questions she was asking, you know, 'What's it like up there, dear? Do you get a chance to get out and go down to the hotel or anything like that?' I thought, 'Dearie me,' you know, it just seemed so funny having that perception that it was really almost a little bit like going to the office, I suppose. Or she'd somehow got that idea. And I suppose I didn't disabuse her. I mean, what do you say in letters, and whatever?

Were you constrained as to what you could say about the actions up there?

Not that I'm aware of, no. There was none of the, as I understand it, the Second World War, you know, there was serious censorship. There was probably no need because the real reason for censorship is so that you don't give away tactical plans that somebody can quickly pick up and use. That example of the Falklands War where the Brits were planning an attack on an Argentinian position and the people about to do the attack were horrified to hear (sound of static) — before it went through — hear about it on the BBC World News, which if the Argentinians had been listening they would have been ready. That's obviously an extreme example. But as far as I'm aware (static) our main concern was not to — people trying to stop people smuggling weapons back to Australia.



Smuggling weapons back?

Yes.

Oh!

I mean, it wasn't — if you'd wanted to get a weapon it wouldn't have been very hard. And I remember just before we came home, one of our chaps was caught trying to smuggle a — sent a .45 pistol back in the mail and he was caught, and he spent most of the journey back to Australia in the brig of *HMAS Sydney*. The customs blokes (intermittent static) were most impressed with this (laughs) — they joined — as my embarkation officer role I was responsible to liaise with the customs people and they boarded us off Darwin and stayed with us till we got round to Brisbane. And they were rather impressed with this (laughs) internal control. But they were very good, very flexible approach about what the chaps could bring in — portable stereo gear and whatever. I think they took the attitude if you could — a lad would say to them, 'Well, this isn't really portable.' He said, 'Well, can you lift it up?' 'Oh, yeah.' 'Oh well, it's portable, don't worry about it.' They were good.

Don, from a family point of view, when did you get married along the way?

I didn't, actually.

No?

No.

So you've never been married?

No.

What about the return to civilian life, *per se*, after you left the Army? Was that a difficult thing?

No, not really. It was only five and a half, six years ago. But I had joined Legacy when I came to Adelaide and it just happened that rather than — I only had a few years left in the Army anyway, because of my age, and I was posted back to Canberra. And I decided I'd resign and finish up here in Adelaide, and it just happened the person that was doing the job that I'm presently in had been in the job for years and years and wanted to finish up so he suggested that I might like to take this on. And it's been very worthwhile, because Legacy is closely related to looking after the — well, Legacy's looking after the families of the men that have either died in action or subsequently.

So does Legacy deal a lot, these days, with families of Vietnam veterans?

We do, but of course the numbers are limited. There are only fifty-something thousand men went to Vietnam, and a small number of women, and compare that with the nearly a million men that were involved in the Second World War. So most of Legacy's work these days is trying to help these largely lonely elderly ladies whose



husbands have passed on. Some of them, of course, lost their husbands during the Second World War, but the majority lost them long after the War. And those numbers are still growing. We've got over twelve thousand in South Australia alone.

So does that mean the task, in one sense, is a good deal — and don't take me the wrong way — social work, if you like?

Not so much social work; we'd call it welfare work.

Welfare, yes, sorry.

Yes. And I mean it's really — Legacy's not a charity, *per se*. It's a charitable organisation in terms of the *Tax Act* and all that, but its role is really to try to help these widows, although there are — I think we've got three or four widowers, but they're mainly, obviously, women — to make sure that they've got the entitlements that they are entitled to. You know, Federal Government, State Government, local government. There's a tremendous amount of support out there, but it's very hard (laughs) to find if you don't know where to ask the right question, and that really is Legacy's main role — and really being an organisation that can just show these ladies that there is somebody there that cares.

Have you found it to be a rewarding role yourself?

Oh, yes. It's certainly something worth doing, which I think is pretty important. Thirty-two years or something in one job, then to move into something else, and just to do something else so that one can just earn enough money to end up with a decent sort of pension, superannuation, whatever, would be pretty depressing. But to do something that you think's worthwhile is terrific, so it's a great opportunity.

Don, thank you very, very much indeed for talking to me today.

Oh, it's a pleasure, Rob, indeed.

END OF INTERVIEW.