

**ROBERT HENRY**  
FIRST WORLD WAR

TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT HENRY, 31<sup>ST</sup> BATTALION, FIRST AIF;  
Recorded by David Chalk

START OF AWM TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: David Chalk interviewing Mr Robert Henry, Drouen, 8th February 1990.

You were captured at Fromelles, weren't you?

At Flerbaix.

At Flerbaix.

Yeah, the Battle of Fromelles. I was captured on 20th July 1916.

Yes. You wouldn't have been long in France, would you? You would have only been there for six weeks, I'd say.

That's all, yes. We came over with the infantry. Been there for six months. I was in the 8th Brigade, you see.

Which battalion were you in?

Thirty-First Battalion.

Thirty-First.

Yes, I had to be in with the Queensland company, because the 31st was made up of two companies of Victorians - C and D were Victorians - A and B Companies were Queenslanders. On the way down the Queenslanders, they lost about fifty men AWOL. They didn't bother sending back to Queensland to fill up the gaps, they put Victorians in. I'd missed my previous lot. I was in 10th of the 6th at the start of it and I got the measles and missed it.

So you were the 10th reinforcement to the 6th Battalion.

Yes.

And you got the measles at Broadmeadows, or somewhere?

That's right, at Broadmeadows, and missed them.

Yes, there was an epidemic of measles around Broadmeadows, wasn't there?

Yeah. I got them. I hadn't had measles evidently. And I missed them. They had the station papers, I went down and they were in the Quartermaster's tent. On the 10th of the 6th. I could have taken them ... cleared off, and they wouldn't have known anything about me.

Oh yes.

'Cause I took them up to the reinforcements and they put me with what they called 'the lost dogs home'. That was a company there that was formed up of all people that went AWOL and that. They were brought back in there. It was sort of a motley lot.

Oh yes.

They used to get markers out of there to go to Williamstown to mark for the riflemen, you see. And I was in there one day and I think it was Colonel Tibby then, he came around and he was looking for men. He interviewed everybody, who went in those two battalions. There was A and B Companies. Yeah, he interviewed them. He interviewed me down at Williamstown and he said I'd do him alright.

So you were actually interviewed by the Colonel to see whether you were satisfactory for the Battalion.

Yes. There were two or three of our chaps there. I don't know how they got in there as well.

So the 31st was mainly a Queensland battalion?

Half and half. Later on they made it a Queensland battalion, I believe. That was after I left it.

Whereabouts were you born?

Me? Born at Doolarra South, now it was Murboo East.

How do you spell those places?

Doolarra?

Yes.

D-O-O-L-A-R-R-A. It's out from Morwell on the Murboo line.

Out from Morwell.

Yes. Twelve miles out from Morwell along that railway line to Murboo North. Murboo East, oh, it would have been seven or eight miles out from Doolarra, I suppose. Seven or eight miles out from Doolarra to the south. Yeah. I went to school at a place called Budgerie. 2864 was the number of the school.

And what was your birth date?

Birth date, 16/6/96.

Yes. So you went away with the original 31st, or as a reinforcement for the 31st?

No. My number's 344.

344, 31st Battalion.

Yes. That's my original number in A Company.

And did you have any friends in the 31st at that time? I suppose you'd made friends?

No. I didn't have any from Victoria, because they were all from New South Wales. Oh, there was one or two of our fellows I knew, they got in as well. A chap named Fink from down in Yallick. I enlisted from a place called Yallick out from Monamie. And he was in there. And, I don't know, there's another one I think too. Well you didn't see much of them. We were way out on the canal for...

The Suez Canal?

Yes. For several months. Because they were afraid the Turks might come over there again. They'd been over before they'd got there and were repulsed.

You enlisted in September 1915, did you say?

No, I enlisted in July 1915.

Did you? That's the same month as my grandfather I think.

Yes. I enlisted in July 1915. Went away on 9th November.

Did you?

Yes. Old King Edward's birthday. On the *Wandilla*.

On the *Wandilla*, yes, I've heard of that. How do you spell her name.

W-a-n-d-i-l-l-a.

How big a boat was she?

Only a small customer boat. Belonged to the Adelaide Steam Ship Company. She used to roll about - I got horribly seasick.

Whereabouts were you? Down below somewhere in hammocks I suppose?

Yes, supposed to be. The nights the hammocks were given out, I was that sick I didn't care if I died.

No.

I never ever slept in a hammock. I never ever put it up. I slept on the deck.

Yes, up on top.

Up on top when you get hot. You come across the Indian Ocean.

Oh yes. That would be during summer.

Then come across the Suez. Then we went to Heliopolis near Cairo, then back to the Canal.

So you would have arrived in Egypt late 1915?

Yes.

So you'd have been in Egypt from January through to the end of May thereabouts. You went across to Marseilles in about June, didn't you?

Yes. I was on the boat in Alexandria on me birthday - on me 20th birthday. Yes, on me twentieth birthday.

Yes. Do you go in the march? You were in the 5th Division, weren't you?

Yes.

Yes. You'd have gone on the march from Tel-el-Kebir to Serapeum, wouldn't you?

Yes. Now our OC got us to go by train.

Did he. You were lucky.

We were lucky. Yes, enormous casualties there, with that business.

How long were you at Broadmeadows?

Broadmeadows. I was in Seymour for a start, up there in the mud with no proper provisions. There was three inches of rain and they had to send us all home.

Did they. Because it was just too muddy?

Oh yes. We were out in the paddock, lying on the wet ground, just on a sheet you see. Oh I got a very bad cold. I had to go into hospital. I was in hospital.

What made you join up?

Me?

Where were the motives?

Oh, nearly everybody was intensely loyal those days. British subject you see. At that time there were only four and a half or five million in Australia and ninety-eight per cent British, you see. Yes. I was a bit too young and they would take me, I had to be nineteen.

Did you. And you actually tried to enlist, what, in 1914?

Oh, I didn't try. It would be no good because they wouldn't take you anyway. You had to have your parents consent.

So you'd have enlisted at nineteen and you had to get your parents consent.

Nineteen years and one month when I enlisted. Yes, I had the old paybooks too and I gave that to Norman. That's down at Epping Street.

And did you have any brothers who were also in the Army?

No. No, I was the eldest of the family.

How many were there in the family?

My family?

Yeah.

Originally there was four. One sister died when she was fourteen. Died down at Yarra Glen, buried in Lang-Lang where my mother is buried too. And another brother, Ernie, and another sister, Ellen. They grew up. In fact me brother, he was in here a couple of years before he died.

Was he.

Yeah.

What did you father do? Was he a farmer or ...?

Yeah.

He was.

A dairy farmer.

I suppose that's what Gippsland's famous for, isn't it.

Oh yeah.

Were you working on the farm also, or not?

Yes. I was on the farm and I enlisted at the Town Hall down in Melbourne.

Did you.

They didn't have any country grouping depots then.

Once you enlisted, what was the procedure then. Where did you go? Did you come back home and then they sent you a letter to go back ...?

Yeah. A certain day I had to down to Sturt Street. They had a whole trainload of us there then. There was a special train took us up to Seymour. Yeah.

Were you living in tents up there, or did they have barracks?

No, no barracks there then.

Just bell tents was it?

Bell tents, yes.

What were they like to live in?

No much good. I got amongst men that smoked and it caused this bronchitis you know.

Oh yes. You started smoking too, did you?

No, I didn't. I never smoked ... nor drank. No, I gave all my tobacco ration away. I've just since learned this lately that tobacco smoke affects you just as much if you're amongst smokers as it does if you smoke. I blame that for getting this wretched bronchitis.

What kind of training did they get you doing out of Seymour? Was it just the basic drill or ...

Yeah. Oh yeah, just military drill.

Had you done any service before in the cadets or ...?

No.

No. It was all new to you.

All new to me. Yeah. I don't think we did any of that. I think we did have some shooting practice. We never ever had a rifle until we went to Egypt.

Didn't you.

No. The military equipment was scarce, I'll tell you.

Was it.

As you got up further towards the front line.

Yes. Who was in charge of A Company? Can you remember the officer?

A Company?

Yeah.

Colonel Hockley.

Hockley, he was a captain at that time, was he?

He would be Captain Hockley. Yes, I think so. He didn't stay with us when he got to France. He went and joined the Pioneers or something. We got another man, called Robertson.

Oh yes.

Robertson. G.G. Robertson. He was amongst the slain at Flerbaix. Yes, I suppose you know about the statistics at Flerbaix. How many were killed and so forth?

I know a little bit about it. Yes. I've tended to just concentrate on the story that I'm writing but First Bullecourt was also a disaster very similar to Fromelles.

Fromelles. Yes. There was five thousand - out of fifteen thousand there was five thousand five hundred killed. You get it all in Bean's book. Seven chapters about Fromelles in Bean's book. I've got the book, it's round at my flat now. I haven't got everything here of course.

I do have that history. Were you specialising at all? Were you a bomber or anything?

No.

You were just in the infantry.

Just the infantry. Yeah, too young. I stepped out for officer school and they said, "Oh, you're too young. You'd better go back in."

What rank did you have?

Private.

You were a private were you?

Never got any further. I would have if I'd have come out I suppose because I was in the original battalion. And I had a pretty good name I suppose. I never did anything amiss, as far as I know. And there would have been a lot of reinforcements come in. I believe my Battalion only had about 156 answered the roll call the next morning, out of nearly a thousand.

That was shocking. What happened at Fromelles?

Fromelles?

Yes. What was your role? What was the 31st Battalion to do?

Well, I was in the first wave that went over the top. Oh, it happened about – oh it was about five o'clock in the afternoon I think, and it would be summer time I suppose. The whole exercise was there was another division of Englishmen that went over as well of course. It was suppose to be a big ... Well we were told we were going over to stay, otherwise I mightn't have been taken a prisoner of war because I could still walk.



Right. You mean you might have been able to get back?

I might have been, but we were told when we went over to stop, to hold the ground where we got, you see. We went over and we got quite a bit of ground alright. We were a way in behind the German lines. We might have got wounded. The whole thing was supposed to be a big raid to try and keep some German battalions up there from going down to the Somme where they were going to make a big push there at that time.

Yeah.

At that time.

Whereabouts were you wounded?

First of all I got, and I still have, our own shrapnel in my shoulder. Shrapnel shell. Burst up behind us, it came from our own guns I'm pretty sure. And one bit lodged into my shoulder there and put this arm really out of action. I couldn't use it.

Your right arm.

Yes. Well then, I had to go ... I got rid of my rifle. I pulled the bolt out and threw it away. Got rid of the ammunition. I started crawling back. The grass was this high in the middle of summer, you see.

Two or three feet high.

Anyway, I was crawling along with another fellow and we seemed to get between jolly machine guns. One of ours and one of theirs. And as soon as one fellow stopped the other fellow started. And I was lying with my head in a hole. Then one of those bursts caught me and I got a wound around there about that long around here.

Around near your hip.

Just a skin wound.

About six inches long.

Yes.

A machine gun bullet went across your hip, did it?

Yes. It went across there and the other bullets cut my pants down to my knees.

Did they. My word, that was close, wasn't it?

It was close. So I think I might have went out to it then. I never fainted in my life but I think I might have gone out to it. I don't remember. When I opened my eyes it was broad daylight. Everything was quiet. You could hear guns were sending over ... we were still bombarding the place. I remember a clod of dirt come right down and hit me on the groin. Yeah. Well then it got a bit quieter and I got up and had a look around and oh I could see a place ... There was a sort of an embankment and I thought I'll get up and go over. And I got up and over there. Of course I was a bit weak then. I'd lost a lot of blood.

Yeah.

And then I came across another fellow, one of our fellows. He was a Lewis machine gunner. He was an older man than I am, and I said, "I'm alright now, I'm back with the boys." He said, "No fear, we're not." He said, "The German's are all in their front line, and we're in behind them. We've got no hope of getting back."

Oh I see.

Yes, that's right. No hope of getting back. So anyhow, about four in the afternoon along came a German – oh, he'd be an unterofficier, an NCO. There was a revolver in his hand. There was nothing else to do but put your hands up, that's all. And we were taken prisoner. Then we were taken away out along one of their communication trenches. And then the German started to rail me about what did our people want to be blazing away at them for. "Look what you've done to all our trenches. You didn't gain anything by it." And of course we kept very quiet. The other fellow, they gave him the machine gun to carry. He wasn't wounded at all.

The other Australian?

Yeah. They picked up a Lewis gun. It was a novelty to them. They hadn't seen one before. The Lewis hadn't been out very long then. You know what a Lewis gun is?

Yes.

And I got two or three rounds of ammunition. They made me carry that.

That's the panniers you mean?

I don't know what they call them. And I got out to a... Then I showed them. The Germans, they weren't the ones that we had. They were reinforcements and they seemed to be quite friendly. One fellow, he gave me a drink out of the water bottle and I showed him me wound. Oh he sent me down underneath to get a dressing on it. He said, "You could leave your ..." I don't know whether I had a helmet or not then but I had me jacket. "Leave that up at the top." It was obvious what they wanted to leave it for.

They wanted to go through the pockets.

They didn't go through the pockets exactly. They took all the badges off it.

Oh I see, yes.

Yeah, when I came back they was out. Then we got into – I'm not sure. It was a transport of some sort and went to a ... I suppose we'd call it a clearing station. We were there for the night amongst a lot of wounded.

How many of there were you, at a guess?

Hey?

How many of there were you in that group? Would there have been fifty or more or ...?  
There were about five hundred captured.

There was about five hundred I believe. Yes, I was practically on my own. There wasn't many at that little clearing station. We were not even there over night I think. One or two died in the next room, I think.

Did they.

Yes. Sergeant McKenzie. Then I got in touch with his uncle just here lately. He's a member of parliament, I think.

Yes. I was told about that by Colin just before I came in. That was interesting.

Yes. His name's Wright now. His mother married again and they took on the second husband's name - Wright. Yes, he's a member of parliament. I met him and I was able to tell him what happened to his uncle. He'd heard of it before and he knows where he's buried over there. Well we were there - from there they took us to Lille. We were in a little hospital there I think. I don't know, we might have been there a week, I don't know. Or more. I remember the doctor getting on - at that clearing station they put a dressing on. The wound was wide open you see.

How deep was the bullet? Had you been hit by more than one of the bullets?

No, only one bullet and it only cut skin deep. The wound was that wide, of course, if it had been stitched up it would have only been a line. It wasn't stitched up.

Yes, about an inch wide.

Yeah. It was too late.

So they left it just as it was.

Yes. And I was going to tell you about, they must have put a bit of what they call lint on it and it stuck there, dry. This German doctor, he had a look at it and turned his head around and got hold of the end of it and in one rip he pulled it all off. By gosh it hurt.

Yes.

Then we stopped there and then they took us to Dulmen from there. We were there until the wounds all healed up, you see. Then they gathered us together, a whole train load of British prisoners, and we were in amongst them. And they took us way over to Poland. I remember going through Berlin in the middle of the night. It took us a couple of days to get there, I think. A place called Schneidemuhl.

Yes, I know.

And we were sent out in working parties from there. The worst one of the lot was when we were sent to Stettin, to work at a chemical works. That was called the Union Chemische Fabrik - that's the German name.

Right. Fabrik is factory.

They'd sent super-phosphate out here in Double Bay before World War I, to New South Wales anyhow.

Had they.

Yes. The by-product. Oh, it was a big factory. It employed – oh there was only a third of it working when we went there. The by-product was super-phosphate but the main product was oil of vitriol.

That's v-i-t-r-i-o-l is it?

I think so. Otherwise, what's the other name. Yes. I was on a lot of shovel work there. I remember on my birthday, on my twenty-first birthday, I unloaded two trucks of metal-like stuff it was. They used to burn that in furnaces and gather the gas from it into great big leaden tanks, almost as big as a house. And then they got that into liquid form but putting steam with it, or something or other. Anyhow it was reduced down to oil of vitriol in the last stages anyway. I was on a job there, it wasn't the first job we were on, of course but we'll come to that afterwards. We'll finish with this one first. Anyway, I was on the job there - a seven day a week job - wheeling this 'keesh'. They called it keesh. I don't know what the English name is. It had to be ground up like metal in the metal crusher before it was put into these fires. We didn't have to fire it. The Germans were shovelling that in to... and I suppose they put it with coke, burnt it with coke. And they gathered the gas from that too. That where the gas came from to go into these big tanks. There were about four or five of us there with wheelbarrows to wheel the burnt stuff away into a heap. There was a nasty red dust come from that. Civilians wore things over their mouths but we didn't anything to wear. That might have helped to give me bronchitis too.

I reckon it could have done, yes.

The wheelbarrows would contain about five-hundredweight and we'd wheel them down, I suppose, twenty-five yards. Up a plank and tipped them out. When they took that away they got copper out of that as well I believe, later on. Well, I was the only one that come home out of those four or five who worked there.

Really.

Yeah. With all the ... we got the flu when it went through Germany.

Yes. The flu epidemic.

Well, we were there in that place for thirteen months. Couldn't get away from it.

Yes. And you were working seven days a week, did you say?

Seven days a week on this particular job. We were on duty for twenty-four hours every second Sunday. Yes. We took five-hour shifts, and ten-hour working shifts.

When would you start in the morning?

Six o'clock and work through till six a night. Two breaks. Eight till half-passed and twelve till one and then four to half past, and then on to six. Well the civilians did it and we were supposed to do what they did. Eventually we got away from that. I don't know the reason.

That was at Stettin?

At Stettin, on the River Oder.

Oh yes. Whereabouts were you barracked there? Where were you living?

Oh, in some kind of barracks there, we were in. Some kind of barracks there. I don't remember much about them. We did a bit of cooking. Sometimes they sent lentils in these parcels.

END OF AWM TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF AWM TAPE ONE - SIDE B

Yeah.

And I was able to what we called 'muck-in' with a couple of Englishmen. They were out here in Australia, in New South Wales. They'd been immigrants. Chaps named Bolder.

They were brothers, were they?

They were brothers, yes.

Boulder?

No. B-o-l-d-e-r. By doing that, if one didn't get a parcel, and another one did, you see. It kept us going. If it wasn't for those parcels, we couldn't have stood up to the work.

No.

No. And I was going to say about the lentils, there was a steam pipe coming, and we all used to hang them on there in the billy to cook.

There was a steam pipe and it was emitting steam, was it?

Yeah.

And you'd hang them over the opening.

Yeah. Hang them over the opening. I don't know how they expected us to cook it.

No. How many Australians were there? Were you with Englishmen or were there Australians?

About a hundred British prisoners. There were one or two Canadians I think and about fifteen Australians. That's where those photos were taken from.

Oh yes. Can you remember any of the ... that's that one, is it?

Yes. (coughing)

You're right. Take your time.

That was at our barracks somewhere. I doubt whether it was ... it wasn't at that factory.

Wasn't it? No.

That's myself there.

Oh yes. The arrow.

That's one of these Bolders and that's the other one there.

That's to your right, with the caps. That's a Belgian, is it? At the far end.

He was in the Australian Army, come from South Australia.

The Bolders were Englishmen, but they were in the AIF.

Oh yes. That's right.

Were they the 31st or from another battalion?

No, they were in the 57th, I think.

Oh yes. They were also captured at Fromelles as well.

Yes. Well, these were all Australians, everyone of them.

They're all Australians?

Yeah. Dad Walsh, we called him.

That's the one at the front with the moustache, sitting on the ground - Dad Walsh.

Yes. I can't remember all the other names. This old chap ...

The one on the left.

There was a party working somewhere and they were working out in the snow in the night-time and they refused to work. And they took them out, changed the sentry every now and again. They kept them out, you know, in the open, and didn't let them inside. And he said he couldn't put up with that, he went back to work. He was too old for that, he was about forty-five.

Yes. Was he Australian? He's not Australian, is he?

Oh, I think so.

Do you know where that's taken, that photograph?

The Australian prisoners of war was taken at Dulmen.

Yes.

That's what I said there. I suppose I remembered.

Yes. That would be right.

I am marked.

There's a little arrow there.

Because all those fellows are all older than I am, you see. I don't suppose there'd be one of them alive now.

No.

No. There's another picture there too. I think there's one at camp.

I don't think in this group. Oh yes there is. That's all Australians. You're in that one. Yes. That looks to also be at Dulmen. It looks to be the same place as this, isn't it?

Yeah. Those are borrowed uniforms, not the ones that we had.

They're not the ones that Red Cross sent you, are they?

No. They were borrowed from others who had them. There are the two Bolders there, next to myself.

Oh yes. They were good friends of yours, were they?

Yes.

What were their christian names?

One was ... they went by the names of Harry and Jack.

Which is Jack?

There's Jack.

On the left.

The younger one, that's Harry, the older one.

Alright. Who's this one on the other side?

I don't know his name. All Australians. Prisoners of War. There's Henry in front. I was always taller then.

You look to be fairly well built.

Oh yes, I was. Yes, I was over six feet. Pretty strong.

What had you been doing on the farm? You were milking cows, were you?



Yeah. Hand milking them.

And when you were captured, you went to Lille. They took you up there by train, did they.

No.

You were marched up there, or wagons?

No. I must have been in a motor vehicle of some kind, I think. I don't remember exactly. Yes, we went from ... where did we go from? Somewhere in the train, I forget where it was. We were in Brussels.

You'd have probably gone to Dulmen on the train, I'd say.

No, I couldn't say now - indeed, I don't remember.

Were you marched around Lille? When you were captured, some of the men were marched around Lille, more or less on ...

On view.

Yes, on view.

No, I don't think so. I wasn't among them anyway.

You were, of course, wounded, weren't you?

Yes.

So you wouldn't have been marching anywhere?

No.

How bad was the wound in your right shoulder?

Oh, well, it was pretty sore. There was only a little mark then. There is a piece of shrapnel still in there. I never did anything about getting it out.

No. Where were you? You were put in to hospital at Lille?

Yes.

Small hospital?

Small hospital, yeah. Yeah, there weren't very many in there.

Did you see anybody that you knew?

No, I don't think so. No, I was walking. I was able to walk freely. I was a walking-wounded man.

The machine-gun bullet wound was only a surface wound, it didn't stop you walking or anything?

That's right, no.

You were lucky.

That's right. It did affect me for a couple of years afterwards. I couldn't put my hand above my head, I know.

What was it like in the hospital at Lille?

Oh, I don't think anything extraordinary happened that I can remember. I suppose we were fed somehow or other. Don't remember anything much about it.

What was your morale like? What were you feeling like? Were you depressed?

Oh, I suppose so. I couldn't tell you (laughs). I never got down-and-out or anything at any time.

No.

At any time - no. Oh, well, the first working party we were on, we were sent out from Schneidemuhl - oh, I forget the name of the place now – but we were billeted in a hall. We'd call it a hall. It must have been at the back of a hotel or something or other. There was about fifteen of us, I think. We were a mixed lot, I think, anyhow. I don't remember any of them personally in there at all. We weren't on it very long. We were sent out to cut down trees - pine trees. Each one was given a saw – one of these with a band around it.

What kind of a saw is it?

Oh, well, it was ...

A two-man saw, is it?

No, it wasn't two-man, I don't think. Might have been two-man saw. Had a big band around it, different to what I'd been used to. You had to cut the trees out near the ground, you had to get

down to cut these pine trees down. Cut the limbs off and measuring them up, out in the forest. Yes, I remember, it was that cold we used to take a billy of water with us, and boil it up out there, and make tea or other drink. Some beef cubes or something. And walking on the way out, you'd be going on about ten minutes, you could hold the billy upside down.

It had frozen solid?

Frozen solid, yes.

Of course, that was the winter '16-'17 in France, that's the bad one.

'16 is supposed to be the coldest winter in Poland for forty years.

Yes, it was in France, yes. You were working out in the forest at that time?

Yeah. Yes, and we were brought back to this place which ... they didn't have double glass on the windows. The frost was that thick on the inside of the window.

It was what, three or four inches thick?

Iced in ...

Iced inside the barracks?

Yes, on the wall there inside. See, all the windows in the houses over there have got double glass, stops them from being frosted up inside.

But these barracks didn't have that?

No. Well, that was the first. And then I was out on a dairy farm for a while, that was alright. There was only a few of us there, and I was about the only man who could milk a cow amongst the lot. So I got over helping them milk the cows. Which was handy. I used to keep a tin in my pocket. I could take a tin of milk to the boys - the other boys, you see. However - must have been - he was only a manager, I suppose. The manager was changing - the next manager, but he didn't want prisoners of war and he sent us back to the camp.

Oh, the manager was changed.

We weren't there very long at that place. It was a sorry to-do because you got better food there.

Yes, life on the farms was better.

Yeah, better, better than being sent to a factory. Oh, yes, I remember going out to a private place one, and had a big feed of potatoes and buttermilk. Potatoes and buttermilk. Yes, it was alright.

This was on the farm?

Yes.

You got out to a private place, did you?

Yeah, he asked me to go out.

This is the farmer?

Yes ... it wasn't the one I was working for, I don't think. It was another one - one of the hands.

Oh, I see, yes. And he asked you to his home?

Yeah.

And you had potatoes and buttermilk?

Potatoes and buttermilk, yeah.

That would be good for you. I suppose they lived on potatoes, didn't they?

They did, oh, yes – kartoffels, is the name in German

Kartoffels, yes, that's right. What was the morale of the Germans like when you were first captured at that time? Was it ... I know later, in 1917, it was very difficult to get any medical supplies. Food was extremely scarce.

It was yes.

Was it like that in 1916 when you were first captured, or did it gradually get worse?

Oh, I couldn't ... I wasn't in any place to make a judgement on that, I don't think, no. I was in the charge of the military all the time. All we got was ... you'd always eat everything with a spoon. You had practically no meat. A little bit of meat might have been dragged through it (chuckles). Mangelwurzels.

What are they like to eat?

Oh, dreadful. We ate a lot of carrots one time, and by gosh, you soon get sick of living on carrots, I can tell you. Oh, yes, the food was pretty bad, I know that, because when we got out parcels ... Oh, another working bee, we were out - we were billeted in Bronberg.

How do you spell that?

B-R-O-N-B-E-R-G - it is a fairly big town in Poland. We were working at a ... we were working there doing jobs on – something to do with an aerodrome there, I think. We were billeted in the town, I think. At that time, some of Frenchmen would be getting poison sent in their parcels, silly galloots. They were poisoning stock and that caused a bit of an upheaval.

They were getting poison sent out?

Yeah.

That's unbelievable.

Poisoned some of the stock. They censored all our parcels then. You got your parcels and you had to line up, and open them up, and the German officers and NCOs went round and inspected everything. There might have been twenty or thirty of us. I didn't hear it, I couldn't understand it, as well as some of the others. But one German officer said, "Mein Gott, there's more food amongst these prisoners than there is in the whole town of Bronberg!"

More food for the prisoners than there is in the whole town of Bronberg?

(Laughs). Than for the people. There wouldn't be more, but it would be better quality.

And the French, their parcels were sent through from their families, was that the case?

I think so, yes.

And the families were sending poison?

There was some to-do about it, anyway, I don't know what it was.

At any rate, the French were poisoning some of the stock - the cattle, and so on?

They poisoned something anyway - it caused this to be ...

All the parcels were searched?

Censorship of the parcels.

And what was the parcel system? They came into a central store, didn't they?

Yes, came to the camp.

This is to Schneidemuhl?

They were sent to Schneidemuhl first, I suppose, and then they were sent out. Oh, I don't know how they were sent. Sent through the local railway system, I suppose, to where you were. Oh, one of the first places I worked at was a sugar factory – a brown sugar factory. I did have pictures of that, and I suppose I've given them to Norman - given them to my youngest son, Norman, of course. Only a few months afterwards he died of cancer.

Oh, yes, I heard that.

The place was called Gossendorf in German.

Gossendorf?

Yes, Gossendorf.

Is this all out from Schneidemuhl?

Yes.

So you were in Lille for a short while - a week or so?

After - oh, that was away down in France.

Then you were trained all the way across Germany to Schneidemuhl?

Oh, I went ...

You went to Dulmen first?

I was in Dulmen next, yeah.

How long were you in Dulmen?

Oh, I might have been there a couple of months, probably.

What did you do at Dulmen? Can you remember much about the camp? That's where my grandfather was, he went there shortly after he was captured. He was also wounded. He ended up in Dulmen a couple of months after he was captured.

Yes.

And he got work with the wash house, or something.

Oh, yes.

And then he was with the British Self-Help Committee - and he stayed in Dulmen.

Did he?

Yes.

Oh, no, I didn't get anything like that. I know we didn't get much to eat there because the conversation amongst all the blokes was about what their sisters and mothers could cook up.

Dulmen had dreadful food.

Yes.

What there was of it.

Yes.

Would you say the Germans were envious of what the prisoners were getting - the Red Cross parcels?

Oh, I couldn't say. Not many of them saw them really.

I suppose they wouldn't.

It's interesting, isn't it.

Yes.

Better open that door a bit, it's getting a bit warm in here.

(Break in interview)

From Dulmen you trained all the way across to Schneidemuhl?

That's right.

So that's your movements. So you were in Schneidemuhl ... let's say, if you were captured in July, then by August you were in Dulmen. Probably about October or so you'd have gone to Schneidemuhl, 1916.

It would have been.

So you were in Schneidemuhl just as the winter started.

Yes.

What was Schneidemuhl like - it was a big camp, wasn't it?

Oh, very big camp, yes. A lot of prisoners there - French, and Russian - a whole lot of them. I had pictures of the place, too. Took them all down there to Norman's. Not much good you going there, there would be nobody there. Lorna, his wife, wouldn't know anything about them. She's got them, I think, got them back again.

I might see what I can do in that regard.

She lives at 10 Epping Street in East Malvern.

Malvern - so she's in Melbourne?

Yeah - 10 Epping Street - she teaches.

What's her last name? - I might give her a telephone call.

Mm?

If I were to telephone her, it would be Henry, wouldn't it?

Oh, yeah, Henry, yeah.

Lorna Henry.

Yes. She would be down in the telephone book, as N. W. Henry. She teaches at a college.

Right.

She wouldn't be home during the day, you'd have to go there ...

I might give her a ring this evening. You were over in Eastern Germany, or Poland, for the rest of the war, were you?

Yes.

So Schneidemuhl was your base camp from about October 1916, right through to the end of the war?



End of the war - that's me base camp. At the end of the war we were out on a big farm again, got out onto a big farm.

Whereabouts was that?

Oh, it was in Poland there somewhere. Somewhere out from Schneidemuhl. Oh, yes, a lot of people worked there. They had about a hundred prisoners, I think.

Did it?

There were a lot of civilian prisoners of war - Russian Poland. See, Poland, at that time, was divided up by three nations: Germany, Russia and Austria. The Germans brought all the people who could work, and were available, into Germany to help the work on farms, and that kind of thing. Let the Germans go away to war.

What's a big farm? Can you tell me how large it was?

Oh, it was two or three thousand morgens.

What's a morgen?

Oh, it's not as big as an acre, I don't think, but it's not far off it. Oh, yes, they had a lot - oh, I suppose about forty or fifty horses there. Used to milk cows there too. Had a herd of seventy cows and had a lot of sheep. All those things, they had to be brought in every night.

All brought in?

In winter time, yeah, all had to be housed. And, of course, there was hundreds of acres of, oh, rye grown. Rye was the principal crop, of course.

This is for bread, is it?

This was for bread. Oh, yes, they grew some wheat. I don't know what other crops they grew there. I remember - I don't know whether it was that place or the other farm - there was another Englishman and myself, and both of us could use a scythe, you see. Well, then, they had - had plenty of modern tractors. They used petrol, but see, petrol became that scarce they couldn't use them. They used to have a whole lot of these civilians with scythes, cutting down - I don't know what it was, whether it was rye, or oats, or what. Anyhow, we were given a scythe, these two - the Englishman and myself. I remember, he was a red-faced chap (laughs). We used to get pretty hot on the farm, using the scythe. I could use a scythe pretty good. And you'd have a girl behind you, binding up what you cut.

It would be, of course, the German girls?

Yeah - oh, well, they'd be Polish girls. Oh, where we were, Germans were pretty scarce there. It was mostly Polish women and men.

Who was the owner of the farm?

Oh, he was a German nobleman. A man called Von Gerke.

How do you spell that?

V-O-N - first name - and G-E-R-K-E, I think.

Von Gerke.

Von Gerke. He used to drive round with a pair of horses, round the place.

Supervising?

Supervising. Oh, well, he had other foremen as well, who used to drive round as well, you see. It was a mighty big farm. These farms - he didn't own the farm, he leased it from the German Government.

Did he?

Yes. Oh, there was a lot of that went on there, wealthy Germans leased big farms from the German Government, you see. They worked them, hired labour, and all that kind of thing. Marvellous how it comes back to you when you start talking about it. I hadn't thought of that, and we were on that farm for quite a while.

How long would you say? Would it be three or four months, or six months?

No, it wasn't six months, no - I reckon it would be four months. Well, we were on that farm when the armistice was declared, because we didn't get back to the camp straight away. They didn't take us back, or something. When we got back to camp in Schneidemuhl, everything was in a mess. See, they'd had the influenza epidemic, and oh, men were dying wholesale, the prisoners of war. And some men had been there prisoners for four years, and they died just before they went home. Anyway I kept healthy, and went back to camp. I was in the camp a while, then they took a trainload of us to Danzig. And from Danzig we got onto a boat there and then went across to Leith in Scotland. Leith, in Scotland.

Were you aware of what was happening on the Western Front at that time, or were you pretty ignorant of military events?

Oh, pretty ...

Kept informed?

Pretty well informed because, you see, all the Poles were Catholics, and these priests, they had their secret information of course. There were one or two Catholics amongst us. They used to get permission to go to mass, and the priest, he was very fond of a quarter-of-a-pound of tea if he

could get it. So our source of information came through them. They were able to get information. So we heard there was trouble coming.

What was the atmosphere like when you heard the war had finished?

Well, we were rejoicing, of course. Of course, those who got away from the camp first were those who had been longest prisoners of war.

It went on that system.

So I got away fairly early, you see. There were thousands left behind in the camp after I left it.

Whereabouts were you living on the farm, this last farm that Von Gerke had?

Oh, yes, we were in, oh, a sort of a building. We were actually down below the level - where we slept was down below the level of the ground, and our window looked out at ground level. Yes, it was pretty cold too, we didn't have much bed clothes. Two or three of us used to have to huddle together to get enough clothes - in the winter time - to keep warm.

I don't know how you lived through the '16-'17 winter out in Eastern Germany. How long was it before you got Red Cross parcels?

Oh, about six months, I think.

END OF AWM TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF AWM TAPE TWO - SIDE A

Identification: Tape 2.

Some of them were allowed to write.

At Dulmen, yes.

A postcard every week, and two letters a month. And, of course, I immediately sent a postcard off home. You know, that postcard got there - I was missing for five and a half months - on the missing list. They didn't know what happened. That postcard actually got home before the War Office let my father know that I was a prisoner of war. That's something worthwhile knowing.

Interesting, yes. So you were at Dulmen, you sent a postcard home, explaining that you'd been captured? That was the first time you had a chance to send a message?

Yes.

But it was five months after you were captured, or more, before your family got that card?

Yes. I wrote to the High Commissioner for Australia in England, telling him we didn't have much to eat, and all that. The Germans jibed this over that, because they reckoned we were getting what the civilians got, and that ought to have been sufficient (laughs). However, I think the letter went out. The High Commissioner, he was a prominent man too - can't think of his name now.

Yes, I think I know who you are talking about - not Fisher, was it?

I don't know whether it was Fisher, or not - Andrew Fisher.

Yeah, I think it was.

It might have been. Fisher's been prime-minister, hadn't he?

That's right. How did you get your name through to the Red Cross in London - the Australian Red Cross? How did they ...?

I don't know whether we wrote to them, or they'd get the list from the War Office. You see, when I was captured, they took my paybook away, and all the photos I had in my pocket, which I never got back.

They didn't give you your paybook back?

Didn't give it to me, no. But I got it back after I come back in Melbourne. They evidently sent it back ...

They sent it home?

The Germans sent it over to England in the mail over. Yes, I got them to scratch down installments too.

Did they interrogate you after you were captured, or didn't they bother much about that?

Yes, they did interrogate us. Of course they were told a whole lot of lies, which, of course, they dropped too. Some fellows told them they were in, you know, different units from what they were. The Germans, they knew what units were over there before we jumped over the top. Got their spies out – marvellous. They jibed us in some quarters for being volunteers. “Man, you must be verucht.” Verucht means mad.

To volunteer?

Yeah, volunteer. “Why did you go in the army for, and all the way to fight.” (laughs) They were all conscripts.

Yes, that's right.

Of course, you realise it now. I was pretty young then - only nineteen or so. You look round and see fellows of nineteen now, my goodness! They are only kids.

Yes, that's right - only boys.

Only kids.

And the range of places that you were working at - you were working with a sugar factory?

Yes.

And you were on two farms?

Yes.

And you were working in a chemical works?

Yes.

Is that all? Also, the first place you went to was the ...

The forest.

Oh, and the forest, that's right. And the chemical factory, that's the place where you had to wheelbarrow this ...

Yes.

That was that job?

That's right.

What were you cutting the pine trees for?

Oh, well, they were falling down and they had to mark them up how many metres they were. Cut the limbs off and left them there. I suppose they were collected by other people. We never saw them go away. Oh, I suppose they went to sawmilling places. Schneidemuhl, that's really the name of the place. It means a town of sawmills.

Does it?

Schneider is saw - cutting - in German.

I didn't realise that. Yes, that would be right.

Muhl is a mill. Schneidemuhl is a sawmill, or a cutting mill, or something like that.

So there were a lot of forests in that area?

Ah, yes, there were a lot of forests around there. Been planted, you see.

Forestry was a big industry, wasn't it?

Yeah.

I think all of the farms had small forests.

They would have had, I suppose, yes. Of course, that photo over there, that's actually in Egypt.

Yes, that's a good one. You'd know a lot about Egypt, spending six months in Egypt.

Yes.

I'm going to talk to you about Egypt.

A hot place. Yes, when we were - I think we got to Egypt in ...

December '15. Were you there for Christmas? Did you get a Christmas billy?

I can't remember - I don't remember where I was the first Christmas I was there - must have still been in Egypt, of course.

Yes. You left on November 1st, I think you said.

November 9th.

November 9th - so, if we said it took a month, that would put you in Egypt well before Christmas.

Oh, yes. I don't know where we were at Christmas, whether we were down on the Canal. We probably were. We were all split up into small companies then.

You'd have been around Heliopolis, I'd say, if you were over on that side of Cairo.

Yeah - oh, we were only there temporarily. We weren't there very long. We were doing training there.

What kind of exercises would they get you doing out there? Route marches, I suppose?

Yes - exercises out in the dark of night.

What were they like?

Oh, they were alright.

How would they organise that? I've heard a little bit about those.

Oh, well, they had men who were pretty good going by the stars, and the compasses – maps. They knew where they were going alright. They could go out miles and come back again in the right place.

I suppose your father and mother didn't know whether you were still alive, did they?

My mother wasn't alive, she died in 1912.

Oh, I see.

Nobody knew I were there. Of course, I had a girlfriend, and wrote to her as well. They got my letters before they heard from the army.

How long did it take you to recover from the wounds that you had? If you were out working at Schneidemuhl it can't have been very long.

Oh, must have been a couple of months at Dulmen, I think. I was alright by then.

What were you doing at Dulmen? What was that?

Oh, took you out to do little jobs. I don't know, nothing in a big way.

They'd take you out of the camp somewhere, would they?

Yes, doing some little job or other. Can't remember anything about it now much.

That was a big administration camp, Dulmen, wasn't it?

Yes, that's right. I suppose it was. I didn't know anything about it. We weren't told anything. No way of finding out. Am I giving you much information?

Oh, yes, you've been helpful. What about relations with the Germans in the sense of treatment and so on? Were there instances that you can remember where they were shooting people?

No. No, we got on alright with civilian people, because they were all up against the military.

Were they?

Yes, you see, they were like, well what we might call – they weren't exactly communists, of course, but they were left-wing labour people, I suppose, you see, the ones that we were working with.

This is over in Schneidemuhl?

Oh, anywhere we worked.

They felt oppressed too, did they?

They felt oppressed too. They didn't want the war. We soon learnt a bit of German, about the work and all that kind of thing.

You'd learn enough to make yourself understood.

Make yourself understood, yeah.

What about escape attempts. Did you make any escape attempts, or wasn't it feasible?

No, it was hardly feasible.

Not from Schneidemuhl anyway.

We were too far away from any borders. You couldn't get food to get away and all that sort of thing. You'd be picked up. We was in shelter. Several people made attempts, I think, but I don't know if I heard of anybody getting through. What was the use, you might be shot. I wanted to come home alive.

Were you able to keep in touch with your family when you were over in Schneidemuhl? Were you still writing home?

Yes. Yes, I had a book list, and I put down every letter I wrote - postcard. Norman had that – it's down there too. I kept a record of it because I didn't – well I spread the letters round. You used to have four postcards and two letters a month.

Was it?



Yes.

That's a postcard a week that you could send, and a letter every fortnight. How were you selected for these jobs? Did they just tell you that you were part of such and such a party, or did you volunteer?

No.

They just told you?

Yeah, just detailed us. Didn't matter whether you had any special qualifications or not, I don't think.

They'd have a parade, would they, in the morning? How would they organise that?

On the farm we always had to line up and we were detailed off with the foreman, to go and do certain jobs on the farm, which the foreman were instructed from someone higher up than he. You were sent off to that particular job every day. You wouldn't know where you were going to be sent.

The first job you were on, that was a dairy farm, wasn't it? You were milking cows, the first farm job?

The first job was cutting down pine trees.

I mean, the first farm was a dairy farm, wasn't it?

Yes.

How large a farm was that?

Wasn't a very big one, no.

And were the family still living there?

He'd been a - what do you call them? - manager. Yeah, I suppose they were living in the house. We were put up in a barracks somewhere. I don't know whether we had a postern with us or not.

A guard?

Guard. Not on the farm, I don't think. We had one at the other farm I was at - the big farm. We had one there.

What was he like?

I think he was a Polish fellow.

They had the Poles doing it, did they?

Oh, yeah. The German Poles had to be in the army.

Oh, I see, yes.

See, the Poles weren't allowed to speak Polish in public. They learnt German at school, when they went to school. The only place they spoke Polish was when they were in church - amongst themselves. I suppose all the younger people, as they grew up, they'd know German better than they'd know Polish.

Identification: Interview continued; Saturday, 10th February 1990.

We might start with the prisoner of war period again this morning, and try to go through the jobs that you were doing.

Yes.

Now, the first one that you were doing was cutting pine trees.

That's right.

Can you describe the place that you were working at there? Can you give me a description of what the job was, and where you were living, and so on?

We seemed to be billeted in a - it seemed to be a sort of a hall place. I think it might have been behind a public house, or something like that. I think there was only about fifteen of us there. I doubt whether they were all Australians. Mixed - see, we were always - Australians - all the British prisoners were put in, and they called them Englanders, of course. But it didn't matter, they treated us all the same.

The Canadians, and the British?

They were all Englanders - we always spoke English, of course.

What was the hall like? Can you describe what it was like inside?

(Laughs) I remember it had a picture of the Kaiser in it. Our blokes turned his face to the wall straight away (laughs). We didn't want him looking down at us. Yeah, I just thought of that. I don't know if there was any ... I don't know if there was any special heating apparatus in it, I don't remember.

You had bunks, did you, or beds of some description?

Can't remember what our sleeping arrangements were.

Might have been on the floor.

I think we were on the floor.

And were you guarded there?

Oh, yes, there were two guards with that working...

They used to call them kommandos, didn't they?

Kommandos, working kommandos, that's right. Yes, there were two guards at that one.

What were the guards like? Were they old?

They were medically unfit. Younger men or older men. Younger men - we got a better deal from the younger men. The old fellows, you know, like all men are, they like to see young fellows ... They see differently to what old men do. They come down on you more frequently. More - harder to get on with. Yes, well, anyway we were cutting these trees down. We had to walk, I suppose, oh, it might have been a mile, or half a mile, to work every day, out into where the forest was. We had to cut down these trees, cut down near the ground, as I said before.

Why was that? That's to avoid waste, I suppose?

That's right, yes. Oh, there was no waste because all pine trees is good down near the ground anyway. Our trees here - our trees are much bigger, of course. These were only about a foot through, or fifteen inches at the most, at the ground. Oh, I don't know how tall they would have been - twenty five or thirty feet, I suppose. We would fell them down and trim the branches off, and cut them up, and measured them. You measure them into (inaudible). That's all we had to do.

Was a guard there with you all the time?

Oh, yes, they were out.

So the two guards would come out, on the work kommando as well, and there'd be a guard on you during the day?

Yes, that would be it, yeah. There'd be civilians about too, of course, doing jobs in the forest. Oh, a lot of civilians would come out and picked up what they could use for firewood - small limbs and that - for firewood.

One of the men who I was talking to did a similar job, and he was cutting what he called 'pine pit props' for the mines.

Yes. That might have been a different job. These, I daresay, were - I don't know, I never saw them collected up. But they would have gone to a sawmill, I suppose. They might have made pit props out of them for all I know. I don't know what they would have made out of them. They were nice timber, nice straight poles on the trees.

And they were about fifteen inches in circumference, were they - or across?

Oh, no, in diameter.

In diameter.

At the bottom.

That was the first job you did, and it was during the winter, wasn't it?

That's right, yeah.

It must have been covered with snow at that time.

Yes - oh, well, it didn't have a very great thickness of snow somehow. It was too cold for snow. Snow falls at a medium temperature. If it gets very cold snow doesn't seem to fall. The ground freezes too. See, they sow their crops there - their rye and all those - and they sow them before it gets cold, and it pops up, you see, and the rye is actually growing in the snow. Not as cold in the snow as it would be out of it even. The ground freezes down too, to a certain depth. I don't know how deep.

Was it a very marshy place where you were out there?

Oh, I couldn't say that.

It was, was it? It wasn't, no. It would be plain country, would it, or was it mountainous, hilly, country?

Oh, no, it was plain, fairly level country. Yes, it wasn't as even as steep as this.

And you don't remember the name of that area?

No, I can't.

You remember a hall at that back of a hotel, or something, so you were in a small village, were you?

That's right, yes. I can't remember the name of it.

That doesn't matter. How far would it have been from Schneidemuhl, do you think?

Couldn't say - oh ...

Did you go out there by train?

Can't remember how we went to that place, I'm sure. I can remember going to one place by train. We went to the big farm working in Poland we went by train to the station.

The place you are talking about now, that was in Germany or Poland?

Oh, no, it would be in Poland. Schneidemuhl is in Poland.

Is it?

Yes. German Poland. No, I wasn't at any other camp.

No, that was your base camp.

Yes, that's right.

How long would they get you working on these pine trees? When would you start - before dawn?

Oh, no. It was all done in daylight. The day was pretty short, of course.

Yes, I suppose. It's winter there, yes.

The days were shorter there than they are here in winter.

You'd take your lunch out there?

Yes, we'd take a bit of lunch. A billy of water.

You were telling me that.

To boil up to make tea. We used to get quarter-of-a-pound package of tea in the parcels.

So you were getting some parcels in, or somebody was there, and you'd have tea, and you'd have a cup of tea?

That's right.

Billy of tea. So you'd start a fire for lunch, I suppose?

That's right - light a fire then, boil the billy.

That doesn't sound like it was too bad a job.

No, it wasn't too bad a job.

Except for the cold.

Except for the cold. Well, the food would be pretty sparse. I can't remember what we ate. No, I forget all about all these things.

Yes, it's a long time ago.

Oh, yeah - it would be about August, I suppose, 1916.

That would be the earliest, wouldn't it? If it was winter it would be a bit later, I'd say.

Yes ... oh, it was winter alright. The farm we got out there – you was captured in mid summer, you see, in July.

Did you have a stove, or heating of some kind, in the barracks, in the hall?

I can't remember. Must have been some kind of heating. It didn't have double windows on it.

Wasn't double glazed, I remember you were saying that.

No. And frost used to accumulate - oh, it would be that thick.

Three or four inches - three inches.

The frost on the inside of the windows.

Couldn't see out of it?

No.

The second job you went to after that was a dairy farm, wasn't it? You went to a small dairy farm?

I don't know – or what order they came in now. I forget. We went back to the camp.

They just came and told you that ... they took everybody back, did they?

Oh, yeah. Everybody went back when the job was finished.

Oh, I see, yes.

Might be sent out on other working jobs and wouldn't have the same mates again.

No. Do you remember any of the mates you had at the pine forest?

No, I don't remember anybody. If I was with those two brothers there or not, I don't know.

What was the dairy farm like - the small dairy farm - that you went to?

Small dairy farm?

Can you describe that place?

No very well - small ... They had milking cows there because I was able to milk a cow, and I was helping in the shed to milk the cows.

How many cows did they have?

I couldn't say - no, I don't remember.

Were you the only person milking?

Yes.

You were?

Oh, well, I suppose there was one of the civilians.

One of the women?

I don't think so, I think it was a man.

How many were there on that job? Were you on your own there?

Oh, no, there were several on that job. I would be the only one that could milk a cow. I got the job milking, you see.

You'd have to milk them twice a day, I suppose?

I suppose so. Yes, I used to have a tin in my pocket and fill it up with milk, and bring it in to the other fellows.

That was a good idea. The cattle - the cows - they kept, they are housed all the time, aren't they?

Housed all the time. Get out in summer time. In autumn they are taken out. You know, they've got to be minded. There is no fencing there. The sheep were different to here, the sheep. They are just following. they follow you about.

Would they?

Yes. They are only small - small lots of them, of course.

Half a dozen or so in a flock?

Oh, I suppose - could be a few more than that, I think. Yes, you'd have to look after them because they would want to eat all the paddock.

What was that? That was just outside, was it?

Yes, oh, yes. Yes, well, of course, first those farms relied on cultivation. You see, most of them were mostly cultivated. And they didn't have huge grass paddocks like we have here, no. All the cattle and that are fed round the headlands, and that's where there would be grass growing.

They used to be tied, didn't they? Didn't they tether the animals - tether the cows - allow them to move like that?

I suppose they did, I don't know. I don't remember that.

Where were you living at that place - in the farmhouse?

It would be in the - there were several prisoners there really - a small company of us. There might have been a dozen of us at that place. Oh, it would be in a room somewhere on the place.

One of the sheds, or barns?

Yes, that's right. A place they could lock up at night.



Did you have a sentry there as well, or not?

I doubt if there was a sentry at that place. The farmer would look after you.

So there was the farmer and ...

In some cases he was allowed to carry a firearm.

The farmer and his wife were living there, of course?

Oh, yes. Well, he wouldn't be the owner, he'd only be a manager.

Oh, yes, he wasn't the owner?

END OF AWM TAPE TWO - SIDE A

START OF AWM TAPE TWO - SIDE B

No, oh, no. We lasted there until the manager changed, and the new manager, he didn't want anything to do with prisoners of war so he sent us back.

Why didn't he want - just didn't like you?

I don't know. That's what we were told anyway.

Do you remember the name of the manager there, or not?

No, I don't remember his name. His name hasn't come back to me, or the name of the place either. I know I used to be able to remember it.

Did you have much to do with him at all, or not?

We used to do a job, and well, we got down to the idea that you might as well be useful and get on well with them, as be quarrelling and disobeying them, and making yourself a nuisance, you see.

You didn't try to damage anything, or sabotage equipment?

No, we didn't.

Did you resent working for the Germans, or not?

It was a matter of how you were situated, you see. If you were in that situation then you might as well make the best of it. I remember in camp one day, an old British sergeant major, he said - he was talking to us. He said, "Now, you boys, you've got to remember you are prisoners of war now, and the Germans are on top. You've got to do what you are told here otherwise it won't be well for you, you see." Couldn't do any good by, you know, sabotaging and all that kind of thing. Although at the factory, we used to get down, and we used to put sand in the oil boxes of the railway trucks.

Did you?

Fill them up with sand. Not that that would ever do it much harm.

Wouldn't it?

No. Wouldn't do them any good, of course. It wouldn't stop them from running.

And from there - I'm not sure what the order is - but you went to a place called Bronberg, and you were working on an aerodrome, I think you said, or something like that.

Yes. I think the second job we were on was at – we had got into winter by then, and we were working at a sugar beet mill.

It was a sugar beet mill.

Yes.

That was at Gossendorf.

Gossendorf, that's right. I used to have a picture of that. I suppose Norman had it.

We'll see if we can find it.

Crutzig. I think the Polish name was Crutzig. It had two names. All those places had two names. When the Germans took it over they must have renamed all the places.

What was the sugar beet mill like? Was that in the town, or outside the town? Where was that?

I don't know, I don't remember any town about the place. It was a huge place, of course.

How many people would have been working there, two or three hundred?

Oh, yes, there would be several hundred working there. It was a seasonable job, you see. You worked seven days a week. We didn't have any days off or anything. Eighteen hours every Sunday.

Eighteen hours every Sunday?

Yes. Changing shifts, day and night.

So the mill was going non-stop ...

Oh, yes.

... twenty-four hours a day ...

Yes.

... while the beet was in season.

The sugar beet was brought in on railway trucks, which had to be unloaded with a fork.

You'd have to unload them?

Yeah. They'd give you a fork, you'd have to unload them and pitched out over the edge. We had great big clusters – they call them 'schwimmers'.

'Schwimmers'. That's the German name, is it?

I don't know whether it was or not. It was like a great big ... I'll tell you why they called the swimmer was, because down at the bottom - they used hundreds of tons, you see - it's fairly long. It might be several chains long - the railway trucks were emptied into there. Down at the bottom there was a stream of water flowing into the factory, and covered over with plates.

Steel plates?

Steel plates, you see. You'd pull those plates away and then the sugar beet had to be forked in, down into this stream of water, which took it into the ...

So the water was being used as a conveyor belt?

That's right, like a conveyor belt, you see. And then it went into a great big wheel that's going round and round, which washed the sugar beet. I had to be – I was working on the swimmer quite a bit, and it was pretty cold during the night-time - all night, you know, working on that.

Gee, outside of a night. It's very windy up there too.

I don't know about windy. It was very cold at night. Then there were other jobs that were extremely hot.

This is in the factory?

Yes, well, then somewhere I went in to get in somewhere the sugar was at all. From where it was washed, it was drawn into a place where it was all shredded up into what they called schnitzel. Schnitzel is the word - same with Schneider, I suppose - to be cut, where it was all cut up into small pieces. Then these were evidently boiled somewhere, because all that schnitzel came out. It was all very hot, into quite a bit of a room, which was up off the ground so the railway trucks could come in underneath, you see. And they'd come in. You had to be in there with a fork. It was as hot as could be, and fork them down through a hole into the railway trucks. Farmers used to buy this, you see, to feed their stock on.

Who used to buy it?

Farmers.

Farmers did, to feed their ...

Stock on.

... stock, yes.

The sugar is taken out of it. Boiled out of it.

Yes, I see. So the residue was used as a cattle feed.

That's right, yes.

The sugar, that was more or less in liquid form, I suppose.

I suppose it would be. None of us that were in there were aware that there was any sugar, and didn't even see a bit of sugar there. They didn't even give you a bit. Didn't even give you a bit.

So you were on a fork, whether you were on the railway truck, loading into this schwimmer?

Yes.

Or you were in the hotter room ...

That's right.

... forking the residue into the railway wagons?

The railway wagons, that's right.

And you were working eighteen-hour shifts at that, or some days you were?

Yes, on Sundays, yes. We worked from six till six. Ten hours work, you see.

Whereabouts were you living at the sugar factory? Were you living at the mill, or did they take you away somewhere?

No, we were in - what's the right name for them? ...

Barracks?

We called them barracks, yes. We had a lot of them.

Huts?

No, they were specially built for people to live in. We were always locked in there at night-time.

Were you?

Or when you were in there.

Did you have a guard at the sugar factory?

I don't think so.

How many prisoners would there have been working there - a large number, or was it just a small party?

Oh, there wasn't a great number - wasn't a great number there. I wouldn't know how many were there. If I tried to remember all this about twenty years ago, I might have been ...

You are doing pretty well, I think.

Yes, well, when we were finished there we were sent back to camp again.

The season finished, I suppose.

Oh, yes, the season finished.

How long would you have been there then - two or three months?

Oh, yes, a couple of months anyway. We were working all the time there, it was a seven-day week job.

That was your second job you did?

I'm pretty sure that was the second job.

That was during winter then.

Yes.

And then you went ...

On this little farm, I think it was normal weather on the farm. That didn't last long, the little farm.

Then you went to Bronberg, I suppose - the aerodrome?

Yes, we were at Bronberg, not for a very long time, I don't think. We were doing all kinds of different jobs there. I can't remember where we were billeted there – billets. Where we were billeted there, I can't. All I can remember, we had to get our packets all out one day, and spread them all out on the ground to be inspected, you know, for any foreign matter that might be used to kill stock or anything like that.

You were saying about that.

Yes. We cursed the jolly French for that because nobody in our - they that sent us parcels, they wouldn't send that stuff in any case, you see.

And all the parcels were searched?

Oh, for some time, for a while, yes, that's right.

The routine would have been very different out on these work kommandos to what it was in the camps because the camp security would be much more ...

Oh, yes.

... and inspections, and parades, than out on the working parties. The parcels would be forwarded on to you ...

That's right.... and there wouldn't be so much inspection and discipline.

Oh, no, not so much discipline. Talking about discipline, I remember in the camp one day, one of our fellows saluted an officer with a cigarette in his mouth. Oh, that was a terrible crime. Had us all fallen in and formed into four, and marched back and forwards, past an NCO, and we had to have practice in saluting.

This is a German NCO you are obviously talking about?

Yeah, that's right. Sergeants, corporals would be unterofficier? A sergeant major was a feldwebel.

That's it, feldwebel. What work were you doing at Bronberg? Was it working on the aerodrome?

Yes.

It was just construction work, was it?

Construction work, I think. Nothing to do with munitions, although that's what was made there. It was a munitions factory. There used to be a special train come there bringing workers there, in the morning, and away at night.

Were there any accidents that you recall, in the factories?

I don't recall any. Nothing but only anything minor.

You didn't hurt yourself, or fall ill, or anything?

I became ill. I was on the farm one day, I climbed up a ladder and the jolly rung broke and I fell down, and the ladder come down on top of me. I come down with a bit of a bang on me back on the ground. It shook me up a bit. The man in charge was very much concerned. I didn't go to work the next day.

Did he?

I was a bit shaken up. It was on a threshing machine, you see, and I was carrying some cavings - do you know what cavings are?

No, I don't.

Where the things are washed out, and they wash out thoroughly, cart them up and put them through again, in a bag or something or other.

I know what threshing is. Did they have many machines, on the farms, like that?

Machines?

Yes, like threshing machines? They were fairly well automated, were they? The farming practice, was it comparable to Australia at that time, or were they behind?

Oh, I don't know. They had machines there, but they couldn't work them. They were driven with petrol, and petrol was very scarce. They'd try and use everything, driven by hand.

You were doing scything, weren't you, at one stage?

Oh, yeah, that's when I done the harvesting – I was cutting with the scythe.

I suppose the farmer was responsible for you, as prisoners, and if something happened to you he would have to answer for it, I suppose.

He would, I suppose. He didn't want anything to happen to you.

No. And from Bronberg you went to Stettin?

Yeah. I don't know when we went to Stettin. Yes, oh, we went to Stettin because I remember we went to a big farm after Stettin. We went to Stettin.

It must have been 1918.

A great big chemical works. Yes, it would be about 1918 then, I suppose. I don't know, I suppose we were there. Must have been winter time because the River Oder was frozen over. We were there thirteen months, couldn't get away from the darn place. The food there was terrible, in the factories.

What was it that they were serving?

Oh, dried up vegetables, mostly. Mangelwurzel soup, made out of vegetables. No taste. They'd give you a kind of a soup. You had to eat everything with a spoon. There was no need for a knife and fork. The parcels kept us going then.

That's right, you wouldn't have lived otherwise.

The poor old Russians, they didn't get any parcels. Quite a few of them passed out.

The Russians, they would have had a Red Cross, but I suppose, particularly after the revolution, they wouldn't have been ...

No, they didn't have any Red Cross, I don't think. They never got any parcels.

I think that's the case too. I don't think they got anything through.



There were that many of them, of course, that was the trouble.

Did you ever try to help the Russians, or was that just not possible?

You could in some cases. They'd come and want to do our washing for us, and that kind of thing. And you had to give them something for that. There were no facilities for having a bath or anything, except at this factory there was. There was a great big tub. I remember a steam pipe broke one day and we had to all get out. One of them dived in without any clothes on.

Did it? And what was the factory like? Can you describe the factory at Stettin?

Oh ... very open sort of a place, you know. We were working in, mostly, like there was the super-phosphate part of it, you see. We loaded the super-phosphate into bags, and so forth.

So again, it was more a manual job you were doing?

Oh, yes, it was all manual.

Shovel, and fork, and so on?

All manual work, yes.

What was the super-phosphate like then? Was it a common practice to be using it here in Australia, for example, or not?

Wasn't any manufacturers out here then because that factory sent out to New South Wales. They used to have it in two bags. They were from that very factory, the Union Chemische Fabrik – so my mates told me. They were from New South Wales - a couple of English immigrants in New South Wales. They'd been on farms.

Were you using super-phosphate here in Gippsland at that time? You would have been, I suppose?

No, oh, no super-phosphate. No, I don't remember any top dressing. There were no top dressing of grass, or anything like that. There was a bone and super, or something, used for vegetables and cropping, and that. It was never used for grass until I got back in farming, several years before we put it on the grass.

What was the process at the factory? How was it ... You were telling me a little bit about it the other day, I think, actually.

Yes - what process do you mean?

Well, the process of making the super-phosphate, for example.

Oh, it was only a by-product. It wasn't the main product of the chemical works.

What was the main product?

Oil of vitriol.

Oh, that's right, yes. What's it used for, oil of vitriol?

Oh, anything - can't think of the other name of it. It had a plainer name we used - sulphuric acid, that's right.

I see - that's a very common chemical.

Yes, that's what was being produced there. I explained the other day how that was done.

Whereabouts were you living at Stettin? Were you in the factory?

Oh, yes, there were barracks in the factory because they employed a lot of people. There was only a third of the whole factory being used when we were there.

Why was that? Because they didn't have the resources to keep it all running?

Well, there was no outlet for it. I suppose they used to export a lot of it.

So they were just making essentials for the war?

Yes, and for their own use. There was only about a third of the factory being used.

Was it a bad place to work, in the sense that there was a lot of smoke and dust, and that kind of thing?

No, I don't think there was smoke. The men smoked, cigarettes and that. They were the only people you'd see. In the parcels they would send the smokes. They wouldn't do that today, I don't think. I never, ever smoked. I learnt that when I went to school, that smoking was bad for you.

Did you?

So I kept away from it.

What were the barracks like at Stettin? Were they big wooden barracks, temporary sort of buildings?

The double-decker ones. We used to go upstairs to go to bed.

How many would there be in the barracks - a hundred men, or less than that?

Oh, yes, I think less than that. I don't know. They wouldn't all be prisoners of war, of course.

There would be civilians living there as well?

I think so.

What was the reason for your being transferred from there? You went back to Schneidemuhl again?

Yes.

Did they tell you why? What was the reason for the move?

I don't know now. I don't know. I know we were anxious to get away from the place. If that had anything to do with it or not, I don't know. Whether they ever finished with us, or what, I couldn't say. Or whether we weren't profitable. That was the worst working place we were on.

How long did they keep you working there? Was it a long day, or was it fairly reasonable?

Oh, yes, a ten-hour day. We had to work the same hours as the civilians. No eight-hour day there.

And from there you went out to the Von Gerke farm?

That's right, yes. I think that was the final place we went to.

What were you doing out there? What kind of work did they get you doing?

All manual farm work. On these big farms the buildings are all built around a - you know - a place. I forget what they call it.

Sort of a central square?

Central square, you see.

(Break in interview)

You were just describing the farm that Von Gerke had, and the houses, and how they were arranged in a square.

Oh, yes. Yes, well, in the middle of this square, all these animals were bedded down. You see, they - well, they didn't bring all the straw. They used a lot of straw for that. Gosh, there was heaps of straw. There was all the rye grass and that - rye - a crop of rye was threshed and they had a lot of straw - and used for bedding down animals, you see. There had to be sheep bedded down, and cattle. They had horses. I suppose they had a few pigs somewhere, I don't know, I don't remember them. Well then, all that was bedded down. Oh, it used to get that thick in the straw and that ...

Two or three feet?

It all had to be forked out, and it was all put out into the middle of this cesspool to rot. Well, at a certain time of the year, that all had to be got out of there. It would all be forked out. They had a little railway line, about two foot, and little trucks, they used to pull them with horses. Well, they'd cart it out into the paddocks, you see. And this railway line was in sections, about six or eight feet long. And you had two hooks, and you hooked onto those pieces ...

Either side?

And they pushed them from one end of the paddock to the other, you see.

And they'd lay a line?

They'd lay a line there and these trucks would come along, and they'd throw the stuff out. Well, it all had to be 'strawed' about, as they called it.

What did they call it?

'Strawed' about. You know, spread about, all over the ground, evenly, you see. Well, then, when that line was fully used to the end, you had to get on the end of - and that's what we were doing. We were shifting the line. You'd shift that line over about, oh, I suppose half a chain or more, you see, for another lot to come down. And was in these long, large paddocks, you see. There was an awful lot of work, you know. All hand work in that.

What time of year would you be doing that? Would that be just before winter, or after winter, I suppose, before the summer?

Wasn't in the winter time anyway. It would be after the crops were taken off, I suppose. You couldn't do it any other time.

That's right, obviously.

That's one fairly big job that had to be done there. And of course, then there was - we were there for some time during the harvest, getting the harvest in. They would thresh as much as they could out in the paddocks, and then they'd bring the rest of it in and put it in big sheds. These sheds were, oh, very big, and high, and a ramp run up in the middle, high up.

What ran up?

A ramp.

A ramp, yes.

Went up there. The horses pulled the loads up there, and they were forked over the sides, down into that bigger portion in the shed, and they'd tramp it in there. I don't know whether they had bullocks or horses tramping it down. They'd tramp it down pretty tightly, I'll tell you.

END OF AWM TAPE TWO - SIDE B

START OF AWM TAPE THREE - SIDE A

Identification: Tape 3.

Yes, it all had to be threshed in the winter-time. However, I remember, we left just before the winter-time.

I suppose November.

That would be about in November.

It would be the Armistice.

Yeah.

So you didn't have to do that?

No. I was dreading the thought of getting all that hard work. Getting that – where it had been tramped in there - all that out again into the threshing machine. That would be a fairly dusty job.

Were they timber buildings, or stone buildings?

Oh, no, timber buildings. Yes, they were built out of those pine trees. Cut down, I suppose. I don't know what they had for roofing. Galvanised iron or something or other. Not much metal there. And other black stuff.

Tar, I suppose.

Tar or stuff to keep the water off.

What other jobs did you do there? Were you doing any ploughing, or milking there?

No, the girls did all the milking there. They had plenty of hands to do it. They had a lot of Polish prisoners there, civilian prisoners.

Why were they prisoners?

Well ...

They were political prisoners, were they?

That's right, yes, because they were ... when the war was declared, of course, that was before Poland was divided up between three countries. Well, Germany went into Poland, of course, through Russian Poland – and all these Russian young men were taken prisoner, you see. they were civilian prisoners. They were sent to work on these big farms in Germany. Cheap labour.

Were you being paid?

Yes, they gave us thruppence a day.

Thruppence a day?

Dreizig pfennigs.

Thirty pence.

....in the factory (mostly inaudible). I wonder whether that was a day or a week - I couldn't tell you now - didn't earn much anyway.

What about of a night-time? Were there any games - playing cards?

Oh, well, we used to play cards. Cards was about the only game you played. Oh, we used to play gambling games, but I never, ever joined in any gambling games. I used to play Twenty-One, I know. A lot of them spent all their money gambling on cards, you see. I didn't join in any gambling there.

Did you play cards at all?

Oh, the only game I could play was euchre, I think.

Is that something that you did much, or was it just occasionally?

Oh yes, , we wouldn't play much.

You would be fairly tired anyway, wouldn't you?

Yes.

What about sport?

No, no sport, I don't think.

You weren't long in any of the camps, were you, in Schneidemuhl or Dulmen?

No, we weren't in the camps long.

You'd only come back for a couple of weeks, I suppose, and then you'd be gone again?

Yes, be gone again. If you were fit to work, they used to find plenty of work for you to do.

Did they give you a medical inspection often, or was it just on the case of, if you looked okay you were sent out?

No, you didn't get any medical inspection, unless you happened to fall sick, or anything. We were generally pretty fit those days, you see.

You were young, weren't you?

All young, and I was pretty strong. (Inaudible)

What about music?

Music, oh, some of them used to play a bit of music. You could buy a musical instrument, if you could find the money.

What kind of instruments would they sell?

(Inaudible) Oh, there wasn't many. There was only the occasional one who was playing. It was something to do.

A trumpet or something?

I don't know what it was. At that chemical works I got a bad finger.

Your thumb or your finger? One of your fingers.

Shovelling.

Using a shovel?

*(The tape is largely inaudible for approximately 20 minutes due to a fault in the recording)*

It all swelled up. It wasn't broken or anything. I don't know what happened to it. I had to go to the darn doctor for that. The German doctor took a look at it....

It was a lonely life in a way, you know. You didn't know when the war was going to end, or anything like that...

I was offered three hundred marks for a pair of (Red Cross) boots in Germany.

Interview continued: Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> February 1990

There are a few other questions that I thought I might ask you on the prisoner of war period today. Firstly about the flu epidemic in 1918. What do you remember about that?

Oh, it swept over the land alright. A lot of people got it. There were a lot of funerals, practically every day among the civilians. There were a few of our – I forget where we were now. There was only a small company of us, about nine or ten where we were. I had just a touch of it, but one chap was fairly bad. He got over it alright I think.

What was it exactly? Was it the Spanish Flu?

They called it the Spanish Flu, yes. Well it went all over the world. It came out here to Australia, before I got home. Because us all in quarantine in Portsea there.

Oh that's why you were put in quarantine?

Oh because of bringing any germs home. A lot of people were going about here with masks on, and so I was told.

How long did they keep you down at Portsea?

Oh we were there about a week I think. They took us in and we were put in a cubicle and then sprayed. And then you were right. We brought a few germs into the place.

What were the symptoms of it? It was like a fever.

It must have been very virulent. While we down there, the boat we came home on was called the *Derbeyshire*, I think. And we had ten or a dozen prisoners on board, who were our own chaps you know. Fellows who had been convicted of various things.

Army prisoners.

I didn't have contact with them until we got down to Portsea, and then they had be guarded. Actually they got out, some of them. But the civilian police caught them.

It was about the time of the Armistice wasn't it? It was right at the end of the war.

In fact it decided them to capitulate. The army started a rebellion which caused the armistice.



In Germany?

Yes.

Were you aware of the coming peace?

Well, there was rumours about, because we got information through the priest. I remember the morning of the – coming out – and one of the Polish foreman coming out, and he said, “Wilhem ist weg!”

The Kaiser has run away.

Machen sie weg kommen! Get out of the way. Oh things got a bit lax then. Oh, we were on a big farm at the time, when the armistice was declared. We wondered when we were going to get back to the camp. There didn't seem to be any hurry to take us back there. That was in November. Well we didn't get away from Germany until December.

Well, you were way over on the other side of Germany.

That's right. Well there were a lot of prisoners all over the place.

Was there much excitement about the end of the war?

Yes, there were. We were greatly excited. I had been there two-and-a-half years, and there was who had been there a lot longer than that, amongst the English prisoners. Some had been captured at Mons. Unfortunately a lot of those fellows got the Spanish Flu and died there in the camp.

And what were relationships with the Belgians and the French. Did you have much to do with them, or not?

Oh, only in the camps. We didn't like the French prisoners at all. We got on a lot better with the Russians. The old Russkies, they were easy to get on with.

Why was that?

I don't know. I didn't have anything much to do with the French. There were French about the camps, but not a great many of them. Oh, they were sent out to work too. We never heard much about them.

Were you working with Russians?

Yes. Well not actually working with them, but we had a good bit to do with them in the camps. They used to come and do odd jobs for the English prisoners. They could do odd jobs and they would get a bit of a reward. Food or something like that. Because they didn't get any parcels. Oh, a lot of them died. There wasn't enough to eat.

What did your weight reduce to?

I was sixteen-stone in Egypt. I'm down to nine-stone-four now.

They had a large number of wooden barracks didn't they?

Yes, they were all made of timber. There was no iron roofs over there.

A tar-paper you were saying.

It was some kind of bitumen with tar, on the roof

What about the fence around the camp?

It was about eight-foot high, I suppose.

Was it electrified or not?

No, I don't think so. I never heard of anyone getting over it, or through it, or even escape from the camp. See you were away over in Schneidemuhl, over in Poland. And food was so scarce. It was not much good getting out of the camp unless you know where you are going to get the next meal from. If you are a prisoner like that in a camp you are not getting much food. You're in a pretty weak state. You're not fit to be travelling long distances on an empty stomach. It was not a very easy matter to escape. Some did escape, I believe. I heard of one fellow, he could speak five or six languages, he didn't manage it. He got caught.

Was he Australian?

Oh no.

The parcels which came in, were they delivered as packages which you opened yourself, and so on?

Yes, they were delivered as packages. About that size.

About eighteen inches.

Oh no, they wouldn't be eighteen inches. Fifteen inches would be the most. Tinned meat, oh I forget what was in them. And every six months you got a complete issue of clothing.

What would they send you? The boots and socks?

There was trousers and boots. I don't know about socks.

What about blankets? The Germans provided them did they?

They provided them. They were poor quality.

I suppose you would heat the barracks with wood stoves?

They usually had heaters. They seemed to be something about six or seven feet high, and they were stoked up from down below with some kind of fuel oil.

What about cooking? How did you manage to cook anything?

No, there wasn't much cooking. We didn't need to cook anything. I remember a mate of mine, he had some lentils he wanted to cook. Hanging on a steam pipe, coming out of the building. I suppose that was steam from some heating arrangement of some kind.

I might ask you about Egypt. You arrived in Egypt in December 1915.

It would be early in December. We went all the way over on the *Wandilla*. We didn't call anywhere on the way over. They took us by train from Suez to Heliopolis. We were in fourth class carriages, not much better than cattle trucks. There was no means of sanitation on those trucks. I remember once having diarrhoea and you had to get out when the train was going, and hang on the buffer. Pull your pants down there. Oh people don't know what we went through.

What kind of a crossing did you have to Egypt?

I was very seasick to begin with from Melbourne to Fremantle. Yes. Of course the Indian Ocean was a lot calmer. It's noted for being calm.

What was the day of departure like? Did your family come and see you off?

Oh yes, some of them came to see us off. We had our battalion band playing.

You came in on the train from Broadmeadows, I suppose, and then you marched through Melbourne.

No, we went straight to Port Melbourne.

What was the scene like at departure?

Well a lot of parents and girlfriends and that were overcome of course.

Did you have a girlfriend at the time?

Yes, she was there.

What was her name?

Ruby Savage.

Was she from the Drouen area.

No from Cooriup, and out at Yallick.

Your mother and father came down?

My mother wasn't alive then. I don't know about my Dad. I suppose he did.

What were the sleeping arrangements like on the ship?

Oh well, we were supposed to have hammocks, you see. They were always given out after they got through The Heads, you see, and I got that sick I didn't get one. I just laid down on the floor, and I can still hear that propeller grinding away. I suffered from extreme billiousness. I didn't do any vomiting. Extreme billiousness. You wished you were dead. The eating arrangements – they had tables to eat off, of course. You were crammed pretty tight when you sat down. Anyhow there seemed to be any amount. It kept us going. I lost a bit of weight going across The Bight. We had physical exercises.

What were they?

Similar to what you do at school.

Touch your toes and so on.

Yes, and oh, they had sports on the ship. Sports of some kind or other on the deck.

They had boxing matches on the ship.

Oh yes, but I didn't want to go into that. When you hadn't any practice at that kind of thing, the best thing is to keep out of it.

They had concerts too.

Oh yes, I didn't take any part in that, although I could sing.

When you got to Heliopolis, you were in wooden huts.

I forget now. We weren't there very long anyway.

You went down to Tel-el-Kebir.

They had a spare brigade so they sent us back down to the Canal. We had outpost out in the Sinai desert. I remember a hurricane blew for three days one day, blew our tents down. The cooks couldn't light a fire or anything. We just had the hard biscuits for a day or so. You'd be walking along in the sand, and you had to hold your helmet up to your face because the sand blowing up would cut your face. And the heat was intense too.

It was a pretty miserable place down there.

We had a bit of excitement one night. The alarm was to be signalled by a rifle shot of course. And one fellow was playing about with his rifle, and he accidentally pulled the trigger and the shot went off. And everybody had to be out ready for action. And word got round that it was only an accident.

What company were you in?

I was in A Company.

Who was the company commander?

Captain Hockley.

Were you doing outpost duty by company, or platoons, or sections.

Oh yes, we seemed to be broken up into platoons.

They were the khamsins, the desert storms.

I don't know.

You were three days in one, out in the Sinai.

Yes, it blew gale force all the time. There was no shelter anywhere, except your tent, and half of them blew down. We had to try and set them up again. However the Turks never came over, so we never had any action.

Did you go up the Pyramids, or the Sphinx?

No, that was out the other side of Cairo.

What about Cairo itself?

Oh I got into Cairo once. A lot of the troubles got into trouble in Cairo. They got into the brothels there, and a lot of them got VD.

What about relationships with the Egyptians?

We didn't have much to do with them. They would walk in selling oranges and so forth, which we weren't supposed to buy. We were on a train one time, and the fellows bought the oranges off them, and the officers came along and made them throw them away.

Why was that?

I suppose they thought there might have been some disease on them.

What about gambling?

Oh I never gambled myself, but oh there was a lot of gambling after payday. One would get broke, and the odd ones would make a lot of money. It was dangerous to have a lot of money. You might get dinged on the head by somebody. I never got a lot of money. I was only drawing one shilling a day.

Was there much crime as such among the Australians?

Oh there were a few of them got into trouble. I remember at Broadmeadows two or three of them, they were NCOs too. They were publicly disgraced. The troops were formed up, and these fellows were marched out into the centre, and the NCOs had their rank pulled off them.

That was in front of the rest of the Battalion? What had they done?

Yes. I don't know what they had done. You don't hear. There are all sorts in the army. Some people went to courts, and they were let off if they joined the army. Well the bloomin' army didn't want them.

Was drunkenness a problem?

There was a problem, because he chanced the drink. I remember when we got to France first, and the boys started drinking wine like beer. And we had a route march the next day, and they were falling out thick and fast. I didn't touch any strong drink, and I was carrying packs and rifles for fellows until they couldn't stand it any longer. Here take it back again, and fall out. My word, we got a dressing down next morning on parade. When we were in Egypt you didn't have much chance to get good strong drink. It would be sold at the canteens.

Down on the canal you were a long way away from anywhere. Did you go swimming in the Canal?

Yes, I swam across the Canal and back again.

That would be a fair way.

Yes, of course there were ships going up and down.

Did you go for a ride on a camel? You seem to have been a very reliable soldier in the sense – you were a private.

Well I had a good Christian upbringing, and I kept to those principles all through me...while I was in the army.

Yes, my grandfather was the same. The YMCA and so on.

The Salvation Army used to supply the best coffee you could get.

Did you see the Prince of Wales in Egypt?

Yes, I did. We were all lined up for a visit of the Prince of Wales, several thousand troops were lined up, and I remember him coming up on horseback. They cantered up. You could see him shaking hands with the officers.

There was the commemoration of the first Anzac Day.

The troops all came to Tel-el-Kebir from Gallipoli. There was a good big gathering of troops at Tel-el-Kebir. The whole of the 4th and 5th Division were formed there. We were out having – we were lying on the ground, and they were checking your rifle sights. And there was supposed to be – there was five rounds in a clip, you see. Well, I don't know, but somehow or other one live round got in the chamber, and a fellow was shot right through the eye.

How did that happen? He was a marker was he?

He was on the ground, and the fellow with the rifle was – someone was checking his sights.

He was looking down the sight?

He was looking straight down the sights. He was killed instantly. It was an accident.

Was that out of the 31st Battalion?

I suppose it was. It wasn't in our company. It wasn't far away. I was in A Company No.2 Platoon.

They used to get you doing a lot of route marches in Egypt, didn't they.

They would get you going out of a night. Well the chaps who knew where they were going. They had instruments, and would go by the stars. They would take you miles out and bring you back again to the same place.

Was the training much good do you think?

Oh yes. We had to be kept physical fit, you see. Oh these physical jerks they called it every morning before breakfast. They keep you busy in the army.

END OF INTERVIEW