

LEWIS SHARP
FIRST WORLD WAR

TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH LEWIS SHARP, 13TH BATTALION, 4TH BRIGADE,
FIRST AIF; recorded by David Chalk

START OF TAPE ONE

I've been in Queensland, in Brisbane. Well I've got a little recorder there and I record generally what the conversations that I have. You're an 18th Reinforcement?

Yes.

And you'd have arrived in Egypt in May. Would that be right?

We left here (Sydney) on the 3rd of May, and went to Colombo, and from there to Egypt.

Well, the Battalion by that time had moved down to Serapeum, hadn't it?

They were on their way to France.

Oh, so when you got there, they had already gone.

They'd already gone.

Yes, well it took six weeks, so you left 3rd of May, you must have arrived in June sometime.

Yes.

I see. You were the last transport to go.

We were the last transport to go to Egypt. I caught up with them on the Somme. At a place, a bog place. We were up to here in mud and slush.

This would be before Pozieres and Mouquet Farm, would it?

No, just after. That's where I caught up with them. Outside of Pozieres, see. We were behind Flers. And we never went in – up to here in mud and slush, and God's know what.

Up to your waist.

And I'm still alive.

What were you doing before the war? Where were you when you enlisted?

In Sydney, at Bondi.

At Bondi? You've always lived at Bondi? And what were you doing at that time? What sort of work were you doing?

Well, I was only sixteen. I shot through.

You shot through. You weren't an apprentice to anyone?

Oh yes, to Abe & Whitlam. The father had a - I was doing a bit of french polishing and doing some cabinet making. It was good work.

Your parents obviously gave you permission to go?

No.

They didn't? When you said you shot through, you literally did.

Oh yes.

You went down and told them that you were eighteen or twenty-one or something?

I couldn't tell them that I was eighteen.

What happened when you went down to - this is Victoria Barracks is it?

No, I

(Break in interview)

Now it's working (the recorder). I'm sorry about that. I'm going to have to go through some of that again I think. I'm sorry about that. I should be more careful. Oh well, you were working here in Bondi. Your father had a furniture factory.

Furniture factory.

You were sixteen when you went away.

I was sixteen and nine days when I enlisted. I was sixteen on the 5th of February. And I enlisted on the 14th.

And this is 1916 of course.

Yes.

So you are 86?

I was 86 a couple of weeks ago.

I think you are the youngest man I've met, Mr Sharp. I've got them ten years older than you – 96.

(Wife) Same battalion?

Yes, same battalion, the 13th. There's a Charlie Kelly up at Eastwood, at *Chesalon*. He's an original. I don't know how old Mr Jack Cunliffe is? He's an original also. He's up in Kings Cross somewhere. I have got to see him yet.

(Wife) What about Harry Townsend?

Harry is still alive.

I saw him a couple of years ago, at a march.

He's 95 or 96. He's down at Rosewell. He's living at home still.

He's living on his own?

Yes.

He's got a daughter up there somewhere.

His daughter is in Queensland, and he's got a son in Sydney.

(Wife) What about the man at the War Memorial, what's his name?

Joe Westwood. Joe is still alive. I've seen him.

I've seen him.

His memory is going now.

I'm not surprised. I went away with him.

Did you, you went away with Joe.

He was a sergeant-major.

He was an eighteenth reinforcement?

Yes.

He was a sergeant-major when he went.

When he went.

That's interesting.

And he was a sergeant-major when we left, and I gave him a dog's life. I was a wild boy at that age. Of course, on my seventeenth birthday, one of the boys I met – who was with – Ernie Cranzke – he got killed alongside me.

This would be at Stormy Trench?

No, Gueudecourt.

Well, the same place. So you were at Gueudecourt. Which company were you in?

B (Company)

So you missed out on – you joined the Battalion after Mouquet Farm.

Mucky Farm we called it.

You were lucky there.

You're telling me!

Then you went through the winter – when it was bloody cold.

Well it was three wars in one, that winter. The 1916 winter.

It was three wars in one, did you say.

I reckon a man who went through that, it was three wars in one. And here I am still alive. You'd think that at my age. you'd think I would be dead by this.

The rigours that you went through, yes. And were you at Bullecourt.

Yes.

Did you go across?

Yes.

You went across at Bullecourt?

Yes. We lost a lot of our boys there. A lot of them got taken prisoner.

But you got out of it, obviously.

Yes, always have. I always kept my head down and my bum in the air.

Oh well, that's interesting, you'll be able to help me. Well, I'm sorry about this mix up here, but anyway we'll go back and go through it again. You were sixteen when you enlisted, and you went without your parents' knowing. And you went down to Circular Quay Board of Health and you went through their medical down there.

Yes.

What age did you go in as?

Twenty. And of course you had to go and get your parents consent. But I said, "I don't know where they are. They went for a trip to England. Last I heard from them they were in Canada." I don't know where I got the brains from to say all these things, at that age. Yes, Joe Westwood was our sergeant-major.

Yes, you'd have been out at Liverpool Camp training.

No.

You didn't go to Liverpool Camp?

Originally. I left here – I think there were 150 in the reinforcement if I remember right, and they took four emergencies down in case anybody was going to shoot through on the way. Change their minds, see. So when we got down there they sent us down to Kiama.

Oh you went down to Kiama.

And that's where they swung us into the 13th Battalion. See, they were ready to go. And it was only a matter of a week or two, and I had final leave again – you know. You got the final leave. But I couldn't go home!

No, you couldn't go home. And when did your parents find out that you had joined up?

Oh when I got away.

When you went overseas?

Yes. I dropped them a letter from Fremantle. We went from here direct to Fremantle, and I dropped a note to them. I said, "There's my number." I was 5763, B Company 13th Battalion. I said, "It's no good trying to pull me out now, because if you do I'll come back here, I'll go interstate, and I'll enlist under a different name, and Bob's your uncle."

What made you so determined to go?

I was always a wanderer. See, even as a kid. I was very good at geography at school, and all these places. I used to say to myself, "Gee I'd like to see these places." This was before the war started. I was only a kid at home. I had a thing that I want to go and see places. My father – I believe it – when he was young, he was like that. Oh, there were three of us who went over. One went into the artillery, and the other was in the general reinforcements. He came over, whatever men were short.

It was just a pool. They went there.

Yes.

That would be later in the war, I suppose.

Oh yes, I was already...

You were the first to go were you?

No, the eldest brother –

The one in the artillery went first.

And of course, he tried to claim me. He claimed me alright. And it was coincidence that we were up on the Somme there. It was September 1916, and he was in the horse lines. What they call the DAC, taking munitions up. On donkeys!

Yes, on the mules.

And as soon as we got onto this – mud bank – at the canteen here you know. And of course all the big stuff was coming. He was back in reserves.

You were being shelled at that time?

Oh yes. I'd sooner be in the front line than where we were then.

They were firing really big shells over towards the reserves?

Naval shells. Anything.

They'd be twelve inch shells, or fifteen inch shells, something like that.

I don't know. I never got close enough to know them!

At the canteen?

And at the canteen. So of course we got to the canteen. You could buy chocolates and cigarettes and what not. I forget his name, the sergeant who ran the canteen. This was near the Ferry Post I think.

Oh yes, that's near Ismailia.

"Only for the 13th Battalion. You go to your own canteen." So he pushed his way through in the crowd there. He said, "Oh, I've got you at last." You can imagine the language he used. He said, "I've got you at last." That's when he – straight away – and even on my discharge – age of enlistment, sixteen.

There were quite a lot that did get away...

When I – you got a bit mental after a time. I had to report to his mob. I suppose it was from here down to Bondi Beach. Not that far. To the horse lines. My memory is starting to get right. And when after a couple of days, I got all my papers. An adjutant, I forget his name.

Marks was it?

No, he was colonel. I went to Battalion headquarters. Nearly got killed going there. Whether it was my fault or my luck, and with that I said, "Well, where's Bill Sharp?" This is within 24 hours from down the line. He'd got trench feet. He was alright. I never saw him for weeks. So they said to me "Alright," but they stuck me on a mule, and I said, "Listen, this is no good to me. I said, "The brother's not here. I think I will go back to my Battalion." He said, "Please yourself. It's tough going in the infantry." I said, "I'll take pot luck." And of course I went back, and they said, "What are you doing back here?" The adjutant. I said, the brother had claimed me, but he went down the line with trench feet, and they brought him straight back here (to Sydney). They brought him straight back.

What does it mean when your brother claims you?

If you've got a brother older than yourself, see, he can. And you're in different units. You can be in the infantry or anything. See, if he wants you to be with –

They would allow you to...

Oh yes.

Oh that's interesting. I didn't know that happened.

Yes, a lot of that went on. So, of course, I went back. And he said, "Sharpey, you're foolish. Why didn't you stay with that mob?" I said, "What they were doing was bringing up the 18 pounders, and the DAC, the Divisional Ammunition Corps. No, I'd sooner be with the mob I went away with." So I went back to the Battalion. And here I stood. So I finished with the Battalion.

Who did you go away with? Did you have any particular friends?

They're all dead.

Yes, I suppose they are.

(Wife) There were two brothers.

There were the two McDonalds, brothers. One of them got killed. I think the other one was taken at Bullecourt.

A lot of them were lost there.

But he came back, Sandy. He came back. Of course you would see him at reunions all the time.

(Wife) Ernie Cranzke

How do you spell Cranzke?

C-R-A-N-Z-K-E.

He was Polish by the sound of it, or Czech.

I don't know. It might be a throw-back. But I believe, oh we were like two brothers. I believe that – what's his name – from Western Australia? Sir – something Forrest. He was the – a big man over there. I believe he was related to them somehow.

What did Cranzke do? Where did he come from?

Oh he came from Kingsford, here.

And what did he do, what was his occupation?

It's seventy years ago. I couldn't tell you what Ernie did. Of course he was only eighteen months older than me. And he was a champion athlete. He was with the Botany Harriers.

What are they, footballers? I have to profess ignorance.

No, he was a bike rider, and everything. He was a really good mate. I used to get his issue of cigarettes.

Didn't he smoke?

No. And every night when we got – we would get a dessert spoon full of rum. Of course, I got his rum, as well as my own.

He was a good mate!

He was a mate. Oh gee whiz, on a payday, especially in Egypt of course, on a payday straight away I used to go – we were only getting 30 francs – and to a two-up school. And it went up spinning, and I used to do my money. Ernie always backed me up. He said, "Alright," he said. He'd always give me a few bob. I wouldn't pay him anything. He always said I could have it. I'd go to pay him back, and he say, "Oh don't be silly." He was a great mate, Ernie. Mind you, I was young and wild. Didn't give a hang for anything. I went through it and I was never nervous.

Never nervous.

Because after – our blokes – new reinforcements. We always got new reinforcements and we'd go in the line, and bingo – about 100 would get killed. To cut a long story short – this Ernie, he got killed on the 4th of February.

Ernie got killed did he? He was killed at Gueudecourt?

Gueudecourt. On the 4th of February. And the next day was my birthday, my 17th birthday.

Oh dear.

He got half his face blow away. He got the whole burst of a shell.

Were you with him at that time?

Yes. I was – see he was in C Company – and I was in B. Well it was just along the trench. And Bluey Melvin, he came running down, and he said, "Ernie's gone!" So I went along the trench, and here he was. Or what I saw was his face was blown away. I couldn't do anything for him. Killed instantly.

Oh well, at least he didn't suffer. What do you remember about Gueudecourt? Can you describe that attack from going across, right through. What was your rank? You'd be a private.

Acting Private!

Acting private yes, OK, in the infantry, so you'd go across what with a rifle and maybe a shovel or some bombs.

No, it would be – each section – there would be the bombing section.

The Daredevil Squad.

Another time, you were a bayonet man. You'd chase them, and they'd chase you! That was the best mark. The last time we were in – went through the Hindenburg Line, a fellow said, "Hey Sharpey, you've got to be a stretcher bearer." I said, "You've got another thought coming." That's the worst job of the lot.

Being a stretcher bearer?

Yes, a Battalion stretcher bearer.

Is that because it is the most risky?

I should think so. There's four on a stretcher, shoulder high we carried them. Of course we couldn't go along the trench, so we'd have to get out into the open, and dive into a trench. I'll never forget one poor bugger. He was sixty-odd, then. Rum, he wanted. A drop of rum.

He'd been wounded had he?

Yes, hit in the groin. I got my water bottle and I stuck it in his mouth. He was drinking water. We dumped him at the doctor, the AMC, and picked up another stretcher and away we went. A bit later on we went down with another bloke, wounded. And I said, "How's our old boy?" I forget his name. And he said, "Oh he died soon after you left." And I was pouring water into him, and he thought he was drinking rum. There is a lot of humour attached to it.

No, I know that a lot of the things that I have recorded – there have been a lot of funny stories.

Oh I could tell you some funny stories, and go from now until Christmas, telling funny stories about it. One bloke, he came from Dubbo. Donovan – he was a bit of a hard case. He copped a bit of shrapnel right here.

Right in his backside.

Yes. On the cheek of his bum, and come tearing down the trench, "I've got a blighty. I've got a blighty." He was that pleased that he'd got a crack for home. He said, a blighty. He got sent back –

Back to England.

Yes, and then he got home. How he got it, but he was lucky. But I wasn't so lucky. I got an issue of gas. That's what I'm on a pension for.

It will soon damage your lungs, that stuff.

Emphysema. Gee I gave Frank Massey a dog's life. This was after the war. We were on our way home. He says, "Listen Sharpey. Fair dinkum, if you do it again." This was in England, waiting for the transport to take us down to Portsmouth from Salisbury Plains. He said – and I got this – I was always in trouble – I – we got two days pay or something – embarkation, when we came over from... So I finished that, and I got stuck into the two-up school with that pay, and one of the boys was saying to me, "Pull out, pull out, you silly bugger." I couldn't go wrong. Finished up he grabbed hold of me and pulled me out. Cor I had twenty pounds, which was a lot of money then. I wanted to go to London, so I shot through. I got off the bus. I had to meet a girl. Got off the bus, and I could see – the corner – at a hotel on the corner – four Australian soldiers. And I thought I had better stand up – and to meet the military police unaccustomed. I knew it – I'm saying this to myself. And I walked straight up to them. Before I can say Jack Robinson the four of them are around me. "Got a pass!" I said, "What's it got to do with you?" I knew I was gone. I said to the corporal, "What authority have you got to ask me if I've got a pass." So they pulled out their paybooks and showed me their unit – Military Police. They took me down not far from there. There was a big place, and they took me in there, and I spent a day and a night there. Well, I won't go into the smaller details, they sent the – and I've still got this money on me. Oh, and the sergeant, Sergeant Carter was the name, and he was in charge of the military police there. And as soon as he saw me, what he called me in no-business. He said, "You're a good soldier, and you're on your home." I said, "Get me out of here. I don't want another night here." (indecipherable). He was one of our blokes – Australian. All chained together. They'd be murderers and Gawd knows what. "Have you got a cigarette, mate?" I took out my cigarettes. I had three or four packets, and I gave him a box of matches. Oh thank God for that, and the next morning, my two mates – we left here (Sydney) together.

They came up from the Battalion did they?

Yes, down on Salisbury Plains, you see. They turned up to bring me back. And we had to wait until six o'clock before the train went. They're broke. So I said, "Oh well I might as well spend my money, so we all got drunk."

(Wife) I've heard this all before.

I'm sure you have, but it's useful material for me.

(Wife) Is your grandfather still alive?

No, he died in 1964. He's been dead a long time.

What mob was he with?

The 15th – he was in D Company. He was a Lewis gunner.

Chocolate and blue.

That's right.

So with that, I was a couple of days late. Over a week before we had our disembarkation leave. He was from the 45th – a Colonel Thomas. When they marched me into the Orderly Room he said, "Not you again!" "That's me." Well he said, "I'm sorry. Twice within a week." And I said, "Well the war's over. What difference does it make." He said, "Then we've got to kill you." He said, "You've got a wonderful sense of humour. You'll go for a court martial." If I was going to go for a court martial I might get twelve months. So I said to one of the boys on guard, "Get hold of Frank Massey will you?" See, there was Frank Massey, Freddie Dark, and what was the other bloke's name – Jack – the three one-pip-artists they were. They were in charge. The next thing Frank comes in, and did he abuse me. I said, "Get me out of this will you for God's sake." He went away and he came back, got me out of the clink, up to see this Colonel Thomas. Well, what Frank said was, "This youngster here, he was only sixteen when he joined the Battalion, and he won VCs that he never got." He went on about me being a good soldier and all. So this Colonel started to think. He said to me, "Stand outside a minute." So he spoke with Frank, and when he came he said, "Come on," he said, "listen I could put a bloody bullet through you. I'm fair dinkum this time." He got me released. He lived around the corner here. He was a DCM, and...

Yes, and a Military Medal too.

I know he won a DCM.

Yes, he won the Military Medal first, at Pozieres, or Mouquet Farm.

Oh that's it. He was a sergeant. Good old Bill Eastey. So Frank said to me, "Now listen, wherever Sharpey goes, you go."

You're talking about Bill there. I'm talking about Frank Massey who won the Military Medal.

Yes. And I know this – Bill Eastey, he won a DCM. That's the next thing to a VC. So Bill says to me – see we left here together. Both of us were from Bondi too.

What was his last name.

Eastey.

How do you spell that?

E-A-S-T-E-Y. A good soldier too.

Joe Westwood – I have had a talk with Joe, although his memory is going a bit now. He was a sergeant-major when he went away with you. So there would have been a lieutenant in charge of the reinforcements, wouldn't there.

Oh yes, Bill Stone. He got a leg blown off, and taken prisoner.

Was this at Bullecourt?

Was it a Bullecourt. I think it was at Bullecourt.

I can check that. I'm writing about the POWs.

There was another one. Of course, he died. There were two brothers, a mate of ours – what was their name. He died a few years back. They got him at Bullecourt.

Joe I think had been...

In the bank.

Yes, he'd been in the bank, and he was telling me that he'd been in the – I forget quite what he called it, but it was like the army reserve – military cadets. He reckoned he should have been an officer of something. He was down at Kiama.

Joe was down at Kiama when we left.

He went with you?

Oh yes. Poor sod. See I was just young and wild.

Can you remember anything about the trip over on the boat?

(Wife) You were sick weren't you?

Not me, Ernie Cranzke. He was laying on the flat of his back. Oh I was a good sailor. No, he was flat on his back, and he was vomiting. It just shows how silly I am. We had bacon and eggs for

breakfast, so I got this bacon and took it up to him. Oh God, I thought he was going to die. There was a lot of that in the army. When we went to the reunions we would never talk about the war. All you do is – “I wonder what became of so-and-so.”

(Wife) Who was the soldier from Western Australia that comes over.

Oh there's one bloke that left there with me.

Is he a 13th?

13th, yes. He left here with me.

Is this Taylor?

Taylor. That's his name.

Yes, he's still alive.

You know, he was coming over here for reunions here every year.

Yes, well he did move across to Western Australia.

He stayed over there.

I've had a letter from him.

Oh he used to write – if ever you see the original invitation cards – what they sent on to us.

I wouldn't be surprised, because the letter I got was a beautiful hand.

Well in the corner there was – say, Mademoiselle from Armentieres.

It wasn't that woman from – Incinerator Kate from Ribemont, was it?

Ribemont. It might have been her. It was him that got that together.

What was actually “Itchy Coo” – where did it come from?

I don't know where it came from.

I've seen it. Can you enlarge a little on what happened at Gueudecourt. I'd like to get some accounts of what happened there because that would be one of the – there'll be Pozieres and Mouquet Farm, and then there'll be the winter, and then there'll be Gueudecourt, and then Bullecourt.

Gueudecourt was in February there.

Yes, it was – it was the coldest period.

They reckoned it was the coldest winter they had had in Europe for 71 years. And I've got to be in it!

Yes, I know that it was a bitterly cold winter. It was a record one.

That's where Harry Murray got his VC - at Gueudecourt.

(Wife) Tell him about that fellow who was in gaol.

That was Jack Prescott. He lived at Kurnell, and he was the other one-pip-artist who – that's who I was trying to think of his name. He was a warden out at Parramatta. Then we had another one – Bob Nill. What's that place half way up the Mountains? Berrima Gaol, he was in charge of that.

Yes, I know the old Berrima Gaol.

(Incidental conversation relating to reunions and so on)

And you went across at Bullecourt also?

Mmm.

What can you remember about that?

What can I remember. Just seeing the poor buggers getting killed. When they are dying alongside of you – you don't think of it. One will just miss you and get the bloke behind you, and over he'd go.

How did you get through the wire there, at Bullecourt?

Well the artillery used to cut the wire up first.

But at Bullecourt they used the tanks didn't they, so.

At Bullecourt, no.

Well, they didn't work did they?

(Incidental conversation concerning photographs and family)

As soon as they got the press on (board), one bloke came up to me. He said to someone else, "Who's that bloke, he's got a lot to say for himself." He was loud enough. And I said, "Why what's wrong." He wanted the history of my life all in two of three minutes. He said, "I suppose you're sorry you're back home again?" I said, "I'm sure sorry!" And in Adelaide – you had no money, but they had a special train to take us from Port Adelaide for the day, because we were pulling out next morning for Melbourne. Well, my mate, he was from Port Macquarie, we went to a pub there, and went out the back to the toilet. This rather well-dressed man there, he said, "Have you just come back on that ship?" Well, as we went out he said, "Come here." And there was two other men at the bar. He was at the bar with them. "Now what Battalion is it you're out of?" I said, "The 13th" And he said, "Well, it was lucky for you, I think." So he said, "Give the two boys a pint of beer each." Well, we had a pint of beer each, and they said, "Well, I'm sorry we've got to go back to work." But he said to the barmaid, "Drink as much as you like, it's all paid for." I said, "Thanks a lot." And I asked the barmaid, "Who are they?" And she said, "That's three bank managers." See they would meet there for a drink every day. We got stinkin'. We were drinking as much beer as we liked. First time we'd hit Australia. Well I was only home a week, I wrote a letter, and I think I put two pounds in the envelope, thanking them very, very much. I said that we were the two boys that you paid for in the pub. I got an answer, with the two pounds back, saying – it's no good sending it back again, because otherwise it will keep going there and back all the time. I was saying thank you very much.

(Incidental conversation)

Can we talk a little bit more about Bullecourt again? Can you tell me what you can recall about that. It as very difficult to get back I know.

How I got out of it I don't know. We struck good Germans there. They were good soldiers, the Germans. The last stunt we were in, on the 18th September 1918, we had them on the run, that's right. And we were in this place, and that's where Lieutenant McGuire, he got killed alongside of me. Before we hopped off. We were out in the open. It was only just passed zero hour, and every three minutes – and the poor bugger – and of course it was dark, and I don't know where he got it, but I know he's dead. It's a long time since I've spoken about.

It's the case generally with many that I've met, that not many have really been speaking about it.

And as you get older, you get forgetful.

Is there anything that you can remember from the 1916 period. How long were you in Egypt for example. You must have arrived in June. How long after the Brigade were you – they left 1st June.

They left Egypt 1st June, it was just after that. I tell you where we linked up with them – at Ribemont. They came down from Belgium and were going onto the Somme – all footslogging. And they of course they detailed us to our different companies. Then we got to Amiens. Have you heard of Albert Church at Amiens.

The one with the Virgin – that was at Albert.

And the Canadians I believe, they fixed it so that it shouldn't fall. There was a rumour going round that when that thing falls – if it falls the war will be over. It's amazing you know. It was at an angle like this.

I've seen a photograph of it. Do you remember going through Bapaume.

Bapaume – that was before Gueudecourt.

It was before Bullecourt.

I'm talking about February 1917.

Yes, Gueudecourt, and you went through Bapaume in March.

Yes, that's right. You wouldn't believe this, but the third brother, I met him. He was in the 4th Divvy. He was in the 46th Battalion. So we came out for a break – at a place called – it was a Friday night – August. We were sitting in the sun, with our shirts off, and killing all the chats along the seams.

Yes I know all about that.

So, I saw a corporal on a pushbike – 46th Battalion. I sang out to him. He was the billeting corporal. I said, "Where's the 46th Battalion?" He said, "They're coming out in the morning. I'm arranging the billets." Old farmhouse, or whatever they can find. That's all I know about – eight kilometres is five miles. So he says, "They'll be out in the morning." I went to see Frank Massey, "What do I want to go the church parade for." And I told him about my brother. So he said, yes that OK. But I said, I've got to walk eight kilos, and I'm not going to talk to myself all the way. What about getting Foster, another mate of mine. Well, I got Foster. We came to this village – whatever the name was – and I saw a sign. I said, "Can you tell me where D Company is?" He said, "For Christ sake, don't ask me. No-one seems to know what. They sent the gas over on their way out. That's if there's any left."

Oh dear.

So, if you're after something you'll get it if you go about it the right way. Ask everybody.

END OF TAPE ONE

(B Sharp 1 16/2/86 microcassette)

START OF TAPE TWO

(recorded following A Doggett 3 as Sharp 16/2/86 microcassette)

Ohh, ohh, ohh.

That was from the gas, was it.

He'd copped it properly. And he said, "I know it's you, Lewis. But I can't see." It would take about ten or twelve days, and you will be right. And here was six of them down. I had this band on my arm. It was a white band with a Red Cross on it, and I said, "You come down with me." I met a mob of them from the ambulance, and there was a Sergeant Carter. And I showed him this band on my arm, "There's a brother of mine, and he's blind. Will you get him on the first one." "Good as done." Well, I helped put him into the ambulance, and said 'au revoir'. And the next thing I got a letter from him. He could see alright. He was at a place in the south of England, a convalescence camp. Well I caught up with him. It's a coincidence that. Every twelve months they used to give you – when your leave is due – your blighty leave. Well, mine was off from the 2 November until the 16th.

This is 1916 or 1917.

No, 1918. So I struck him. I got rid of him alright. I got this letter off him telling (indecipherable)...

Where did he get that from?

Oh, running a two-up school when we were out of the line. Well I had to be in London on the 2nd of November when my leave started. We were up in Belgium. So as soon as I landed in London I sent him a telegram: On leave from France, Brother Lewis. And they granted him – I knew where to pick him up. So I met him the same day, or the next day, and they granted him 24 hours leave.

Where were you when the Armistice was signed?

I was in London when the Armistice was signed. And of course – I was with a brigadier-general, six foot six – going through The Strand in London, making for Trafalgar Square, you couldn't put a cigarette paper between each person. Well, eventually, where I met him – in Liverpool Street Station. So we went to the pub. I said, "Two mugs of Guinness." I was going to pay, but he said, "Oh put it back in your pocket. Only for your blokes Gawd knows what would have happened to us." I said, "Thanks, well I'm a hero."

Did you get down to Trafalgar Square that day or not?

I got down to it, and then I lost him.

In the crowd.

This bloke – he was a Brigadier-General. I don't know how he come to me, or I was blind. So he gets me, and we went into the Officers Club. General, gawd-knows-what, he said, "Here, this is what I found in The Strand." Well they were pumping whiskey into me. I was a beer drinker, and they were pumping whiskey into me. Well I came to in Trafalgar Square. How I got there I'll never know. When you see the Australian soldiers with a hang-over, all sitting around Nelson's Column. I sat down, and they said, "Can you spare a drink." "Can I what." I don't know this officer. He must have stuck a bottle of whiskey in for me. I pulled the cork out of it there, and as soon as the mob saw it they rushed down. I said, "Oh drink it all yourselves."

What were the people doing at that time? I suppose everyone was very excited.

Oh excited. You've never seen anything like it. I'd never seen anything like it in all my life, especially along The Strand, because that's the main part of it in the West End of London.

(Incidental conversation)

What reinforcement was that you were going to go to?

The 2nd of the 53rd.

There were four emergency reinforcements.

I think it was four.

And you went down to the pier.

Down Woolloomooloo.

But you didn't go. You went back down to Kiama.

They stuck us on the train and down to Kiama we went. About a week after, we were on leave again, final leave. So I had two in a fortnight.

I didn't understand you, what was happening.

(Incidental conversation)

When we were in Egypt, we weren't in khaki. It was all shorts and shirts.

What can you remember about Egypt? Can you remember any stories from there? About going into Cairo or out to the Pyramids.

Oh yes, and to Alexander (Alexandria).

(Break in interview)

About Egypt.

We had special cards. We had to pencil it, because of Gyppo kids. They were going to steal whatever they could get. And we used to use sticks. They said, "Hit them harder than ever if you catch any of them."

And how did you get across to France.

We left Alexander (Alexandria) and got off at Marseilles.

You got off at Marseilles.

They stuck us in cattle trucks, and they ended up in Belgium. I crossed that English Channel about eight or nine times. It used to get rough crossing that English Channel.

It gets stormy doesn't it.

Yes. But I was a good sailor.

What else can you tell me about the winter of 1916? How would you keep warm at that time?

You couldn't. In fact we had sheepskin coats, and we had those balaclava hats. All you could see was nose and eyes. And while we were digging the trenches – the engineers were supposed to have done that, but we were doing it – so one of the staff officers was there, and he said to me, "Feeling the cold at all." I said, "What do you think we have all this paraphernalia on for?" And I swore or something or other. And he laughed. And we went back to work. One of our sergeants, he said, "You remember when you were speaking to that staff officer. You were swearing and complaining. That was General Birdwood."

Oh dear.

The most ungodly sight I've seen was in the front position near there. High Wood they called it. It was named High Wood. And there they were, that was oh weeks before we landed there. There was two – a German and a New Zealander, both of them with a bayonet in each other guts.

Oh dear.

Oh there was plenty to watch. We were talking about Pozieres. There was an arm –

Yes, I think I've heard about that.

And everybody shakes it saying, "How are you going mate?"

Do you remember anything about the Buckshee Stunt at Bullecourt, when you were going to go out, and it all got cancelled, and you came back.

Yes. Christ almighty. The Pommies were running. They were running like hell they were, and we were going forward. At Paschaendale. He was an Australian champion swimmer. I can't think of his name. He was just as well known as Bob Hawke is.

END OF INTERVIEW