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OH 811/3

Full transcript of an interview with

GRAHAM NYBO

On 10 May 2007

by Dr Susan Mann

for the

VIETNAM VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Recording available on CD

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J.D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA: INTERVIEW NO. OH 811/3

Interview with Mr Graham Nybo recorded by Dr Susan Mann at Adelaide, South Australia, on 10th May 2007 for the State Library of South Australia's Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project.

DISK 1

This is an interview with Graham Nybo and it's being recorded at the State Library of South Australia on 10th May 2007, and the interviewer is Susan Mann.

Thank you very much, Graham.

Yes, thank you, Susan.

Okay. So what I'm going to do is just ask you a few questions about yourself first.

Thank you, yes.

So what's your full name, Graham?

My full name is Graham Charles Nybo.

And when were you born?

East Coolgardie, Western Australia, on 26th July 1940.

Okay, thank you. What was your dad's name?

Dad's name was Paul William Nybo and those days I guess he was returned from World War II, that's my earliest memory, but pre-that he was a machine miner in Kalgoorlie.

Okay, and what about your mum?

Mum, born in Kalgoorlie, to the Baker family, they were of Jewish origin, and Mum was a brilliant housekeeper and mother.

And what was her name?

Mum's name was Phyllis Lorraine Nybo, married name; maiden name was Baker.

And where do you live now?

Our current residence is No.6, Bridges Street, Broadview, northern suburbs of Adelaide, not far from Channel 2, so it's pretty well an inner-city suburb now.

And do you have any brothers or sisters?

Yes. I have no brothers; I've got two sisters, both reside in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, and they were here last week for five days. I hadn't seen them for five years, so that was pretty special.

Absolutely. And are they older or younger than you?

I've got one younger sister of about eight years, she's the Baby Boomer in the family, and I have an older sister by – well, she's seventy this year, so she's three years older than me.

Excellent. So do you recall your grandparents at all?

I do my grandmother, who lived at Capel in Western Australia. However, unfortunately, I never knew my grandfather as he died as a young man as a result of his lungs being dusted in the mines at Broken Hill. Hardening of the lungs – like a lot up there, those times.

Yes, absolutely. So mining was in your family, by the sounds of it.

Yes. I never went that way, but it was certainly there and perhaps if we'd remained in Kalgoorlie it might have been the track that you would have been on.

Yes. So you were telling me when I met you last that you actually enlisted in the Army.

Yes, I enlisted in the Army in Western Australia and it was 1958 and I was around seventeen and a half years of age then.

Do you recall what was behind that decision?

I guess it was an opportunity to better yourself. I'd been employed in fairly testing employment as an apprentice slaughterman, I didn't particularly like that, and I worked in various labouring jobs and prior to joining the Army I put my age up to twenty-one and I was a fettler on the railways, paying five shillings a week for board and you got a tarpaulin and a Metter stove. Now, that's true – that's true. (laughs)

That's amazing. So what's involved in being a fettler on the railway?

You're a labourer and you carry out the task by the ganger who's a fairly hard taskmaster, and our job would be to relay track, dolly up the track, hump sleepers and make sure the line's straight, and in general terms it was pick-and-shovel work. Still, it put muscles on us and was a pretty exacting sort of work. But I was getting the – cheeky enough to put my age up to twenty-one to be an adult, you had to work like one.

I guess so. But it sounds like very hard physical work, though.

It was, yes.

How long were you doing that before you enlisted?

Around six months before I joined the Army. I'd hitchhiked up to Perth and made general inquiries to join the Army, and I did do an aptitude test. I was pretty keen to go into the Navy myself, but they said you had to be pretty smart to get into the Navy and I'd left school at thirteen. And as it turned out we all sat down and did the same aptitude test anyway. So I went back to work and then I rang Perth – I hadn't heard from anybody because it was fairly isolated country those days – and I rang, there was a little public telephone in a place called Noggerup, so I got through to Georges Terrace in Perth and they said, 'Oh, we've been looking for you.' (laughs) So it was quite a surprise. So I had to resign and hitchhike back to Perth. Got overnight accommodation at a friend's place and then went to Georges Terrace in the morning and I did the affirmation and next thing I was on the back of a truck and headed out to Guildford Army camp, and they had this wonderful – I'd never seen so much food in all my life, they had this wonderful lunch for us. I thought it was Christmas. (laughter)

Amazing. What did your parents think of this?

My mum and dad were working on the main roads and they were really doing it pretty tough those days, too, because those days the Main Roads Department you camped on-site in the bush, although Mum had her camp set up as good as most people's homes, so – – –. So I didn't really see them very much at that time, I just freelanced and next thing it sort of all happens and I'm on my way on the train to the

Eastern States and pretty exciting as I'd never been able to afford a fare out of Western Australia then. (laughs)

Amazing.

Yes.

So it was a real – – –.

A real adventure.

Yes, it sounds like it. So how long were you in the Army before you went to Vietnam?

I'd been in the Army quite a time, having joined in 1958, and I went to Vietnam in 1966, so that's like eight years. But prior to that I'd gone to Malaya in 1964, as being regular Army, I was serving in Perth at the time with the 3 Field Regiment and they were looking for anti-aircraft gunners and I'd been trained in that, so they flew me straight back to Sydney and within a fortnight or so I was on the *HMAS Sydney* heading over to Malaysia –

Goodness.

– during the Confrontation. Good part about that, though, is that we never ever got to fire a shot in anger. (laughs) Which was pretty good.

Yes, absolutely.

So we were – although we were all set up and well-equipped and well-trained, thankfully nothing happened; and in any case, the weapons that we were using were obsolete at the time. Point of weapon attack from an aircraft at 600 knots was two miles, our Bofors were effective at 1500 metres, so there was quite a huge imbalance.

Absolutely.

That was the last run of those sort of guns until they went to missiles –

I see.

– so it wasn't long after that, few years later, that really that type of anti-aircraft weaponry was dispensed with and they went to missiles. And the modern-day regiment is up here at Woodside, which is 16 Air Defence Regiment.

Sixteen which?

Sixteen Air Defence Regiment.

Air Defence, okay.

So there was quite an evolution of the type of anti-aircraft defence. But I was never part of that.

Okay. So what did your role in Malaya, Malaysia, entail?

I was the bombardier on a 40mm Bofors, the sergeant in charge on that, we had a crew of five – could have done with seven, but a crew of five – and we were set up as a perimeter defence on the airstrip at Butterworth and we all had interlocking arcs of fire. But, as I said earlier, whilst there was a threat, quite a serious threat, they chose not to fly across and have a go at us, which was – it was not that far away, just across the Straits, yes.

So just forgive me for not understanding this, Graham, but what's a Bofors?

A Bofors is an anti-aircraft weapon, it's a quick-firing artillery gun and can fire upwards to a hundred and twenty 40mm rounds per minute – subject to malfunction, of course, and they were quite adept at doing that. So providing there was no stoppages on the gun they could keep up a very, very good rate of fire. But at that time, though, they were really superseded and weren't suited for an anti-aircraft role, in my opinion. Perhaps an aircraft attacking at a lower speed and at a lower altitude you may have been effective. But anyway, as I say, we didn't ever fire a shot in anger so we got out of that one. (laughter)

How long were you there?

I was there for eight months, at that time unaccompanied. I did have the opportunity of staying on but I went back to Australia for Christmas and then I was offered promotion to join 1 Field Regiment, which is in Sydney, as the regimental transport sergeant, so I went that way. However, the opportunity was there to go back for another eighteen months to Malaya. Sometimes I think that might have been a better way to go, because I think they had a pretty good time. But no regrets. Went to

1 Field Regiment and did the best I could there, and so that was getting on into, that would have been ’65 I went there, and of course early ’66 we went to Vietnam.

So what was your role in your promotional role, your work?

I was regimental transport sergeant.

What’s that entail?

That entailed the training and testing of drivers, the maintenance of the vehicles and I guess the allocation of duties. But the POL requirement – which is petrol, oil and lubricants – was quite a significant part of that and of course in that role some people considered it a taxi rank, but my role was to allocate really the vehicles to its tasks.

So it would be vital, because if they weren’t serviced properly then men would be at risk.

Yes. Well, whilst we’re limited in the servicing of the vehicles, we had quite a competent what’s termed an LAD – light aid detachment – they were all fully-trained mechanics and for mechanical repairs they were always on hand and always did a crackerjack good job. They were very highly-trained and kept us on the right track, too, yes.

That’s good.

Which was very good, yes, because we weren’t skilled on that side of it. But we operated them, that’s the main thing. (laughter)

Absolutely. So you were there for, what, just about a year?

Yes, and that year really entailed a lot of courses, training exercises and right up through to early 1966, whilst we were never told anything we were all pretty perceptive, and the training exercises had increased in tempo and it was during an exercise down at Tianjara which is south of Nowra on the New South Wales coast that it was announced that 103 Medium Battery would go and then they followed it up the headquarter battery would go as well. There was already a battery in Vietnam – I can’t remember who they were now; perhaps it was 102 Field Battery – they were at Ben Wah, and when we got to Vietnam they came and joined us so that made two batteries, headquarter battery, to make up the regiment, supported by 161 Field

Battery from New Zealand, a battery of 155s from America and a battery of 8-inch and 175mm, which was the 2/83rd US Artillery.

Goodness, okay.

So there was quite a bit of firepower there when we got there.

Yes. So how many men would have that been? That was a lot of, sounds like a lot of people.

Just coming to mind – each battery would consist of around, say, a hundred and fifty men, including headquarters staff, so we had it would be four hundred, with Americans there would have been about eight hundred, plus additional support, so there would have been about a thousand people, a thousand men involved in that. That's just on the artillery side.

Goodness me. So how was that organised? Like, when you got there, when you got to Vietnam and you got off the plane, what happened, what did you do?

That was organised chaos. (laughter) An advance party had gone ahead and the rest of us arrived – we loaded the *HMAS Sydney* with all the guns, equipment, and the advance party left before us, then they unloaded at Vung Tau and we flew in around about three or four weeks later, the balance of the regiment, and we were just loaded on the back of semi-trailers and taken to the north end of a strip and they had some tents set up in the middle of a cemetery. I thought, 'Well, there's a good start.' And alongside of that there would have been a million gallons of fuel at about fifty metres away, so I thought the location of the regiment to get in there was rather hazardous right from the word go. But we were only there for three or four weeks and then the battery moved on to Nui Dat – or the regiment moved on to Nui Dat – and at the same – well, I think who went in first was 5 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment went in first. That was the Australians.

But pre-that, the Americans had gone in and cleared the area, and then they took substantial casualties. A lot of people don't realise that, but had they not gone and cleared the area – – –. There was immediate casualties in 5 Battalion, but the Americans did a wonderful job I think in reducing the casualties and the political flak in Australia.

So when you say 'cleared the area', was that cleared the area of mines?

No; that's the physically clear the area by patrolling –

Oh, I see.

– and that's eyeball-to-eyeball stuff, that is, yes. That had gone through, and in-line or in some other formation, and just to make sure that the place – and they would have secured the perimeters for when our battalion went in there, because you needed the infantry in there first. Can't put guns in first.

No, no, okay.

They got to be there to protect the gunners.

Yes, all right. And I didn't realise that, I didn't have that history, so yes.

Yes, that's very so, yes. Because we were sitting back in Vung Tau and the dust-off helicopters – that's like the ambulance helicopters – were coming in one after the other, one after the other. And you could hear – we were, I'm not quite sure how many kilometres from there at Vung Tau, but you could hear the thunder of the thunder of the gunfire in the distance, and I thought, 'What the hell are we going into?' (laughs) So, anyway.

Yes. How did you feel, sitting there listening to all of that?

You don't say much to each other because Australians have got that stoicism and so you don't say much. You think a lot, say, 'What the hell are we going into?' But you just get on with it. But you don't say much. You can think a lot, (laughter) but you're not allowed to say much.

Yes. There must have been a great unspoken camaraderie, I would think, is that right? Or is that just an assumption?

I think that's a fairly correct assumption, that everybody would look after each other in that regard, without question.

So when you got into the position that you were to occupy, what happened then, what was – – –?

Well, by the time – I was held back for about two to three weeks because I had to get a lot of the stores up into there, ferry those in. By the time I got there, a lot of the

weapon pits had been dug, a lot of the fences had been put in and they'd worked like slaves twenty-four hours a day to set that up. But we had to man the gun pits throughout the nights, and in the first night that I got there and I went into about a foot of mud, because we happened to arrive in the middle of the monsoons, and I wasn't aware of the exact positions of the guns and one fired about twenty feet from me and me and this other fellow went straight into the mud. (laughs) And we were supposed to be used to all of this, but it frightened hell out of us. (laughter)

Yes, I'm sure.

Straight down we went. But then we come good, we realised what it was. But that woke us up. (laughs)

Yes, I'm sure. A true baptism of fire, by the sounds of it.

Yeah – but at least it was going out, it wasn't coming in.

Yes, exactly. Okay, so you were telling me when I spoke to you last about a fellow serviceman who lost an arm and an eye that you were aware of. Did that happen while you were there?

No, I was back in Australia then and he was my neighbour. Only a young fellow. I think he was the medical corps – isn't it sad, you know, I can't remember his name now. But it was very distressing, and I've often thought that I should have done more; but then you think he's in care, getting the best of medical treatment; but I often think I should have gone and sat on his veranda step and had a story with him. But being neighbours you don't want to interfere – that's a dreadful thing, isn't it? But if I'd sat on the veranda with him – – –. I think we did do some of that, but – – –. I've often wondered how he got on, because he'd lost an arm, he'd lost an eye, and – I've often wondered how he got on.

All right. Well, just let's go back to your time in Vietnam. So can you paint me a picture of what your day-to-day life was like?

In many respects, you possibly know that nothing much happens for a long time and then when it does all hell breaks loose. But in many respects, being – I guess some people would call my role as a base warmer's job, but my routine was to develop the transport compound. But they were so short on labour I was pulled out of there and I

finished up digging weapon pits, putting up barbed wire, the trucks'd knock it down, I'd put it up again, I'd dig more weapon pits. In addition to that, you've still got your domestic things to worry about in transport: the rubbish has got to be removed, the rations have got to be got. So it was a very, very busy time, like your day would start at 5 a.m. where you'd stand to, and then there'd be some duties and then there'd be – we had great cooks and things there and plenty of tucker, being on American ration list – and then you'd have your duties and there'd always be a morning tea somewhere and lunch. We were well looked after, really, in that regard. We always complained about the etherised eggs, but you had to run with that, yes. (laughter)

Okay. So it was because the Americans were – you were serving alongside the Americans that the rations were better? The Australian rations weren't as good?

Well, we were on the American ration quotas or distribution list, and there was never any shortage of that – although, in some ways, it was pretty tiresome. There was aspects of it that wasn't our – it was very, very soft type of diet. There'd be five-pound tins of 'rolled fatback', as they called it –

What was that?

– you know, that was rolled up in grease paper and they'd roll it out after you opened the tins, and you'd have that and powderised egg. But some Australian rations would come through, which was good. But I used to get – the only thing missing in my rations was the Holbrook's sauce, and I used to get that (laughs) sent out from Australia in a plastic bottle. It arrived all right, too. And no Vegemite; we all got Vegemite-hungry.

Yes – and you couldn't get that sent up?

No. Well, I don't know. I think I tried to get some up there, but that was – you'd have been king of the mess if you had had a jar of Vegemite. But I shared out my Holbrook sauce, reluctantly. (laughs) Bacon and eggs and Holbrook sauce: can't go past it.

You still enjoy that, obviously.

Yes. But the day itself was pretty full. And of course there'd be stand-to of a night, and there was clearing patrols to be done, and then right alongside of me, about

twenty metres away, the 103 Field Battery would be firing H&Is all night – that's called 'harassing and interdiction'.

Say that – – –.

Harassing and interdiction.

Okay.

So they'd have selected areas and they'd fire the odd rounds every now and again just to keep, if the enemy out there, the Viet Cong out there or the NVA,[1] you'd keep them on their toes. Because they'd record if they'd seen any lights or movements or sounds or what have you, so they'd fire on that. And lots of it. (laughs)

And were you part of that – I mean, when you say the clearing patrols, were you part of those clearing patrols or were your – – –?

Not a lot.

No.

Not a lot, no. The batteries would do their own. I'd sit there and watch them go out – being a sergeant, you know, every job's got its perks, you know? But the clearing patrols would be out and very, very well-conducted, morning and night. And my only involvement was in the odd standing patrol, where I'd gone out into the rubber with myself and two others and the only thing between me and the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong was a few rubber trees. So the three of us would sit out there and watch and listen all day.

How did you feel doing that?

Not too bad. I remember on one occasion we were there and we were to be relieved by an infantry company, and I was out about one and a half kilometres in front of the American field batteries and they'd come through to relieve us and right on dusk, and it was pretty eerie seeing them come towards you. That was one of the finest military manoeuvres – because they just drifted through like ghost men, it was just amazing. And then as they got through us, well, we were able to buggy up and get

[1] NVA – North Vietnamese Army.

back out and go and have tea. (laughter) I'll never forget that, that was an amazing experience.

So you had a lot of respect for them?

Because you thought you saw them, then you thought you didn't, then you thought you saw them, then you thought you didn't – – –. And then, boom! One would appear.

Wow.

It was just – the way that they would ghost through with their patrollings was just amazing. So if you'd been on the receiving end of it you would have known all about it. (laughs) Because as they were coming towards me I got on the radio and let them know where we were. (laughs)

So not to mistake you.

Oh, yeah – well, those things happened, yes.

You were telling me also that you actually became quite friendly with one particular American serviceman who was a musician, is that right? Or who played – – –?

Yes. Well, our brothers-in-arms relationship with the Americans was just second to none. We really got on famously. And this fellow seemed to adopt us and he used to come up through the rubber and bring his banjo and twelve-string guitar and his mouth organ, and he played that style of music that perhaps we wouldn't have heard, which was the bluegrass style of music, and it just wowed us. Then he'd go. But I've maintained contact with him, and his name was Richard Hutchinson, and he was a warrant officer in the American army. I think they got the benefits of the bachelor officers' quarters as a warrant officer in the American army. But nevertheless he liked being with us, and I did go and visit him at a place called Swan Lock for a weekend, then I came back and lost track of him somewhat because he went up onto the northern border, up to what was termed I['eye'] Cor, or 1['one'] Cor, if you like –

Okay.

– because the country, South Vietnam, was divided in four military areas, but we called it 'I Cor', which is up on the 15th Parallel. And then we communicated through till about, would have been 1968–69, he'd gone back to America, then I lost track of it and it wasn't till 1980 – or no, nearly 1990 – that he got in contact with me. So I went to visit him in America in 2002, and sat in the backyard while he played his banjo. But that was one of the great relationships that come out of all of that and we were really bosom pals over the years. But, sadly, he died a fortnight ago.

A fortnight ago?

Yes.

Oh!

He got cancer, like a lot of Vietnam veterans, and he died a fortnight ago. But he promised me he'd send me this banjo, and he did send it, and it arrived.

Did it?

It's a Vega, 1923 Vega, he sent me. It's worth a lot of money. Anyway, we've had a play with it so it's a great memory.

Yes, it's a wonderful memory.

But that's what comes out of all – – –. So out of all of that, some great things can happen.

So how long were you in Vietnam?

I arrived in May '66 and I left in June '67.

So quite a long time.

So it was a good twelve months. And I had a lot of away exercises before going; then I got back. The Army was pretty good. Wendy and the kids were in Collie in Western Australia: they flew them back, put them in a house, and my old battery sergeant major picked them up at the airport and helped get the furniture in and then picked me up. So I got a great help when I got back. But for me it was business as usual, not like the National Servicemen. I went back straight into the military

environment, so I wasn't out there subject to all this dissension that was then, this divisive thing that was running through the country at the time, so I was pretty protected. Until I got out of the Army in 1970, and it was still out there and I was subject to being a 'child murderer' and all sorts of those things.

How did that make you feel?

I don't think I've still got over that, no. No, I think that really sticks in your craw. And when you get that – I remember going down to a little village with a group that used to be called 'Win Hearts And Minds', you know, we used to go down and look after the people. This was a little organisation at Task Force Headquarters, humanitarian organisation, 'WHAM' it was called. Pretty Americanised, isn't it, but it was Win Hearts And Minds. And we'd go down and we'd take down all sorts of things to the people, and then to come back and be subject to that I thought was rather detestful.

Not too much now; I think there's another generation now, so they have no idea as to what happened there (laughs) at that time.

So when you say, you know, like you came back and you went straight – you were quite protected in the first instance –

Yes.

– but I guess you would have known and served alongside many conscripts.

Yes. Yes. They were the ones who become subject to the hate campaign in Australia. Because they would get off the plane and sort of next day or next week would be back on the factory floor, want of an explanation, and be subject to abuse. And they come out of this hostile war environment and all of a sudden they haven't got the security of the Army, it's like the severance of the family will, and there they are, they were subject to all this abuse. And I think it's a consequence of that that's really added to a lot of the mental problems with these young fellows who suffer with PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder. Very much so, it was through that. Because it wasn't pretty good, you're doing the country's will, and the population, of course, a lot of the population were aiding and abetting the enemy. So hence the

unpopular war and the troops become subject to vitriolic comments from the uninformed public.

Yes. It must have been very, very hurtful, to say the least.

Yes. Well, there was probably displays of that. I think it was in Brisbane where there was paint thrown over, symbolic blood and this sort of thing, onto the commanding officer of a particular battalion. I can't recall which one, but I can recall the image of it, that type of style of thing. And of course whilst all this was happening there was all the confrontational marches in Australia, the Moratorium marches. I mean, everyone's against war, but if we're going to do it the population needs to be behind their troops. There's been a big lesson learnt from that, because the efforts in Timor today and Iraq and Afghanistan, at least we're not seeing – everyone's against war, but at least we're not seeing this public display of unjust ....., at least I think there's been an awakening and they support the troops more so now.

Yes.

I think there was an element that were being led by the nose, in my opinion. That's only a personal opinion, of course.

Yes, of course. Yes, I'm sure – well, it was a very significant time in Australia's history all round, wasn't it?

Well, certainly. It was termed 'the unwinnable war', but at the end of the day the North Vietnamese Army didn't go into the palace in Saigon with briefcases, they drove in with tanks. That was the difference. Of course, they won it politically and then the people were getting the support worldwide. But the South Vietnamese then fled in their hundreds of thousands from the country because they didn't want any part of that system. Still, it was a system that was being used for the reunification, and as years go by, well, I think Ho Chi Minh would have used any system for the reunification. He was able to get support from China.

Where it was unwinnable, of course, was that you learn later in life there was twelve infantry divisions sitting just north of North Vietnam, just waiting to come in had the attack ever gone into North Vietnam. It would have escalated things. So to

bring it to an end and finding a conclusion at the end of the day perhaps that was the best thing for all.

Yes. So tell me a little bit about what you did as part of that, the Win Hearts And Minds group, because I think that's a story that, as you said, people don't know about.

I didn't have a lot to do with it. I got pretty pally with the – my little transport compound was, I think there was Padre Bennett the chap was named, a little nice guy. I used to walk through there, it would be pouring with rain, he says, 'Graham, come in here and have a Drambuie.' (laughter) So me and the padre would sit there and have a Drambuie. He had this real lonely spot out there on his own. I was rather pleased when the brigadier got him moved back into and in around the Task Force Headquarters. It was a lonely spot. Anyway, it was only through him that – I think I had some spare time, tidied up the transport thing and what have you and just went down there on a couple of occasions to give some support. But that unit was full-time.

I see.

Yes, so I went down and gave them a hand. They were there full-time and they were going out doing a lot of good humanitarian work. Some people would say they were papering over the cracks, but they did do a lot of good down there.

So it was really hands-on working at the grass roots.

Yes. And during the time that I was there they went down, there was another little place between Wah Long and Beria, that I know the engineers went down and built a new market for the people down there in all this hurly-burly of things. Roads were improved, this was done, so they did some good work there, besides. Australians are typical of that, you know, don't want to see people down and out.

So I think that's – I'm really happy to have that on the tape, Graham, I think that's a really good story. What were some of the major challenges that you faced when you were there?

I think ticking off the days of the calendar. (laughs) There was major challenges because you had to see it through, you couldn't – – –. There were times there when you'd sit there in the quieter times and think, 'Well, what the hell am I doing here?'

You know, you'd sooner be home. Because you're in the wire and you'd be watching some of the infantry patrols go out and this type of thing and you'd like to be with them but you have other responsibilities like as key personnel, you can't do that. But we kept ourselves pretty busy. Where I was you could always have a beer of a night and got well looked after. But I was always pretty active, and I suppose you could have sat on your hands and not done a lot. Of a night-time I still had my orderly sergeant duties to do and still had my work duties to do and other tasks, re-supply and that type of thing. So I did go up in the bush, different areas, with a truckload of fuel on it, pretty hazardous (laughs) at the best of times. Go up, refuel a regiment. So that was pretty good. They had a couple of APCs[2] for protection, but thankfully nothing happened.

But dangerous.

Yes.

Okay, so you've talked a little bit about when you came back, and you just went straight back into, as you call it, 'business as usual' –

Yes.

– and obviously you were reunited with your family that you'd been away from.

That's right, yes, yes.

How was that?

Fairly daunting, in lots of ways. But here he is, this man's back on the scene again, and I hadn't been there for about fourteen months and the house was all sparkle-arkling and your children are all another twelve months taller and they're wanting to dominate your time and you've got a young wife there and so you really had to re-establish the affections of the family, I suppose. But it was quite exciting, really. I had a bit of time off and I'd saved a couple of bob so we were able to go and do a few things. But there was some settling-in, but back to work we went.

Because your children were quite young?

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[2] APC – armoured personnel carrier.

I'm trying to think. Gregory would have been three when I left, Deborah was born in 1960 so she'd have been a little bit older, six or seven, and Belinda would have been about four or five. But the son would have been the youngest one, since I left in – I think he was born in Western Australia in 1963. It's a long time ago now; he just had his forty-fourth birthday this week, 5th of – – –. (laughter) Time's gone by, hasn't it, eh?

It does, hey?

Hooley-dooley.

Yes, I reckon. They're little people to leave behind, aren't they –

Aren't they? Yes.

– and then to come back to?

The youngest is now forty-four. (laughter)

Well, how did they respond when you got back?

Oh, they were over the moon, because I suppose they got a bit tired of looking at the photo on the mantelpiece. But from that time – 'cause 1964 through till 1967, I'd only been home about four or five months, so it just wasn't my twelve months in Vietnam; I had lots of exercises to do, I had qualifying exercises, all of this and all of that, and so I was away a fair bit of the time. It was a bit testing, really. You become the grass widow. (laughter)

I guess so. It's a story in itself, isn't it, about how military families operate and how they maintain relationships?

You need a lot of loyalty within the family.

I'm sure.

Yes, absolute. And I was very, very fortunate in that that's a super-loyal and protective of – not wanting to stray or the opportunities that come about. Everyone's human. But I was very, very fortunate in that regard.

That's excellent, that's excellent. It must mean a great deal, I would think, while you're away, that.

Oh, you do. Because the world is not a bed of roses and there were fellows that were sent back and did cause them a lot of distress when I guess they'd got a better offer somewhere. But let's hope that they're all over it now, it's all in the past. But that's happened in all conflicts, that type of thing.

I'm sure. So you were telling me also, when I spoke to you last, about the five warrant officers that lost their lives.

Yes. I was sent to – or a better word is 'posted'; or maybe it was 'sent', I don't know, ... about that (laughs) – I was posted to 1st Recruit Training Battalion as a sergeant for promotion to warrant officer for experience, and during my time there five warrant officers who'd gone to the Australian Army Training Team – I'd have got down there about late or mid-'68 and I was there till October 1970, and five warrant officers had gone to Vietnam on the Training Team and they had lost their lives, so it was pretty hard to take, really, from there. My neighbour – I won't mention names – but lost his life there, and he left behind a wife and five children, and two of those children had Down's Syndrome. So I've often wondered how his wife had got on.

Once again, that networking was never really in place to keep in contact. Maybe it is now, maybe they can do better than what we did in the future, because we often [wonder] what happened to the lady. I know that the Department of Veterans' Affairs and Legacy and those really jumped to and looked after her. I think she moved into Victoria there somewhere, but – – –. They're the sad things that go on.

And my task down there as regimental drill sergeant major was to train the funeral parties, so I had quite a responsibility in the Riverina burying the lads who had been brought back from Vietnam.

Goodness me.

Me and the RSM, the RSM was really wonderful. I had to get some coaching in how to conduct these things properly anyway, but that was the job, to go off and conduct the funerals throughout the Riverina, because there was quite a few from the Riverina area that lost – being at Kapooka, well, they were sort of central in that command area to be responsible for that area. So they were sad times, to do that.

And did you have anything to do with the families, or was it only on the periphery?

No. Generally it was the padres and administration and the system, and whether we all kept it at arm's length – you'd help where you could, but generally the system took over then. As to how good it was, hopefully some – and I don't think the system was that good. I don't think that they, I really don't think that there was ever any extended care and counselling for the families. I think they'd go so far, you got your DVA, perhaps the wives got the widows' pensions or the next of kin was supported; and then in many ways the iron curtain would come down. So I'm hopeful that in these days that there is extended counselling. Because there is the facility of the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service and they've just changed the name of that to Veterans and [Veterans] Families Counselling Service, as another change in the direction. So I really think there needs to be this charge, responsibility to have extended care for the families, because you can't sort of say, 'Well, here's a cheque. Get on with it.'

No.

As I was saying earlier, you need someone to sit on the front veranda step and have a yarn, like I should have done more of with the chap who lived next door to me when he come back badly wounded. That was in Holsworthy.

Yes, okay.

So I'd certainly like to see that. Although the ex-service organisations are out there too to give the support now, too, through the RSL, through the Vietnam Veterans' Association, the Vietnam Veterans' Federation, through the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and there are lots of other ESOs like Naval Association, Air Force Associations, Legacy – I must apologise; perhaps I should have put them at the top of the list because they do a wonderful job. And I think that a lot of that could be tied up a lot tighter and so that you'd get almost an extended family support within the ex-service community.

Yes, right.

And then it might rub off to those who are outside of the ex-service community as well. I think there's the caring out there because you can see that reflected in the Anzac Day marches now. You can see it reflected in the Dawn Service. At the last

Dawn Service I think there were people fifty deep, as far back from the National Memorial back as far as the Museum. It was just enormous. So there is that caring out there. You've just got to cobble it all together and perhaps do a little bit more.

So what do you think – you know, like when you said that you'd left the Army in 1970 and then you became subject to some of this vitriol that was out in the community and that was very distressing: so how did you – what did you do about that? Like you had to get a job in civvy street, I suppose.

Yes, yes.

What did you do?

I went into the real estate world as a sales consultant and that's a pretty intensive job so that fairly kept me pretty busy seven days a week. But I think (laughs) you throw yourself into things too much then, because as you leave the Army they say, 'You'll be sorry. We'll see you back here.' Well, I was so determined to succeed. But I think what's happened in the past it does change your personality, it does change your direction in life, it does change your attitudes towards people and I think their attitudes towards you as well, because I went through a period in my thirties of drunkenness and obnoxiousness.

And that was out of character, obviously.

Absolutely. But I didn't wake up to it till I was forty and I opened my own business and I never went back into a bar again. But it can have that effect on you, and all these things are in your head. But I did get counselling later, through the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service, and I'd certainly advocate that to any veteran, really. But at the end of the day, though, I think it does shorten your work ethics, if you like, or your ability to continue in the workforce. I left at sixty, and I was rather fortunate in that I received that full support through the counselling service, through psychiatric help, and at the end of the day a TPI[3] pension, which helps us immensely because with a few extra dollars it makes life a lot easier to have not that extra strain on you, and –

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[3] TPI – totally and permanently incapacitated.

Oh, for sure.

– yeah, we get looked after pretty well.

That's good. So it sounds like, when you did come back and okay, so you threw yourself into your job but it sounds like you really had a pretty harrowing time.

Through that time, yes. There was a fair bit of – and I don't know what it is, whether it's – – –. It's almost out of character. Or it's almost a release to socialise, because you've led a monk existence in many respects; you've missed a lot of socialising in that time, although you've got bars in the Army and good messes, but you tend to relax and get picked up into the social scene in parts of the world that you'd never seen and enjoyed, because remember I joined the Army at seventeen, I hadn't had any youth – I started work at thirteen – so I went through the social scene for ten years. But at the end of the day you wake up in the morning and the candelabra's rusty. (laughs) You can't see the rust for the lights of a night. So you wake up of a morning and the penny dropped. And I opened my own business, I walked out of the bar and I have not been back, apart from I'll have a social drink at home, two beers at the RSL and the odd little binge, but that's it. (laughs) Don't go into pubs any more.

That's a fantastic story. So I think, I suspect that there's a whole, bigger story underneath what we're hearing up here.

Yes, yes. Because you're driven, I was driven into the social world and I thought, 'Oh, here we go, this is wonderful', because you haven't got the disciplines on you. You can sort of do what you like. But it comes back and bites you on the bum.

Yes. Indeed, indeed. Okay, so can you tell me a little bit about – actually, Graham, just before I ask you that next question –

Certainly.

– I've just noticed that we're about to run out of this tape, so what about if I stop this one and we put in a new one to start the next question, is that okay?

Sure.

Great, thank you.

END OF DISK 1: DISK 2

Okay, this is tape two of the interview with Graham Nybo, and the interviewer is Susan Mann. Thank you, Graham. So I just thought it would be really interesting to talk to you about your experience since you've been back. You've mentioned the Vietnam Veterans' Association: now, is it that association that you became involved with, or was it more the RSL?

Initially I joined the RSL in 1970, as soon as I got out of the Army, I went up to Angas Street, to the headquarters up there. Perhaps there wasn't a lot of enthusiasm or maybe I wasn't enthusiastic, but once I started in the real estate world I just took to that with a great passion. I did go into Salisbury RSL and to get my membership transferred from the State office to Salisbury, and I sort of went through the mechanics of that but I never went back. And it wasn't till about 1990, I had friends – a lot of my friends were in the Vietnam Veteran's Association and said, 'Why don't you come to a meeting?' Anyway, I finished up president of the association in the State, so that was – – –. (laughs) So I got involved in there and I'd always had a wonderful affection for the RSL and I thought that was the ultimate, once you received an active service medal, that you could join the RSL to be part of the old brigade. But it wasn't until the early '90s that – – –.

Well, because the Vietnam Veterans' Association in South Australia was being hosted by the Walkerville RSL, and they were struggling a bit, the old fellows, so they said, 'Well, you really should join the RSL to support us.' So we all become dual-badged: RSL and the Vietnam Veterans' Association. And in due course I was invited as a member of the RSL – I'd been on the committee at Walkerville on and off, and the VVA,[4] and then I was invited, I think it was early in the 1990s when the current president invited me in and said that they'd like me to become a [?councillor/counseller?] in the RSL when I'd have the responsibility of going around and flying the flag, I guess, but going around and offering support to various RSLs within a particular zone. So I had about twelve RSLs to go around and look after. I quite enjoyed that.

And then I was responsible to a vice-president who sort of controlled the area, and anyway he retired from the job – he was in his eighties, not bad, eh? – retired and he

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[4] VVA – Vietnam Veterans' Association.

said, 'Well, Graham, you'd better do this.' So I put my hand up to become a vice-president, which takes you to board level in the RSL. So I got up the greasy pole there and then later they must have seen some worth in me because I was invited to become Deputy State President, where you understudy the President, and – well, I'll mention the names, because it's public: John Bailey was the President at the time, John Bailey OAM, so I was lucky to serve with John on the board; and then Jock Statton, our current President, OAM, is there, and from time to time I've been able to do his duties, which has helped me immensely because you have to get the confidence and you have to put yourself out within the public, and there's public speaking involved and a public image that's involved. And sometimes you've got to punch above your weight with things that you do. So that's how I sort of evolved up into the RSL.

But this year I'll be standing down for twelve months. I've told the President. I do get the guilts a bit because, as I say, I enjoy it so much, because one of my portfolios is the RSL Villas at Angle Park, which I enjoy immensely.

What do you do there?

I'm the RSO representative there and I go down and I chair the residents' meetings, I assist with their fêtes, with their welfare, and I'm the conduit between the management and the State board. The management is the James Brown Memorial Trust, who does a wonderful job – they've got Kalyra, another, down at McLaren Vale, another – they have the expertise to run the place; we don't. But I've been the conduit between the two, so I've learnt a lot in that time. And we do commemorative services down there, because the RSL Villas is just not dollar-driven; it's welfare-driven. Because we don't have shareholders whereby the money's going to go out to the stakeholders, if you like; the money goes back into welfare. It's got to be dollar-driven, it's got to have a profit, so we're profit-driven, but we can put that money back into it. And as a result of that, we will dedicate a new, two-million-dollar extension to that within the next three or four weeks.

That's wonderful.

Yes. There's fourteen dementia beds there and it is absolutely beautiful the way it's come together.

Congratulations.

Nothing but the best for them down there. So that's what I really enjoy.

Oh, yes.

And there's cadets, and there's administration, and there's our publication *The Signal*, and there's the rules revision, and there are other (laughs) things that you get, and the phone goes off in the middle of the night. And then you've got a few old narcissistic fellows out there who want it done their way, so you've got to go and straighten them out. (laughter) So I've got to go and put out bushfires as well. You know, some people can't get their way in committees they stamp their feet still.

Oh, dear. So it requires a lot of skill.

It does. And I'm fortunate that I had these thirty years in real estate so I've cut across the board of a lot of people, and you can recognise the angry buyers and the demanding buyers and so you can sort of do a little bit of a shifty across to people and you develop a very good understanding of people, how they react.

Yes.

Some people you can never satisfy and some people are grateful. (laughs) Real interesting.

Yes, I bet it is.

'I appreciate how you feel; I feel the same way myself', you know, learn those sort of techniques. (laughter)

You've got a few strategies up your sleeve, by the sounds of it. So how do you – can you talk to me a little bit about the Vietnam Veterans' Association and the RSL? Like there has been quite a conflict between those two organisations from time to time. Is that now coming together?

Yes. They didn't get off to a really good start because there was a difference of attitude over the Agent Orange and the chemical issue way back in the '80s, and I think there was a stoic attitude from the RSL – not so much the RSL, but from individuals within the RSL. 'We didn't get that and why do you want that?' So the VVA then said, 'Well, if you're not prepared to deal with it we'll go out and fight that.' And at the end of the day, Agent Orange was found guilty and the VVA's

done a wonderful job in that regard. So there was a real gap between the RSL and the VVA. And then we hear stories of people that have gone to seek membership of the RSL and have been ostracised by secretaries that perhaps didn't understand the situation and that created a lot of ill feeling. Like, 'What sort of a war were you in?' Just absolutely childish attitudes that got compounded.

Today, though, if I can come forward to today, you'll find that most of the Vietnam veterans are members of the RSL. So where the VVA was really a one-issue, it was a one-issue party, if you like, developed skills and have gone on and have done a wonderful job in pension and advocacy work and have taken on and fought the battle of PTSD, which is a wonderful thing – and that was never recognised by the World War II veterans because that was the old stoic thing again. I think they called it 'war neurosis' and 'shell shock' and all this type of thing, and gladly it's recognised now.

And we do hear people saying at the end of the day that the VVA perhaps should never have been there, that it all should have been the RSL; but so be it, that's the way it is. But I think it's great now that most of them are members of the RSL now. And you find now that, even at the State board in South Australia, the whole of the board now is post-World War II veterans, so it's moving on. Like Jock Statton, our president, is a Vietnam veteran, and all those who sit around the board are all Vietnam veterans in there and doing a sterling job.

But even the VVA's had its trouble, you know? Like, have you heard the VVF[5] come along and fellows that said, 'We don't like the way you're doing it and we're going to do it better than you'? So here we go again. So here's another ESO.

Yes. ESO is – – –?

Just a term for ex-service organisation.

Oh, yes, okay.

And there'll be more. But we do get these little groups that keep forming and forming and forming, and how much better would we be if we'd have all come under

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[5] VVF – Vietnam Veterans' Federation.

the one umbrella of the RSL? Because you know the old thing: 'United we stand, divided we fall.'

Yes, for sure. So is there any way that you can achieve that, is there any way constitutional that that could be achieved?

Not unless you want to get into threats. (laughter)

Okay, okay.

No, no – I say that in jest. I don't know whether that will happen or not. But the RSL is still the premier – I'm trying to think of the right words; is the top ESO in Australia, some two hundred thousand members Australia-wide. And then there's a multiplying effect on that because there's all the families in behind that as well. No, the RSL's pretty strong.

That's good. So since you became involved in 1990 it's become a very significant part of your life, by the sounds of it.

Almost intrusive. (laughs) Well, I know my wife says that.

Oh, does she?

Because it's fairly demanding. There are a hundred and fifty-three sub-branches in South Australia.

Is that right?

I have, I think at last count, about thirty to look after. So if I visited them twice a week there goes the year.

Yes.

And then you've got your own family life to do and music and my own hobbies and things. So we do do a little bit of this, you know, bring Mahomet to the mountain and not the mountain to Mahomet, so we do have meetings and what have you and sub-branch meetings and this, so we do get together. But it can be pretty demanding. I don't know how President Jock gets through it all sometimes, I really don't. His wife Miriam must be a wonderful, caring lady, (laughs) because I don't think he's ever home. But I would have at least fifteen major actions that I would have to do in a month. Now, that could be appointments or tasks that I'd have to do. It just seems

to work out – and sometimes more – but sometimes it works out every second day that you are tied up, that you can't go anywhere, you've got things to do. Because you're going to go to an appointment sometimes: there goes half a day. I went up to Mount Barker to assist with a meeting: well, that was a full-day job. By the time you get yourself ready, by the time you get up there, by the time everyone's had a crack at you and then you come home, you don't want to do anything else. (laughter) Like you're doing it all wrong.

Oh, dear!

'You can do it better.' Try and find the middle ground. All those things are – – –. But it is very demanding. Even within our sub-branches, really, to do it right I think a president really needs to be there four or five days a week to make sure it runs, because like in most clubs ten per cent turn up and two per cent do all the work, which is very, very hard sometimes. In the club atmosphere it's a case of 'Entertain me, feed me and clean up after me.'

Yes, that's a big thing.

But if you can build, in the RSL environment, a good ladies' auxiliary, good committee support and that, if you've got everyone doing a little bit, well then that makes it easier. But sometimes a lot of it lands on your shoulders to get it done.

But am I right in hearing you say in amongst all of that hard work that it's actually very rewarding for you?

Oh, absolutely, yes. (laughs) Just having a whinge. (laughter) My work at the Villas is so rewarding. It is just wonderful. You get to know all your residents down there and you get to sit and have some morning tea and have a yarn with them, so I'm making up for the sitting-on-the-veranda bit a bit now, later in life – maybe because I've got more time, the pressures aren't on you – and looking after their welfare is a wonderful reward, it really is.

That's good.

And different things that we do from time to time at the State board level to make sure the funds get channelled right, and we give support to people that are in necessitous needs, and we assist with funerals and things of that nature and look after

the families. It is excellent. Commemorative services, look after the memorabilia; there's lots of things you do.

So much that people in the general public don't realise, isn't it?

No, no.

So how do you think you could get that message out more?

I think things have improved in that we do have a radio program once a week, 5RPH, 1197 on the radio. That's once a fortnight. We have our own national paper; and of course the internet has flattened out the world and for us now we have a wonderful database and website now that people can access, you can have a look at all the memorial sites and memorials throughout South Australia that some people have put together, Wilf and Jackie, and there's lots of information, there's lots of historical recording in there now for students who want to find out the service history of the nation. I think that that's another rewarding thing that can be done. We have hospital visitations so that we can go out to visit veterans in the hospital. We have AFOF, which is Australian Forces Overseas Fund, where we send parcels to Afghanistan and Iraq, Timor and the Solomons, and I've missed places like – I think everyone's out of South Africa, although I'm not so certain about that. But certainly to the Middle East and all those places. I think there's a few people still in Uganda and places like that, keeping an eye on things.

Yes. It's a great story, isn't it? It's another story to be told, really, in its entirety.

And they're the sorts of things that we like to do. Like there was a lady hadn't seen her son's grave in Sydney, he'd come back ...., so we were able to fly her to Sydney and see it, which was great. And I know with the Indigenous servicemen now, finally – Vietnam veterans had to wait a long time, so we're catching up again – and the recognition for those that's happening at the moment is a wonderful thing to be done. On Anzac Day, one of our Aboriginal veterans stood out the front, held pride of place and went forward first before anyone else. So they're the things that we can do to perhaps avoid those gaps that were in the past.

It's happened between the Boer War and the First World War, the First World War and the Second World War, the Second World War and the Korean War: '*That*

wasn't a war.' I mean, really. The poor old Korean veterans didn't get the recognition.

No.

The Forgotten War. Then of course there was the Malaysian Emergencies and Borneo. Friends of mine were on the Indian–Pakistan border with the United Nations. You know, things all happen. So it goes on.

So it goes on indeed, yes. So why do you think telling your story is important?

I think in essence is the responsibility to take up support of veterans who come back into the community and to recognise that they may have changed and so as that we can give them that consoling support when they come out; and to know that they can join an ESO, an ex-service organisation, and gain some support as well, that there are people out there that will give you some assistance. I think that that's important, and I think it's very important that when our troops do go to war, whether it's war, whether it's peacekeeping or peacemaking, that we need to give them a lot of love and affection when they come home. I think that really summarises it: they need that. Because I know those in Uganda who had to stand, with the United Nations, had to stand inside the wire while people were getting hacked to death on the other side of the wire and couldn't do anything: how do you live with that? So don't forget the peacekeepers, don't forget the peacemakers, don't forget the armed forces; and don't forget to join the RSL. (laughter)

Okay! That seems like a good spot to finish. Thank you very, very, very much, Graham. Is there anything that you want to put in there?

No, just to thank you for the opportunity to come along and share this with you. I think this sort of thing is very, very important because – I mean, we're finding diaries today that have been hidden away from people who were in the First World War and Second World War, just coming to light now what they had to endure. And if in any way this has convinced people to be a hundred per cent against war, then if we're ever involved, be a hundred per cent for it.

Yes – well, for the troops, is what you're saying.

For the troops, yeah – not the pollies. We'll give them a run. (laughter)

Okay. Thank you.

Okay, all right.

Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW.