RON FRANKUM: This is Ron Frankum conducting an oral history interview with Kevin Bovill on the 10th of May, year 2000 at approximately nine a.m. in the Special Collections Library Interview room. Mr. Bovill, if you would, start with giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself; when and where you were born, where you went to school, and then we’ll talk about your training and your preparations for Vietnam and your experiences during the Vietnam war.

KEVIN BOVILL: Okay, fine. I was born on the 8th of September, 1946 in Christchurch, New Zealand, the oldest of four children; myself and three sisters. I went to school at the local priming school, I went to high school at the local high school, and subsequently went from high school directly into the New Zealand Army as a regular force cadet entry. I enlisted on the 11th of January, 1963. I served in the New Zealand Army until January…what was it, I can’t remember…1968. During that period I served in New Zealand infantry battalion, 1st Battalion Royal New Zealand Infantry. I was posted, did my initial recruit training center at the New Zealand camp in Walleroo which is their equivalent of Camp Pendleton, I guess…

RF: Right.

KB: …for all recruit training that occurred. I posted with battalion which was then [?] just south of the city of [Malacca] in Malaysia. The unit then formed part of the 28th Commonwealth brigade which was a Southeast Asia strategically served
brigade. I arrived…the unit had, the previous year in 1965, they had deployed operations in Borneo against the Indonesians. I went immediately into a training cycle which was to prepare us for a second tour in Borneo. We went to Borneo in 1966. Things had quieted down considerably, however. We occupied a stretch of the border in the 1st division coming under the command of west brigade brigadier chain and that tour was approximately six months. A peace negotiation was signed in August and we returned to Tirandac in September to be greeted with the news that there would be a commitment to Vietnam the following year. April of…we were advised around about March. The battalion who was going it was a rifle company plus supporting elements. That entitled them about 180 strong contingent. This was not as picked a company when it came under command of 1st Australian task force which would be based at Nui Det in Phuc Thuy Province since 1966. They said that was the expanded unit from the original striking commitment to the 173rd at Bin Hua which was an infantry battalion and the New Zealand Army at that time had committed a field battery of 105s. We arrived in Vietnam from Singapore aboard a C-130 Hercules into TSN. We moved from TSN by C-123 up to the task force. Was that correct? No, that was the 2nd or 3rd tour, wrong.. We arrived in fact in Vung Tau from Singapore to Vung Tau. That trip they trucked from Vung Tau up to the task force. It was a relatively short distance.

RF: You were stationed in Baria at that point?

KB: Just outside of Baria. Baria was the provincial capital for province. That was sort of just south, it was about three miles south of the task force base. The nearest local village was Wha Long which was a festering Wah Long of VC activity so we gathered. In fact, Wah Long was the source of a number of tunnels that had been started to try and probe to task force perimeter.

RF: Those were the red rats?

KB: Well, their nickname in Vietnam was which was big red rat derived from the fact that equipment had a red kangaroo stenciled on the side, so that’s where that one came from. New Zealand Army, they line them up, Vietnamese, but New Zealand contingent had the equipment which was a white kini which confused the US people that had to deal with us because they called us the kay one whiskey one. That was it. That was 1967, that was a six month tour because at that state
of the game we were at the end of a two year overseas posting. So the previous year
we’d been in Tirandac by the time we went back to [?] in December of 1967 after a paid,
relatively uneventful tour, that one. Phuc Thuy Province was relatively quiet at that
stage. What had happened the previous year was the major battle at Long Tan where six
Delta Company, 6th RAI engage 275 regiment plus D445, a local force battalion. It was
a fairly heavy engagement. 18TH AUSTRALIAN KIA. I estimated fairly heavy
casualties, in the hundreds, for the VC. They were then reluctant to return to the province
when they saw no profit in with us, tangling with us again. Initial contact had been by a
company doing a clearing patrol and they actually bumped the 275 regiment forming up
for an assault on the task force so we actually hit them in their own LUP. It was a pretty
confusing sort of a battle, that one. Subsequently we patrolled through that area and sort
of the remnant of it and there was a lot of battlefield debris thereafter. So consequently,
The Australians erected a memorial at that site in the [?] which is, well, the replica is still
on location. In ’75 the original cross was taken down and moved into [?] a local
Vietnamese museum and subsequently we reerected a replica. However, that area rubber,
having a sort of set life was then old, mature rubber subsequently fell and they have that
area sort of being replanted in young rubber so it hasn’t got the same character as it did
during the battle. For that tour we picked a company. We were replaced by Victor II. At
this stage the New Zealand government increased its commitment to Vietnam and we
then actually formed basically half of an Australian battalion. We had two rifle
companies, support elements, assault pioneers, mortars, SIGs in the command situation
[?] position in situations like that. So that was it. In 1968 I returned to New Zealand. It
was a bit unsettled when I was [?] and by 1969 I was back in, the beginning of 1969, I
was back in the Australian Army, or in the Australian Army. I went to the Special Forces
unit, The SAs, went through selection, and as a consequence of my previous experience I
was a reinforcement backup to the 3rd squadron which was then deployed in the task
force in October ’69. So that was a completely different tour. The role of my unit at that
stage was medium to long range, well technically medium range reconnaissance for the
task force from ten to 50 kilometers.

RF: Infantry [?]?
KB: Yeah, mainly Phuc Thuy province. Occasionally four rows over into Bin Thuy, [?], Bin Hua; certainly in Tet ’68 into I’d missed that we were pretty heavily involved in Bin Hua, but generally restricted to the Australian tactical area of operations. Most of the time we conducted as a five-man team. We inserted usually by helicopter, and we would have an insertion group of two gunships. The slick ship was carrying the patrol, a spare slick ship in case something happened, and the overall commander, the insertion commander, flying another Iroquois. Those patrols normally went in around about 16:00 to 17:00 in the afternoon getting the deck to a half an hour to an hour of light daylight left. The insertion team would hold off two to five clicks away. Once they got the okay from us that the area was quiet and there were no problems they’d go home for the night and leave us to it. Now depending on the season, they would then come back, if it was dry season, five to seven days later and pick us up. If it was the wet season it would be seven to 14 days later. Obviously from the time that the missions were primarily US long range lightweight rations, so the water was a major factor. Dry season, I would say, that 30% of the total weight we would be carrying, which was pretty heavy, we had some heavy loads, would have been water in the dry season. In the wet season we didn’t’ have to worry so much. It was a little more available.

RF: Right.

KB: Although certain areas, God knows what we were drinking after. Operation Ranchhand had been through and had sprayed the defoliants over those areas. We were never too keen on defoliated areas; one we had no cover, two it was a real [?] sort of a situation to move through, and although we didn’t know at the time what obviously the water supply had been pretty well dosed.

RF: I wonder if we could talk about your first tour?

KB: First tour, yeah.

RF: What were your main responsibilities…

KB: During the first tour I was within the battalion organization in support company was a specialist platoon known as the Assault Pioneer platoon provided mine clearance, fortification, [?] a mini engineer group available to the battalion commander to carry out those sort of tasks. Obviously in our training prior to going to Vietnam and in part is a consequence of casualties occurred in Borneo. A high emphasis
was based on mine warfare training so we done quite a lot of that. Been down to the
British engineer school at Cluang and that brought us to a pretty intense type of, as far as
say their schools and resources were available to us. So we, and of course we would get
a good degree of reports coming back from Vietnam as to what was going on and the
mine warfare aspect mines, booby traps of particular importance to us and believe it or
not, our first KIA during that tour was a mine incident. Unfortunately, one of the major
strategic disasters committed by the Australian task force was to lay or bury a minefield
to try and break up Phuc Thui Province and interdict the movement of supply. That was
a joke. The concept was I guess okay, but the principle behind the covering of a
minefield by foreign observation, we relied on the south Vietnamese ARVN to do it.
Well that was a joke. Consequently, on a number of occasions when we’d do a patrol
along the perimeter wire of the minefield we’d find locations where VC had backed up an
ox cart and thrown a couple of ropes over the holes and pulled it away and gone through
and lifted the whole series of M-16s. well a number were laid with anti lift devices
underneath which was an M-26 grenade and a pressure released switch. That was
partially successful, the evidence by the shredded clothing and body particles hanging on
the wire, but it also provided them with a pretty ready supply of mines which they then
proceeded to relay right throughout the province and particularly in the Long Hoi
mountains which the Australian task force had tried on a number of occasions to go into
and clean out. Horrendously large caves and it had been a traditional part of war for
many hundreds of years. We were certainly unsuccessful in actually dominating the
Long Hoi’s and setting up the cave complexes and as a result took pretty heavy casualties
[?]. Fortunately, that was one part of the RAI that I never had to put foot into, although
during the 1967 tour the battalion, the task force had a fire support base. They put them
in a fire support base outside the task force itself Dap Do known as the horseshoe [?] in
the shape of a horseshoe. We actually hard as rock to dig into. We dug it in [?] engineer
[?] a little bit of [?] and then the [?] 104 is [?] so it would then fire back in support of task
force.

RF: [?]

KB: Yeah, the 161 battery formed part of 12 [?] regiment and the
regiment had three factories so there would always be tourist [?] and New Zealand [?].
Yeah, 161 just coincidentally had a US presidential citation from [?] Korea along with [?]
so it was a long established sort of relationship with the US. Then they provided us some
pretty good fire support on a number of occasions. In fact, in 1967 they ceremoniously
fired from the horseshoe they had one million [?] in south Vietnam.

RF: Did you find that the training that you received when you were in [?]
and perhaps the strategy and tactics of the Malaysian campaign helped?

KB: Oh yeah, yeah.

RF: [?]

KB: See, one of the major differences in approach between the
Australians approach and the US approach was that we believed that we understood the
nature of counter-revolution warfare and operations in close country rain forest, jungle, a
lot better than the US. Certainly because we had had World War II, southwest pacific,
New Guinea, we’d been in [?] emergency, we’ve been in confrontation, and Vietnam was
just the next step to take. So therefore, we believed that we understood the nature of
counter-revolution warfare better than the US. We…the New Zealand Army at that stage
right through the Vietnam conflict was completely volunteer Army, so everybody was
there because they wanted to be pretty much. The Australians, in 1965, introduced
constriction. They had a policy that nobody would be sent to Vietnam with less than nine
months training in Australia and that was pretty well where they had exceptions. So that
meant that the youngest and newest soldiers arriving in country was generally better
prepared as far as preparation can go for war, than the US counterparts. The real high
reality was that it was the only war we had. We could not afford to take casualties on the
scale that the US was taking. Simply, we didn’t have [?]; both governments, but the
Australian is the only government that would have just pulled us out if we had taken
casualties anywhere near this scale. So we have to be a lot more circumspect of that [?]
business and that meant that we did more hunting, for want of a better term, of the
enemy, rather than going full strength into an area and letting the enemy come to them.
The US will seem to get out there, go into the fire support base, and say, “Okay, we’re
here, come and get us,” sort of thing. That’s the generalization; it didn’t’ always happen
like that. But generally we spent a lot of time in close reconnaissance finding out where
they were, what they were up to, and then we made the decision on where we were going
to hit them. Probably 90% of the contacts were self-initiated whereas in the US situation
usually the NVA or VC initiate. So because we tend to fall on the ground of our own
choice, we’ve done the pretty thorough reconnaissance, we tended to not take as many
casualties which was sort of one of the aims of the game. We did a lot more lurking in
the jungle, so to speak. In fact, my SAS, my UUA unit in ’69, ’70, ’71, was given the
nickname by the Vietnamese, “Phantoms of the Jungle,” simply because we could get in
undetected, we could hit them, and we were out, and they just never knew we were there.
Obviously any unit the size of a rifle company moving through the jungle is going to make a
certain degree of noise, but because we emphasized silence and security within the units
at that level, we were able to move with less degree of detection by the enemy. I guess
we were prepared to sweat it more, too, than the US. We would cover distances in APCs
and choppers, but then our final approaches which would be anything from one to ten
kilometers because we’d always be in on foot whereas the US would do a vertical
envelopment. That dropped the choppers floating on the top and they’d be in a firefight
with all sorts of crap going on before they hit the deck whereas we, we would probably
select an LZ that is secure, try to get in, and then move in and encircle the enemy, put our
blocking forces and then hit him. That tended to mean that quite often we took on a little
bit more than what we could handle, which usually meant calling for help which was air
support and the US was always generous with air support plus our own artillery. The
task force, from time to time, had in support a US battery 155 SPs, 8” SPS and 175s so
yeah, quite a lot of heavy support from the US in that sense. But rather than sort of
heavily prep an area before we went in, you create the problem of vegetation being
chopped down and blown apart by artillery and try to move through it. We preferred to
move through basically unscathed country and then if need be, then we got our support
in, so we were relatively successful as far as the tactics were successful. We never had
the numbers to make a big impression over all and we just couldn’t afford to be there on
the same scale as the US, it was just an impossibility.

RF: Do you think that the problems themselves was too large of a tactical
area to…
KB: No, I don’t. No. I think by the time we got our 3rd battalion…see, the task force with two battalions up until 1969 I think and we finally got our third battalion.

RF: A little early ’68 actually I believe.

KB: ’68?

RF: …’67.

KB: Now, we were pretty headstrong and I know anecdotally that was some concern to General Westmoreland. At the time we could only get a relatively small number of companies actually deployed because of the way things were going and that was just a change of one situation. But, because we had a base with only two battalions in it, then at least one rifle company would have to be left for defense of the base which left battalion commander out there with three at any one time even though he had two battalions deployed, we would only have six rifle companies which really is quite not enough. When we got the 3rd battalion in, that balanced change and we were able to do a bit more. We tried to provide our own helicopter support. We had a squadron of Iroquois. That, from time to time, wasn’t’ enough and we would then have to get a newest aviation company particularly for battalion lifts if we were going somewhere and wanted to get the whole battalion in one hit. We’d frequently borrow US aviation assets. But yeah, I think that the area that we operated in we dominated, certainly from the long range-patrolling prospect. But then, from time to time, political limitations would come down on commanders which prevented them from doing what they would have wanted to have done, and certainly had to let opportunities go. There were occasions when we’d have a local force battalion bottled up and were really ready to do a job on them and we would tell them no, we’d taken too many casualties for that period, and let them go. So from that point of view, we were particularly less effective than what we really could have been.

RF: Did you find then that there were a number of political restraints on the forces for that very reason?

KB: Well, see, at my level those restraints didn’t’ become apparent until well after the event. But certainly on my second and subsequent tours, talking with people that I meant later on and they say, “Oh, we’ve responded to some of your
information and by the time we got there there was nothing there,” but I personally go
back and find that what the guy’s talking about is that the information was in fact 12
months old. Yet it had been presented to them in the briefing that my unit had found this
located, possibly occupied; yes it was, 12 months prior and we did it, but by the time it
was handed on to them for response, the trail was long cold. So that was one of the
limitations, that reconnaissance patrol had produced could not necessarily be after the
bomb straight away. But it also provided the task force commander with…he knew
where they were or where they weren’t and I must say that probably 70% of the time they
told you where the enemy wasn’t, but it was just as useful. It can’t be just as useful.

RF: How did you find the relationship between the New
Zealander/Australians? What did the US troops when you had interactions…

KB: Okay, it was very much big brother/little brother relationship
between Australia and New Zealand and of course Uncle Sam is always being the rich
uncle. Very much so, I mean getting off at the airport in Saigon, it was just awesome to
see just what was…just the sheer mass of material that the US military had put in. There
would not be a day go by we weren’t sort of [?], just to see a massive amount. In fact,
even when I went back in ’93 it was still evident.

RF: Right, even today, still…

KB: Three things that were still remnants of the US presence: One is
every six ton truck that the US produced and put into Vietnam is still running, even
though the radiators were out. They have a 44-gallon drum on top. The other one is that
all the, I think all the little one tons or 30 hundred weights are still running. Their
engines crapped out but they still go and they sort of provide the agricultural pump and
are still driven. That was the second one, they’re all still running around, and I think you
guys call it marsden planking, PSP, perforated steel planks, and I don’t know how many
millions of feet of that stuff ever went into Vietnam and has now been hauled out and has
about a million and one uses. That was obvious.

RF: Yes.

KB: Certainly credit to the US automobile industry that in 1993 they’re
six by six five-ton trucks are still running. I guess they’ve never had an oil change.
RF: You mentioned the big brother/little brother relationship between New Zealand and Australia.

KB: Now this is a thing that goes back in the history of both nations. We first served together [?]. Australian state troops came to New Zealand fighting in what was called the Maori Wars and received good land grants for the determination of their service and stayed on in New Zealand. Once Australia and New Zealand became independent countries, the first time that they served together was World War I, the Gallipoli landings in 1915 and from there the Anzac was started his own Army corps. So World War I, World War II, Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam, Australia and New Zealand troops had served together. New Zealand after World War II, New Zealand’s commitment was too small to stand alone, certainly Malaya had served under Brit or rotated command under Brits with Australia, Borneo are the same. Korea, part of the United Nations, but generally with an Australian who is the 28th Commonwealth Brigade; Canadian, Australian, Britain, New Zealand brigade. So, we’ve always been with the Australians. Vietnam was the first time that the units were integrated under a command system under Australian command, so in New Zealand, a commitment which at any one time at its peak 800 guys would all be under Australian command.

RF: One of the arguments that’s out there, certainly in Australia, but for some is that New Zealand would not have gone to Vietnam had it not been for Australia. Now I don’t know, at your time when you served, was that a feeling that anyone in your unit had?

KB: No, not really. When we went in 1967, the official line given by the commanding officer was part of a SEATO agreement. Now that was true, but then at that stage SEATO was sort of fading away anyway. So that was partly true. I think the situation was that New Zealand would have been reluctant to go without Australia, but probably would have made a commitment but in a different form. I tended to think our medical services team would have gone, probably some engineering and support, but certainly not the combat commitment had Australia not been there. But, both Australia and New Zealand governments, I believe their basic reason for committing was to gain brownie points with the US. At that stage, the UK and traditional markets in the UK were being shut off. This is for our agriculture products [?] because of Britain joining the
European economic community. This meant that Australia and New Zealand both lost
massive traditional markets. We then had to look for somewhere else in the world to sell
our beef, our butter, our mutton and lamb. So, we just had to focus on the US. That was
it.

RF: When you went to Vietnam, you were obviously part of the military, what did you feel your reason for being there was?

KB: Okay, there was not a question about it. I was in the Army, I had a
duty to serve, my unit was going, and I went with my unit, and that was it, bottom line.
A little bit more difficult for Australian conscripts, the national servicemen, because
obviously a disruption to their lives, but generally they served damn well; really, really
well, and they sort of really had the same responsibilities to the unit, their mates, the jobs
of the guys that they soldiered with came first and foremost. Certainly the higher-level
evaluations and political situations throughout Vietnam, the domino theory and the threat
of international communism was sort of a nebulous idea out there somewhere. We
certainly subscribed I guess, not unquestioningly, but we subscribed because we didn’t
know any better to the domino theory simply because both Australia and New Zealand
during the Malayan emergency the opposition had been a communist guerilla group, and
Korea the same thing. So you know, even though it probably solves a little, we
understood that the threat was communism and certainly we probably subscribed to the
domino theory.

RF: In 1967, and I’ll ask that question again on your second tour around
after the Tet Offensive, could you describe the general feeling of yourself and your mates
in terms of whether or not you were truly being successful in the province; to what degree
to which you were successful?

KB: I think we were generally optimistic, generally optimistic that the
war was winnable. Certainly in ’67 there was I think Khe Sanh some pretty heavy battles
going on up on the DMZ, 881, Khe Sanh, and the A Shau Valley, and we tended to think
that, well, the US could not lose a war. It was inconceivable that the military might of
the US could ever be defeated, so we saw it with eyes full of hope and pretty optimistic
that yes, and then certainly within Phuc Thuy Province after [?] ’66 we dominated the
province and we won our little patch of dirt. [?] whether or not we felt confident about
the south Vietnamese government. I tended to think not. One of the sort of…the first
impressions of Vietnam arrived in coming up by truck from Vung Tau from task force
was the sheer numbers of adult males, south Vietnamese males of military age, zipping
around on little Honda motor scooters. Their country is at war and what are they doing?
Why weren’t they in uniform and fighting it? That was our first impression, and then we
tended to realize that the underlying political situation in south Vietnam was more
complex than we would have ever thought. To put it quite simply, every Vietnamese
knew which side we were on. We didn’t’ know which side any Vietnamese was on.
Then we came to the realization that possibly even the Chu Hois that were our Kit Carson
 Scouts could have been double agents in one form or another, that within one Vietnamese
family there could have been children on one side, parents on the other, or even brothers
and sisters on different sides. So, once we came to understand the complexity of the
political situation in south Vietnam, then we realized, and of course understanding the
sheer level of corruption that existed in south Vietnam, we didn’t realize that while the
US will never lose a war, but is it winnable? Of course history shows what happened
there.

RF: So you spent six months on your first tour in Vietnam and then you
returned to New Zealand?
KB: Returned to New Zealand and I took my discharge from the New
Zealand Army in January, or February of 1968. I went over to Australia common thing,
rather Canadians come into the States looking for work. I worked in Australia and then I
enlisted in the Australian Army nine months later.
RF: How was the feeling, both in New Zealand and Australia, of the war
itself? I know there was a growing dissident movement in Australia.
KB: Yeah, yeah.
RF: What was it like in New Zealand?
KB: Same thing. We came home basically unwelcome, unannounced,
under cover of darkness, potential under cover of darkness, our aircraft landed at night, so
we were dispersed. No bugles, no fanfare, no trumpet, no welcome. The anti-war
movement was growing and strengthen in both countries as it did in the US. The same
group that formed the annual protest movement in the US formed it in Australia and in
New Zealand. That was the students, the left wing academics, the socialists, the Pinkos.
There was very few anti-war protestors that did the intellectual hard yards to look at the
war, asses the situation, and come to the conclusion that it was an immoral war. There
were very few that ever did that. There were just simply the bandwagon merchants that
hopped on it looking for a cause, their own drums to beat. Certainly in Australia, not in
New Zealand, there was those elements of, “I’m too good to go and die, maybe someone
else can go in my place,” the coward factor.

RF: The same phenomenon that occurred here in the US.

KB: Same as in the US, yes, and of course your current president would
be one of the examples of that. Only in the US do veterans sleep in cardboard boxes and
a draft dodger sleeps in the White House. I saw that on the back of a vehicle in the Cav
pack which I thought was very accurate. New Zealand didn’t have the draft-dodging
situation because every New Zealand soldier was a volunteer. But, certainly a lot of
political pressure was in both countries. Australia had had a long period under a liberal
government. It was in fact time to change just for the political health of the nation. But,
we didn’t need a subversive, almost treacherous, traitorous anti-war movement. The
political machinery was there for democracy to speak, and through the elections the will
of the people will have been made known without subverting the morale of Australian
troops committed on active service even. There was no doubt that the anti-war movement
provided an incentive to the North Vietnamese to keep taking the punishment that was
being inflicted because they understood the power of it and ultimately it worked to their
advantage. It was certainly a factor in their victory. So yes, even today we don’t hold a
lot personally and generally throughout the veteran community. We don’t hold the anti-
war protest movements in particularly high regard and certainly the political figures in
Australia and to a far less extent in New Zealand, but certainly political figures in
Australia, on the left, I will be for one dancing on their graves when they go. Certainly
no love or respect or regard; total and utter contempt.

RF: Did you experience personally this [?] when you came back in New
Zealand?
KB: Yes, I have one example. In New Zealand we were in a hotel in Wellington. We had come back and in fact we had been down to the hospital and got our day release, smuggled out one of our guys a couple of months earlier, been wounded, pretty badly shot up and we were sitting at a table having a few drinks and a talk and some young predominantly female groups that were sitting away started to make adverse comments about the war and the chap that actually just sort of sat there and shut up. Anyway, he’d had enough of it, he stood up and took his shirt off, and he’d been opened up front and rear on the chest. The whole chest cavity had been laid open for the [?] and he said, “Yes, ladies, well this is what I’ve got to show you. War is hell.” He put his shirt back on and the ladies just shut up and they got up and left. But, certainly not to the extent that it happened in Australia. I think [?] I came home probably not long before LBJs tour and [?] blood [?] so after that they stopped parading battalions through cities and [?] pretty quietly. So it wasn’t to the same extent in New Zealand, either. New Zealand’s just more apathetic, really. Talking to people, the average sort of citizen on the street in New Zealand never heard of Vietnam, didn’t know where it was, didn’t really want to know where it was. It was all too much. Australia was more politically aware, equally as geographically ignorant, and of course still are today, still are today, but certainly it was a more aggressive vocal anti-war movement going on in Australia certainly because of the conscription factor. Not, as I said before, not because they’d done the intellectual “hard yards” and understood the whole situation, was simply a band wagon, whip up a cause, [?] the campus out there protesting one way or the other, so yeah, we had [?].

RF: When you traveled to Australia, its not uncommon to search for work and ended up back in the Army?

KB: Yes, within eight or nine months [?] in fact it was probably a couple of factors, certainly Tet, and then battle of Bun Ba reading the reports in the newspapers and whatnot. I sort of said, “Do I want to be doing this for the rest of my life?” or do I want to be back in with the rest of the guys. So I’d rather go back to New Zealand and reenlist. I enlisted in Australia, and then it was sort of an abbreviated area through there [?] initial employment training and I went for Special Forces selection. I was past the selection [?] one of 69 selection course for SAs and was back in Vietnam by October that
year, 1969. So I came home in December 1970 and was back in Vietnam in October ’69.

I must have been a slow learner.

RF: Did you go through the jungle training school?

KB: No, the SAs, prior to deployment in Vietnam, had a fairly strenuous exercise in New Guinea, and because of that they exempted it, and said that was the equivalent to going to the jungle warfare school. However, I also missed out on that one because of my previous tours I was sent out as a reinforcement to three squadron who had lost a couple of guys, not KIA, but combat casualties and illness and there was about four or five of us at the time who were strained off from one squadron up to three as reinforcements.

RF: In October of ’69, how was the situation in the province?

KB: Well, [?] probably a pretty dramatic change. D445 which was a local force battalion, had come back into the province. 275 NVA regiment had come back in as well and was hammered at Bin Ba in late ’68. They were out of the province [?] had split, had been reinforced from the NVA because there was, at that stage, there was very little recruiting, VC recruiting. They were scraping the bottom of the barrel, and local force units, VC units, were relying on reinforcements from the north, so D445 split and formed D440 and D445 of which we were in eternal pursuit. We pinned them down here and there and then of course our old favorite 66th Rear Services group which we just loved to run across the Chau Doc District support unit. That was sort of sad. They had a very low standard of military skills and of course we used to ball them over pretty regularly. But, by the time I deployed in ’69, D445 and 275 to a certain extent had started to develop drills to counter our tactics and we then started to get aggressive reaction to our ambushing. Our most effective weapon/tactic was ambushing. They then started to travel in larger numbers to have a well rehearsed anti ambush drill that they hadn’t had in the past, so that made it a little bit harder for us to operate, so we were less inclined to get out and do body searches and hang around in the ambush area. I mean, not hang around, but we would certainly go into the killing zone, search the bodies, and get any information we could. By ’69 we were starting to bolt out, quick smart. If we suspected there was a movement, a reaction to us. A lot of the time we were still able to get out and do body searches and that sort of thing, but increasingly we were getting hit
from the flank by the reaction group. So, the ball game had changed. We no longer
dominated to the same extent I guess you would say. We still dominated. It was our
backyard and we ran it, but it was coming back in. Now through 1970 things sort of
swung back a little bit the other way and it tended to stay out and I tended to think once
they got wind of our potential withdrawal in the Vietnamization program because they
would have had the intelligence on it, they decided basically that it wasn’t a worthwhile
chase. They knew we were going home. Its not worthwhile engaging us and taking
unnecessary casualties. They would just stay where they are, consolidate their going, and
leave us until we went of our own accord. So that then certainly by my third tour,
certainly by ’71, that was pretty much in place. We still made our patrols. We’d
certainly be locating the signs of their activities and reporting, but generally they were
left alone. They left us alone, we left them alone unless there was an accidental
engagement, in which there were a couple. They went looking for us, and we knew
where they were, and they in fact were out on a deer hunting activity. They were
advancing in an open vee with dogs flushing game looking for something to eat, you see,
and they flushed us much to their shock and horror. But yes, certainly the turn around
through 1970 and on into 1971 until the final withdrawal, a different ball game, a
different attitude, a different approach from ’67 and ’68. ’68 was probably the peak year
for contact with the enemy mainly because of Tet and the follow up to it. One of the
battle of Bin Ba which was Route 15, he made one of the attempts successful, too, to take
over Swan Loc. in that province there were two large towns just over the border and Bin
Hua was Swan Loc which was 199 Blackhorse, the US based and way out to the east of
Phuc Thuy was Swan Loc. I think I’ve got that right. It could be the other way around,
but I always get confused, and he took that, overran the ARVN outpost out there, set up
an ambush, and he drew out task force and APC reaction group so they bolted down the
one and only road at midnight to get out there. The ARVN outpost, we had advisors out
there, and they radioed in that we were being overrun sort of thing. There was a bit of a
stiff stash out there. We saved the town when Charlie had run through it, disarmed them,
took all the ARVN off, left a few widows behind, so yeah, that was ’68. It sort of given
us a couple of reminders that it was still around, but as I said, by ’70-’71 it was pretty
quiet in the province and we were just hitting Chau Doc’s and the 84th Rear group.
Certainly the task force in 1970 did a big for them, a long duration armored sweep so we took a battalion group, APCs and tanks and did a great sweep right around the province, right out into Long Can, almost over to Ham Tan, and [SAS] at the time, we got the job of following it up and seeing who’s going to come in behind it; a couple of interesting sort of activities that went on then.

RF: Did you get a sense of a change in the morale of the troops as they knew as a task force the 1st battalion left and…

KB: Once Vietnamization became a fact, a reality to us, we developed within our own Australian Army training teams, what we called MAT teams, mobile advisory teams, we then established within the task force where our 3rd battalion had been and hadn’t’ been replaced the training camp for Vietnamese. So yeah, there was a change in attitudes. Prior to that the Vietnamese, very few Vietnamese ever came into task force; very few. The ones that did were interpreters and the kitchen scouts and they stayed there, weren’t able to get back out and pass on intelligence if they were NVA agents. So from that time that 3rd battalion of the task force wasn’t’ replaced and we brought the ARVN in for training, yeah, the realization was, “Who wants to be the last man to die in Vietnam?” Well certainly not me sort of thing. So that was it. By the same token, it was at a time when the US Army had massive morale problems and we had some of our own, but nowhere near to the same extent. You might recall that within the US Army there was the racial problem, there was the fragging situations, there was the massive scandal in the PX. Morale probably was at the worst possibly in the entire history of the US Army; possibly going back even to the Civil War. There’s probably not a period in its history where the US Army had so many problems, as big as what it was, had so many problems as morale was so low. That obviously infected us to a certain extent. We certainly managed to maintain a higher level of morale. We certainly never had the racial problems. We had, in fact, a couple of fragging incidents which probably start by alcohol more than anything else. We didn’t’ have the drug problem. I can never recall one incidence of dope smoking and that was it. We maintained what we would conceitedly say was a higher level of professionalism so that when we came out of Vietnam, we came out in better shape than what the US did when it came out.
RF: I wonder if we can go back and I mentioned a little bit about the mission of the SAS, but I wonder if you could go back and provide some more detail into…

KB: Okay.

RF: There’s not a typical mission, I know, but perhaps…

KB: Yeah, basically the background on SAS was it was raised in North Africa in 1941 to take out enemy aircraft on the ground, but then developed on from there. The parent unit is in the UK. Australia and New Zealand developed their own with similar roles and tasks. Our role was generally long range reconnaissance. In Vietnam, we didn’t actually operate in what we would term the long range, you know, 50 to 300 miles behind enemy lines, and that didn’t’ happen. So, we were basically a medium range reconnaissance. We had, first of all, a reconnaissance patrol, a reconnaissance mission. If something had been sighted on by air or by intelligence coming in, we would then deploy a reconnaissance patrol to check it out; duration, five-seven days. The AO would be something like six grid squares with a barrier over one grid square, a barrier around it for a no fire zone. Then we started recce ambush. We would go in, conduct a reconnaissance, if we found anything worthwhile, we would ambush it. Then the 3rd sort of mission would be an ambush. Alright, say acting on information previously received from whatever source. An ambush sight was pre selected. We would go in, check it out, find the most suitable sight within the area, and ambush for five to seven days. So recce ambush, hitting targets of opportunity or specifically ambush. A few of the odd ones that came up were bomb damage assessment on specific sort of things, aircraft recovery, [?] aircraft recovery, aircraft destruction after it had gone down, they’d put us in pack explosives around it and blow it, and on one patrol we even got the job of going down and checking a beached trawler. The Air Force [?] just to back track a little bit, each morning around first light around the province area O-1 would do a flight or we had the polatus porter. We’d do a [?] around the province and [?] a trawler beached. Obviously it had come in at high tide during the night, was off loading stuff for Charlie, usually weapons didn’t’ get itself off in time, so the pair of helicopter gunships went out and had target practice on it and we were five kilometers away on a reconnaissance patrol and we got a message to deploy and go have a look at
this thing because by that time Charlie was long gone but his foot prints were evidence 
that his activities were still there, so we knew that it was probably all on his way back to 
his base area in the Nui Bay Mountains which was in the northeast, northeast of the AO. 
We’d been in there a number of occasions. We’d cleaned out a big hospital complex up 
there. 275 used to come down and use that as a base area sort of kicked down from 
further north. We knew that area pretty well. [?] and the [?], we knew that area pretty 
well and we knew that’s where [?] finish up. That was the general sort of range of our 
missions.

RF: You mentioned you’d be inserted via helicopter on the ambush 
missions?

KB: Pretty much. 90% of insertions were by helicopter. A few were by 
APC. on a very occasion it would be other means. We went in by destroyer once and we 
did operation on Long Son Island which was just off Vung Tau and the local VC had 
been using Long Son to rocket Vung Tau, making nuisances of themselves, so we in fact 
were taken down below Ba Ria close down inside APCs. Round about midnight we 
hopped in, blew up zodiac inflatable craft, threw them in the water, threw themselves in, 
the guys came back, all done under cover of darkness and we proceeded to creep around 
Long Son for seven days. Found all the evidence of where he was, got shot up by an 
ARVN outpost and came over and said, “[?]”. That one there…but they were the 
exceptions. The general rule was the helicopter insertion and we hated bloody APC 
insertions because we’d be closed down [?] bombs and you’d finish up seasick and [?] 
other end [?] got to get out of it.

RF: I wonder if you could maybe just talk in some more description terms 
of the helicopter insertions? In a sense, I’m interested also in your thoughts and your 
comrade’s thoughts, too, as you were going into these.

KB: The basic procedure would be the CO [?] would receive a sort of 
series of AO’s to be checked out from the task force ops. He would then brief the patrol 
commander on what he wanted. A visual reconnaissance of the AO would then be 
conducted, usually by fixed wing, a 0-1 or in their case a [?]. the patrol commander and 
[?] would go out. We would then select AO’s, take photographs, look at the [?] looking 
for [?] where we’d go in potential sources of water and look at a root for the AO. The
patrol that did go into a preparation phase, ammunition, rations, whatnot, patrol always
would be given on that day. The following morning the Australian Air Force Albatross
lead, who was the commander of the helicopters, would come in and he would then take
the patrol commander and patrol [?]. They would fly and he would plant his root and he
would look at the [?] that these guys were up and that would be all firmed up. three
o’clock that afternoon after flying around all the day, testing the radios, and just drinking
water, saturating your body with water, we would walk down to the heli pad. The Air
Force commander would then brief his crew upon the insertion. We would be [?]. from
there we’d walk out on the helicopters. That’s the first thing, walking [?] as you guys
would call it, ram it in the chamber, and onto the aircraft. That would normally mean a
16, depending on how far the flight was. All insertions, if it was over 60 kilometers that
was a pretty long one. Usually ten to 30 kilometers, depending on the flight time
conditions. So we’d get airborne, fly the aircraft [?], two helicopter gunships, two Slick
ships flying at tree top level, and Albatross lead, the command aircraft, sitting up at about
two to 3,000 feet and he’s talking these guys through. We would run out to within five
kilometers of the insertion LZ at about 300 feet. At five kilometers out he’d put the [?]
and the [?] tree top. Then the sort of what we would call technical approach to the LZ.
In that period, if anything was spotted on the LZ or any enemy activity, [?] smoke and we
would overshoot and go to our alternate insertion LZ. At that point, the Slick ship
carrying the patrol would [?] and at around about what we used to hope was three or four
feet off the deck, the patrol would bail out. Now what inevitably happened was that
where the LZ had had higher grass growing on it, the grass could be anything up to six
foot tall. The prop blast or the rotor blast would force the grass down, bend the tops. As
the skids touched the grass, we would jump out. Unfortunately, there was another four to
six feet to go before we hit the deck, bearing in mind the weight of our packs was 60 to
80 pounds. We had some pretty heavy impacts and a lot of subsequent injuries and back
problems from those experiences because of the fact that we bailed out of that chopper
when the skids hit the top of the grass and it was still six feet to the ground. So they
would also generally four guys out of one door, the patrol 21-C would go out the other [?]
so there were five guys in a bunch running the team to 30 meters into the tree line into
cover. We always used to try to get as close to the edge of the tree line as possible so we
didn’t have that long period of exposure on the LZ. We would then penetrate ten to 20
meters, drop in a circle, and the helicopter would be gone and they would go into a
holding pattern two to five kilometers away. They would hold there for 30 minutes. At
the end of 30 minutes, I should say here at this stage, all communication with the
helicopter was on UHF. Initially the [?] and when that was replaced the URC-68, 64, 68,
which was the standard US Air Force so that communications was on the guard
frequency which was 243 which was the international distress frequency monitored by
ACC aircraft in Vietnam. The aircraft or the slick commander would ask us are we
okay? We’d say, “Okay,” and he’d say, “Good luck,” and away he went. He flew back
to the base, of course our Air Force task force they were based in Vung Tau so they
would head sort of straight back to Vung Tau for a hot shower and a home cooked meal
leaving us out there. We would then let the jungle settle down a bit, the noise of the
helicopters fade away, sort of in the listening mode, and then we would move 50 to 100
meters right on last light and go into a night LUP. the patrol always slept in a circle,
spokes of the wheel, heads in, and in dry season just on the ground with a bit of a poncho.
Wet season we’d put something, a poncho, up to keep the rain off of us at night. We
always slept fully clothed, generally the belt off and the belt would be our pillow, weapon
alongside, boots on, so that would be [?]. We never ran a sentry at night but what would
happen was guys as they woke up through the night went to sit up one by one sit up,
listen, any sounds, activities, take a bearing on, just note it. Everybody carried a
notebook and pencil. We maintained a patrol log, a log of the incidents. Prior to first
light up, pack up, stand to. An Australian tactic was always prior, just prior to first light
to be packed up and standing to, sitting here, facing out, weapon in hand, ready to go.
Then throughout the patrol routine, we would then move. We tended to move 20 minutes
to half an hour, prop for five to ten, move for 20 minutes to half an hour, prop for five to
ten, so we always covered ground very slowly which usually meant that we would hear
the enemy, his activities, before he heard us. Very seldom did he bump us and we were
unaware of his presence. Very seldom. It did happen, but we’d then prop up, [?]. Every
time we went into a lying out place in the [?] a clearing patrol would be done, so two
guys would go forward depending on the thickness of the vegetation ten to 40, 50 meters
and clear that area, come back in. That would probably coincide with our first
communications start for the day, run out an antenna and guys would be cooking breakfast, making the brew. We tended to live on brew so that was for us it was tea, coffee, and the excellent cocoa that the US provided in the LRRP packs.

RF: Were these hot, hot teas?

KB: Oh yeah, we would...tended to cook heat tablets a little bit more efficient than the tabs that the US used, so yeah. We tended, unless we were in known close proximity to the enemy, then we would always cook out. Hot brews were the order of the day, sustained your body and soul. Communications, as I said, we would then run out a wire antenna across the LZ. You always had right angles to the receiving station, and then we would communicate on the PRC 64 which was a lot like long range patrol except by using Morse Code by CW and generally all messages are encoded. We used the one time letter and that would consist of a five group message for syndication, location, and direction of movement. If there was nothing else to say, that was it. So it was five groups of 15 letters went out; bang, end of story, pack up. Generally there were two, we did patrol one in that same way moving short distances, stopping, listening. By about 11, certainly mid day, we would then go to what was known as park time. that was the heat of the day. The enemy tended not to move in that period of time. He was too smart. All the animal activity in the j would sort of come to a halt. It was too hot for them even, so we would then park up for about two hours, 12 to two, then maybe if there was a message that had to be sent with a lot of information in it, that would be the time that that information would be sent off simply because in that time there we weren’t going anywhere. That was also the time when you listen, and might do your administration tend to cuts and scratches. We were always heavily camouflaged so everybody had a little can kit and a mirror that would be touching up their camouflage. Between two and three in the afternoon we’d then start to move again, and then we would move in the same manner until just prior to last light. Now prior to last light and going into a night LUP, depending on patrol commanders we would often employ a break track; everybody turn 90 degrees, move 30 meters, turn, and then we went in, or basically loop official, and come back, ambush our back trail to make sure we weren’t being followed up, and then go into a night LUP. LUPs were always selected as being the thickest, densest, most uninviting patch of j that we could find. The only thing we expected to
find in there would be pigs and bloody snakes because nobody else wanted to go into it. That was your ideal night LUP. Anything that oppressed you during the night would have to make a lot of noise getting in. Then, the evening meal cooked up, packed up, stand to for last light until half an hour after, and then into the night routine once again, lay out our sleeping gear, settle down for the night. We always slept so that, as I said, heads in, spokes of the wheel. If anybody started to snore you could just put your hand out and grab their nose. Occasionally you get guys that talk in their sleep and that was always a little bit of a problem so there was always someone with a hand that would descend on their mouth. We actually took out a cook who’d been pestering us who wanted to do a little bit of bush time and we in fact had been very close to an enemy route during the day watching them and we pulled back about 100 meters and we were going to go back the next morning and put in an ambush and unbeknown to us this guy used to have nightmares so as the torch lights of the Charlie were moving down the track, here’s our man sitting up yelling at the top of his head. We all simultaneously dived on him and stuffed a rag in his mouth.

RF: That was his last…

KB: That was the last time he was ever allowed out of the cook house.

[?] so the nights were a completely different thing. I can remember one night being approached. I knew it wasn’t human, animals coming in, sort of rattle, rattle, and I actually recognized what it was, but I still could not resist when it started to sniff me I gave it the backhand and of course it was a porcupine and what did I learn ended up with a bloody fist full of porcupine quills. It scuttled off. But, generally we were pretty safe in our night LUPs. Very seldom, very seldom were we ever compromised in a night location. It did happen, not to me, but certain other patrols from time to time. It wasn’t common. Generally we got a good night’s sleep.

RF: You weren’t compromised by the enemy? How about the, you mentioned the porcupine, the other wild life? I imagine there’s, when you’re sitting in the…

KB: Wildlife was always a point of interest. A whole range of things used to happen. For example, sitting in LUP during park time and the center of the LUP was a large dead tree with a woodpecker on top hammering away, and these things go,
and these bits of dead wood sort of falling down all over us; that was one. Getting spun
by a troop of monkeys coming through the treetops and male monkeys are pretty
cunning. They send the female ahead with their kids. Next thing there’s a whole heap of
monkeys sort of sitting out and they’re looking down on you. Then, they start to scream
and shriek because we used to play hide behind leaves with the monkeys yelling. Snakes,
they’re another one, come through the LUP, investigate and go on their way. In fact, I
had a… I used to [?] common, we’d carry opera glasses and I remember one time I heard
some sort of noise coming in and I pushed the foliage away with one hand and I put the
opera glasses up with the other trying to have a look through and I was nose to nose with
a honey bear, we were eyeballing each other; he gave a bit of a snort and a sniff and
turned around and went away. Elephants were in the AO. These had been previously
brought into Vietnam for lodging and allowed to go wild. Created a degree of disbelief
that nobody believed us when we said we came across elephant tracks until a helicopter
pilot actually saw the elephants and confirmed it. Another one was gaur. They wouldn’t
believe when we put the report in that there were gaur which was a wild Indian ox; pretty
big beast, bloody big, simply because they didn’t know what a gaur was,
G-A-U-R was what it was, the spelling. So, that was ignored but subsequently
believed. That tended to get out of your way. The ones that really sort of gave me
palpitations on one occasion were guinea foul and we’re on LUP and I was actually out in
an OP overlooking a grassy area and I was back in a [?]. Anyway, it had been pretty
quiet, little old [?] here, but it had been pretty quiet; no enemy activity, and I had my
webbing off, my strides down, my rifle along side me performing a bodily function and
along the edge were these NVA helmets bobbing which sort of gave me the dilemma of
do I pull my strides up and carry the consequences along with me and the smell? Do I
grab my rifle and blow these things away? What do I do? Anyway, one of them stuck
their head over the edge of the stream bank, and these guinea fouls, four guinea fouls in a
row and all I could see was their backs. It looked like NVA helmets bobbing up and
down. But, we were always, always aware of wildlife because in Borneo a unit actually
had a guy killed by an elephant, was gored. The elephant chased the guy and it was quite
a drama. On the first tour with Victor company a deer actually broke cover and ran
through, through the platoon which was in a single file and one of our more intrepid
soldiers tried to bulldog it, threw his arm around its neck and threw it to the ground. There was a meal for fresh meat. Unfortunately the deer shook its head and opened up about an eight inch gorge in his thigh to the bone. We reported a casevac will only be approved if they could prove that the deer was VC. [Then we sent him to the] aviation unit. But, the occasional, in fact, one platoon commander straight in, our first operation, first LZ, stood on a snake, bit, went back out on the same job. So, that was the end of the operation for him, but the occasional animals sort of thing; nothing dramatic.

RF: How frequently did you go out on patrol or ambush?

KB: The patrolling sort of roster would work out that we’d get one a month. Now if we got a 14-day patrol that took out the whole month [?] back in and into our base routine and then cranking up for another one. The shorter patrols would come up probably two patrols every six weeks. We weren’t back in camp generally for much longer than seven days which was just as well. Base routine was pretty boring. Most of us generally felt that we were better off out there, anyway. Nobody would pester us, there’d be no duties to pull, and we pretty much lived alone which was one of the big advantages working with a LRRP, a SAS patrol.

RF: That’s what I was going to ask you, actually; what was life like when you weren’t out or weren’t preparing?

KB: Well basically we had a part of the perimeter [?] perimeter which was on the hill, which was actually on Nui Dat Hill, so we had a responsibility for base defense. Because we didn’t employ Vietnamese civilians to do our washing, cleaning our garbage, and that sort of stuff we had to provide all our own duties; that was mess, looking after latrines. One of the big differences between our base and a lot of US bases, we used a different method of waste disposal. Our latrines were a deep pit whereas the US used to use 44 gallon drums and burn them off.

RF: Right.

KB: Which was a horrendous practice. It used to stink to high…the US bases would just stink. But, so yeah, a different set up so there was always cutting the grass, keeping the grass down around the perimeter. That was always an ongoing thing. So, it wasn’t’ a great deal of time for any other activities. We always got at the end of the patrol after the debrief, we would back in by…most patrol extractions, we always tried to
get extracted in the morning so we’d be back at our base by ten o’clock, settle down, 
catch up on the gossip, clean up the equipment, go and have a patrol debrief, and then
that afternoon our beer ration, two cans to a man per day which had accumulated while
we’d been out. We then had that. At four o’clock in the afternoon, usually the helicopter
that pulled us out in the morning would come out to our pad, pick us up, and take us back
to the airbase for that night and we were back in the Air Force mess in Vung Tau kicking
back, unlimited booze, food, whatever. At eight o’clock the next morning, plus a
hangover, on board and back up to the base and back into our old routine. So camp life
was pretty boring. Occasionally there were trips away and we had exchanges with the
SEALs down at Solid Anchor. We would go up, because we had a big hand in
establishing the recon school at Na Trang, we’d frequently get up to Na Trang.
Occasionally we would get away to our advisors which were the AATT, Australian Army
Training Team. A lot of their guys had come to us with [?] between [?] so we’d get a [?].
But in country [?] with these guys in different locations. But, that was the exception.
Then of course the R&R program, we’d get seven days once in the 12 month tour which
ironically we could go anywhere except back to Australia. The US used to like going to
Sydney. They could go to Sydney for their R&R but we couldn't, so we set to go
everywhere else. But yeah, the [?] team between patrols was pretty boring, so my unit
conspired to defeat the beer ration regulations to avoid as much work as possible, the un-
necessary stuff was created to keep us busy; the belief that idle hands do the devil’s work
or whatever. Then there was quite a lot of time spent, ranges, we’d all be forever getting
down a range and rehearsals, rehearsing drills and whatnot. Kept you up to date, there
was always regular briefings on every morning. The task force in summary would come
down and we’d sit down, go through it, take at for their own patrols that were out there of
course we’d know about. Occasionally, there was always a patrol on standby, on ten
minutes notice to move, and that occasionally if you got the standby patrols reacted. That
was a good thing because you’d go…generally if one of the Army patrols was in trouble
or something was happening somewhere else in the task force and the task force
commander had his own reaction group, but he might also pull out standby patrol from
SAS. So that was always the highlight of excitement when the standby patrol was
reacted.
RF: Out of curiosity, what type of beer did they provide you? What type of beer did they provide you?

KB: Anything was available through the PX system; Budweiser, Pabst Blue Ribbon, Miller’s, horrible stuff from Korea called Crown. It always seemed to be that Australian beer was in short supply, all this US was less desirable but none the less acceptable was available.

RF: I’ve spoken with some US servicemen who worked with Australians and they were always pleaded to be with the Australians because they could get the Australian beer, the Two E’s or the Foster’s or something.

KB: Well, that was [?] the case. We used to always like to get our own beer but we always preferred US steaks, but not the pre digested ones. See, the bulk of our rations was US provided but somewhere along the way the US had a good contract for steaks and hamburgers and we used to like to get to a US base to get us feed from time to time.

RF: Was the base ever threatened in the time you were there?

KB: No, no, no. After he got hammered in ’66, at Long Tan which is when he set up, when the 275 set up to attack the base, no. The base was never threatened by an assault. What they did do from time to time was rocket it. The 107 and 122 millimeter rockets which always caused a bit of excitement. It caused an occasional few light casualties, never anybody killed with it, but generally, and after they generally stopped probing it as well. Generally the base was left alone. We ran 24 hour base security. The biggest sort of threat used to be the rubbish dump and kids from the local village would come in and scavenge on the dump and there always used to be a sort of standing patrol to chase the kids away from the rubbish dump. We had bulldozers operating down there permanently and the dump was always on fire and troops had a bad habit of throwing their ammunition, old, unwanted ammunition out in the rubbish and of course the poor old bulldozer driver was in shell shock because the stuff was always going off, under his blade. The fire sort of set it off and then the local kids would come in. it was still a threat that stuff that was salvaged by the dump could be used by the enemy. [?] because the dump was right down in front of one of our gun pits, we had it
under constant observation. We always seemed to get the job of going out and chasing
the kids away.

RF: You mentioned that, unlike the US bases, your base didn’t allow
Vietnamese to work in them. But, what sort of interaction did you have with the
Vietnamese people?

KB: Very, very little. Very little, almost to the point of none. I think,
other than there were a few civil action patrols where we would go out, usually with a
medical officer, to a village and provide a treatment service. Occasionally we would go
out, our quartermaster would go out, take an escort, go to the local market and buy fresh
vegetables, seafood for a special meal or barbecue or something that we were having, but
generally for the guys, the patrol members, very little contact; very little. If you were
lucky you could get down to Vung Tau and do a two week language course, cramming in
basic Vietnamese for two weeks, if you were lucky. Other than that, other than the
normal bar bill scene in Vung Tau, you’ve got the add break down there, no; certainly not
in the task force and certainly not on operations. The battalions generally, if they had to
deal with Vietnamese, would have an interpreter, ARVN, and/or local police and handle
over straight away. On two or three occasions we captured unarmed people in an out of
bounds area. We detained them, got a chopper in, sent them back, and that was it. Dung
Loi was about as far as it went there.

RF: You talked also briefly about some of your encounters with ARVN,
on the island when shot at you and then also the problems with land mines. I wonder if
you wouldn’t mind talking a little bit about some other impressions you had of ARVNs
or some similar [?].

KB: Okay, I think generally let me say in general, the ARVN were held
in pretty low regard. However, the exceptions would be that as those that had served on
training team and then were doing another tour with us, always with that exception talked
highly of their guys. Usually the ARVN officers were pretty corrupt, [?] liberal
corruption. However, the troops were pretty hard working. We had established a
training camp fairly close to task force, place called Phan Kiet, which trained what was
known as provincial reconnaissance units, PRUs. Because they operated, were taught to
operate the same way as us, they used our AOs and air communications systems because
the advisor would go up would be SAS, he would carry the same radio, the PRC 64
communicated by Morse back through so we had a little bit to do with them that way.
We knew that, at a certain level, these guys were professional soldiers and some old guys
that we were talking about fought the French at Dien Bien Phu and swung across, carried
on, and these guys have been in this war for a [?] longer than we have, but generally
when we drove down the road and saw an ARVN outpost and the PLF, not PLF, local
defense, I don’t’ know what it was called…
RF: The PF or the RF?
KB: PF, yeah, popular forces, they were pretty hopeless looking rabble,
and of course they were penetrated by VC agents anyway, and their fire control was
shaky to say the least. They would shoot first just for the hell of it, so they weren’t held
in particularly high regard, but there were exceptions to that, and certainly the guys that
our people trained, we’d have to sort of support them, not the PRUs which I think was
part of the Phoenix program. But generally, we didn’t hold them in high opinion, but, I
must say in ’75 when we were talking about it in May, a couple of guys who had been
advisors with the 18th ARVN division which was the only one to fight at Swan Loc in
the defense of Saigon, put up a really, really creditable performance, yeah, they could cut
it. But, certainly these guys didn’t get paid or they got shafted left right of center. So it
was easy to hold them in low regard but it was also easy to understand the situation that
they were in.
RF: Absolutely. You left, on your last tour, you left Vietnam in 1971?
KB: ’71.
RF: Right, and I guess if you could describe a little bit about how you felt
at that point and knowing that you’d be returning…
KB: Yes, okay, that was a strange run. I think there was certainly a
feeling of the job wasn’t’ complete. We were handing it over to the Vietnamese and in
our heart of hearts we knew that they couldn’t handle it, so yeah, we were…now we were
happy to be going home, but we hadn’t done the job to the fullest extent. We weren’t
leaving an Army that would be able to sustain itself and ultimately win the war and
history be as it out, they lost.
RF: And did you return to Australia or New Zealand?
KB: Yes, no because I was in the Australian Army at that time so I continued on and I served up until 1993. I served up until 1980 in the regular Army and then from 1980 and another 13 years in the Army reserves.

RF: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your return trip home? I know it took some time, as it did in the United States, for the Australian people to recognize the service of the soldiers.

KB: Yeah, that took…Australia had its official welcome home parade in 1988, and then had the dedication of the Vietnam memorial in 1992. New Zealand had its welcome home parade in 1998, Wellington, Jim was there.

RF: He was there, right.

KB: Yeah, so was I but I didn’t know Jim then. Yeah, so it took a long time for any form of official recognition. This was the first war in Australia’s history and in New Zealand’s history that divided the nation, second war in US history [?] divided the US nation, and still to his day, divisions are there, no doubt about that and will continue to exist quite a long time I would think. It certainly was my generation’s still alive.

RF: Did you think that the Australian government was able to provide the necessary support for the Vietnam veterans?

KB: No, no. Whatever, just basically backtracking that one. The Australian government in 1920 implemented very, very effective legislation in support of the returning soldier. This was known as a repatriation. There were pensions, benefits, housing grants. Unfortunately, there was never the education provided that the GI bill did, but in all other respects it provided possibly the best civil legislation to support a returning soldier anywhere in the world. It then established a government bureaucracy at the department of veteran’s affairs to administer it. From 1921 until almost as we speak, the department of veteran’s affairs has sought to reduce the benefits under that act and every successive generation of return servicemen who have entitlements under the repatriation act has had to battle the department to get what they were entitled to that should have been given without question. This was applied equally to the Vietnam veterans, and as a consequence a very serious rift has occurred between the department of veteran’s affairs and the Vietnam veteran community. Only in the last five years has the
department of veteran’s affairs realized that all those from World War I, and they are
almost dead, and all of those from World War II are well on their way, and they’re
running out of people to support and look after. As that base shrinks, so go their jobs, so
goes their power influence within the bureaucracy, so shrinks their budget. Suddenly,
“Hey, Vietnam veterans, you’re welcome! Come to DVA, what can we do for you?” Or
like the wind of change has blown only because they realize if they don’t look after us,
they’re out of a job. They will soon start pushing a desk in social security, you know, the
lowest. Even the public services hold social security in contempt. That’s where the scum
of the public service go. So, the DVA has had a change of heart. There’s now more
support, more support programs, PTSD is being recognized, veteran’s health, DVA calls
us the younger veterans’ very kind of them, and we’re getting more support from the
department. But, not without long, heartbreaking battles. Guys that should have been
picked up straight away, should have never been made to jump through hoops to get
pensions, had to. Finally that’s swinging around all too late. The real damage has been
done and the bridge will probably never be…the gap will never be bridged. But, at least
DVA is starting to realize and change their ways.

RF: Do you think perhaps for different reasons there’s a greater
recognition of Australian and New Zealand’s role in the war now? I’m thinking in terms
of education. There’s a new phenomenon here in the United States that Vietnam, all of a
sudden being talked about and discussed.

KB: This is happening in Australia and New Zealand. Where it is most
noticeable is that Anzac day, April 15th, is Australia and New Zealand’s national day of
veteran’s day and over the past ten years, whilst the number of veterans marching is
decreased as guys are dying. The number of citizens turning out early in the morning to
attend the services and watch the parade is increasing. We area also now including in the
marching group are the children and grandchildren of veterans. Children whose parent or
grandparent is a veteran and is deceased can march on that parade wearing their father’s
medals. So, the level of recognition and the level of education and awareness within
Australian society, not only Vietnam but as a whole, the whole military commitments of
the previous century is being recognized, increasingly recognized. I am a volunteer
guard of the Army museum in Freemandle, Western Australia. One of the real pleasures
of that little task is to conduct tours, organized tours, for school children and increasingly particularly high schools, the junior schools, booking tours and once a year a class will come and do a museum tour. We will also do a museum tour on a specific project that relates to the military history of Australia. So yes, there is an increasing awareness, acceptance, and understanding within Australian society as a whole. However, it doesn’t heal the gap, the wound caused by the protest movement because the teachers, the professors, the lecturers were the radical students of yesterday. But, they are sort of coming across.

RF: We’re going along in time.

KB: As long as we’ve got time.

RF: You mentioned earlier on that one of the reasons that the Australians and New Zealand’s were in Vietnam was sort of the little credit in the United States. How was your reaction in ’73 as the last of the US troops were out and in ’75 when Saigon fell?

KB: Well I guess Gerald Ford was President. I still had a feeling that the US would not let south Vietnam go under, even though they pulled out. I thought if it gets too bad they’ll crank out the B-52s from Guam and they’ll come back and [?] NVA, wherever need be. I never really thought that they would let them go under. I thought that the US stake was so big and it cost them so much in terms of money and lives that they just wouldn’t do it, and I think a lot of Vietnamese felt the same way. But at the end of the day, I think Ford was the man, and he let them go. So it was a bit of a shock, I must admit. I was still serving at the time and we used to get together a few of the “Olds and Bolds” who had and through that, those last two weeks of April ’75 we chewed that around quite a bit and we just sat there and we knew that the Australian government, it was a shame for the Australian government at that time, and it was a loaded government under Goff Whitlin which is one of the reasons I despise the man, was that he allowed all Vietnamese who had directly supported the Australian commitment to Vietnam, to be taken by the NVA when he had the ability and the capability to put every and any [?] that the Australian Air Force had into Tan Son Nhut and pull them out before the fall of Saigon, and he said, “They’ll be alright, no harm will befall them,” and consequently, we got a flight of boat people down [?] seeking refuge and asylum in Australia because of it,
partly because the north took over Saigon and created it, but we should...we had a moral
obligation to get our people out and we didn’t. At least the US made an effort, too little
too late, but at least they made some effort. I mean, they burned into the souls of the US
embassy when they just shut the door, went to the top, stood on top of the embassy and
took the last chopper out knowing that they promised Vietnamese who were in fact
employees of Americans, who were employees of the US embassy, who were higher
ranking military whose heads were on the black because the NVA's intelligence was so
good they knew who they were after and they got pretty well everybody they were after
and that was...remarkably they weren’t executed, but certainly ten to 15 years in a
reeducation camp was taking ten to 15 years off your life span. So yeah, Australia had
committed what I considered to be probably the second [?] or second most shameful act
of [?] history, really foreign policy, shameful act.

RF: I’m wondering if there’s anything that we didn’t cover. I’m sure
there’s probably quite a bit we probably just weren’t able to cover, but anything
specifically that you would want to share?

KB: Well, not really, but I’ve been in the US for 50 days, part of my
mission while in the US was to remind those Americans who are unaware of it that
Australia and New Zealand were there, 512 Australians were killed in action, 37 New
Zealanders were killed in action, we committed, in round figures, 50,000 troops through
Vietnam over that ten year period, New Zealand committed three, three and ½ thousand.
They have a population of two and ½ million, that wasn’t’ bad going proportionally. We
carried our weight, and we were the only two countries, allied countries, there that paid
for everything. Everybody else, the Thai’s, South Koreans, Filipinos, the US footed the
bill. We were the only ones that paid our way.

RF: Absolutely.

KB: So thank you, Macnamara, for those [?] kindly admitting that it was
all a big mistake and we really appreciate it.

RF: Well does the Australia veterans share the same emotional feelings
for the former secretary of defense as American veterans?

KB: Totally not quite because we had a certain level in the lower ranks
with the Australian Army, there’s no sort of very limited awareness of US politics
certainly in the Officer Corps, dealing with US counterparts at that level had that awareness, but down at my level post Vietnam we continued on with our relationship with the US Army. We did the three-month trips to Hawaii with the 24th [?]. We had exercises, Pacific Fleet exercises or [?] exercises, kangaroo exercises in Australia, large US commitments, so yeah, we still maintained a relationship. We always enjoyed having the Americans around. They had lots of beer, they had lots of money. I think they enjoyed having us because we had things that we could teach them. So yeah, the ongoing relationship has been fairly good with blips along the way.

RF: Sure, sure. Well I think that concludes our interview. I certainly appreciate your time and I hope you have a wonderful visit here in the US.

KB: Well I’ve certainly enjoyed the US so far. I’m looking forward to another four or five months of the same.

RF: Wonderful.

KB: Right.