Keith Stewart 6th December 2006 Aged 90
Interviewed by Colleen Williams and Barbara Cox
Barbara has put the interview on CD

Fiji asked us for resources so we sent up B Force and I was in that early echelon of that B Force as a cipher person and I was a sergeant at the time. We established a Headquarters and a battalion of soldiers were spread around the place. The engineers came over and they build a seawall all round Suva Point. It is still there. Across the neck of the peninsula, they dug a very large anti-tank ditch which was designed to stop any intrusion from the North. It was a kind of 'Singapore syndrome."

CW That sounds like they were scared after what happened in Singapore.

They should've known better because that was the basic weakness of the Singapore system that they didn't accept that the Japanese were going to come in the port and .....overcoming the defences . They overlooked the fact that the Japs would land further up and come through from the North. This was exactly the same situation in Suva. To be quite honest, if the Japs had decided to take Fiji, we wouldn't have lasted 24 hours. We had nothing. We had one small anti-aircraft battery, a light Ak Akers they called it . Later on when Singapore fell, they sent some high level anti-aircraft guns, 12 of them, ostensibly for Singapore. When Singapore fell, they dropped off 9 of them in Australia and dropped off 3 in Suva. They were 6" anti-aircraft guns. And around the perimeter of Suva Point, all we had were 18 pounder fieldguns, vintage 1890.

CW Is that from the Russian invasion

Presumably – they came from UK of course. They were distributed around the Point. I'm not sure – I think we had about 8 of them and they were dug in around the Point. Any sort of invasion would have overcome – they were by no means fast loading. The whole situation was really farcical but they did their best mainly for morale purposes I think.

CW My father went into the Home Guard and then became Major Turbet in charge of the Home Guards. The Fijian troops generally I am told trained with a post, just a stick and they wore sulus. They didn't have any rifles – they had nothing.

They did later. When we got started, we were very short of armaments of any sort, rifles and so on. The New Zealand Government impressed .22 sporting rifles and that sort of thing and got a whole batch of those and sent them over to Suva to augment the small arms complement for Fijian Defence Forces (FDF). The idea was to set up guerrilla groups. A 22 rifle using hollow point ammunition is a very deadly weapon at very short range, up to say 50 yards. They were designed to be used by these Fiji guerrilla groups in the event of an evasion. The trouble was the Fijian fingers were so large they wouldn't go through the finger guard. So we had to saw all the finger guards off and that made them an exceedingly dangerous weapon.

CW On the same vein, the Fijians were so used to going barefoot and they had terrible trouble when they tried to put the boys into boots, cause they couldn't get boots big enough and so a lot of the route marches finished up with the Fijian boys coming home with their boots hanging around their neck.

That's right, I know that to be true.

BC Would Fiji have been useful to Japan strategically?

Oh strategically. The strategic plan that Japan had was quite simple. They invaded New Guinea with a view to going from there to Northern Australia. Coincidently they had planned to come down the Eastern Pacific, capture the various Islands like Guadalcanal and Solomons and all that area, New Hebrides and

New Caledonia, then Fiji and then consolidate there and then invade New Zealand. After a few months, consolidate here and then attack Australia from the South, coincidently with taking it from the North. That was the grand plan and it would've worked except for the American Navy.

CW Oh yes the Battle of the Coral Sea

The 2nd Coral Sea battle was the turning point

CW I was told they wanted to use New Zealand as a food basket for their armies and for their people.

I don't think there is any question about that but their main purpose was to get Australia. Once having done that of course, they ruled the Pacific unimpeded. The American Navy, with some attached ships from other Forces, prevented it. The 1st Coral Sea battle was an absolute disaster for the Allied Forces. A combined force of Dutch, Australian, British and there was a New Zealand component. I am not sure about the French at that stage. There was a combined fleet had been set up and was patrolling ….what is the name of that strait that leads into the Coral Sea – might have been Sunder Strait. Anyway they were patrolling that area and the fleet had just come together and the flotilla leader was a Dutch ship, Van Tromp or Trump, I'm not sure which. There were all sorts of problems with language of course, with a Dutch flotilla leader, communications would be difficult. The fleet had only been together for a matter of weeks when they were attacked by the Japanese Navy and, I've forgotten the casualties now in detail, but I know a British cruiser was disabled to the point where they had to beach it, there were at least 3 vessels sunk by the Japs and the whole thing was just a fiasco. I think it was the Exeter, who was the cruiser, who was eventually towed off and made off to Falkland Islands where she was repaired and taken home. 2 or 3 others were sunk including Van Tromp so that alerted the Americans as much as Pearl Harbour to the fact that things were getting pretty dangerous. This is before Pearl Harbour. All those strategic tales have been told and told but just to give you a general background of what we were in the middle of, sitting there just waiting to be taken over as it were.

CW I'm so glad you say this because nobody knows what it was like to be in Fiji – to be so aware – we had nothing

Vulnerable, totally vulnerable. We did our best as I say in the way of fortifications around the place. The engineers were marvellous. They dug tunnels in the cliffs behind Ofalu Bay for the purpose of storing fuel and ammunition for the flying boats

CW In the soapstones

In the soapstones – they tunnelled right in and they had a seaplane base there – Catalina flying boats – incidentally a cousin of mine was an engineer with that group. They also did the anti-tank wall right around the peninsula, they did the trench across the neck of the peninsula and looking at the peninsula from the South, on the left hand side going around there, there is a big bluff –

CW Waimana Rd – up the top there

It's the main road going northwest. There's a kind of Bay there – Walu Bay – and this big bluff and what they did, the engineers dug 3 huge holes in the bluff by tunnelling method, very clever. They built a tramway out from the bluff over the sea and then they tunnelled in from underneath, made a gallery in underneath, then they tunnelled up from the gallery upwards. At the same time, they tackled it from the top and took out spoil from the top of these 3 big holes and fed the debris down through chutes into the tunnel below into little trucks which took it out and dumped it in the Bay.

CW So it's part of the Walu Bay reclamation

Then having dug the holes; they, in the meantime, had tanks prefabricated in New Zealand and sent over and these tanks were assembled inside the holes and welded in place in the holes and then when it was all done, it was all covered over. Fuel tanks

CW They were to fuel all the various military or naval ships.

Yes that was their purpose.

CW The Japs would've had trouble bombing them in the cliffs like that.

If they knew they were there, a couple of bombs would have got rid of the lot in no time because there was relatively little top cover. If they knew they were there, and I don't doubt for a moment that they knew they were there because there were various elements in Fiji at the time, the Intelligence - I was in the Intelligence Section and we were worried stiff about what was being leaked out about what was going on. Indicative of that was later on in 1942 when the Americans came over, we had our *dahbi wallahs* and people looking after us and charging us quite reasonable charges and a week before the American reinforcements arrived, suddenly all the dahbi wallahs and all the other Indian traders jacked their prices up, more than double what we were paying. They knew they were coming. We were actually dismayed to find that this was the case because as the Security Section, we had taken great pains to try and keep the information secret. They knew, quite extraordinary.

Dahbi Wallah – that's an expression from the Middle East.

CW It's India

Its India rather – dahbi wallah – they are the people who looked after the laundry and they did it very well.

CW Yes everybody had very neat .... over there. People of your age had immaculate clothes

Everything was all neat and tidy.

BC Have you any idea how it might have leaked?

I think – I think you become a little naïve until you are faced with the situation where there is a breakdown and then you look at the causes. You have people floating around the place doing chores about the place and that sort of thing. Even the guy who sweeps the office floor. You never know just how cunning they are, you never know, you may become quite familiar with that sort of staff and get used to them being around and I'm quite sure they work on this and they become part of the furniture and you simply don't observe as carefully as you might.

CW In Suva our housegirl used to do that. If ever I had anybody, she'd be around quietly dusting and I knew she was listening for all the gossip.

BC Was it a selling point?

CW Just nosiness

Just nosyparker. I don't think there was...

CW .. we called it the bush telegraph, we called it.

I don't think there was any surreptitious intent. I think it was just their nature – to get information, to get behind everything and know what was going on.

CW And there were people because Ruth Barreclough has a story about there was a Japanese trader there and a Japanese photographer and one day a Japanese ship came in just before Pearl Harbour and the Japanese sailors paraded and the ship went and these two Japanese people disappeared at the same time so they had obviously been planted. I haven't quite got that story right but Ruth told me the story how they had been planted and then they disappeared. And how these two people went out fishing in the weekend and they always came back without fish.

Good story that – poking around all the time and they were photographing everything and in NZ before the war, the Japanese tourists were notorious for the avidness for which they used they used their cameras around the place. Subsequently it showed that the information that they had gleaned was in the military records.

BC You are talking roundabout 1940?

No earlier than that – 1936, 38 – before the war. It was often remarked on the fact that the number of Japanese who went around with cameras taking pictures of everything. You know the Japs had detailed information about the terrain…

CW…and radio stations and water supplies – they had the whole works. We've got a map at the Museum that someone got off Trade Me. Its New Zealand all in Japanese.

They were a very efficient people in that regard. Anyway time went on and eventually events occurring in the Pacific generally were getting pretty torrid. In the meantime, Sir Harry Luke, the Governor, who was also the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific had decided to send out coast watchers to various Islands throughout the Group. They were fairly widespread. I've forgotten the number now; I think maybe 12 or 15 stations were set up in the whole of the Western Pacific. The Australians did a similar thing working from their end over the Northwest Pacific and I guess the Fiji initiative spread into further east as well but I cant remember the details now as to which coast or where or whatever

CW Tuvalu – Gilbert and Ellis

Oh yes – right out. All the small islands, places like the northern side of Ba…… and out to Rotoma and obviously Yasawas. All around there and beyond. I don't know – 12 or 15 stations as I recall. What happened was they assembled a group of operators, radio operators; they were from Cable and Wireless or Telegraph people and so on, civilians. They paired them with a soldier – a New Zealand soldier. The soldiers were provided with a rifle and a box of ammunition which was a 1000 rounds and that's about it and off they went. And they were distributed around the Group in these various places on the Viti, the Governor's ship. We used to call it the Governor's packet bottleship. There were many, many a party had on that! The guy in charge of that operation was a Sgt Major, Warrant Officer, named Merv Corner who was a former All Black and he was responsible to get these guys out and spread around these various places and make sure they were provided for. Then the local natives took charge and fed them and hid them. They were provided with a coding system which was fairly elementary.

CW In what sense, Keith, we don't know anything about codes.

It was a coding system whereby messages they sent over the radio were coded in such a manner that anybody intercepting them wouldn't know what they meant. The code was a simple numeric transposition code – quite a simple elementary sort of code.

CW For example As for 1,

9 = BB or zebra. You could build up a code. You didn't have a code book as such – a code list. But the details now have faded somewhat with me. My part in that was that, after this had been going on for some

weeks or months, all the decoding and encoding to these people was done by the aide-de-comp to the Governor, a young man named Ian Thompson, a lovely guy

CW He his still alive, he's living in Edinburgh, lovely man.

He became a General, didn't he?

CW He's now a Sir Ian Thompson. I've just sent him his Xmas card

I would love to communicate with him. If you've got an address, I would love to catch up with him. I still think of him. What happened was because he was overloaded they put out an appeal to New Zealand B Force Headquarters, "could they please send somebody over to help him on the coding." I was cipher sergeant so they sent me up there every morning from 8-12 to help Ian on the coding and decoding. It was very pleasant I might add, sitting there in the Governor's office, in the aide-de-comp's office with the fans overhead and the Fijian servant would come in with a bowl of kava every now and then. You would get a couple of bowls of kava each morning and then at lunchtimes, I would go back to the barracks and carry on with my normal duties.

CW You know at that stage my mother was one of the cipher clerks – Laura Turbet – in that book of mine…

…That must have been later because in the early stages there was only Ian and myself who were doing it. Later on, no doubt, it became…

CW…the traffic, when the Americans came, it would've increased.

So it became a different set up altogether then because at that stage you were using diplomatic codes and probably that was going on in parallel with what we were doing on the coast watch because Ian would be responsible for coded cables to New Zealand and Australia and Britain and so on. So that was where your mother would be involved – in the diplomatic codes.

CW I know that there were about maybe 10 wives of Government officials were…

…..ended up inside a big office

CW….I didn't ever know what she did. It was all kept high secret. I didn't know she was working as a…

..One of the problems doing that sort of thing. I had that problem with the family. "What do you do, what do you do?" I'm a cipher sergeant. "What does a cipher sergeant do?" That's when the conversation stops. The prime edict – a secret is only a secret if it is known to one person.

CW She was very quick with arithmetic cause people in those days were and they would then subtract all these numbers, I understand, from other numbers and then maybe you'd subtract them again. Did you do that sort of thing – double subtract?

Yes, you'd do all sorts of things like that. Codes changed from day to day or in some cases a high level cipher from hour to hour. Nowadays, the codes are automatically generated by the signal equipment. But that's a totally different story. There's no cipher section anymore – it's all automatically coded.

CW When you did the change in the cipher code – did you decide today we are going to change the numbers or… how did they transmit it to you … that you knew when to change it?

The major problem when I got involved later on with diplomatic codes and that sort of thing. Later on I became the chief cipher officer down at Army Headquarters in New Zealand. In order to get those details

to the various outlying people, they were sent by what was called 'safe hand' which meant that a dispatch would be sealed. You've seen it in films and things with the dispatch case manacled to somebody's wrist. Well that's true, that's what happens. That safe hand dispatch is taken so far by the courier, then he hands over to the next stage and they pick it up and they take it on further and so it goes on, leapfrogging right all round the world to get this information to various people.

After the war was winding down, I became chief cipher officer at Army Headquarters, I had a situation where some messages were coming back corrupted which means the coding wasn't working and so this went on for a couple of days and then I became really alarmed. So I went to the Colonel who put me in the job and I said to him, "there is something wrong, the system is falling down, I'm getting corruption messages from UK and Australia." And I said, "I think what is happening is that some information of our code changes is not getting to me, has anything come in, that I should know about?"
He said, "well I don't know." He said, "we'll talk to Major Borman." That was his 2IC. Borman was one of these very secretive characters, a very able officer, he was marvellous in the Middle East and desert, then he came back from there and they put him in Army Headquarters as assistant to the chief signal officer. Very secretive character so the Colonel said, "Major, has any top secret stuff come through from UK or Australia in the last couple of days?" He said, "oh yes Sir." "Well, what did you do with it?" He said, "I put it in the safe." Hadn't even opened it, just put it in the safe. I can't imagine anybody being that thick. So the Colonel said, 'well in future, any top secret dispatches that come in, go to Stewart first and then they come to you and you hand them to me. So that solved the problem.

CW How did you get the couriers out to these remote Islands?

That was one of our big nightmares, constantly.

CW Did you use flying boats at all?

Oh yes, it was all by air

CW From the Catalinas from Suva Point, flying out of there.

Well no, as far as we were concerned, distributing locally you mean? For our operation we were on very low grade ciphers and codes so that problem didn't arise. I'm talking about the high level stuff, the diplomatic codes.

CW But even in Fiji, if you wanted to get from, a change of code out to the Yasawas or .....

...we would dispatch it.

CW Did you send Fijians on foot or in canoes...

..Or whatever, whatever means was available. You'd send the information by dispatch and then you would get a receipt for the dispatch would come back through the system.

CW How long did that take to get something out

Well it just depended where you were and it depended on the frequency of the change of code. You might only change it only once a week or once a month – the low level stuff. You didn't do that too often. Then later on we used an American coding machine which speeded up the whole process. Once again you still had to get the codes out but it was a little what you call M209 converter. Very clever little device. but that was later in the piece. We didn't get those until we went up to New Caledonia, I think, but earlier on it was all manual cipher.

CW How did those decoding machines work?

Well, a mechanical device scrambled …

CW.. like a roller or some such

The footprint of the machine would be smaller than that – like 6" x 4" – it had a reel on each side. One reel was gummed and the other was plain. On the front it had a little keyboard and the mechanism was up here so you would get a message and you just typed in the information in coding, you switched to the coding thing, typed it in and on one side, the plain paper as you typed it in, would come out the version as you typed it. On the gummed side would come out the coded version and when the thing was all complete and you checked your plain language version against what you had, you decided that was okay, then you took this tape and gave it a lick and put it on a message form and sent it.

CW Like the old cables – you had those little strips of paper along them. A cable would come and there would be some strips like that. I've just seen one quite recently. The Museum has got a new book and there is a photograph of one that says "your son he was missing in action has now been found' and it is all in these little tapes.

Yes, these little tapes got stuck on the message form. Now, conversely when you got a message in in code, you switched to decode, and the coded version would be on the plain tape so you typed the coded version on the message form and that would be reproduced on this plain tape, then on the other tape, the plain language would come out. You'd take that tape and paste it on the message form and deliver it to the addressee

CW Now the coast watchers that were out on station would be a civilian and a New Zealand soldier and they just watched on the beach.

As long as there was no Japs around, yes

So you would say (talking about the decoder he is showing us) whatever message you would put along there, you built up the message letter by letter and you didn't worry about spaces. And you built the message letter by letter and on the code number for the day, then you read of zero one – that would be the message you would send – a scrambled one. You had one of these machines at the other end and you set up that machine with the similar – knowing what number you should put it on – and you put the code in there that you get – the scrambled code you put on there and you go to 1 and read of that.

CW Who invented that?

A New Zealander I don't know – it is brilliant

CW Have we got one of those in the museum?

I don't know. I came by this quite by accident. This was used right down to regimental level – regimental signals – the battalions had these for front line coding.

CW So there would have been numbers of them through the battalion.

There were hordes of them all around the place. When I handed over – when I pulled out – I had a detailed receipt for everything, including a number of these and various other coding machines and so on. At the regimental level, they weren't so careful about that sort of thing and an old friend of mine who had been a major or colonel I think in the army when he died his widow said she found this thing – she thought it had something to do with codes and would I be interested? And that is how I got it. So I am going to hang onto it and maybe hand it over to the museum one day.

CW I've never seen things like that

Most people wouldn't have seen this – nobody would have any idea – they've probably never seen this. Instead of drawing the code, it was a mechanical thing and much much quicker. You put a little bit of lubricant on there and the operator could click round ....

BC. Forgive my ignorance, but could you not use the telephones to say "Okay today we need code 24."

Well you had to use whatever means were at hand to the caller at the other end and you would use the most secure means you could. Sometimes you had to risk security in order to get the information over. Compromise all down the line. That's just a bit of detail about the coding process at elementary level.

CW The radio operator that was out on the station, you could send him Morse code

Yes that was done by Cable and Wireless (C&W)

CW So the Cable and Wireless communicated with their operatives by Morse code

Yes – with the coast watchers. They had a little transmitting radio which they used from their end which came back to Cable and Wireless. C&W sent the information up to Ian who decoded it or I did as the case may be and it was passed on to the Government. That was the way the system worked and the Army had an independent parallel system whereby they were communicating with their own battalions around the place and that was quite independent of the High Commissioner.

BC So in other words, you had this High Commissioner who was basically appointed by England so they set up a system ...

CW He was the Governor of Fiji as well....

BC ...so they set up a system so you had the NZ Army send up another system.

Yes, we were quite independent of that because we weren't responsible for coast watching. We were responsible for general defence matters. The coast watching was a reporting system – it had no military significance beyond that. Those guys were extremely vulnerable and the sad part was as things went on , the Japs came further and further down, you would get a message from a guy – it would depend on the circumstances – a submarine might have turned up – a landing party come ashore – the Japs and so they closed down the station, go away and hide – the local natives would hide them and the patrol would come and they would search the place and they may or may not find them. They usually didn't and they would go off again and then 2 or 3 days later, you would wait anxiously for word from them. Then you would get a signal back – coast clear – then they would carry on with their normal reporting. Their function was to report air movements, ship movements, the weather and any circumstance that would be of value to the military. These people were civilians – operators from C&W – from the Post Office.

BC Were they civilians drawn out of Fiji – so basically just the one who volunteered – they didn't get paid?

CW Some of them were missionaries, were they?

Yes, some of the mission stations took up the office of doing that but that was more with the Australians than it was with us. The Australian network was very much larger and much more widespread and ultimately 27 of the operators and their soldier companions were captured. Their eventual fate was terrible – the 27 included the soldiers I think – I think 27 in all. They all finished up in Saipan which was the Japanese Naval base for the South East Pacific and the Admiral in charge of Saipan apparently had a son in the Navy and this son had been killed during one of the naval battles and he went berserk and he got all these guys out – lined them all up – and beheaded them one by one. That was in Saipan.

CW They were taken prisoner and taken back to Saipan?

Yes. His rationale for that was, these guys were civilians, therefore they were spies, therefore they would be treated as spies. What relationship that had to the soldiers I don't know but maybe they differentiated, I cant remember but it was a terrible, terrible thing.

CW Was it 27 in our Pacific area?

Yes – that is .....that is the Australia, New Zealand coast watching.

BC It wasn't actually a glamorous job.

CW I don't think enough recognition was given to those people for their bravery...

...I agree...

..the remoteness, being away from their family and in fear all the time. Not getting good food.

Inadequate equipment....

BC What about the language problem?

I think seeing they were recruited from Fiji, the Western Pacific coastwatchers – that wouldn't be a problem

CW Who was doing New Caledonia? Did the Free French Forces or was it under Australia?

I wasn't privy to all that – it was just the coast watchers that I was dealing with.

BC When you were in Fiji, can you remember the general feeling of the people. What was Suva like in those days?

Well, Suva was a dream – a free and open friendly society. I got on well with the local people, on leave times and so on. Incidently, the Brigade later, the Divisional Headquarters, was located in Borren's House up on Tamavua Hill and on the opposite side of the road, was Levi's house. Levi was the local jeweller cum souvenir – Noel Levi. The junior officers, there were 4 of us, we were accommodated in Levi's house as guests of the house and the Army paid for it all. The other senior officers were accommodated in Borren's House and that was also the military Headquarters.
(Showing a photo) that's all the officers in Headquarters – there's General Nead who went missing later, that's Colonel Murphy who was a GSO1 – senior staff officer and various colonels in charge of the battalion. There's my boss. By this time I had been transferred to signals and there I am there.\

CW Where was this picture taken?

Borren's House

CW He was a rich man

He was the wealthiest man in the whole colony. That's the whole of the officers in Headquarters and it was a combined HQ hence the navy people and there should be a couple of Air Force blokes as well – there were 2 of them I think.

CW These are all NZders here and this is called again.....

…….Headquarters 8th Brigade and here is the junior officers detached from that lot. 'A' mess as they called it was the senior officers

BC So the reaction of the Fijians, the Indians and the odd Chinese was of a welcoming ..

….Oh yes very friendly ……

CW Had you been promoted at this stage?

I was a second-lieutenant at that stage – there's my boss. The photographs have all the names as well.

BC Did they coast watcher have a holiday – did they get any leave?

No

BC So once they volunteered to go basically…..

.They were there for keeps. Keeps is a nice word to use in the circumstance.

BC Do you ever recall meeting up with them after the war?

No we never even met them personally. The only contact were the Army directly was through Merv Corner who was seconded to the Commissioner to distribute them all around the place.

BC When the Americans came – when you first went into Fiji as a NZ Army official was the atmosphere relatively – apprehensive…..

…..not at that stage……..

….so all of these of these photos are around 1941- 42. So the Americans came …

They came the latter part of 1942….

BC .. and that's when things change?

Things changed in many ways but what happened was, the Authorities decided that we should be with ….The Americans apparently offered to take over Fiji and they sent in a territorial division – the Ohio Division and they sent it in in two stages; the first stage came in and half of our HQ went back to NZ for retraining. I stayed on until second half so I then I had 2 months with the Americans – half and half with the Americans. In due course, they sent over the second half and I went back to NZ for retraining after which or during which the 3rd Division was formed and then went back to the Pacific to New Caledonia and later on to the Solomons.

CW What was John Rose in?

I think he finished up as a Lieutenant-Colonel.

CW He was in the Pacific, wasn't he?

I've got pictures of him. I think he was in the Pacific sometime. I've got pictures of John Rose in the Territorials before the war

CW Were you in the Territorials?

I was in the Territorials in 1936.

CW From Auckland Grammar?

I went through Auckland cadets – I was at Auckland Grammar from 1931-34 and then a year later, I joined the Territorials in 1936. From Territorials, I was in the Intelligence Section under John Thompson who was the leading elocutionist of the time and he was the founder of the teachers' speech and drama which Ngaire was a foundation member. John Thompson was an Intelligence Officer – he also then was already a sergeant major of the school cadets at the Grammar School and I was the Sergeant in the Grammar School cadets so John and I have had a close association for a long time. John formed the Intelligence Section in the Territorials of the Auckland Regiment – the CRO that is the Countess of Ranfurly's own. John Rose was one of the members of the Intelligence Section.

CW And John Rose was with Dempsey was colonel in charge of Ranfurly's

I think he was Regimental colonel

CW They used to go and see the Countess of Ranfurly. I know they are neighbours of the Davenions

Yes, John and I have known each other a very long time.

CW I should ask you about the cadets …it seems a pity in a way that the cadets have gone. I know it was militaristic but it did a lot of boys, didn't it?

I'm sure it did – same as CMT. I think CMT (Compulsory Military training) was an invaluable thing – there was less crime in that period than ever before.

BC I think Colleen is quite interested in terms of – I can remember from her book – when you crept downstairs and overheard your parents talking about "what should we do them, should we take them to the hills?" There was fear that the Japanese would land…….

CW … Keith's comments about having guerrilla pickets going up into the hills because maybe Dad had known that because that was his solution for us was that we would take the horses, we were totally provisioned – we took the horses and we went to the hills – most Fijians – we would be okay. We wouldn't as it happened because the Japs in other places where people did that, they were eventually rooted out by the Japanese and then they were really badly treated.

We sent patrols out into the hinterland and unhappily one of our junior officers was lost. On one of these patrols, he fell in the river and got drowned. A very fine young man – I cant think of his name for a moment. That was all part of the preparation for the local soldiery to get to know the territory.

CW Barbara is keen to know what you thought of Fiji. You lived up there. Was there a canteen going or not at that stage – that was much later. There was a military canteen down on the waterfront

I don't know about a military canteen. Our canteen was McDonalds Hotel – that was a watering place for all the troops. Years later, I read when the hurricane of 1950 was it? McDonalds Hotel was demolished right in the middle of the city because it was a big open place you know – with verandahs and shutters and things and you could see right through it underneath. The hurricane just picked it up and destroyed it.

BC So you sort of had a – trying to get a normal day in your life in Suva – so you would work from …

….oh you would work all day – it depends on the duties you see. In my particular case, being introduced as it had - I might work 12 -14 – 16 hours a day on occasions, depending on traffic requirements, I was the only one. That is not strictly true, there were 2 of us but the ------was transferred. Duncan my

immediate boss who was the Intelligence Officer and the site officer, there was only the 2 of us to handle the whole situation and if traffic came in the middle of the night and it had a priority rating, well you'd be dragged out of bed and get up there.

CW How did you know it came in – did you hear sort of dit dit dit – did they wake you up?

There was signal people on duty 24 hours a day.

CW And their signals would be coming in by Morse code. So then, they would wake you up and say there was a message and you would have to go up to the town…..

I'd have to go to the office and decode them……

CW……was your office up in Tamavua in the house - Borren's House –

…Up in Borren's….

….CW so you did it there rather than do it through the C&W They would have been very vulnerable down there on the waterfront

Oh yes. We had our own communications by that stage. We had three main transmitters; there was 1 in Suva, one out on Bequ and one up in Nadi.

CW You must have had troops stationed on Bequ to maintain it – so you would have had a platoon over there.

Probably – I don't know

CW And who was servicing them – the old VT. VT was travelling around the Pacific……

….making itself useful.

BC So you might finish at 6pm so then you would go down to McDonalds and join the other troops.

Might go down and have a prowl around the town. Being in intelligence section, it was a bit unusual in the sense that I had much more freedom than most people. I didn't need a leave pass. Everybody else had to get a leave pass to get out of the camp everyday but I had a universal pass because I was the Intelligence Sergeant and I could roam around the town anytime I liked and in fact when I first met up with my new boss, he said -. (Goes to get cup of tea) This narrative tends to become more about me than about Fiji.

BC I'm just saying to Colleen because the role her father played – what we are both trying to get information – fill in gaps and also for example when you went on the prowl in Suva Bay, did you do any other intelligence work.

No directly no. My duties gradually became centred on the cipher department and there was another Sergeant there who was Intelligence Sergeant as well and he did a certain amount of prowling around. A lot was done by the liaison officers. Each battalion had a liaison officer who was responsible to 'feel' the local scene and report back to his boss and the behaviour of the troops

CW Do you know anything about the Home Guard cause that's where Dad was.

I remember the Home Guard broadly but more the FDF (Fijian Defence Force). There was Sgt Phillips who (FDF) and I have a picture here – he took this on a trek up to his farm way in the hinterland up the Guanamala . The Guanamala and Wainebequ rivers, they join together to form the Rewa don't they?

CW It wasn't Tony Phillips –

Cant think of his first name – Frank I think – he took 5 of us up to his farm. That was an adventure because we go by road to the banks of the Guadamala and then we get into a big canoe and paddled up the river.

CW It looks almost like a raft there.

We paddled up the river 5 miles to the landing where his farm was. He had some cattle up there.

BC These trips were few and far between?

Yes

CW Did you go and visit with any local – in their homes – did they take you in?

Not particularly no. One thing I regret subsequently …

CW (Looking at photo_ – Charlie Phillips

Look here is my universal pass – ----------"is authorised to be out on duty during curfew hours."

CW People didn't realise we had a curfew in Fiji either.

Oh yes, we had a curfew alright. There's looking down on the river from the farm

…I regretted. I wasn't a very religious turn of mind in those days and I used to go and sit outside the Fijian church and listen to the singing because I was enormously fond of singing but I never made myself known to them which is what I regret. And the warmth too. There is the Sergeants' Mess in Fiji in 1941.

BC Did people every go back to NZ to have a break?

Only if you went back on a course

BC So basically once you got sent to Fiji, you were there – not like some of the Americans who used Auckland to come back for R & R

We didn't get any R& R. I was lucky I was sent back to NZ twice on courses for the furtherance of my skill and so on, it didn't have anything to do with leave but I got leave with it. I came back on a signals course at one stage.

BC Did you come back by flying boat?

Yes, the Catalina. These were all the Sergeants at HQ with various duties – some clerical, some military, that guy there was the chief signal sergeant for the Air Force. This guy here was the paymaster – he was a Warrant Officer. There's yours truly with a mo and that was the senior signal sergeant.

CW These guys were not connected to the Fiji Military Forces. No. It surprises me cause there is a huge connection through to the Fiji when you read the names of these in this book. Charlie Phillips was he in the Fijian or NZ

Fijian – he was the one – we had him up to our Mess and then during the course of one of these visits, he said, would a few of you guys like to come up and visit the farm? So off we went one weekend. Got a weekend leave and went up there. We went up to the farm and it was quite a small farmhouse so we dossed down and it was so absolutely dead quiet. He said, now listen. So we stood still and listened. He said, Hear that. And you could hear some form of noise, couldn't pick what it was. He said, that rustling noise - it's the army worm getting stuck into my grass. He said, by the morning, it will all be stripped. And that's what happened – went out next morning – bare stalks everywhere. He said it happens every year – lasts two days and it strips the crop

BC So it doesn't look like there was much mixing between the Fijian Defences and the ……

CW…most of the guys in here are. When I went through this, I realised that an awful lot of the people living in Fiji – working – because there was a big community then…

… I'm waffling around a bit – I'm not being very constructive.

CW Oh no, yes its wonderful – I love hearing all this

BC So Colleen the people working in Fiji were NZders.

CW Yes there were NZders and Australians but a large number of NZders and they were working now Hop Atkins he was in the Dept of Agriculture, he became Colonel in the 1st Battalion of the FDF. Then David Cape went into something – all of these people who lived and worked in Fiji in Government or C&W or Banks – Burns Phillips – all of these – Morris Hedstrom, the Carpenters, CSR – they were very very big. And there were plantation managers and so forth and of course they all joined up. There is also in this joining up, there is also a little bit of 'this is a great break from routine – it's a bit of an adventure' I think. There is that that comes into it and another woman told me her father was sent across to Tonga and he was the first commanding officer of the Tongan Army. Colonel Frank Rennie.

BC He became CEO of Rothmans

CW Well he certainly was in Fiji in the Dept of Agriculture I think and then he went on to .. It is very interesting to think he was the first one and Sheena told me the other day – I want to get to her because she has got photographs of the foundation of the Tongan Army presented by Queen Salote to her father so you know there is a huge amount of treasure out there which we need to preserve

Another section that we were responsible for was local air raid defence. We had anti-aircraft battery and 3 big guns that came from – should have gone to Singapore and came to us – and that was it. But the big caves just at the back of Suva town – what are they called – walking distance –

CW Swallow caves – we used to call them cause they were full of swallows.

They were only walking distance from the main town as I recall and we modified them a bit to make accommodation for people in the event of an air raid.

cW We had the tunnels in the rock. One thing I just remembered that somebody told me that up in the battery, up in the Suva battery, they planned to put this big fortification up there but they didn't have the guns – they'd been ordered. So they cut down coconut trees and they stuck them in place of the guns which is quite spar green

Bc In terms of organisation – you've got the FDF, NZ Defence Force, you've got a Governor appointed by Britain, who was overall in charge.

The Governor of Fiji

BC And when the Americans came

When the Americans came, the same thing applied. He was still the boss. He was the colony governor. He was the prime authority and a very diplomatic position to be in as far as he was concerned especially when the A force (Americans?) came because they are pretty arrogant and they tend to take charge. Sir Harry didn't let that get to far I don't think. Another thing that happened was in 1941 the first Pan American flying boat came down from the States on a fact finding trip – Pan American Flipper – among other things it landed in the lagoon in Fiji and that was a big event. It was a pioneering flight and I got a couple of photos of that.

CW Was this Musik Point?

I sent them to Pan Am – I thought they might be interested for their archives. But they said they already had the photos and sent back this letter – I was a bit disappointed – "I return the enclosed negatives of the historic photographs you took in Suva 40 years of the first commercial flight by Pan Am in the South Pacific. I've checked and found that we have several shoots in our numerous archives so we won't require them. Thanks very much for considering us. --------- Public Relations
There's all the troops sitting out watching the arrival of the Flipper. There was press report in the local Herald – that's when they pulled out.

CW Pan Am was the life line, wasn't it?

BC It was still a flying boat though or had it been modified by that stage

Still a flying boat – in this photograph – its just a splash in the sky.

CW This is 1944

1941 – it was the first flight made. Later on, it was the life line.

BC Its aircraft were a familiar sight in Fiji during the war when they were part of the US Navy's transport service

I had several flights on the Pacific to home and what a tedious flight. It took 7 hours for a Catalina to fly from Fiji to NZ . One flight took 9 hours – we set off for Hobsonville – 2 flying boats American and up to North Cape which was their taking off point and the other aircraft did a 180 degree turn and dropped down in altitude and went off back. So a crew member came down from the flight deck and I said, "what's happened to your mate/" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "the other aircraft has gone home" "Ron, he says, 'panic, panic" So he rushes up and tries to make contact with him and to cut along story short, this guy had had mechanical problems. He tried to raise our operator to tell him what was happening – our operator was sound asleep, having had a heavy night the night before so he didn't get the message so we then flew for 2 hours between Three Kings and North Cape up and down 90 Mile Beach trying to find this guy. Meantime he's flying back to Hobsonville. Eventually by the time he got back there, probably then sent us a message and we learned that he was back home safe and sound so then we continued our journey. I get to Noumea and instead of getting there about 5 or 6 in the evening, its about 8 o'clock at night and the people who had been sent to greet me had gone home, thinking we got lost or something. So here am I and I find that I am on --------at Manova where our seaplane base was. So I watched and waited a while and I could see boats going to and from somewhere so I hopped on one of these and eventually ended up in Noumea city and then I browsed around there for ½ hour before I actually found the depot so I got there about half past 9 – 10 o'clock at night. The next morning I am in the back of a truck going up to Burei 120 miles north. I got up there and my colleague handed me a cold

beer as I got off the truck which I dowsed in too much of a hurry and finished up with stomach cramps and collapsed on the floor.

BC You know how it's always been said when our army and so forth have joined with English that they didn't particularly like the informality of our NZ troops.

Well the English officers took time to get used to the informality of the NZ troops – no question about that.

BC You wouldn't have had that problem in Fiji, would you?

No we were our own self-contained group

CW There wasn't any British officers there, were there?

Well the only British officer I contacted was Ian and he was an absolute gentleman. He treated me as a sergeant in every way friendly.

BC My husband says the army runs on its sergeants – without the sergeants the army couldn't function…

…no question about that. I was a Warrant Officer Class 2. I was a Sergeant and it is my firm conviction that the army runs on the NCOs

A souvenir of the evening spent with the Free French ship Triumphant on board 20th Oct 1941.
That was a French ship which was part of the flotilla that engaged in the Coral Sea battle. I think it survived but that was the fastest ship on the sea at the time. It did 42 knots which is about 50 miles per hour and it was a communications ship. You see it is very lightly armed – it has a little 4 inch gun there and another one back here and a torpedo tube on each side and that's it – That's all it had but it was choker block full of radio gear as a communication ship. What it would do – there would be a convoy or something like that and this thing would be whipping in and out of the convoy, round and round and back and forth maintaining communications.

CW So you did have some connection with the French Intelligence.

Not the Intelligence necessarily. The Petty Officers on this ship. When we were in Suva we were visited by naval ships of every allied nation, Americans, Canadians, British, Australians, New Zealand and the French and Dutch – they all came into Suva at various times. Each time they came in, in the Sergeants Mess would go down and invite the Petty Officers from the equivalent rank to come up and have an evening with us. They in turn would invite us down to the ship including the SS Triumphant and I broke up the party by standing on the mess table and banging my head on the bulkhead and singing the *Marseilles* in French. They thought it was absolutely marvellous.

CW Did you learn that at Auckland Grammar? Bill loves it too and he went to Mt Albert Grammar. It just seems strange to me that they would be taught the French National anthem in French in a NZ public school.

French was a required subject and I took a keen interest in French – it was my top subject
So they gave each of us a picture of the ship and a can of cigarettes about that big.
That photograph is Suva town and this is Sergeants' Mess dinner – I think August 1941.

BC And when these ships came in, they broke up the monotony?

Oh absolutely – most of them – a bit of bash

BC Was their food different?

Well it is interesting. We compared notes with the various ships that came in and the cleanest and tidiest and most general air of efficiency was the Dutch without any question. Closely followed by the NZ, Australia, British, Canadian and the French were at the bottom of the list. They were terrible, they had a mulatto crew and they had 2 messes – they had the officers' mess, they had the sergeants' mess and they had the Chief Petty officers' mess and the Petty Officers' mess was being renovated so we were shoved into the Chief Petty officers' mess which was a bit crowded but what a shambles. Stuff all over the place, clothing and bits and pieces that came off the walls – a general sort of smell of greasy cooking and things – not a pleasant sight. But the Dutch on the other hand, you go in there and its like walking into a palace. Beautifully appointed, the furniture is perfect for the purpose and the walls all beautifully painted. On the wall there is a tap coming out of the wall, and you just go up with your mug and shooo, get yourself a beer – all laid on.

BC Did you make notes about the food

No we didn't make any particular notes about the food but I made a few notes here some time ago

BC And women were never invited into these messes?

The officers' mess occasionally would have a ladies night and that was the only time that women, until women officers came along, that was the only time that women came into the messes. Particularly a male domain.

BC And you got used to that male domain

Well it's a bit inevitable – you just have to put up with it. I was in the Army for 5 years and 5 weeks – You get the odd break on leave and so on, but it wasn't all dull and monotony by any means. Within a group like that you form a fellowship which you …

BC…which takes the place of relationships that you would have…..

….yeh well you substitute for normal family relationships – you become a family. Inevitably there are some conflicts, character and so on, but fairly rarely because you would be the person responsible for that conflict – you'd be very quickly ostracised, then he realises his mistake and comes back into the fold

BC Is that why war makes such strong bonds.

I was never on active service in the sense I had bullets flying around my head. It just so happened that my service protected me from all that but I can imagine that those who were subject to that sort of trauma would form a very close bond to the extent of going out and hazarding their own life to save their mate – that sort of thing. It wasn't demanded of you it was just an instinctive thing to do – in fact it was discouraged in the sense – its not good having two casualties when one will do – it reduces the force and the Americans had a different attitude to that altogether. If anybody is injured, the whole caboodle brings him back, regardless of what is going on and that is to their detriment because they lose the battle.

CW One of the Fijian boys, he won the VC, he was caught out wounded and Japanese all round and he knew that his troops were going to come and rescue and he knew that the other Fijian boys would inevitably be shot because of the fire that was coming so although he was wounded, he raised himself up on his arms and took the bullets and was killed. He got the VC for that. Its dreadful.

BC Its really interesting that we are talking about a bond and that was one of the reasons put forward for women in the army. "We cant have women in the army because men would be trying to save them"

CW I think that still applies

BC But we are saying here that men would try and save their mates – its quite interesting

Yes it is an instinctive thing.

CW I think women do cause more of a problem in that like that girl in Iraq that was taken prisoner and there is the question of will they be raped. Not that men cant be but there you go.

That's' right – that's very true. --- of the group as it were, diluted by the fact that it has got these worries.