



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL WARFARE ORAL HISTORIES

Interview Number 13. Lieutenant Gordon Richter, Operation SEMUT 2

Interviewed by Dave Sheehan

Commentator ([00:00:01](#)): Gordon Richter enlisted into the AIF in June, 1940 with the Special Wireless Section of the 1st Australian Corps Signals after service in the Middle East, he returned to Australia and was commissioned. He joined Z Special Unit in 1943, when they were looking for an officer with heavy wireless experience to operate from a junk in the South China sea. At one stage, he manned a radio station in Darwin and waited in vain for three months for communications, with RIMAU¹, when communications difficulties developed with some mode, one Gordon volunteered to go to Borneo and sort things out despite being given one week to do so. He was still there three months later, when the war ended, he had filled the role of a wireless operator for a forward party operating under the leadership of the SEMUT 2 to IC Captain Eric Edmeades. Gordon is talking with Dave Sheehan

Dave Sheehan ([00:01:07](#)): Tonight it's my pleasure to be talking with Gordon Richter about his experiences with Z Special Unit in Borneo during the Second World War. Gordon, could you start off by telling us, how you joined the Army and where you served and in what capacity before you went into Z Special,

Gordon Richter ([00:01:24](#)): It was the prior to the Wars in the militia and the Australian Corps of Signals, which was an attached to the 4th Division at Albert Park. When the war started or shortly after in 1940, I joined the AIF and signed up to see more and driving and seeing water as turn left for the 8th Division signals turn right for Corps Signals. So having been in the Corps of Signals already, I thought best to stick with the Corps of Signals. Fortunately, so I turned right and went into Corps Signals and from there, I was posted to a Special Wireless Unit train at the was just starting off just being fo. I was promoted Sergeant straight away because I had the experience militia and in 1940, we embarked for the Middle East and arrived in North Africa just towards the latter stages of the campaign there.

[\(00:02:36\)](#): Then after short time in the desert, we embarked again and went to Greece, went right through the Grecian campaign until Germany, of course, German forces came in and and the stokers soon. So I asked to retire smartly from Greece. We're back to Palestine where we're all re-equipped and into Syria and the Syrian campaign and after which of course the Japanese entered the war and it wasn't long before we were returned to Australia arriving back in Adelaide. I was transferred with my section across to Western Australia and there I was commissioned and posted to 6th Brigade Signals attached to the 4TH Division. I stayed with them for quite a few

¹ Operation RIMAU the second raid into Singapore in 1944.



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months and we travel all around the South of Australia up as far as Cairns and back to Townsville and I could see, I wasn't getting very far with Brigade Signals and I engineered a transfer then to 1st Army where I knew quite a few of the officers and two from a previous section previous Corps.

[\(00:04:05\)](#): And it was there that on one night down in Brisbane that I met an old friend of mine from one of the Wireless Units in Corps of Signals, Keith Harris and he said that he was looking for somebody to go on a Chinese junk. Are they going to put other high powered transmitter on it? And, it was to go up into the, somewhere in the China sea and act as a relay station for troops in the field. Sounds a crazy idea. Now I'm the probably quite impossible to do such a thing, but it sounded all right then at the time it was just as well as we were all a bit frustrated and not doing anything. So anything was better than nothing. So, when Keith left that night, promised me that he'd put my name forward for this particular operation.

[\(00:05:16\)](#): And I'd hear from him. Well, give months went by and then I received an order to report down to Melbourne arriving at the moment. I was directed around to Headquarters in Toorak, in South Yarra and reporting there went down and a lot of British Army officers and others were there. And strangely enough my old section officer with whom I was worked whilst I was in Western Australia one more Israel, or he was a veteran from [inaudible] and a very splendid person beautiful, beautiful fellow altogether. Anyhow, Marie took me around, introduced me to everybody there, including the Second in Command to Jock Gamble. And Jock was quite a most remarkable person as though up to know him later. He was an executive of a French plantation company in Malaya and before the Japanese invaded Malaya, he'd been to Java and Sumatra establishing an escape lane there, people that were escaping from Singapore and Malaysia, he was one of the last to leave a job. He, with a party of others, about 14 of them sailed in an old fishing boat, all the way to Ceylon and from Ceylon, he was sent back to Melbourne, to form what became known as Services' Reconnaissance Department which is Z Special Unit.

[\(00:07:30\)](#): So I was accepted after some time and I didn't do that. I go onto a Chinese junk up in the South China sea with a high-powered transmitter. So then I sent to Darwin and where I had to erect a station, quite a large radio station there, a lot of equipment and quite a few signallers where we were engaged then in setting up a listening watch for the party, which had just departed Australia being RIMAU, the return trip to Singapore. Of course, no signals ever came from the party and after about three or four months there, I went back to Melbourne and was sent from there to take over the forward link in what was then Dutch New Guinea in Hollandia. In Hollandia, we had quite a big transmitter there, which we were working two parties in the field and back to Melbourne right on under General MacArthur's nose.

[\(00:08:51\)](#): And gentlemen MacArthur did not like other people operating radio sets in his area, although he never came to know that we were there and we provided that, but time John Campbell came up to a Hollandia and established a forward Headquarters for Z Special there. Then with the 8th Army, I moved up to Morotai and



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once more established a radio base station in Morotai that was working quite well, except as time went on, we had communication with everybody quite well, except with SEMUT 1 had gotten into a lot of trouble and all the communications we were receiving from them were being routed through Darwin, Melbourne, and back to us, which took a long time to come through. Yeah. So, this time John Campbell had arrived, and he said, what can we do about this?

[\(00:10:05\)](#): And I was reading the case to no good. I said, well, everything's okay. This end, it's a, it's the other end of that's at fault and he said, what can we do about that? I said, well, I could go in there and have a look and see what I can do. And he said, well, you can't do that. You go and headquarters staff, and it'd be ridiculous for you to go in. So about three or four days later, he called me up and he said, that might be a bad idea if you did give me overlook. We'll give you one week. So, it was off by a Mitchell bomber, and I was loaded up with all the gear. I thought I might need small transmitters and battery chargers and various other equipment I put on board and arriving at Tara.

[\(00:10:55\)](#): Then I went into the IWF radio station there and use the equipment to contact at one Bob long, there was the operator there, all blonde, but in the book about SEMUT 1 and told him I was coming in the following day to have a look around. So, then transport was to be provided by the RAAF. Transport happened to be an Auster aircraft, which I loaded up as much as possible and got myself a board and the pilot, I happened to be Fred Chaney. Well, Frick Janie was piled off to Fred Chaney to me then, but later on, when I returned, I've been in malaria after the war came back here, I see the Fred was so Frederick and quite some note in Perth, anyhow, Fred took off and he was confident that we could reach allow it, which happened to be a, quite beyond the point of no return. But without incident we went in and landed on this strip that had been engineered and laid well, Bob Griffith said was a split bamboo strip, which they'd laid cleared the jungle and laid the strip out. So having arrived there met Tom Harrison, the wild man of Borneo been lots of tales about Tom. He was a first-class fellow. He did a first-class job.

[\(00:12:56\)](#): And he raised me and showed me all round his little part of the world below it. I fixed up the trouble with the Lake, the radio link, which fortunately didn't take too long, and Tom suggested that CNN zones there and everything was going all right, then what about going forward one of the forward bases and being a radio operator. So, I thought, well, that doesn't sound too bad. I'll try that for a while. So Eric Edmeades, Captain Eric Edmeades was going for the next day to his forward base in Surat and I went with him. It was a quieter, quite a hard slog uphill down, down, over mountains, across rivers and we eventually reached his little base. and then I met up with Col McPherson and Bob Griffiths. The engineer from, from the strip wild was handling all the medical side of things and in long seminar and Eric was the fighting soldier. So I set up my transmitter that I'd bought along, which replaced the runners, which they relied upon two days to base and do those bags and which wasn't a very fast way to maintain the communication and without our transmitter working back to



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Bob long, everything was going okay and week in there gradually stretched out to about three months.

[\(00:15:15\)](#): The only trouble we had with communications in the forward post was the looking after batteries, dry batteries road, K for a short time. But when you have to throw them away, because they don't last very long wet batteries, you have to have some means of charging them. Well, I'd taken in taken in a small wood fired boiler attached to a steam generator, which was all right while it was running, which was about five minutes, and it was only a small unit. So, you'd have to undo the, the plate at the top and fill it up with water and screw it up again and start it up and run for another five minutes and repeat the operation again. Well, trouble was that, although it was getting power back into the batteries slowly the seals were the rubber seals weren't totally up to it very well. So, after a while, we would see that that wasn't going to be a very much practical use. So, we relied then more on an American hand generator that I'd taken in also. That was one where you just worked the handles, straddle the mounting and work, the handles to supply the power that requires manpower. Of course, Bob Griffith tried it and he didn't try it very light at all too hard.

[\(00:17:01\)](#): He was out. And the only other person we had around there that could possibly be of any use was a coastal Malay who's suspected of collaborating with the Japs on the coast and he was with us while they're arranging for escort back to Tom Harrison's headquarters. So, I thought he might be interested to provide a little power and we could put in a good word for him, which I told him, you know, if he could pump away at the handles, well, I'd put in a good word for him when he went back to, so he was, he was very good on the generator and we overcame that problem, that way cyphers, everything was on a one time pad.

[\(00:18:12\)](#): That took some time to doing cipher signals and decipher them. So towards the end there, it looked as though we were winning the war and I just changed the cipher then to a simple transposition cipher, which we used internally and just saved the one time pad for the re communication to monitor about all I can think of day except we finished, well, it was after about three months, I was we were changing headquarters and with arrogant mates walking along one night, and we kept on top of a mountain somewhere on the middle of Borneo, plenty of mountains. And I happened to be listening to a favourite program that night as we laid on and a musical program and then all of a sudden the news came on and the war was over.

[\(00:19:23\)](#): So it was quite, were both of us quite shocked coming to an end like that. I said, Derek, what are you going to do? And he said, Oh, I'm coming back here to join the Constabulary Field Force, which he did for Larry. He went back after the war, but he died as you know, in the early fifties. And I said, Oh, it's too wet here for million. I'd like a little more civilization. So, I said, I'm going back and see John Campbell, who had already offered me a position in Malaya with him, rubber planting and after the war. So I I got out of sprinklers. I could fly back tomorrow, Thai saw Jock and he said, okay, you get yourself demobbed and I'll be going back shortly, and I'll give you a call, which he did, and I spent many years then in Malaya.



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Dave Sheehan ([00:20:30](#)): Well, the initial signals problem with Bob, was that a problem with the actual radio said that he couldn't fix? Or was it a ?

Gordon Richter ([00:20:43](#)): No, the sets themselves a Dick? The good, I didn't explain that really the sets were British sets. We were using, they were splendid transceivers there. Not very, not very large actually though the same sets that were used by a Special Operations Executive in Europe. They had them in small suitcases which were designed to look exactly like the suitcases that people were walking around in France or Belgium or, or any of the European companies. Of course, when they came out to us, we, the suitcases were very impractical for jungle use. So, as we're trying to put into metal containers with rubber seals and the webbing backs on the back, so that you could wait across rivers and still keep your sets dry, but the sets themselves were resplendent. Now Bob did work from [inaudible] back to back to Darwin, to Melbourne under good conditions. But the trouble at the time was just a frequency and antenna. So we made a few alterations with the antenna, and I had some crystals and we tried Chris's different crystals and found ones that really worked at the proper times that he wanted to communicate. And that was it. So

Dave Sheehan ([00:22:29](#)): What, what sort of timeframe was there with the schedules back to Australia? Was it once a day, once a week over?

Gordon Richter ([00:22:41](#)): What I recall now, it'd be two or three times a day. Yeah.

Dave Sheehan ([00:22:48](#)): And the information coming in from the forward base would be coded by Tom Harrison and he would send that information back.

Gordon Richter ([00:23:00](#)): I tried, he did encode his own signals and send them back to a base.

Dave Sheehan ([00:23:09](#)): Were there signallers that went in with this SEMUT parties? Were they operators or were they technicians as well? Could they repair the radios if something went wrong?

Gordon Richter ([00:23:23](#)): Not really. There's no facilities for repairing there's no tools. They didn't carry any tools like that though. No, I'd say anything went wrong with the set. It was out, it was fast.

Dave Sheehan ([00:23:37](#)): Did they, how many signallers normally went with H party was where if the parties into, do they take several SIGs and several radios in case of casualties or was it a once a week per party?

Gordon Richter ([00:23:55](#)): Well, more tired. I think the big three or four SIGs with radios are those operated without they still had their runners, small parties. Yeah. It was only where you had a smaller group that you could afford to have a signal on with. It



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Dave Sheehan ([00:24:21](#)): Was the organization have to run as was that done by the signallers. Were they responsible for that form of communication or did that come from Carl MacPherson and the other guys,

Gordon Richter ([00:24:36](#)): The leader of each particular group would look after that part.

Dave Sheehan ([00:24:41](#)): So that the six were only responsible for just communications and relocation and nothing else. Yeah.

Gordon Richter ([00:24:48](#)): Oh, well, they they're they were they were there to do the fight.

Dave Sheehan ([00:24:52](#)): Well, yeah, that's, that's what I meant. They were before they went in, were they also trained in the infantry minor tactics and the same as everybody else? So, if called upon like then if possible try and bring in guerrillas with weapons.

Gordon Richter ([00:25:14](#)): Which they didn't. Yeah. Okay.

Dave Sheehan ([00:25:17](#)): So I think a lot of the young SIGs that we're going to get on future courses would be responsible for basically the same task these days.

Gordon Richter ([00:25:35](#)): Yeah, it can't count very greatly. I mean,

Dave Sheehan ([00:25:38](#)): The equipment will all change and eventually still the problems of antennas and weather and things like that will still remain the same.

Gordon Richter ([00:25:50](#)): Power is one thing and I've seen some of those recent sets with the solar power, which I think, yeah, it'd be an answer to it, although you know, it's still got a long way to go with that.

Dave Sheehan ([00:26:04](#)): But I think what we would like to see is operators trained as technicians as well. Cause if you get a very small party where everyone has to be cross trained in a couple of tasks and the SIG is your only lifeline and the radio said goes us, we preferable. If, if somebody in the field could repair it, if possible.

Gordon Richter ([00:26:34](#)): Yes. Well, that's getting more and more difficult as the president sets unless what you could carry your space, because there's a lot of throwaway parts in the sets themselves, which you possibly can put Jerry, I don't know. You got no other thoughts you'd like to pass on to the, the present SIGs on the problems you had. Well, having seen the Sigs² out at Watsonia, they're a great bunch of fellows out there as superbly trained and I don't think anything I could give them a be much useful and I've been quite impressed by them, all the officers and men out

² 126 Signal Squadron (Special Forces)



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there. I think they're a wonderful bunch of chaps and on that note, thanks very much.
Thank you, Dave.

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