



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL WARFARE ORAL HISTORIES

Interview Number 17. Lieutenant Frank Oldham - Operations COLT and SEMUT 3

Interviewed by Dave Sheehan.

Narrator: Frank Oldham served in Libya and Syria after joining 1 Ordnance Field Park in 1940. On his return to Australia, he volunteered for service in the independent commando companies and became, in fact, an original member of the 2/8th Independent Company. He was posted to Darwin following commando training at Wilsons promontory. Following active service with the 2/8th, as part of the 6th Cavalry (Commando) Regiment in New Guinea at Aitape, he returned to Australia, seconded to Z Special Unit.

After training at Fraser Island, he operated in the Labuan and Morotai areas in Liberators and Snake Boats. Frank was a member of the SEMUT 3 party in Borneo in 1945. He speaks to Dave Sheehan.

Dave: Frank, could you tell us initially, how you joined the army and your previous military experience prior to being involved in SRD?

Frank: Yes, Dave. I enlisted in 1940, with the 1st Ordnance Field Park. Went overseas and finished up in Libya and knocked up and down the coast there a bit. A short stint in Syria and then came back to Australia. Pretty static back in Australia and when brochures came around, asking for volunteers for independent companies, I put my name in. I was accepted and went down with the 2/8th Independent Company, 2/7th and 2/8th and trained at Wilsons promontory. [02:04:00]

Being on strength, went around doing various things. Spent some time in Darwin, saw the bombing raids up there. As the war progressed, they grouped the companies into Commando Regiments. As a member of 2/6th Commando Regiment, we went back up to New Guinea, this was a second go, of course, and landed at Aitape. Now, prior to that, I was recruited to Z by a chap called John Sax. We're having a drink down the Botanical Hotel in South Yarra and before I knew what, he'd whizzed me around to Harbury, which is not as well-known as Airlie.

Harbury was another Z Headquarters in Anderson Street¹. It's the site of the old Italian Embassy. Signed all the papers and did all those things. Of course, it was rather unfortunate, we're getting stuck into them up at Aitape. The message came through, I was seconded to Z and pack up and leave at once. It was a bit embarrassing. I got back to Australia and put through a course at Fraser Island, pretty intensive, all the usual things.

¹ Harbury was located in 9 Acland St, Sth Yarra several hundred metres from the headquarters building in Airlie House.



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I was on full strength at Z. A group of us was formed, STARFISH 2, I think. The purpose was to go on to Lombok Island, up in the islands and blow some Jap guns which were causing a lot of trouble. An old friend of mine, Lawrie Black, was Starfish 1, who went in on the recce and not too many got out of that. STARFISH 2 never made it, being a lot of very angry nips up there. [02:06:00] From there, we went into Borneo, I was a Z Borneo man, operating in Sarawak and from Labuan.

Dave: Did you get placed in a group for STARFISH 2 on the later operation code or were you on strength and when a job came up, they just grabbed people from various locations?

Frank: STARFISH 2 was a specially trained group. It is interesting, our job was to go in and blow the guns after Lawrie Black and his boys had recced it. Our training, for blowing the guns, was on the six-inch guns down in Point Nepean, which were all there complete. We did a night landing there in the boats [02:06:48] and it was all very successful. After that, it was a case of being re-allotted, my role in the Sarawak, I was with SEMUT 3.

Now, if I can make the difference between SEMUT 1, 2, and 3 and say, operations like the one I wish to discuss tonight, Operation COLT. Operation COLT was what you'd call a small party operation. Get in, do the job, and get out. SEMUT 1, the SEMUT boys, they were guerrilla warfare. They went in and they stayed in. I was doing a bit of both; I had a foot in both camps. In Labuan, I was doing these small party ops, which I did several actually and then in the latter stages of the war went into Sarawak to back up the other two SEMUT teams, went in with SEMUT 3. I was doing a cross between small party ops and guerrilla warfare.

Dave: Could you go into more detail on the COLT operation, the small party [02:08:00] operation?

Frank: Yes, now Operation COLT, there was an actual intention there. Fortunately, being at the latter part of the war, some of these records survived and the intention of Operation COLT, there was myself, an interpreter and five other ranks. I read, "You will extract alive, if possible, the Japanese Kempetai Sergeant Major, Kamamoto. Same as the two China men, together with the government clerk Bracus [02:08:33] (at your discretion). The first priority of the whole operation is the Japanese."

Now, Sepetang's a small village on the west coast of Borneo. Oh, there was Jap parties wandering more or less up and down the coast, it was a case of hit and miss. A characteristic of Operation COLT was that it was a seaborne insertion and get back. What's the word? Insertion and pick up. Will I keep going?

Dave: Yes.

Frank: Good. Anyway, we headed off, 16th to the 18th of July 1945. We left Labuan in one of the Snake Boats. I have these figures fortunately in my mind, 2300 hours and we were to land near the village of Sepetang at 0400. Well, that's where things



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started going wrong. We ran into a US PT boat and the next moment, we were closer to the shore, the next moment the big search light goes on and, of course, we're in some amount of trouble. The Skipper of the Snake Boat was a very resourceful chap. He grabbed the oil lamp and dashed the signal off [02:10:00] to the PT boat. Very shortly after, the light went out and they whizzed off. I said to him, I said, "That was pretty good." I said, "The signal of the day?" "Oh, no," he said, "I just sent them a clear eff off."

Dave: [laughs]

Frank: We decided this was the first thing to do. Our cover, basically, was blown. You could see us for miles from the air in the first light. However, there was no shooting offshore. We decided we'd press on and headed for the beach. Now, the mess up with the PT boat didn't help because we didn't land exactly where we wanted to, which wasn't very good.

Something else went wrong, then. As we were getting ashore, one of the chaps, who should not have had his finger on the trigger on the iron gun, did, tripped, and let off a long burst which just missed.

Now, our cover was really blown. We had a searchlight on out in the bay, and now, we'd fired a burst of our own, no silencers, of course, on the beach. Everyone went flat. I'd had a quick recce up and down the beach. We didn't seem to have brought any nips on our necks, no enemy action, so we decided, once again, to press on so we headed off into the mangroves. They were very, very thick mangroves. At this stage, I decided that, if the nips hadn't seen us on the water and they hadn't heard us on the beach, then what the hell?

Dave: Press on.

Frank: We got out the torches, and we did a carol-by-candlelight through the mangroves, got up, and dug in till daylight.

Now, the original operation was that we were to land at 4:30 am and get back on board at 10:00 AM with the sergeant major. Well, this was a little optimistic. [02:12:00] Come first light, we grabbed a native coming past, and first things first, found out were there any nips nearby, and where was the Jap living. I found out where his hut was, and, it must have been about 0700 or a little later, we hit it, attempting to grab him. Now, one of the tricky bits about this little show was the fact that the powers-that-be wanted him alive, not dead.

Anyway, he was far too smart for us, saw us coming, missed a very easy shot, me, and went bush. We'd messed that up. We did a search right across the area, terrified all the local villagers, but no sign of him. He'd got away, so back to the village. I had a little talk with the village headman, the old chief. Now, he knew who was winning the war, and he was all our way. Very smartly, he pointed out the local Malay collaborator who had been helping the bad sergeant major. We tackled him, and I questioned him



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with no joy at all. He wasn't going to talk about where he was, or anything, so I tried a trick.

I told a couple of the boys-- Bear in mind, this was all through interpreters. If you're in an unabashed raid like this, unless everyone speaks the lingo and you haven't got a full-time interpreter, you haven't got much of a chance. The last man you want to see killed is the interpreter, by the way. I said to a couple of the boys I'd organize this so, of course, I said, "Take him out and shoot him. He's a traitor." He fell about in great wailing and calls for mercy, [02:14:00] and offered to make a deal, of course.

Now, the point I make here is, these fellows, they'd been dealing with Chinese traitors for a hundred years. They were miles ahead of us, so we had the deal. If I promised as my word, as the word of an officer, if I'd let him go, he'd go and capture the Jap and bring him back. Well, it didn't take long to make a deal on that because, once again, I had to make up my mind what to do. I let him go. At the worst, he'd bring a patrol of nips on our necks. Well, we'd shoot that one out when it happened.

At the best, he might bring back the Jap. I had another talk with the old chief and the village grapevine, of course. He said there were no nips quite near, or were words to that effect, it was. I organized a few of his blokes, and they went down the track as spies. I couldn't split our group. There was only six of us, really, and the interpreter. We just sweated it out. We dug in, got our best positions, sorted out emergency plans between us, and sweated it out. Glory be. It must have been about 2100, 2200 hours, a bit of a commotion. In came our collaborator with a couple of his mates, and the Japanese sergeant major trussed up like a fowl.

Well, from then on, everything went right. We had our walkie-talkies to the boat, and the boat had radio contact to headquarters at Labuan. We very smartly organized-- [02:16:00] I forget the details, but we'd organized to pick up, first light, on the beach. We dug in there, everyone on full alert, and then moved him down to the beach before dawn, and in came the boat. I would state that, on occasions like that, those boats always look beautiful. Well, still no shooting.

There was 200 nips down the way, a few miles away, apparently, but nobody had told them. We let this chap off, of course, who had done all the hard work, and boarded. No shooting, we never got shot at, and got safely back to Labuan with the prize. Only one thing. I brought the sergeant major up on deck. I had him tied to one of my chaps with a bit of paratroop cord. I didn't want him jumping over or something stupid like that, brought him up on deck, and gave him a look at Labuan Bay. There was a chock of block-wood boats and LTDs dashing around. The look on his face made it all worthwhile.

Dave: What was the reason you were getting him? Was it for intelligence, or because of his treatment of the villagers?

Frank: It was a combination of both. He was a real little tyrant, and worked on the basis of, nothing like a few shootings and a couple of beheadings to get the natives'



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cooperation. He was causing a lot of trouble to the locals, but also, he apparently had quite an interesting background. I was aware, I had been advised he spoke English fluently, but he never said one word during the whole time I had him. They were most interested in having a talk with him back at Headquarters.

Dave: Did you find out how the chief and his men captured him alive?

Frank: All the Malay said is, "We knew where to find him. It's no good, you coming." I'm afraid, with great respect to these people, [02:18:00] when the soldiers come in with the guns, they're going to be on the side of the man who's got the most guns. The Japs' co-prosperities sphere had really worn itself out by that time. When the tide turned, well, we were in favour.

Dave: With your interpreter, as you mentioned that because he was the only one that could speak the language, did you take any special effort to protect him?

Frank: My word. My word, he was the most valuable person because, as I said before, in these hit-and-run affairs, if you haven't got command of the language, it's not on, really, especially when things go wrong.

Dave: What was he, a trained member of the team, or was he just an interpreter and nothing else?

Frank: No. I understood he had worked for the government in the islands before the war. He was an old chap, but he knew all the lingos backwards. He was the man. Normally, he would never be in on operations, but on a show like this, of course, he was a Godsend.

Dave: I've noticed, reading your notes beforehand, that the amount of weapons and ammunition you were taking, with every man carrying a pistol as well as his primary weapon, was that the normal case that each man would have two weapons on a raid like this?

Frank: We always worked on the basis of the more firepower you've got, the better. And don't laugh, it always impressed the locals.

Dave: Not particularly on this operation, but on some other operations, did you at any stage take extra weapons to, like in his case, present an extra weapon to a local chief to get him on-side, or

[02:20:00] Was that ever considered or ever done?

Frank: It's a good question and it highlights to some extent the difference between the SEMUT parties who were guerrilla fighters who stayed in, and the weapons drops to them of course, went to all the natives that were recruited into fighting troops but [unintelligible 02:20:22]. No, you're there, you did what you had to do

Dave: And then got the [crosstalk]



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Frank: You got out again. Now, sometimes you got out and, sometimes one didn't. John Sax who recruited me, he was a fine bloke, I dropped him in on a sub on one operation and put our John and we just never saw him again, killed and buried in the jungle, just another Z party that never got back.

Dave: Could you go into more detail about SEMUT 3, about what your particular part of the operation was?

Frank: Yes, so I think there were four SEMUT parties, 1,2,3,4. 1 of course, was the famous one that dropped into North Borneo with Flight 200 and the new book written by Bob Long tells their story. As it expanded, the whole operation expanded, SEMUT 3, where we were in Sarawak, the idea was sitting on the main river, the Rajang River

Dave: Is it there? [02:21:29]

Frank: (Pointing to map). It's a big river running from Kuching right to Song, in dense jungle like that, the rivers are the rage. One of our jobs was to prevent the food barges and parties passing up and down the river between the various villages which, even if that light stays, they're still controlled and anything that came up and down, of course, got shot to pieces, but in the latter stages of the war and [02:22:00] especially I would say, in '45, they were pretty well bottled up. The big landings were still to come, but Song, Sibul, Kuching there was an awful lot of Japanese troops there as I found out afterwards, but they were terribly restricted.

About 200 Japs were bottled up in a village called Song, which is along the Rajang, they only came out at once to patrol, they were sixteen to seventeen and I think two got back, the rest got the chop, and after that, I think they might've given up a bit. Mind you, they were hungry, and they were bad-tempered like all nips.

Dave: Did you have any problems with food with your party as well? Some guys have mentioned on SEMUT 1 and SEMUT 2 that depending on the area they were working in; they had a lot of trouble actually feeding themselves and feeding the guerrillas they were working with.

Frank: They had hard days and they got drops and they didn't get drops and they really did it-- Well, a lot harder than we did at SEMUT 3, where 113 Air-Sea Rescue flying Catalinas used to land on the Rajang and bring us in, the food and ammunition. By comparison to SEMUT 1, we had it a lot easier, except I don't recommend you being a passenger [02:23:37] on a Catalina or a Cat boat taking off the Rajang when you're running out of river and there's big bend coming up.

A bloke called Walley Mills was their chief pilot of some fame and it was his plan at Kuching after the surrender where they negotiated the surrender terms, the great people 113 Air-Sea Rescue, they helped us. [02:24:00] They weren't seconded to us like 200 Flight Liberators, they were special help.



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Dave: With SEMUT 3, as in the guys in SEMUT 1 ended up working as individuals often times a long way from all the members of the party and solely relying on the guerrillas', SEMUT 3 were you in the same case or did you end up staying together as a group?

Frank: We stayed together more as a group, but there weren't many of us-- Things were getting better organized and, of course, we were winning the war much more so than even 12 months prior [02:24:42] prior, in and around Sarawak and North Borneo. The lessons haven't changed from one of the old school talking to chaps in the young [02:25:00] school. My first advice, of course, is don't have a bar of it [02:25:05] because once you do a couple of ops, you're hooked and then there's nowhere else to be. You never have enough time, blessed is he who expects troubles in the ops, he shall not be disappointed.

All the other things have not changed, before an operation, necessary preparation, looking at maps, escape routes, getting all the thinking together, your own thinking and you have to be a man for all seasons.

Dave: How much time did you normally have prior to going out on one of the small party operations together [02:26:00] to do the actual planning and preparation, was it measured in days or a week or whatever?

Frank: Well, from memory with COLT, they were just sort of laid on and it seems so ridiculously easy after all it was 4:30 and out at 10 and home for lunch, but it was something all our troops were hardly trained, there was no training on the landings or on any of that stuff [crosstalk] All done it before, so laying it on was just a matter of getting them in together, they were together, getting the weapons together, we had most of them anyway, the intention laying on their transport and go. I would say from memory the whole thing was cooked up at my level within a couple of days, it was just another op.

Dave: Did you find it, that people formed a sort of pool of trained operatives and if a task came up whoever was given the command of it, selected his own people or were the whole group tasked by a higher headquarters and it had choice on who he was taking? What I mean is, did you find that certain people worked together regularly or was it a different people each operation?

Frank: On the little COLT show, I don't remember picking them, but I bet I did. I took my top team and they're all dead shots as fit as Malley Bulls [02:27:34] and when I had to make the decision or when I made the decision to stay overnight in Sepatong, hoping they'll bring the nip back, the worst, as I said, could happen, was to get a Jap patrol on our necks. Well, good luck to them, they'd have got a very warm welcome. [chuckles]

Dave: In hindsight looking back after COLT and SEMUT 3, were there some aspects [02:28:00] of your training you think could've been improved prior to going in or some subjects that could've been covered that weren't?



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Frank: Of course, one thing obvious [02:28:13] is, we land on the beach, some other blokes triggering off the AR² [02:28:16] now that shows a lack of discipline and lack of landing procedures. It's as simple as that, it should never have happened, a couple of feet to the right he'd have cut me in half. A few nips back in the bush and having a think about the world, in general, would have them right on our necks, so yes, we can say there, that was not good enough.

Dave: Did you have much intelligence prior to going in on that operation or was it a case of go ashore and see what happens?

Frank: You have general intelligence but in a case like that, it was go ashore and see what happens. Not a great number of Japs reported in the area that's why we went in on the night bases, we were lucky.

Dave: At the conclusion of SEMUT 3, what was your function or what did you carry out when the war ended?

Frank: That's another story. There was a great rounding up of prisoners and I think that everyone got a shock when they found out the number of Japanese prisoners that actually came out of these villages and who were still rather hostile and stories, they tell me that they had great trouble for several days of getting them to really lay down arms. At that stage, I'd gone on a very late patrol and when the surrender came, I was right up in Central Borneo, so I missed the fun and games.

Dave: [laughs] Just in conclusion, have you got any particular tips that you want to pass on or

[02:30:00] recommendations to any young guys that might be on a similar operation in the same area? Things that you'd think would be most important to know before you went in.

Frank: These are pretty standard. Maps, terrain, attitude of the local natives, pro or anti. Escape routes, of course, always important. Communications, most important, you can be sure they'll break down somewhere along the line. That's why torches were always carried. You can have the best radio in the world, if it doesn't work, you're either flashing a torch on the beach or you're lighting a fire, and that's been done.

One thing that keeps coming back to me which should always be borne in mind. Expect trouble. Expect trouble as the norm. Never be upset by it, welcome it because you've been trained to expect it. Time, again, you will never have enough time. You also, in our line of business, it's a great help if you have a bit of luck.

Dave: [laughs] Thank you.

Frank: Good. Thank you, Dave.

² AR is an automatic rifle



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