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Interviewer/s:	Victoria Stead [VS]
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Image:	

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

Time	Transcript
0:00:00	[VS] If you're ready. Okay so we're recording, so when you're ready please introduce yourself and begin.
0:00:09	Okay Doctor, my name is Basil Koe. I'm about 80 years old. I was born on the 11th of April 1937. I was about six years old when the Japanese arrived on the 21st of July 1942. It was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon when we heard the Japanese warplane just coming over the villages and the gardens around Buna, and signalling, maybe warning that there was an invasion fleet arrival.
0:01:20	And then it wasn't long before we heard the noise, the big guns, and banging, droning noise of the big guns in the ocean off Buna village and the government station. The community, the village people, when they heard the noises of the guns and the plane overhead, they started to run away, run away from the village to the bush. It was a very, very frightening situation at the time, and you know it was the first time that people were experiencing such big noise and the big battleships and the transport ships arriving.
0:02:35	So, it was so frightening. So, people ran away through the bush, and I – as I said, I was about six years old. I ran myself. We were seven in the family and I ran myself. My youngest sister also ran herself, and my youngest brother was – mother was carrying, he was small, small baby, so mother was carrying and we ran away to the

	bush. Just before the invasion, I and my brothers and sisters and father and mother, we were in the garden, first garden, first government garden.
0:03:46	We had a garden over just next to the – sorry second government garden. So we went to dig yams and so forth, left them in the garden. So the next morning we ran towards that garden, the name of the garden is Karako, where the first, sorry second government garden was. So we had a garden house there, so we ran towards that. How the other community went for safety I don't know. But children, parents, all dispersed, all dispersed various directions.
0:04:51	Unfortunately, we had an older sister who was very sick in the house, so we left her in the village. We left her in the village and mother was very concerned about her safety. Father became so irritable that he wanted to try and rescue our elder sister. So, he left us in the garden house and he ran towards the village to rescue my sister, elder sister. But towards the village, he couldn't enter the village, because the Japanese were there already, and you know, worried about her safety, he returned to the garden house, told us and the mother. Mother started weeping.
0:06:04	We knew that there wouldn't be anybody in there. At that time we knew that there wouldn't be anybody in the village because they would by then run away to the bush. We were right. Our uncle took the – took our elder sister with him to the bush. So, about several days later, children went on their own, women went on their own, men too – if people were lucky they went together as family, but many ran away by themselves, each went each way to the bush.
0:07:06	As you know, the invasion was about 3 o'clock, and it was getting dark soon. So, the night experience was very bad. Sky and the thick bush as a shelter, we slept around, you know around the bush. No cover, no proper shelter, just slept under the big tree. To make it worse, the heavy rain fell that made the life miserable overnight. Several days later, when each family started to pick their children together, all came together. So, by about two weeks' later, we were all set, but in various hideouts.
0:08:19	We left our garden house and then went to join where the most people were, and we found – and the father went searching in various hideouts and found our big sister. So that consoled our mother. She was weeping all the time, and when father came back and reported that, told us that the sister was okay, she was very happy. Weeping with joy for finding the sister. We were, after the Japanese landed, we were in the bush for about three months. We were in the bush for three months. The food was scarce.
0:09:26	Overnight we became you know collectors and gatherers. We could eat any edible leaves, and what-not. Luckily our fathers and elder brothers started making sago, so that helped us, that helped us. For about three months. We couldn't make garden, it was a bit hard to, or very hard to make gardens, and cook food in the day time, for fear of you know the planes spotting us. Anyway, after three months the help came.
0:10:26	There were ANGAU, Australia and New Guinea Administrative Unit arrived. So the police, they sent the police out to find out where the community, Buna community were. We had a very literate Solomon Islander who was a medical man in Buna, he spoke good English, he was conversing with the army people. So he told and directed the police to go and find us, where we were. So he did very well. The police went and brought all of us. The ANGAU had carriers and labourers with them, and ANGAU also brought rations, rice and foodstuff.

0:11:34	So they built the camp, the first camp was in Boanda, it's up the road from the junction, Buna-Kokoda road junction on the beach there. It's about, say about three kilometres away. So the first camp was there. It's not far from Japanese but you know it's a little bit hideout from the road, from the track. So we were there until the Japanese, sorry the Americans, the first troops arrived were the Americans.
0:12:30	They started to counter Japanese and it was very hard. We could see people, see the soldiers, the company of soldiers going down, the platoon, or battalion of soldiers going down. But very few returned in the evening after the fight, and it was a very sad sight at that time, to see many, many troops go down and just a few come back from the track. Very sad sight.
0:13:15	My mother and sisters used to cry seeing this. Anyway we were on that camp for, oh, three, say for about a month. Then the barrier the Japanese put over the triangle with a big gun, looking, shooting up the track, was finally held by the Americans, through some guides, through some guides help. Guides helped them to follow the eastern side and came over to where the big gun was. The held the gun from the Japanese and turned the gun towards it.
0:14:25	[VS] That was some of your relatives who assisted with that?
0:14:30	My father, Koe Bude, was the guide who helped the American, American platoon to do that job. They did it very well. So that turned the tide. So the Americans were able to move into the triangle, and the triangle was not only the gun itself, but also the Japanese forces were there. They just very heavily guarded, and eventually taken, taken. So that enabled the first, sorry, government second garden was free from danger. So the ANGAU built the next camp for us to move into, in there, in the second garden. At Karako.
0:15:46	So we were there for some time, and after the triangle was freed from the Japanese, the Americans moved down towards government station and because the very heavily guarded area, the government second garden. That area was fully fortified, with bunkers and fox holes and so on. So the area was free for us to settle. So more assistance from ANGAU came in, and we, we felt a bit secured, because there were soldiers around to look after us.
0:16:53	So we were there until government, Buna government station was secured from the Japanese. So the ANGAU also moved their camp down to Gerua, very closer to the old government station. At Gerua, it was the area, the area between Cape Endaiadere and Buna and Sanananda was cleared from the Japanese. So we were totally – not totally free, but we were able to move around at Gerua.
0:17:51	We were there for a while at Gerua, and then while we were there, I think it was in February 1942, my father and other Buna Sanananda, some men were gathered together. They were rounded up and taken as carriers to carry, to help the forces to Salamaua following the Ioma-Wau track and when they left for the Salamaua campaign, then we were also moved to Boreo. It's past Cape Endaiadere. They built another, the fourth camp for us to go there.
0:19:05	So you know the ANGAU people were moving us for security purpose, because the Japanese planes were, you know, bothering us, they moved us there. We were there and my father and others arrived back from Salamaua after taking Salamaua from the Japanese. So we were happy to see father come back in one piece, and so

	the family united. So were everybody, but you know we were very happy with our father coming back.
0:20:02	We missed him so much, yeah. And we were in Boreo camp for a while and the government, the ANGAU people prepared another camp again, to Inota [Inonda], it's the western side of the present Girua airport. So we were moved up there until my father and others, when they returned from Salamaua campaign, they were still working for the military, helping them. So we stayed in the camp until we had a good news saying that the Japanese had surrendered. So we celebrated. [Laughs]. With rice and tinned fish and tinned meat. [Laughs].
0:21:18	Yes it was very, very happy day when we heard about it. So that was in 1945. The ANGAU still held us until 1946 while the labourers prepared garden, big general garden at Doboduru. The intention was that when we returned home we would have taro sticks, bananas and sugar cane and we received seed from the general garden, when we returned home and we make our gardens with seeds from that general garden. So that was a very good intention.
0:22:12	So when I look back I see it was a very good intention anyway. Because when we returned, we had to start all over again. Start a new life. That was a very hard battle to, you know, being away from the bush for a while and out into the camp, and eventually return to the village. We had to try and resettle, it's very hard time. The government, the ANGAU was still supporting us the whole of 1946 until, in the beginning of 1947 we started to have taro, [unclear], kau kau, and bananas, and ANGAU told us that you know the assistance from the government was [finished], so we were happy.
0:23:16	Because we had gardens to have our supply from. So that was it, and so it took us from '42, so July 1942 to January 1947, you know. It seemed long time to us, but we eventually came back, back to our place. Reconstruction and rehabilitation – we found it hard, but eventually we had enough bush materials to rebuild to build our houses. We had enough land to make gardens. The problems were the potholes and bomb craters and so forth. So we, you know, the mosquito breeding and so forth. The problem of resettlement too, rehabilitation. After being in the camps for a long time, you know living on military supplies, when you come back, you start using your own food, you feel that you have to readjust yourself. That, to readjust you have to go through all sorts of sicknesses and problems. It wasn't long. We overcome those problems and got back to our normal life. So by the end of 1947 we were okay. Yeah.
0:25:25	[VS] So when you were in the camps, in the different camps during the war, you were eating army rations?
0:25:25	Yes, yeah.
0:25:37	[VS] Were there gardens at that time?
0:25:38	No there were no gardens at all, all army rations.
0:25:47	[VS] So during the day – so I'm thinking about the time when your father was away and your mother was in the camp with you and your brothers and sisters, some of them quite small. So your mother would not go to the gardens, because people weren't gardening at that time?
0:26:04	No there was – we were away – especially Boreo and Inota camps, we were away from our own land, so no gardening at all, no gardening at all. So most of our living

	is army rations. So mother couldn't make gardens, and even in first, second, third camp, we couldn't make anything, because the land was unsafe for us to make gardens, because of the you know, the bombs and hand grenades and so forth. So everywhere, the gardening was not, mothers couldn't make any gardens at all at that time
0:27:01	[VS] So what would be the activities that would fill the day, the tasks that you as children or that your mother would have to do?
0:27:12	Yeah mother would have to you know make mats and for us to sleep on. But mother was also engaged in doing something for ANGAU. Like labourers, yeah, would go out and get sago leaves to come and make sago, like this one here yeah, for camps and you know, other camps. For labourers, and for us as well. So mothers were also involved in those type of work. Yeah.
0:27:58	[VS] Can you tell us a little more about that, so making mats for example, materials for the huts, what other kinds of work would women be enlisted to do?
0:28:06	Women would go and bring those sago leaves, and kunai grass. Men who did, do the house, built the house, and women would bring those sago leaves and so forth, kunai, and the men would build the house, complete it. That's the kunai and the sago leaves [pointing to the walls and roof in the building where the interview took place]. That's these.
0:28:44	[VS] You were eating rations that were supplied by ANGAU, would they be given to an individual family or would you go to a large kitchen and be fed altogether?
0:28:53	It was very good at that time. The, we were very well looked after, it was each family was given rations. Enough to last for a week, and then we'd have more rations. We were fortunate, because seven in the family, and of course with mother would be eight, so we got rations enough for eight people. So that would last us a week. But then we have still more leftover, till we get new ones, because a large family, you know, you would have a store of food leftover. So we were okay.
0:29:44	[VS] What would you do as a child? Was there schooling that you could do, or you'd help your mother, what would you do during your days?
0:29:54	There was no school at that time, until we moved to Boreo camp. At Boreo camp I was already, you know, I can move around, save myself. So we used to, you know, play some sports or go fishing. We would pull some Americans with their grenades and they throw and get some fish, and we'll dive and collect the fish, bring home. So, interesting life, you know. My bigger brother, used to go and dance for the American soldiers, and they would pay him with food and so on. [Laughs]. So he would come back home with some silver coins and so forth.
0:31:00	But you know I was, at that time I was okay to move around, so I would follow bigger boys and bring some fish home for mother. Yeah. We could play some, just tennis balls on the beach, as soccer balls. [Laughs]. You know, it's, I mean, very hard life. You could imagine it being hard, in the hard life, to me I see we enjoyed. Because the camp life was very good. Soldiers would visit us, you know, take photos and see how we were. Both Australians and Americans. Give us PKs.
0:32:12	I would go and say 'hey, give me, give me'. That's all I know about English. [Laughs]. But it was very good, camp life. But still the Japanese were, you know, menace, air raids and so forth. Doboduru was a very dangerous area because that was the air force and military headquarters there, and the Americans, the Japanese would fly

	over, especially in the night, to bomb. Allied forces fired at the Japanese, you see the guns, the lights of the guns coming towards us, and towards the camp. We would duck down and hide ourselves.
0:33:12	So it was a menace you know, especially in the night. It was very safe, the situation, you know the last camp, where we were in was okay. Because all the gun points was towards the sea. So instead of shooting the Japanese planes, they would by accident shoot us, but lucky we avoided those, that sort of menace. Inota was safe for us, because all the gun points were towards the sea. So we were safe there until the surrender news was heard, and the ANGAU still held us until 1946, the end of 1946 when the preparation to repatriate us taking place. At the end of 1946 they repatriated us to Buna.
0:34:38	[VS] To the main Buna village?
0:34:40	Yes, the Old Buna, yeah. Old Buna Sanananda people were there together. Yeah.
0:34:51	[VS] How old were you then when the war ended, well in 1947 when you moved back?
0:35:00	Yes, I was already nine, 10, between nine and 10, yeah. I was ready to go to school then. So when the school was established in 1948 I enrolled. My parents enrolled me to the elementary school in Buna, old Buna.
0:35:36	[VS] Thank you very much for coming and sharing your story today. Is there anything else that you would like to add, or Margaret do you have anything to—
0:35:48	It's a pleasure. I'm indicating, yes I am saying that you know, the history, the stories about our problems were never covered in any history books. The military battles and so forth is well written by many historians, both army historians and others. But our experiences, the type of dilemma we had were not told in any history. Someone has to sit and think about writing those histories. We have historians, I'm sure they might be writing some, but at the moment I don't know of anybody who's doing it.
0:36:56	[VS] Yes I agree, they're important stories. Thank you again for your time today.
0:37:04	Okay Doctor it's a pleasure.