Australians at War Film Archive

Gwen Davidson - Transcript of interview

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http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1881

Tape 1

00:36 **Right Gwen, if you could just start please?**

Well, Gwen Davidson, I was a Miss Gow, I was born at Salisbury Road, Willoughby 1923. Lived there until I think into the late 20's when things were changing. My father was a dairy

01:00 man, we moved to Rozelle and life went on from there. I went to Rozelle Superior School then out to Riverside Girls School, that's when I first saw my husband. It was quite a big thing to go up to Rozelle to watch the scouts marching down and to where this scout hall was. Life went on, I made my debut and being independent, I said,

01:30 "Yes I can get someone," until my mother said, "Who?" And I made my debut with Harry Davidson. Life went on from there. I was apprenticed to be a tailoress and then the war came on. I finished my time tailoring, then I decided to have a change, applied for a position in the GPO [General Post Office] which I achieved, was quite a long

02:00 six weeks course. Stayed there until 1945 and then took up life again with a husband in Rozelle, we had an old Federation [style] home. We were to stay there only two years, we stayed there thirty-odd years, had two children, very involved in the community.

02:30 And then it was getting time to think of retirement and through illness I came to Manly for a brief holiday and we came three times altogether. Fell in love with the area, moved to Fairlight and it's been a wonderful change of life. Until the 80's, we had a frightful time in the '80's, nine of the family between '81 and '88

03:00 passed away. Very sad. And I remember when my husband died, I thought, 'Well I'm sixty-three, what do I do?' Fortunately I was a Tai Chi instructor and life went on from there. And I look around me now and I think " I've been very fortunate, I've had a wonderful seventeen years."

Fantastic summary, thank you. Now we're going back to the beginning.

03:30 **What do you remember of your mother?**

Beautiful young woman, long black hair, or dark hair and well, she was great. She had been a governess and of course her big thing, if she saw you sitting... 'Get a book.'

What did you read when you were a

04:00 **child then?**

I can't remember what I read as a child, but I can remember reading later in life. She'd look at you, 'Get a book.' And you could go to a library for about a penny and I remember reading The Don, The Flows On, and I think the third one was The Don Flows Down to the Sea. One of Tolstoy's books, which I still have, was wonderful, and still a very modern book.

04:30 And also, a man who wrote about Australia. All I remember he wrote Lasseter's Last Ride, but if you know books you'd know his name, I just can't recall it. [Ion L. Idriess]

And what about your dad?

Hard worker. And being, if you know anything about the Scottish Irish background of families, my grandmother was Irish, my grandfather Scottish, and it was always that when the boys

05:00 turned fourteen, that's when they had their first drink. My brother, my father's three older brothers, they weren't drinkers. But my father, he wasn't an alcoholic or anything, but he was the drinker in the family. And I think in a way, if he'd have been a more milder drinker, it would've

05:30 made life much easier for my mother.

What do you mean by that?

Well I think she carried the load of four children. And, their whole set up of life then was so different, you know, the woman, she didn't count. It was mainly a man's world and then we were coming up into the late, into the '20's and

06:00 my grandparents, as each man married, the four sons, they were given a home and a business and that's where I was born in Salisbury Road. And my four aunts were given a home. Except one aunt, Aunt Myrtle, she stayed in the family home in Marlborough Road, Willoughby, that's where the dairy was.

06:30 My four aunts lived a very good life, they never went to work. And then we were coming up into the '20's, I can remember going to school at Rozelle Superior School, a very beautiful little school, today it's a wreck. And we had moved from Willoughby, my father bought into a dairy on Victoria Road which then was known as the Great Western Road.

07:00 And I stayed there at school until it was time to go to high school, and a lot of things happened in between. Like you had brothers, and I was very popular with my brothers because I was a good cricketer and a good footballer.

Where did you get your blonde hair from?

Well I don't say it's true blonde now, but I did, I had long blonde curls and when I started school, first thing happened

07:30 was nits. And my mother, she just cut the lot off. But it's always been a bit, having a little bit of a wave in it, and but now it has to have a bit of a help, I'm always going to say, 'Let it go grey.' At school, I did quite well in history and maths, very

08:00 good. I can remember one year there was some big celebration on and I wore a blue crepe paper dress with silver ribbons. Then we had the opening of the [Sydney harbour] bridge, and the day before the opening of the bridge the schools all walked across, I remember that very well cause looked up at this huge... it was outstanding. And then I think things were

08:30 changing. With my father and the man he bought into the dairy, they could walk the cattle across what's now known as Victoria Road to a block of ground down towards the water in, what, that would be Rozelle, round the water there. It had to stop because the traffic was getting bigger. And the dairy closed down and my father worked

09:00 and also Dairy Farmers [company] had opened up in Rozelle and he worked there for a number of years until the Depression was creeping up on us and everything was changing. Billy cans were going out, bottles of milk were coming in and then the Depression came and of course everything crashed.

Before we get to that point, what was Willoughby like

09:30 **in your early childhood?**

I don't remember a great deal about it but from the front of the grandfather's home all you could see was the dairy cattle, that was all that there was there. And where I was born, I went over there a couple of years ago, it'd been pulled down but all the old stone work had been kept, and what was built there was like an English Manor House, you know, that

10:00 squarish look. And I can remember a big tree at the bottom of the street and my older brother said, "Now when you go, you'll find that tree," and the tree's still there.

Tell us about your brothers?

Well my older brother, Bob, he's still alive, he's eighty-four. Oh mad cricketer, always mad on cricket.

10:30 He was okay, but then there was me, then my young brother who was three, fifteen months behind me, we were very close friends, and he was also cricket, football, later on he wanted to do boxing. And he always seemed to be, it was a battle to keep four kids in shoes, you know, but he would tie his boots together

11:00 and wear them round his neck, more than wear them on his feet. And we played cricket out on the street which you can't do now, we'd moved from Rozelle by now to Lilyfield. And my older brother, he didn't include my young brother Bill and I in very much that he did, but they were good blokes.

11:30 **You talked about cricket and you being quite good at it, which part were you the best at?**

Our cricket stumps was a kerosene tin and I always seemed to be able to hit right in the middle.

What did you wear while you were playing cricket?

I can't say I remember many clothes, but I guess a dress.

12:00 I don't think slacks for girls were in and I don't remember shorts, so a dress.

What was your early education like at Rozelle Superior School?

Excellent. Very good. I remember a Miss Fraser who everybody was scared of and you'd tiptoe past her. But no, very good and of course you had

12:30 domestic science then, you did sewing which was my love, could always sew. But no, the teaching was very good, very good. And also I loved history and I did well in maths, and I wasn't interested in learning to spell correctly and I still don't, I need my dictionary. And no, very good, involved in sports and so on.

13:00 **What did you learn in history?**

Oh the world in general. Although when I look back now, we really didn't, because when Second World War broke out where was New Guinea?. But you did learn something about, more English history than what'd happened in Australia really.

So did you cover the First World War?

13:30 Not through school, but three of my uncles had been in the First World War

Tell us about that.

Three of them, Patrick, Eric and Ronald.

Did they all come back?

Yes. I don't remember my Uncle Ronald or Eric very much but I remember my Uncle Pat. He had been gassed and although he raised eight children, he was always coughing. But

14:00 somehow we never seemed to keep in touch, whether there was family undertows or something like that, I don't know. If there was, it was never talked about.

What did your Uncle Pat tell you about his experience in the war?

Well strangely they rarely talked about it. You know, never, hardly talked about it.

14:30 **What was Lilyfield like when you lived there?**

It's a very nice suburb and it still is, very nice. We lived in Alberto Street. Well really things were changing, we had a home in Rozelle which we had to leave and we moved to Cecily Street and where my young sister was born, it was a lovely double fronted home. Then gradually, with the

15:00 Depression all of a sudden work disappeared for everybody and it took some time before I think people reacted to it. Because the work went and I think you lived on what you had, then of course, it was called the dole [government pension] in those days, was bought in. And then we moved to a cheaper home in Alberto Street, no, the corner of Alberto and

15:30 O'Neil Street and we were there for some time. And it was one of the happiest times of our life because it was a long narrow house and down the side was a long narrow strip of ground and on it was an old chassis of an old truck. And we would sit up there and travel the world without going out the back yard. And lunch

16:00 time, my mother was very careful, she was very protective of us, she would build a fire in the yard and we'd bake potatoes in the fire. And it was a great life. The government were building a canal at Gladesville, and in our back yard we had a big

16:30 tin shed and he had a horse and dray. The horse was in the shed and the dray, he cut the back fence so he could get the dray out. And that made another part of a good life, pat the horse, clean the hors. Sundays was an interesting time. We would gather up the horse manure and lay on the top of the roof, at the back of all this was a laneway.

17:00 And as kids would come down to go to the Catholic church, wasn't it lovely, we would pound them with horse manure. Then I guess an hour or so later we'd be going off up to the Church of England school at the top of O'Neil Street and they would pound us with rocks they'd bought coming home from the Catholic church. If that happens today... they're into the police and so on, but that was all part of good fun.

17:30 And at night out, you played under the lamp post, "statues" and all these sort of things. And I think about now we were coming up to the time of radios. And the milkman had a radio and Tuesday night he'd make it open house for all the kids to go over and see Inspector

18:00 Scott of Scotland Yard. I think by now my brother had gone down to Balmain, I think it was a technical school. And then after three years I was getting up to twelve by now

18:30 A new high school at Gladesville had opened, can't just recall the name... Riverside. And I went to Riverside, I was only there I would say one year and things were so bad, the money, and it was thought better to keep my younger brother at school. And so I left school

19:00 at about thirteen.

What were your thoughts about leaving school?

I don't think it worried me, I knew what was going on at home. And as I say, I was the girl, that was all there was to it. And luckily for my mother, she still kept up her work, 'Get a book, get a book,' and I think that was really wonderful. And

19:30 she'd, now and again, she'd set some sums for you to do, sit down and talk to you and so on. That was something there I seem to have forgotten. And I remember being at the high school at Gladesville, Riverside, and I remember the head mistress, a rather nasty woman I think. And she said to me one day, "Have you got mosquitoes at your home?" I had a few pimples. Amazing what people

20:00 will do to break down your confidence isn't it?. Also you learned how to make beds and how to cook and so you had to have cooking money which I knew my mother couldn't afford. And anyhow I just left when after my first year. Fortunately we had a night school at Rozelle Superior School, so when I was fourteen I was able to go, to go up there.

How did you get there in the evening?

Oh you just walked up,

20:30 was nothing. My older brother was going and quite a few in the area. Everybody was in much the same position.

What position was that?

No money, or very little money. My Dad, from what I remembered, he had the horse and cart, they were building a canal at Gladesville, and that's what he worked on.

What did you learn at the night

21:00 **school in Rozelle?**

I went to PE [physical education] and dressmaking and millinery.

Millinery.

By now though of course at fourteen, I was working.

What work were you doing?

Well I wanted to do dress making but I just couldn't, but I was able to get into

21:30 tailoring. And in those days you didn't wait to get what you wanted, you took what you could get and hoped you would find what you wanted to do. But there was very little work. And I know that people considered the Gow kids wonderful, the four of us got apprenticeships. And I still sew, I make my own winter suits and so on,

22:00 so it wasn't a lost three years.

As the only girl amongst four...?

Three boys, two, no I had a sister.

Oh you did?.

Yeah, she's seven years behind me, she's up at Dorrigo. And she also did tailoring.

Did you have particular responsibilities within the family even when you were young?

Yes. My mother had some bouts of, well I can remember

22:30 when my, she was pregnant with my sister, she wasn't at all well, she was in bed most of the time. And, well I had to just get in and help, I don't think I had to do a lot but it was just be supportive of my Dad and so on. Then later on as I got older, I was apprentice

23:00 and I can remember she had a hysterectomy, and I had to take off two weeks, look after the family. And as my sister grew I made her clothes and to be apprentice I got seven shillings and four-pence a week. And as I progressed I had a wonderful woman, Rita Hoorigan. There were six apprentices, I don't even know if they

23:30 ever passed, cause she said I was the sewer. Sydney Tech., she took me out of that and taught me herself and she said, "They'll never make a tailoress of you," she just left the others there. I don't know what happened to them. And she concentrated, and I'll never forget her words, "Gwen, take it out and do it again."

What was she like as a teacher for you?

Oh wonderful.

24:00 You come up into a men's suit, you had to ease the material as you came, tacked it or... down, when it was turned out it was flat, and that's where she would say, "Take it out and do it again." And really, I really learned tailoring through her. If I had to go back today, I think I could do all the padding necessary. And we specialised,

24:30 it was a big company, but I was in the private, we did orders, men's wear, women's costumes, dinner wear and tails, and I learned all that.

What were your hours like?

I would've said about eight until five thirty. But you didn't

25:00 work under very good conditions. There was no air conditioning and but you worked, and that was all there was to it.

Where was this?

Well I really, the first few weeks of tailoring I worked a very exclusive tailor, he was in George Street, somewhere opposite the QVB [Queen Victoria] Building. And

25:30 I had two long plaits and I would have to go to the boats with orders. But I didn't stay there long, cause he was very worried that I looked such a child. And so that was why I was sacked, not because I wasn't working, but he needed someone a bit older and to go there. And the firm I work with was Cooney's, a very cheap

26:00 factory, but I was fortunate I was under Rita Hoorigan's teaching, and I really learned my tailoring.

What did you enjoy most about the work you were doing there?

Oh, talking to all the boys I think.

What were the working conditions like, can you describe the factory floor?

Well you sat at big long

26:30 tables. And whatever was to be done, you just did it, whether it was getting a coat ready for machining, I didn't do machining, I had a machinist, who I came to know very well. And you just kept going, you had to keep your head down and work and that was all. I can't remember the name of the man who was in charge

27:00 of the whole area, but I know for a couple of years I was also the tea girl, until you progressed, depending how you went. I was there from the time I was fourteen until just after I was, about eighteen I think. And once again, things were changing again. We were looking at a war.

27:30 There was talk, I can remember with my older brother, we were both very interested in the Japanese coming down through Manchuria and so on. And that interested both of us, because we always said, "They'll keep coming," you know. And of a night time, with the cricket, course we thought we were tuned into England.

28:00 We weren't. You've no doubt read about that how the radio stations, they were not tuned into England, but they would make it up here in Sydney as though you were there, right there at the cricket ground. And we had a fuel stove and with my older brother we'd sit up until all hours of the morning to listen to the cricket. We were all, the

28:30 four, except my young sister, the three eldest were all keen on sport. And my brother at one time, see we were near Callum Park and my brother was in the Callum Park cricket, they were mainly what they call then the warders and all that. And Don Bradman came and my brother he scored. And also

29:00 my sister's husband Thomas Pickering, was a well known cricketer, and there's photo's around of him. He played in, could've been Sheffield Shield Cricket, I'm not sure about that, he was quite a well know cricketer and a thorough gentleman, a wonderful man. So, and see it was nothing, you could walk through Callum

29:30 Park [mental hospital], nobody stopped you. And as you did, you looked, and you could feel people you passed thinking, 'Now which one is it,' you know, 'that was the patient?' But you could ride your bike through there, if you had a bike. And have you ever been through there? Beautiful grounds, really beautiful. And up until about ten,

30:00 my Aunt Nellie who wanted to have children but her husband didn't and she would walk from Willoughby, they lived in Hector Parade, Willoughby, and she would walk in her night dress in the early hours of the morning to see my mother and us four kids. And gradually, she went into Callum Park and I think today you

30:30 would say she had a nervous breakdown, she just wanted to have a family. And when she could come out, she said, "No, there was no life, I'd rather stay here..." she eventually did come out and, but I think

she died of pneumonia.

How did having her in Callum Park affect your family?

Well it didn't affect

31:00 us kids. My mother would go to see her and my mother would say, "I don't know why she's there?" If it was today, she'd just need perhaps psychiatric treatment. But it didn't worry her .. and also she wasn't a patient who had to work, because my uncle, he was head of something to do with asbestos, because they didn't know it was a killer then,

31:30 and course he could pay for her. And he would pick us up, and he had a '29 Ford and he would put us four in the back. He'd say, "Now sit in the back, you'll get a longer ride."

When she returned from her time in the hospital, did they remain together as a couple?

They remained, yes, she went

32:00 back to the home in Hector Parade, because whether they lived as a couple, I don't know, I doubt it very much.

During the Depression, what other limits were placed on you as a family?

What limits? I don't know that there was any limits, there just wasn't any money. I can tell you where we got our fresh fruit and

32:30 vegetables, as long as I don't go to jail. Well my parents were really wonderful what they did, and we always had fresh vegetables, beautiful vegetables. And you didn't ask questions. You just thought, 'Oh well you, there's community hand outs and so on.' And then one night I heard a great deal of noise, woke me up, I went out and I couldn't believe my eyes,

33:00 on the floor was all this beautiful vegetables. And my Dad and my Mum, my older brother and a neighbour, Mr Bennington and his son. And my mother just said, you know, "Back to bed, I'll speak to you tomorrow morning." And she did. And they used to raid the gardens at Callum Park, so we were well fed. And there was course hand out, you would get tickets for meat and other things.

33:30 Our clothing, not so much clothing, I think it was dress material. And then I knew there was a lot of trouble in, you know, worry in the family, and my Mum would always talk to me. And she said, "Mr Bemmington and your Dad were caught up in Callum Park," and it was a Sergeant Fisher, and they were to go to court. And so they had a talk with

34:00 Sergeant Fisher, my Mum told me, if that went ahead, they'd let Mrs Fisher know just what her husband was up to. The local barmaid. So he didn't go to court, but there was no more fresh vegetables. But there seemed to be plenty of fruit and I think although my father was working, I think the government did give out extra coupons for food.

34:30 **How much of your income went to the family when you started working?**

My mother worked on three things. A third to her, a third I banked and a third I could spend. And the one thing I wanted was a sewing machine and I had twelve pounds saved up, and I really went to town to buy an overcoat. Instead of that I went to a machine

35:00 shop, just almost opposite Liverpool Street, I think it was Thompsons. And I come home, and my Mum said, "Where's your coat?" I said, "I've bought a sewing machine," and it was under fourteen, just thirteen pounds something. And I think they must've delivered it because I couldn't have carried that; it was a treadle machine. And then I made an overcoat, I've just gone from there. I don't do so much

35:30 sewing now, you buy a bit, and in fact it doesn't pay you to, materials are expensive. But the wish to sew is still there.

When you were working as a dress maker and tailor, where did the fabrics come from?

Well we had very big mills here all around Sydney, that brings back a memory. Woollen mills and jam factories,

36:00 pickle factories, and I was always saying, 'You won't find me in a jam factory or a wool factory.' And my mother told me later on, 'I worried about you, that you would end up, that's where you'd end up,' she said I knew I'd feel terrible, that you'd gone on about ... because everybody was working in a pickle factory or a woollen. But luckily I got what, almost got what I wanted, I did tailoring.

What was the smell that came out of these mills

36:30 **and the jam factories like?**

Well I never got there so I didn't know.

Where were they in Sydney?

That’s something else I wouldn’t know but they must’ve been somewhere round about to know I could get there. You had trams and to save money, living at Lilyfield, if I walked up to the top of the street along Darling Street to the Rozelle, say,

37:00 terminus, that cost me tuppence[two pennies] into the city. But if I walked down around the bottom into Rozelle up to White Bay, you know White Bay, that only cost me a penny. And this is what you did, that’s how you saved a penny.

What were your favourite clothes to wear during this time?

Favourite clothes. Oh, I

37:30 just really don’t remember. I remember my mother saying once, ‘You can cut up anything you like, but don’t touch the lounge room curtains.’ You made things out of sheets and jumble sales were all the go. Yes, you’d go along to these, in churches, big jumble sales, you’d buy, possibly buy a coat for ten pence...

And when you bought second hand clothing, would you alter it yourself?

38:00 I don't know that I ever bought anything. Every Christmas, no matter what, I had a new frock. And one time, .. you could do lay-bys , you would take it out and pay back so much a week. And some of the shops, there was a shop on Marsh

38:30 which is the end of Harris Street, I think that’s part of Sydney Tech. now, you’d go there, you’d go to Winn’s up in Oxford Street. And I remember one year I had this gorgeous voile, blue voile pattern frock and it had two blue, like, wings down here and buttons, oh I just thought I was wonderful.

Were you very interested in fashion?

Yes. But I don’t remember a great deal.

39:00 When I worked I think one of the first things I made was a brown skirt, which was easy, and I could make them even easier today. And I remember making my first coat, was a blazer type thing. I had a snap shot taken in the garden, I don't know where it went to. You wore a hat, you wore everything. And

39:30 then I found out, it was easy, you could buy a suit, and that suit cost me three pound ready made, so even then it didn’t pay you to make your clothes.

When you were walking the streets of Sydney, when you were working for the tailor, what were the women wearing, do you remember?

40:00 Well you know how fashion is, it just progresses. Most women wore a hat, gloves, you wouldn’t go without your stockings for anything. And I remember one day, working at Cooney’s, you wore an overall which wrapped and tied here. And you were not allowed to go

40:30 out at lunch time with that apron on. And one day I know I did, I thought, ‘I’m just going across the road to get something,’ and when I get down stairs, who should be there but my mother. She had on a navy blue frock and a big hat and she was horrified to see me in this working apron, which was no doubt quite dirty, down the front. And I never did that again, I made sure I took that

41:00 apron... I think you called them pinnies, took your pinny off.

Tape 2

00:33 **When you were a child you mentioned there wasn’t much money to go round. How did that affect what clothing you wore?**

Well I think there was hand me downs, my mother had a very good friend, had two girls, and I think a lot of swapping went on in families. And

01:00 I know a family were taking me swimming, and that was one thing she did buy me, but I think about two and eleven-pence for a swim suit, it was a bright orange, I remember that one. But I would say that’s how it was, just swapping. Shoes were all a worry, and cheap shoes, you always seemed to have blisters. You didn’t complain, you just kept going. That’s about all I remember of the clothes.

01:30 But I would say it was mainly swapping around. My Mum seemed to have friends with children and no doubt, that might’ve been somewhere you went to get clothing, I’m not sure.

What did a girl’s swim suit consist of in those days?

02:00 Cot, oh, like a sort of a knit and skirt. Put a skirt on lot of them today, you would have the same thing.

So how far down the leg did it come?

Oh no it was just like boy, the boy leg undies which are the big thing now today, that's about it.

Where about did you used to go swimming?

Ellington Park baths at Balmain, now known as the Dawn

02:30 Fraser pool. And my older brother, then me, my young brother, my Mum would give us tuppence each, a penny in and a penny for pie. We'd walk from Lilyfield to Balmain, spend the day there with all the other kids, then walk home. You just, you thought nothing of it. We went to the movies. From Lilyfield we would walk out to

03:00 Leichhardt Town Hall, collect the tickets, come home, have lunch and walk... The theatre, the Marlborough Theatre, which is now a retirement village, and we'd walk right back almost and where we'd picked up our tickets. And you thought nothing of it.

Sounds like you walked for miles all the time?

Well to walk from Alberto Street right out to Leichhardt, oh, I couldn't, it's a

03:30 fair walk but it just didn't worry you.

You obviously had a lot of experience around that working end of the harbour, how would you say it's different today than what it was in your childhood?

Well where I lived, you had Darling Harbour, all the trains coming in. That was a source of

04:00 just interest for my brothers. They'd go to Lilyfield Bridge and I'd tag along, on the understanding, 'You look after your sister,' and they would climb down to the train line and collect tadpoles. I wasn't allowed to do that,'You sit there.' A couple fell off the bridge and I don't think anybody was killed. And then you moved along

04:30 to White Bay with all trains. Now, beautiful. And there was a park there, Eastern Park, which is still there and to see it now you got the water, Black Wattle Bay, big restaurant, nothing to see. I believe Greg Norman [golfer] shopped there. So that's how it's changed.

05:00 **Certainly probably a lot cleaner down there these days than it was when you were there?**

Well strangely I did read at one time that although we had the White Bay Power House, everything went over us and here is, I can tell you, the dust here is amazing. None of us, we're all four of us are all still alive and so on.

Were there any rubbish dumps around Rozelle area?

05:30 No.

Somebody told us the other day about growing up in a similar area and how the rubbish dump was always on fire.

Anywhere near this area?

He was over more towards the Ryde end of Rozelle I think.

Oh Ryde, I know Ryde well, Ryde had a lot of fill in property. This is jumping ahead a bit, but to give you how I know about how

06:00 Rozelle's changed. When my husband's parents died, their home in Burt Street, Rozelle overlooked this Eastern Park, and then there was Darling Harbour. Well after the war years we went there for two years but we became very involved in the community.My mother used to tell people I was living at Drummoyne. Now she wouldn't, because I can't buy that home back. And that's how I know

06:30 the changes.

You also talked about being near Callum Park, the hospital there. As children, what sort of tales and rumours did you swap about the people in the hospital?

I don't think we ever talked about it. No. Because we would go there and you'd walk through and you could see it. Later, I went back, my son took me there to see what they'd done and we both laughed about how people used to look at you,

07:00 'Which one is the patient?'

So you were obviously aware that there was people there that [were mentally ill]...?

Yeah but...

It wasn't a source of horror or spookiness for the children?

No, and the psychiatric park, strangely enough one of my grand daughters' a nurse, she works there.

You said that you loved sewing. At what age did that hobby or that interest start to come

about?

07:30 Very, very young I could cut up and make doll's clothes. I could always just do it.

Was your mother inclined that way?

I don't know that she ever actually made clothes but she always seemed to be sewing something up to keep it together and...

So did you make the doll's clothes from off-cuts or...?

Oh I think just bits of rag you picked up from anywhere.

08:00 And I had a girlfriend, we always thought we'd open a shop, you know, ideas you have as a kid. We never did and I don't even know what happened to her.

When you were at school, at the Rozelle Superior School, was it just girls?

No, you were all together until you went into the primary. And because the boys'd hang over the fence and the girls'd be

08:30 round there talking to the boys. A lot of kids now say they wish schools were more separated, they, possibly the boys would do better.

You seemed to have a bit of an affinity with boys through your brother there.?

Well I think so, yeah. And...

So you interacted with the boys quite a bit when you were younger?

Well having started life on a dairy

09:00 and parents that were there, my father particularly, you weren't frightened of them. But there was no need to be frightened. And oh, we all went to church, Sunday School. And Sunday School picnics at Parsley Bay and I remember very well one year, they

09:30 put up a cricket stump. And my brother, they said, "You're going in it, you'll win it, you're right," you know. "And when you win it," they showed me what prize to take, it was a big bag of lollies. And there was doll's heads which were very popular, a type of a French looking, it was just the chest, a head, beautiful hair pulled down, taken back in a bun and you would attach it to a body. And they said, "Now

10:00 this is what you'll pick, the lollies." Sure enough I hit the stump, I took the doll. I was out of things for a long time, just because I didn't pick the lollies.

Did you make a nice doll's outfit for the doll?

No, I think she sat in my young sister's bedroom, our bedroom, and we just used to gaze at that.

10:30 **So I take it the competition was to hit the cricket stump?**

Yes.

And none of the boys could?

No. But I did. But I took the wrong prize. But they were good years, we went every year. We'd walk, once again you'd walk out to Augusta Street down to , I think , the Marconi Club, the Italian club, well the wharf was there. And you walked from Rozelle right down to there, off you'd go to Parsley Bay. Come back, then you'd

11:00 walk home.

Did the church play a big role in your family's social life?

I think so because it was somewhere to send the kids and it didn't matter whether you had money to put in the plate... It was sort of time where you didn't get much money so you didn't worry about it. And that amazed me, one of the Sunday School teachers, I remember her very well, her youngest sister taught me, but she's died. But,

11:30 Miss something, lives near my son, and she's in her nineties. And still going.

As you got older into your teenage years, was the church still an important part of your social life?

Yes. Then after I made my debut I changed from Church of England to Methodist.

12:00 I'd become very friendly with a group of kids, their family were masons, and that was to make our debut and I said, "No I can get my own partner thank you." And when I got home my mother said, "Who do you know that's got a dinner suit and all...?" So my older brother... said, "You find your sister a partner." And he came home and he said, "Well, Harry Davidson

12:30 he partners many debutantes, but you'll have to ask him yourself," which I thought was pretty rotten. And so instead of paying a penny to save a penny I started walking past his home. And he was there one night and I was making my debut, would he be free on such and such a..?. He said, "Oh yes I'll be... don't worry." He had everything, shirt, patent leather shoes, the works. But I knew

13:00 him before that, I hadn't actually spoken to him. See entertainment, Friday nights we would all walk up to Rozelle, Darling Street Junction to watch the scouts and the cubs march by. Well this awful tall lanky kid would come along, white gloves up to here, he'd get to the crossing, do you know the crossing there up...? Out would go the traffic that way then that way and he'd be blowing this damned whistle.

13:30 And the few girls, we'd laugh and think, 'Oh,' you know, 'terrible.' Turned out to be Harry Davidson. But he was a very keen scout and then they'd march on, then you'd all march home again, because your parents would be with you. Or at least my Mum and Dad would be, I don't know about the others, and we'd, you would all march home then. And this was the bloke I had to ask to be my debutante. And for six

14:00 weeks we went training at somewhere at the Chelmsford Hall on Parramatta Road and after that, hadn't kissed me goodnight or anything like that, he was just my partner. And he turned up with a cab, mind you, and my family thought, 'Turned up with a cab!' to take me to my debut. And then he said, "Would you like to go and see a movie." "Oh I'd love to." And asked my Mum, "Sure, I think that'd be alright," and we went and seen Gone With The Wind.

14:30 The next day I got home and there's my Mum and my older brother, a neighbour had said to her, "Fancy you letting a girl like Gwennie go and see a movie like that with a man." And that was the days... filthy movie. Just as well they don't see today's.

So that was a sinful movie of the time was it?

Oh terrible. But it was decided,

15:00 of course by this time, Harry was a reservist, in those days they called it militia, and it was decided, well, he was obviously in good company...

What year, sorry, are we talking about did you make your debut?

I was eighteen, I was born in 1923, so '23, about nineteen, about eighteen, something like that.

So that would've been

15:30 **1941 or something like that?**

Well I must've been younger because I don't, I think the war had just started.

Before that, before you chose tailoring, as a young girl leaving school so early, what were your options?

The jam factory, pickle factory or the woollen mill, there was just nothing. There was nothing.

16:00 And also I didn't have an education to go to an office, but you have to understand, the work just disappeared, disappeared. I've even met people living here, it didn't seem to strike so much over this side, but still there were people, they'll tell you, there was just no work. And most of the work was government, like my Dad

16:30 working on that canal with the horse and dray. Which provided us with entertainment, pelting the kids. But I don't think I ever thought of anything, but I would get into dressmaking.

What about your older brother, what'd he done?

He was apprenticed to a newspaper, Smith's Weekly. We were never allowed to read it.

What was he

17:00 **apprenticed there as?**

A lino-type mechanic. But he did go on to colour and until he retired. After the war years he was a very sick man but he, I think he ended up the Sydney Morning Herald.

What was the procedure then for finding an apprenticeship for you?

17:30 You watched the newspapers. Oh you just had to find your way around Sydney and so on and...

So you just, found a newspaper advertisement ?

I would say so yes.

And were your parents involved in selecting the job as well?

No it was a case of get out and get yourself a

18:00 job. I don't think they meant it that way but they just had to have money to feed you and clothe you.

You mentioned that the first position you had was with a quite exclusive...?

Yes, Peraggio.

And he was worried because you looked young...?

Too young to go down to the boats and so on, take parcels down. I think he was worried , I guess, fellows were still attacking kids, girls then...

18:30 There wasn't so much, well it did go on, well the murders were a bit like they've been this last couple of years in Sydney.

How did you feel about safety in those days, you obviously spent a lot of time wandering the streets?

No, after I left that Peraggio, I can remember going down to the stop past Central

19:00 Railway, you'd always think if you were lucky the inspector won't come around, I'll go another stop. I got out, it was a shoe shop, Gardner's Shoe Shop on the corner. The first street down on your right from Rawson Place isn't it, Rawson Place? You don't know the city. Rawson Place, and you went down, I think it was just the next street. Well I remember walking up

19:30 that street and I remember a policeman spoke to me but I didn't like the way the police man spoke to me, and I went for my life.

What'd he speak to you about?

I haven't a clue. Possibly he was only asking me could he help me or something, So I went straight up that street before the Capitol Theatre, and I went round to my left and I found this address. It was pretty old, pretty awful,

20:00 and I went up and they said they would give me a try. They were trying out six girls, but what happened to the others I never knew.

So were you conscious walking around the streets that something could happen to you as a young female?

Well yes, you'd been told not to speak to strange men and so on, make sure you had clean underclothes on in case you were in an accident.

20:30 **So you were taken on at this other factory. What did you wear to the job interview, can you remember?**

Not really. Well, it would've been still summery clothes, I imagine.

And was there any way that you could prove how good you were at the job interview, your skills, were they tested?

I think we were given,

21:00 I don't know, so many weeks to see how we went. And luckily this Rita Hoorigan, straight away when she saw what I could do, I think that's when it was her who spoke up, she was in charge of the table hands. There was a table hands for cheap work and table hands for doing what I was fortunate to learn, the people who gave orders. The clothes were made in bulk but then we had

21:30 the section where we did orders. And I think it was Friday night, you might have to work back because somebody was coming in for a fitting and you just had to work and make sure the fitting was right... and you just took it as normal.

So the factory did some off the rack work and then some commission work?

Oh yes. Dinner suits, tails and women suit costumes. That's what I, really I didn't know much about anything else, you did your work

22:00 and you had to get through it and that was that.

What was the kind of ladder as far as your skills and your position went, as you got up through the apprenticeship?

Oh I think you got a little bit better money but the money wouldn't have been much over three pounds, that would be top money.

And were you given more interesting jobs to do as you got through your work?

Well no it wasn't a case of getting,

22:30 more interesting work, you had to be interested in the whole lot. And by the time you got to the end you had to be able to do all the hand work to get it to a machine. And the machinist, it turned out, she was a

few years older, she would have been about three, four

23:00 years older than me. And it turned out that, well after the incident of Gone With The Wind my husband and I, we became good friends and the war was started. And being a top scout for a while he taught signals...

23:30 **You said before Gwen that you, one of the things you enjoyed at work at the tailor shop was talking with the boys?**

Well you weren't allowed to but there was the sink where you'd get the boiling water all ready. And the chaps on the big presses, they were there, then the other end of the room were the cutters.

24:00 So I was up making the tea, whoever was on the press, they'd have a word. I remember the boss saying one day, "You're not here to entertain," you know. .

Were you a bit of a flirt Gwen, were you?

No not really, no.

How many people worked at the factory?

Oh, well I, could be close to a hundred I guess.

Oh that big, that's why I asked, I wasn't asking for an exact figure but it was obviously

24:30 **quite a big enterprise?**

Yes. Then they expanded and took another floor upstairs, yes.

What were your bosses like?

Oh, there was only one boss, but I can't remember his name. But oh,you just had to keep going, you know, you couldn't stand up like today,

25:00 say, "Get lost, I'm off," or something, because you didn't know where you were going if you did.

Would you describe the conditions as hard or average..?

No I'd say they were hard because there was, you couldn't knock off for a few minutes and just, even two or three minutes, they seemed to have eyes everywhere. And, didn't seem to affect anybody.

What were the major discomforts of working in those surroundings?

25:30 I think the heat, because there was a big glass ceiling and that was bad in the summer months. But oh no you had your talk across the table with your head down and you know, somebody'd ask where you'd been the weekend. And I always remember Rita Hoorigan she loved the races. Saturday mornings sometimes we had to work, if it was a special order, and she would come in dressed beautifully and with a big silver fox

26:00 on, huge silver fox. She was going to the races.

What about breaks, how many breaks did you get in a day?

I think you had morning tea, lunch and possibly ten minutes in the afternoon. But you could all, if you wanted to go out to the toilet there was no, well they couldn't stop you or anything like that.

What did you do for lunch?

I would say you

26:30 took a cut lunch. Now and again I think you went across the road, you were right to the bottom, behind the Capitol Theatre really. And I can remember one day I had an apple, it wasn't time to eat, but I just sat there throwing the apple like this, and this Rita, she said to me, "If you get caught, you'll be in bother." But it was just, I would imagine factories are much the same today, you keep going, you do your

27:00 job, and that's it. You had your social life outside. And no, I wouldn't say I was a flirt with anybody.

Did you socialise with people from work?

No, no. I left the Church of England church because the old Rozelle Methodist they used to have dances once a week.

27:30 But then my parents moved to Bondi. The two ladies that owned the home, they wanted it, and the only place you could get anywhere was Bondi, because the war was upon us by this.

What did you know about the war that was coming?

Well you could follow where the Japanese

28:00 in Manchuria, then that film came out something Earth? It was about the Rape of Nanking and all that,

and you could see the Japanese coming. And when war was declared, because my older brother was with my husband Harry and my husband was very good in signals through scouts, he could Morse code, what they use on boats,

28:30 and also semaphore, you know, the flags. Anyhow they both decided that they weren't going to stay in the army, that was, oh, below them, and they applied for the air force. Well my brother got into the air force but they wouldn't release my husband, because he was a specialist. And he made up his mind then, 'Stick their AIF [Australian Imperial Force], I'll never join them,'

29:00 and pig headed, he didn't, until he was in hospital, he got badly wounded and with the other blokes, but that's further down the track.

So before the Japanese came into the war, what did you know about what was going on in Europe and North Africa?

Oh yes you were kept up with that, the papers. You had your wireless. The funny thing as kids, we did get a wireless, but my Mum would take the valves

29:30 out of it every night because if you didn't, couldn't play it, you'd have to buy a license. And we also had a gramophone from my grandparents, a square box, and a huge big horn, pale purples and pinks, and I've still got the first tape my brother, older brother bought. He was a jazz man, very into jazz. Bob Crosby's Bob Cats, it's been played that much you can't understand it

30:00 now. And my Dad said, "You play that again, you get out." Nobody ever got out. And my brother went on and he was a foundation member of the Sydney Jazz Club and he used to sing in a night club in Martin Place. He used to wear this grey hat and he'd run his finger around it, thinking he was, you know, Bing Crosby. But then that went with the war of course.

30:30 **Your mum sounds like she was very good at managing the house on a small budget?**

Oh yeah, we did. And I manage very well, I live a very good life. But I think it's all that I learned, that you don't have to live on fillet steak.

What about special occasions like Christmas and birthdays when you were younger?

No, I can remember one year my Mum telling us three older ones, we'd have a Christmas dinner

31:00 but there'd be no lunch and no toys, but my young sister, of course being much younger, she would get something. And I don't know that ever worried any of us. It was great fun killing the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s in fact and pulling all their insides out and saving the egg yolks. Things you did. Plucked out, Mum'd fill up the tub with boiling water and we'd all be into it. First of all the heads, WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK 's head would be

31:30 chopped off and that would run around the yard. And then when it dropped, into the boiling water and we'd all have a go at plucking out the feathers and then you'd clean out the insides. It was all just a part of life, that was all it was, the majority of people were doing.

I guess the WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s were only killed on special occasions?

Oh you didn't eat chicken every day of the week then, no. And no

32:00 hormones. And we would save up stale bread because another elderly lady in the street, where my sister was born, Cecily Street, her home was like a small farm and we would take all this bread around for her WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s and she'd give us all an egg each. We saved newspapers and carted them off. Bottles. I think we had a wonderful

32:30 grounding in life.

So what would be an average meal, evening meal, for example, in your house as a child?

Oh well there was always something on. I can remember shepherd's pie, potato on top, steak and kidney, occasional roast, and we had good vegetables. I never found out what my parents, my Dad and his mate had

33:00 against Sergeant Fisher, but it was something to do with a woman barmaid or something, they never went to court. No I think you did go in for the things you have today. But you had custard, rice custard, baked custard, steamed puddings, jam. No, I don't know, I guess you made do. But it taught the four of us a pretty good

33:30 way that life didn't have to be all steak and oysters.

And what about treats for you as kids, what were treat things to have?

Well I read a comic and my mother then, I think it was tuppence a month, and from then she made sure that I got my comic. I can't remember, it must've been like Dolly today, perhaps. And she always,

34:00 I remember her saying, "Girls are so different from boys. Boys can wear the same pants and shirts, but a girl needs a few things." And it's true. You possibly can live in your jeans and a shirt, t-shirt, but a

girl... it’s just the difference. Luckily my mother’s friends had had the two daughters, whenever they were going out, she would take me with them. We might wait until two o'clock in the afternoon to go to Clovelly...

34:30 **We were talking about your mother and how she felt that girls needed a little bit extra?**

Yeah.

Where had your mother been a governess?

Doctor, I think it was a Doctor McMahon, somewhere in Gordon somewhere. Even, now this amazes me, they bought her wedding frock back which I’ve still got, gorgeous. And she cared for the children while they was away overseas,

35:00 and that must’ve been, although it could’ve been 1919, there was a break between that. And her father had been down Picton way but he died very young from pneumonia and her mother, my grandmother, was left with my Mum, about five, and her brother about two or three. She

35:30 came up to Sydney, got a house at Lavender Bay, and there was a lot of private schools around and my mother went as house keeper and cook at a men’s school on the understanding that my mother and her brother sat in and got an education. And that’s just how long she was at the school, I guess until the mother died in any case. And I think that’s where, she wrote a beautiful hand, beautiful hand writing.

36:00 And she passed it on to me. Read, read, read. Never stop reading. I don’t have so much time now to read.

Can you remember what it was, the comic that you got regularly?

No, I haven’t the faintest idea. But it must’ve been something, I remember it opened up like, it was just paper, not a book, not like Dolly today. But it must’ve been something for girls,

36:30 tuppence a month.

That’s a bit of a contrast to be reading Tolstoy one day and comics the next?

Yes, well I found that Tolstoy book again, and in amongst a lot of old books, my husband’s books and some of his books, Boys' Champion, are still down the garage. And do you know I read it again, and it’s a modern book, it’s not an old story. Still holds your attention.

37:00 And no I love reading. And one of the best books I read, I think before Christmas, did you hear of Mad Cow? It was written by a woman journalist, she went to India. And a friend a grand daughter not long back from Nepal and then a friend, his daughter’s just back from India, and they both said, ‘The book was India to a"t" - India, everything about India.’

37:30 **Is that the one by Sarah McDonald?**

I think so, yes. I’m trying to get mine back, I lent it to another grand daughter who’s lent it to a friend, and I say, “Please get my book.” But no, it was well worth reading. And I think another book I looked for years ago, I’ve just had a clean out of books, but I think we’ve kept his book, oh my grand daughter might’ve, there’s bags and bags of books in that second bedroom. And he toured from, he walked from Pakistan

38:00 through into India . I just read whatever is going.

And at your home as a child, there was obviously a collection of books that you were able to get hold of?

Yes, there must’ve been, particularly those Russian books, they were wonderful, about the Cossacks and so on. But we had a, there was a library, oh there was a library institute you could go to

38:30 on what is now Victoria Road, and I think it’s still there, and get books. And maybe, well maybe parents were exchanging bits and pieces that they had, I don't know. The book, you were just told, ‘Read.’ And you read.

And was that just for you or for your brothers as well?

I don't really know. My older brother, three years older than me, when I left school he was then sixteen,

39:00 so I guess he was busy reading the Smith's Weekly. And I doubt if my younger brother was a reader. My sister, although she was tailoring, she was mad on fancy work and now at seventy-five, I think, and she still does fancy work. I don't know who, what she does with it all.

You weren’t interested in that type of...?

Oh I did a bit. But

39:30 I made my debut frock and we were going to a ball and we all had dresses to make.One Saturday about five of us, we had two machines and we all made a dress in an afternoon. It’s just so different today, they go off and buy them, couple of hundred dollars and

40:00 think nothing of it.

But for you to make a ball gown in those days must've required some significant investment in material?

Yes, but it was, what, one and sixpence a yard, and you'd put all these sequins. I had one that had all, a sequin leaf up here , so you just sat up and sewed and sewed. And then one'd be on a chair and you'd be trimming a hem and fixing things. You just did these things.

It was a social

40:30 **thing to do?**

Oh we were all going out where it was social, and we all needed a new dress and we're going to get, make one.

Tape 3

00:31 **Gwen, what do you remember about the path towards war for Australia in the late 30's?**

Not a great deal because we, other than the Japanese I don't think anybody took very much notice. After all, there was no media, it all had to come through wireless, and newspapers. I remember seeing, that was, I think George

01:00 the V was the king, the day war was declared. I remember seeing that front page of that newspaper very clearly. But I don't really think the average person... England, Europe was away, you know, Australia was just this little place that you weren't near any of this. And it wasn't until the war, the Japanese

01:30 were getting closer, and then of course when Singapore fell, that's when I think it started to hit home, what was really happening. And I know a very dear friend, she's dead now, she was a prisoner of war in Java, she was in Singapore, and they weren't even worried then. She was out on her bike and she saw some Japanese and she went and told them, they said she was mad. But

02:00 she wasn't. And I think that's how it was, we just felt we were invincible, we were Australia and they couldn't, they wouldn't come this far.

What were your thoughts about the Japanese before the Japanese entered the war?

About all I remember them saying, they all look alike. There again, you didn't have much contact, except, what, the Japanese

02:30 crockery and so on. Seems strange, I know, but you didn't, everybody just thought that we were where we were. And I don't know even after Singapore whether the government or anybody really took it so terribly serious. Except that a lot of men of Australia, the men were certainly overseas.

03:00 And I think it was a very interesting, how they got a lot of their army, see, men weren't working. And a friend of my dads, Mr Leonard, I couldn't tell you what Mr Leonard looked like now except that he was short and had dark hair. And I heard him come down and say to my Dad, he was much younger than my father, and he said, "Look Bill I'm joining the army, I'll get a bit more money."

What about your brothers, were they pressured to sign up to the

03:30 **army?**

No, well when it was coming, my brother, older brother and my husband they both wanted to join the air force. And Harry of course by then was in the militia, well he'd been in for some time but he wasn't accepted, because they had very few signallers, whereas he could teach young ones coming in.

What did you think

04:00 **about your beau potentially going and fighting overseas?**

Well I just think it was strange. I think you thought if he go, he's got to go and... I don't think you thought, on the whole I don't think you took it so terribly serious until it started to get closer to home, or

04:30 you heard of a neighbour's son been wounded or something like that.

Do you remember what was on the newspaper headline that day that war was declared?

Oh I can remember a photograph of the King George V and I think just in big words, 'War Declared.' But then I think after that, when you knew the Japanese got closer, you were taking more interest in what was happening in England.

05:00 But as I say we didn't have a big media coverage, you just had the radio and that was about it.

What did you think about Australia following Britain into war in Europe?

Well they were, asked for army and off, you just went off.

Did England have a big influence on you, do you think, when you were

05:30 **younger?**

Not really, it had influence this way... You started working, you know, you had, 'Food for England,' and then another woman she asked me would I join the group and they were going to form the First Balmain Red Cross, and we were going to help in that way. Balmain didn't have a Red Cross so off we all walked to Balmain,

06:00 about six of this group that we used to make our clothes together. We went down, walked to Balmain Town Hall, I have no recollection of that meeting. But coming home, walking back to Leichhardt, we turned a little corner at Balmain and there in the glare of the headlights was a motor bike, a figure, I guess was a man, women didn't ride bikes then, and

06:30 blood everywhere in the glare of the ambulance headlights. And behind us was a low fence, all our knees went, we said after, we just all sank onto this low fence. What happened to the Balmain Red Cross I don't know because the two ladies that owned the home my parents were renting, wanted it, and we moved to Bondi. And that started another part of life.

How did life change in Bondi?

Well there was a beach

07:00 to swim on. Join the local church and there and they had a drama group. And you were raising money and knitting socks, and by this time I was engaged. And everybody thought I was mad, I was knitting a balaclava and everybody thought, 'A balaclava for a man in New Guinea?' And then I remember getting a letter saying they all wished they had a

07:30 balaclava, very cold in the mountains at night, and they all wished they had hand knitted socks cause they were better for walking in.

Tell us about getting engaged, I mean these days it's a really, really big deal for girls and they're often presented with a ring and all that. What was it like for you?

Well I think we met another couple, Bill Lester

08:00 and his first wife, and they were going to become engaged. And, I don't know, we went looking at... I knew the ring I wanted but it was thirty-nine dollars, and that was Coe's in Park Street, it was a gorgeous ring. And I thought, 'Oh thirty-nine pounds for a diamond ring,!' you know, so I settled for twenty

08:30 pounds. There was a little jeweller's shop, would you have known where Anthony Hordern's was in Sydney? Was a little jeweller's shop and we went there and who should we meet in there but this Bill Lester, and I think her name was Jeannie. And I bought my ring in there, I haven't got it on today. Twenty pounds. I was disappointed

09:00 but we were saving money. Oh, I know, we went to City Tatts [club] for lunch and when the bill came Bill Lester said, "Do you think we've bought the whole building?" Cause you just didn't go in for those expensive meals. It was possibly almost nothing.

What were, do you remember what you ate?

No I don't but we were always looking for fish cafes, so maybe it was fish.

09:30 My husband, as an engagement present he bought me a set of cutlery. And while we were in that end of the town I lay-by'd a piece of lace, and it was the last piece of imported lace that they had at Anthony Horderns. It was Spanish, still have it, and they just had six yards left, so I lay-by'd it, just

10:00 for the future.

For your dress?

Yes.

Before we get to your wedding though, we haven't talked about your debut. Can you explain, right from the beginning, what was the significance of the debut for a young woman?

Oh that was supposed to be your coming out It was a high society thing but this was the Masonic lodge group, and I think they did things like that then.

10:30 And I was mixed up with this crowd, we used to make dresses and everything and we'd met these girls whose brothers were Orange lodge, their fathers were all in Masonic, and that's how we come to be, we

were going to make our debut at a Masonic ball. You, some of the boys were partners but I wasn't interested in any of those boys, and the independent Gwen said, 'No, I'll get my own.'

11:00 And we went along and we learned the" Pride of Erin", it's a lovely slow old time dance. Not as it is today. And we learned the Pride of Erin, you learned how to walk down the hall and bow. I don't know who it was that you had to bow to, it was possibly a hierarchy

11:30 of the Masonic lodge and his wife, and you dipped. And then your partner, you took his arm, one couple walked that way the next couple'd go that way, when the circle was formed, you did the Pride of Erin waltz. And then photographs were taken and then you sat down to dinner and then after that, well you just danced with everybody else. Dancing was,

12:00 very popular, the old time dancing.

What was it like having to ask Harry yourself, to be your partner?

What was it like? I wish I hadn't opened my mouth, when they said, "Gwen," you know, I wish I kept quiet. But I think it was just always in me to feel that I was independent, these people. But we really had two debuts, two dress

12:30 ups, because when the photographer went out to his car, it'd been broken into. So we had to get dressed up again in his studio...

What did you wear for your debut?

I had white chiffon of course, it was a sweetheart neckline, pulled back, and with two diamante clips just here. And you carried muffs.

You made it yourself?

Yes.

13:00 I think we all madly got on that machine again and sewed. In fact I think we all wore the same dress, the same pattern. The only thing you had to get out and find was clips to make it look like a sweetheart neckline. The diamantes were cheap in those days.

What was the importance of a sweetheart neckline?

Well that's what was in the style. It was like a crossover, or was it crossed over? I'm not sure.

13:30 Then you pulled it back like this...

What did you wear on your feet?

Well I couldn't tell you if it was white or silver sandals, one or the other.

And how easy was it to get the fabric that you made your dress with?

Well I don't think there was ever any shortage of fabric,

14:00 it was just what you picked. And possibly, it was like a crimp, crinkle cotton, which possibly wasn't in demand and you're able to get it.

Who or what kind of girls attended these debuts?

Oh we were all much the same, just workers. The woman who asked me to join the group to form the Red Cross, she also taught music.

14:30 And she had said to me, "Gwen, you've got a good, deep voice, you should learn to sing." When I went home and told the family, my Dad said, "Darling, I think she's just looking for a few more customers," and I didn't, I didn't learn to sing.

Who was the society that you were being presented to, at this debut?

The Masonics, you've heard of them haven't you? Masonic lodge? Well these, mainly these

15:00 brothers, like there was a number of brothers and sisters in this group and some odd chaps, well their parents were all members, the fathers were members of the Masonic lodge. Which Masonic lodge it was, I have no idea.

What was the class structure like in Australia at the time, that you recall?

I think you could say there were three. By this

15:30 time we were on our feet, we weren't rich but we were on our feet, then you had very, the lower, and then you had the high society. You know, you'd read about them in the papers and one paper we got then, because my brother'd bring home a Smith's Weekly. Another paper printed when we were young was The Truth, which my Dad read and put away, it was too naughty for us to read.

16:00 I think it was your behaviour more than anything, there were some excellent people, and I think it was your behaviour whether you were welcome to be in with the Masonic's sons and daughters. We were all mad hikers, we would hike everywhere, and we went to this place called Fairy Land once.

16:30 It was scorching hot, when we got there it was a bush fire, couldn't light a fire to cook your lunch, so we ate what we had and turned around and walked back to wherever the tram, we could pick a tram up.

When you did your debut, where in Sydney were you living at the time?

At Alberto Street, Lilyfield.

And what kind of a suburb was Lilyfield then?

Just your

17:00 average working suburb. Like you've got people, all sorts everywhere. Balmain I think was even lower than Rozelle was, it's the opposite now.

Was Lilyfield very built up?

Oh yes, no it was well, well built up. Quite a variety of houses, a lot of weather

17:30 board, fibro[fibro-cement building sheets]hadn't come in, I don't think fibro came in until after the Second World War. But no they're just good, decent, working class people. I don't remember any trouble... except taking the vegetables from Callum Park gardens. If there was, you young people didn't know about it, you were busy

18:00 with your own life.

When did Harry leave for the war?

Early in '42.

Can you describe Sydney for us when war first broke out, what changed?

Well I can only take it for how it changed for me, there was no work for

18:30 me. Because they took in the suits that they made in big numbers, they weren't being called for.They took in doing army uniforms. I was quite okay for a while, I was doing officer's uniforms but then that gradually slowed down. And then I was put on what was called brushing and folding,

19:00 and that's what it was, brushing the cottons and things off the uniforms and then folding them up to put into boxes. I just thought that was below me, very much, I'd been a top table hand. And a friend had applied to the post office and accepted and she said, "Gwen, why don't you put in for the post office?"

When was this?

I've gotta keep counting out my age... '37... I've

19:30 got a snap shot there marked 1940 so it must've been about then I went in.

When you first entered the post office were you still living in Lilyfield?

1940no, I think we might've just moved to Bondi.

Okay so first of all, Bondi, that must've

20:00 **been a pleasant change?**

Oh it was wonderful... oh well the beach.

Tell us about your life there?

Well we're in what was known as Fletchers Avenue, we were right on top of Tamarama and there was Fletchers Gully down to the beach and very nice unit. And on the right hand side of us was the McArthurs,their beach home. And on the other side of it was

20:30 .... oh I just can't recall the name. But I don't think we ever saw any of the McArthur's there because they were in the proceeds of selling the home. I was definitely at Bondi because I can remember sitting up all night trying to remember all this, that you had to learn,

21:00 at Bondi then.

Before we talk about the post office though, what did you do with your spare time in Bondi?

Well I was involved with the Methodist Church there, they had a drama group and they did Pride and Prejudice. I'd not been there long enough to take part in it, I think I was at the door selling programs.

21:30 And one my husband's friends, his girlfriend, lived at Bondi. You went to the beach or you'd go to the movies. And you'd sit there all day if you liked the movie, over and over again. Also we liked the theatre,

the Theatre Royal, always liked

22:00 the theatre and went there with Harry and seen The Vagabond King. Then whenever he'd be on leave we'd go and I remember seeing Gladys Moncrieff. And, oh and a few other shows, whenever he'd come on leave. And I think

22:30 it was mainly the beach or you'd walk across from Bondi, still walking, to Rushcutter's Bay. Have a cup of tea, coffee wasn't a big thing then, you'd have a cup of tea and you'd walk back to Bondi.

Quite a long walk.

It is.

What were the suburbs, the eastern suburbs of Sydney like then? Were they as prestigious as they are now?

Oh yes it was a step up in

23:00 life to go to Bondi. We always thought we'd retire back there, but I think where we are, where I am here now is much more accessible to what I need. Also you did a lot of knitting, you did wool work and we worked frightful hours. That's when you got through your

23:30 six weeks of learning. Then I know a lot of friends they tell me what they did, they were forever at the canteen entertaining, I just didn't have the time. There wasn't time.

Why did you decide to join the Methodist Church and leave the Church of England?

Because they had dances. Oh they had more of a social group for young people.

24:00 And, well I got to know Harry Davidson better and that's where he was, and that's where I was going.

During the time that you met Harry Davidson, what were the thoughts about sex before marriage?

You filthy woman. No, I don't think there was any thought of it.

24:30 I don't think things built up long enough to get to that point. But nobody, you knew very little about it, it wasn't talked about as much as it is today. Now it's every night or day on TV there'll be something for young people, and sex seems to be okay if you're over, what, fourteen isn't it?

25:00 **Something like that.**

Something like that. Life seemed to go along quite smoothly, I'm not saying there weren't some people involved, but the group I knew we weren't... Although we went to church, but we weren't a sour faced group, we got around, did things and went to dances, went to homes, raising money for all sorts of things. Then the girls I got to know at Bondi, we'd be making fruit

25:30 cakes, they were great fun. Then you had to stitch them up and sew into calico, the tin into calico, and send it off [to the soldiers]. And also whatever clothes I needed, I was making. You didn't need much because most of the social life had closed. Well there was the Trocadero [dance hall] but you didn't wear

26:00 evening clothes. When the Americans came well the jive came in and well, you know what they jive in, it was full skirts and so on. But once I got into the PMG it was nothing for a mail to come in and you would be asked to work another two or three hours. By the time you got home you fell into bed and so on.

When you were raising money with the church group,

26:30 **which were the groups you were raising money for? Do you remember?**

Mainly the Red Cross.

And what sort of things would you do to fund raise?

Oh we'd have games, game nights. Oh, and on another night you would take along a photograph of yourself as a baby and they had to guess... But talking this now, I've

27:00 missed quite a lot from those first years before we missed winter Bondi. You talk about sex, my older brother never had a girlfriend, so I'd get dragged along, I was right. And do you believe it, we used to play a game and whoever won you pulled out the light and kissed the girl. You can

27:30 laugh. And I heard one of the men say, one of the boys say one night, "You can tell who's got false teeth, when you kiss them, the teeth move."

What did you think of your first kiss?

Oh I guess it was alright. The person I remember is Dougie McCloud, the fire chief's son. He got me out onto the front verandah, this is in Louisa Road, Balmain, And he was just about to ask me out, I know

that,

28:00 and he was a gorgeous, handsome young man and my older brother came out, grabbed me by the arm and said, “We’re going home,” and I never heard of Dougie McCloud, the fire chief’s son again. But that’s what they did, kiss and then remind you, and oh I don't know, it was just all good fun. You went fishing, the boys had an old sailing boat, they called it the Schiltz, why it was called the Schiltz I don't know, and they sailed up and down.…

28:30 that’d be Iron Cove there. Life was good, but different today. If a girl wanted a yacht, she’d want somebody with something up to date and modern, not an old tin Schiltz.

When you were sailing on the old tin Schiltz…?

I think I only got invited the once. It was mainly the boys who liked to think they were you know, big time and...

Did that annoy you, ever?

29:00 I don't think so. I think by this time, now I’m really thinking, another chap I went out with for a little while was Bruce somebody and he was the son of the Adelaide Steam Ship Company. And Bruce, oh, I don't know, but that didn’t last long at all, there’s a snap shot there somewhere, I think we’re going for a picnic and we’re both carrying a suitcase.

29:30 **Where did the boys get the money to take you out?**

Well they were all working. One of the Stewart boys was, I think one was a photographer with the Sydney Morning Herald, and one was a journalist. Dicky was the journalist, Dicky and Ronny, and Ronny was the photographer.

30:00 See it wasn’t much to go out, to go to the movies, best seats were a shilling. We went to dances in the Sydney Town Hall, the Sydney, the Cinderella dances, dinner suit, long evening frock, a shilling.

What were those dances like?

Wonderful. The family could go and sit up in the gallery at the Sydney Town Hall, and I doubt if they paid to sit up there. It was just us who did the dancing,

30:30 who did the work.

Where did you learn to dance?

Oh, I don't know, just picked it up I guess. I learned the Pride of Erin of course. But my Mum was great, she’d always have young ones at home, if we wanted to bring anybody home, and she’d push the furniture back and everybody’d showing each other a step and so on.

At those dances

31:00 **did you have the little cards with the pencil?**

No, no.

Did you ever have them?

No. I think that was a higher level.

I’ve just seen one. I just saw one, I think my grandmother had one or something once and I thought that looked really cool. Doesn’t happen now. So, tell us about joining the PMG?

Well this girl, I don’t remember her name, she said, “Why don’t you join up?” And she didn’t tell me what she had to go

31:30 through. And I guess I wrote, must’ve got an answer and I went in, had an interview and you had to do a six week course. And the first week, if you didn’t get through, that was it. So I found it very hard, because I think I said before, spelling was, to me was a waste of time. And

32:00 some of these country towns... I remember sitting there one day absolutely I didn’t know what to do. And all it was, I think, up around Wallerawang, I had no idea. And this man, little man, he volunteered, he was one of the helpers there, he sat beside me, he said, “What’s wrong?” I said, “Look, I can’t go any further, I can’t... these words,” I showed him. He said, “Just take it to pieces, take every word

32:30 to pieces.” Wallerawang, Gulargambone, Collarenebri, and you would be given so many you had to get through each week. Then you would go to the boxes and you had to sort, I think, five hundred letters in ten minutes, you were allowed ten mistakes. You had to call those mistakes back and only have three. And to study at home you’d be given a pack of cards.

33:00 Say it was Lismore, maybe it had twenty little towns all around it, so you had to learn those twenty towns. Lismore, you know, Rozelle, Lismore, Roze….., I’m just saying where they went to. And I’d be up nearly all night with these packs of cards. And I can always remember my mother coming out with a cup of cocoa, or something, ‘Come on you

33:30 best go to bed now.' Then I got through my second week, got round about my third week, I was going good, made some friends. And then the women were starting to fail. And we had one woman there, I would say, she could've been a society woman, very educated, and she started investigating. Fourth week, and I thought, 'Well I haven't much hope of getting through,' you know.

34:00 And a new man for the GPO, Mr Gray, why I remember his name, I don't know. He came on, took over, and what we found out later she went to him. And I got to about my fifth week and these women were still failing, and course everybody was just shaking, whether they'd get through. And anyhow I think about my fifth week it

34:30 all happened. She told Mr Gray what she'd found out, and they set up a trap to trap this particular man that was failing all the girls. And this particular woman he failed, and Mr Gray stepped out and had a look ... she had passed. I don't think you should ever print this or put it on tape, but he was Catholic,

35:00 and unless you were Catholic he was failing you. So it was a big write up in The Sun, he lost his job, his superannuation, everything. So I was just lucky that the next week was my sixth week. The six weeks you had to sort five hundred in ten minutes, you had three mistakes and you weren't allowed any call back. But I got through.

I can't picture

35:30 **the sorting process, can you describe, was it a big wall with pigeon holes?**

Yeah.

Can you describe it?

About that wide.

So about a metre.

It was called sitting on the wires, you didn't have a back or anything, and yeah it would be about a metre. And then you be picked, the letters would go through, what do they call it, obliterating machine, I believe it's all different now, to stamp it. They'd fill up the long

36:00 tray and you'd take a handful and sort at a time. That was the first sort. And then if you went and sat for another exam, which I did, then you would be put in charge of a section. And if you sent a letter to a wrong... only happened to me once, it was a country, or some country, I was in charge of a country division. And I only sent a letter once, only once, that was good, to a town that

36:30 was somewhere else, and I had to fill a form in and so on, and so on.

So in that initial sort when the letters would come along, what different pigeon holes did you have, what were the regions at that point?

If I remember rightly, we'll go back to Rozelle, I think that had to be sorted

37:00 to Balmain, so even in suburbs there were groups. And in the country towns were the very hard ones, was very hard to remember all those towns. You also had to learn a few all over Australia. But the girl my brother married, her father said to me one day, "If you can answer this question you'll get through." He said, "Quilpy, where is it?." "Oh," I said, "TPO2 North West." He said, "You're right."

37:30 He said, "If you can remember that one..." And you know what TPOs were? They were just posts beside the railway line, and the farmer would hand his mail, the train'd come along and take it and coming back, the train would put the mail back on. Or if the train going somewhere, they'd have their mail, they'd hand it on , take one off and put the new mail. But that's all gone now.

So it was TPO, Train Post Office?

Yeah, TPO, TPO, Quilpy, TPO2

38:00 North West.

Were there the postal codes there are now..?

No, no, it was just by town.

Five hundred letters in ten minutes is a lot, I mean how did you concentrate when you had to do that again and again?

Well there was always a supervisor on the floor, and there was also the union men. And everybody said, "Gwen,

38:30 you do well you know, you change your shift..." I was a mad rugby leaguer [supporter], and with another friend who's a very religious woman, we'd both become rugby league followers, we'd take our knitting, sit right up the back somewhere. But to get an after, Saturday afternoon off, you had to get someone and you had to pay them ten shillings, that was the law. But I would ask could I have the afternoon... and, "Gwen," you know, "you do alright." And I said, "Yeah, don't ask me how but I ask

39:00 can I change my shift?" "No trouble." And one day the head of the union sat beside me and he said, "Gwen, never see you at the union meetings in Lower Town Hall." And I said, "Well no, I'm not Catholic religion." "Oh," he said, "you go to the Protestant down in the Macadamian Hall," which was down near Saint Mary's somewhere. And I said, "No, I don't go to either." The end

39:30 of everything, religion was the big thing.

When you say, that was the end of everything, what do you mean?

Well from then on I had to get around, find my own, who I could swap a shift with and pay them ten shillings.

Oh.

And that's how I was. This man thought I was a Catholic ... until he woke up to the fact that he'd never seen me there.

Was this the same guy who was failing...?

No, no, no, he was gone the other one. This was

40:00 the head of the Catholic side of the union. Ridiculous isn't it. To think I used to shy [throw] horse manure at kids going to mass. We found none of that living at Leichhardt. But in apparently that was a big thing in all sorts of work. Religion. In the war, we went to religious, Catholic dances and nobody thought any-

40:30 thing of it except these older people in the post office. But after that it cost me ten shillings to get to the rugby league.

Who was your team?

Well I imagine Balmain was one, but I can't say I remember them anymore.

What did you think of that segregation due to religion?

Oh disgusting when I had to pay ten shillings apart from

41:00 getting to the, paying my tram fare to get to the match.

Tape 4

00:33 **When you were doing the training for letter sorting, were the letters that you were practising on real ones?**

No, you didn't have any letters at all until the end of that week when you went to see how you were going. No, it was all like paper, you had to copy everything out, and that's what you had to learn, that Billy bla, bla, bla, went to Billy Nudgell or something like that. And

01:00 it was just a case of all getting your memory going, but to get through that week you had to do a lot of work at home. You had a pack of cards, and it might, the cards might've been for say, the 'L' division, so you could concentrate on that 'L' division until you got the idea, and those little stories were a wonderful help.

So what do you mean by little stories?

In the book I showed you, you know, the main town was underlined,

01:30 that was where you go to send all that other twenty or maybe fifteen towns to Billy Nudgell, or to Lismore. You always had one with your big town. Like Lismore, Tamworth, they were your big towns, but all the little towns around, little towns are sometimes just little havens, little farms.

So at the, say the post office at a town in Tamworth, they didn't re-sort the mail there?

No you had to go, well

02:00 today I would say that, the idea's gone but way back then people would go into town to do their shopping and collect their mail. The big properties had the TPO and they'd put their bag on the post, the train'd slow down, take the bag off and put mail from Sydney on.

How did you memorise all of that?

It's like everything, over and over and over.

02:30 And that's all it was, you went back over it and over it. And perhaps at lunch time, in the war years, a Carls' ice cream cake and caramel sauce kept us all going. We'd race over there, take what we'd

learned that morning with us and as you ate, go over something again. But that's all it is, repetition's the word. Just like tai chi, repetition.

You obviously worked very, very hard at learning all this, do you think the other women

03:00 **did?**

Oh yes, oh to get through you had to. And we all had the same things to talk about, boyfriends, husbands. And when you did get through it became quite a sad time, you became more aware of what the war was.

Why do you think that was?

Well these women, some had husbands, Changi [prisoner-of-war camp], army, air force, girl, you know, boyfriends, Americans.

03:30 And it made you aware that you never knew what was going to happen.. When you went to the mail room you'd have these big long lines of mail, and be sorting away. And the supervisor of the day would come down and speak to one of the girls or the men and she'd just keep, you know, keep sorting. And after about ten minutes she might get up and walk out. And then

04:00 possibly the next morning, no more than two mornings, she'd be back. Just, it was just a case of keep going. And but you just accepted what was happening and got on with your job. And when the Prisoner of War mails came in, which from Japan were very, very few, that was a time when you, the whole GPO might work

04:30 perhaps every shift, another three hours, or something like that, just... that's how you felt for the men.

In that case when you were getting POW mail, that extra hours, all those extra hours, were they paid?

Oh yes, yes. We were getting men's, or ninety percent of men's money, close to six pound a week.

You mentioned that all the people that came to do this training were women, why was that?

05:00 Oh, don't know. When we got through and into the mail room, there were young men, apparently they had been to war. See by this time, the war was, what, a couple of years old and they were back. And one young chap used to get around with a cough, a bottle of Irish, Wellington's Irish Moss, until somebody found

05:30 out he had Scotch in it. We'd have very old men too, men who'd come, who'd retired, come back. One gentleman used to come in from Gosford, he had a white goatee beard and everything, and I remember one of the women asking him for a match one day. He said, "Buy your own, you get as much money as I get."

The fact that you were paid a lesser salary than the men,

06:00 **did that worry you at the time?**

No, because it was very close to men's money. But I don't think anybody worried greatly about, not in that level of workers anyhow worried, not everybody wanted to work. Many, how they got away with it, I don't know, but they didn't work. And I changed my shift as much as possible to be on the beach at Bondi, and a woman in our

06:30 block of units at Bondi said to me one day, she said, "With a husband overseas and a brother, it's a wonder you don't have a job." And I said, "Well I do, I have a night job." And whatever she thought of that I don't, I wouldn't know. But I know one time I went down with Bell's palsy, one side of my face was frozen, and in six weeks I was just about over it. And I met another one of the sorters in

07:00 Bondi Junction, and I said, "Look I'll be back next week." Well next week the other side of my face went, and next thing the people, what are they called, they kept, supposed to keep a check on everybody, they were out to see why I wasn't at work. So when they seen the other side of my face, well that was okay. But then some people didn't ever seem to get caught by these people, but whether they knew somebody or..., heavens knows.

07:30 **What exactly is Bell's palsy?**

I believe even today they're not sure of it. It can be a chill that affects the nerves somewhere here in the cheek and it can be stress, it can be a number of things I had it in about the May of

08:00 1944, about May, June, and you had to keep warm, tied up.

You mentioned that there was a great division in the union movement that represented you. It seems hard to believe nowadays that that was divided, so divided.

Well I think it was practically all government jobs,

08:30 but it was. The Catholic side met in the Lower Brewer Street, the Protestants with the Macadamian Hall somewhere down, used to be Sydney Bowling Club. It's gone now. I never went to any of the union meetings.

Did you pay union fees?

I would think so.

What was the union?

Oh I don't know, postal officers I guess. I don't think the women took much notice in

09:00 all this. Second World War did wonders for women, it made them realise women could do a lot of things that the males just thought she couldn't do.

When you were sorting letters, you mentioned you had to do five hundred in ten minutes was that?

09:30 **How did the handwriting on those letters affect your speed?**

Well I think in the school room, they were possibly all the same but when you got out, nobody kept you to that 500... long as you kept sorting, I don't think they worried very much, and no doubt you got used to it.

I'm sure you had to deal with some very...?

I imagine we did.

What were the shift hours that you were working?

10:00 One went, I think, from around about possibly eight o'clock until five, the night shift came on about three until eleven, and then the all night would come on eleven until I'd say six in the morning, something like that. The night shift was good.

You preferred to work the night shift?

Yes. Particularly, yeah, if the

10:30 sun was out, I'd be on the beach.

And then what hours would you sleep if you were doing the all night?

From what I can remember I spent the mornings mainly on the beach and you'd go home and, cause I was living with my parents and you'd have some lunch and then you'd doze off I guess. What you can do when you're young, you can't do now.

What sort of person made a good mail sorter?

Long as

11:00 you kept working. And we'd all chat, and if it got too much the supervisor, depending who he was, would come down and say, you know, "Cut it out," or, "Cut it down girls," you know. But the other thing I remember is when you went to the toilet, they put a disc on a rubber and kept going, you know. By the time the disc fell down you had to be back in sorting, which caused a few problems, until

11:30 after a while they gave up, as long as we didn't over do it, you know. Then another time a couple of women used to be lost for a long time and they were entertaining Americans down in the change room. They were running a little quick business down there.

Entertaining?

Entertaining yes.

What did you think of women that threw themselves at Americans?

12:00 Oh I don't think I thought any at all, if that's what they wanted to do, they did it. I know one woman said to me, "Gwennie, don't bother with the privates, they've got nothing to lose. If you must, get with the captains and things, they've got to think of their future career and all that." But as I say, I never had much time.

Sorry, you talked about a disc when you went to the toilet?

Yeah.

What was it, how was it,

12:30 **what was it put on?**

It was like about say, six inches wide, you'd put your disc up here, and it apparently worked by batteries or electricity, and as that disc, as that rubber moved, so your disc, when it got to the end it would fall off. But I think they had trouble with the women just took no notice, after a while they gave up, and as

long as you didn't stay away too long.

It seems funny to think that you're under that pressure when you duck off to go to the

13:00 **toilet?**

Yeah, that's why I say, after a while they just had to stop it.

Were your supervisors always men?

Yes. And one man, can't remember the name, but his son was one of the captains in the 36th Battalion. And, what's another name for grasshoppers?

Locusts?

No. But that's what they used to refer to this

13:30 captain as. Oh I just can't think of it. He wasn't a captain, it was all nice anyhow.

Was there ever any issues of sexual harassment?

Only the time the fellow kept brushing my shoulder and my hair, when I said I was Mrs Davidson. Another fellow one night, oh he was,

14:00 I think he was getting friendly. And he said, "Do you know who you're like?" And I said, "No." She was an old film star, Madeleine Carol, long before your time. Just that she was blonde and so was I. The other thing was I finished a shift in the winter months and if you'd have seen the way you're dressed, you're in black flatty lace up shoes, thick stockings,

14:30 overcoat, a hat pulled down. And I was going up Martin Place, it was quite dark and cold, and I got to the tram stop, and there was this fellow there, the hat pulled down, very Humphrey Bogart, double breasted overcoat wrapped around him. And I thought, 'Oh ye Gods, what happens now?' Anyhow when I got to the tram stop he started to walk over and I thought, 'Oh dear.' Hadn't learned tai chi then. And

15:00 he said to me, "Is this where the Bondi trams go from?" No doubt in a little voice I said, "Yes." That was it.

A happy end to the story.

Yes.

The chap who was brushing you on the shoulder, who was he?

Oh I don't remember his name but I was in charge of a division, a country division, way over in George Street, the George Street side of the GPO and it was very dark.

15:30 And as he clipped the bags I had to bend down and make sure they were well clipped. And I had long blonde hair in a snood and he'd, if it wasn't his shoulder it was his cheek against my hair, this went on. But then in the end he must've got courage, and he said to me, "Oh Gwen, what's your other name?" I said, "Mrs Davidson." That was that.

Did you ever look at the letters, I mean try to look inside them or hold them up to the light?

Oh no, no, no.

16:00 Oh no, that would've been very naughty. Post cards we weren't allowed to look at, but course you looked at them, you know, quick look. Some were very sad. And I remember one, oh not very many came from the Japanese camps, but we worked it out 'I haven't

16:30 seen Garter or White.' You wouldn't know Garter or White. Garter or White was a cake, cake and biscuit maker. 'Haven't seen Garter or White in a long time,' so you just knew, okay they haven't got much food. About all I remember. You didn't have time, you might just look at it and send it on its way. And that was a sad time because some of the women were there and they'd have worked twenty-four hours just to see if they got

17:00 a card the next day in the post. It was very sad at times, very. Not only for the women, for the men who had sons in the war. One young girl I was sitting next to one time, and we were chatting away, then the supervisor came down and spoke to her. And she just went on sorting, and then she got up and she went and we didn't see her, I think, for two days.

17:30 And her husband had been shot down over the English Channel. But when she came back she just told us what happened and... I don't think it hits you right away, and took up the sorting. Another one, a Mrs Phillips, always delightfully dressed, older than all of us, make up. And her husband was alive until the day war was declared over. And but

18:00 I heard that later on, a couple of years later, she married one of the men from the post office, which was good.

How would all you girls support each other in that sort of atmosphere?

Well you'd just keep on talking, made sure that, well if you were going over to Coles for your ice cream cake, say, "You don't want to come over?" and so on. Wasn't a great deal of social life,

18:30 we were all too tired.

I take it you were on your feet for the shift?

Oh no, you sat on like a pole with a seat, not actually a back, you still see them around. You know what I mean

19:00 **Like a stool or something?**

Yeah a stool, I think it swivelled a little bit too.

And what were you sorting the letters into?

Well they'd be on a big rubber belt, and they'd come along and when that was full, you'd pick up a handful, this hand, depending what you were, left or right, and you sat there and sorted. If you're on suburban well you, cause we

19:30 didn't have the suburb names we have now, nowhere near it, and you would just sort. Perhaps Leichhardt sorted, I just forget... Rozelle, Balmain, might've all gone in to Leichhardt, and then that would go on, would be all bagged up and be sent to Leichhardt, and at Leichhardt they would re-sort. I believe the same thing happens here, all mail goes to Balgowlah, and it's sorted out to Fairlight,

20:00 Manly, Balgowlah, possibly Seaforth.

So the letters would come in on a conveyor belt completely mixed up, is that right?

Yeah well the bags would come in from anywhere.

How, if there were so many letters going to so many random places, how could you reach with your arms enough boxes

20:30 **to put them all?**

Well you were sitting higher than this, bit higher, and you had your feet on a, there, and that's all it was, you know.

And did each sorter have her own boxes?

It was all made out in boxes. The bags of mail would come in and be opened, and that was all, a lot of the systems were over

21:00 head and dropped down onto where we were going to sort. First of all, if they were letters, the stamps had to be obliterated,[franked] I believe they don't have it now. And when they'd gone through, that dropped on to another rubber [belt] and that gradually came up, and you were never short of letters.

Once you'd

21:30 **put your letters in, say, the Leichhardt box, what happened to them?**

Well then the boxes were cleared and put into bags and that would be that area box, that area bag. It was all different. It was amazing the mail, you can imagine there's mail coming from army all over the world, not from army but mail was used more, much more then, you know, you've got email today, computers, and

22:00 there was mail from everywhere. Although I sometimes think here, we still get a lot. A lot of it's junk of course, for money, Red Cross, blind people.

So another type of worker was then clearing those boxes from in front of you?

Yeah, and it would, bag it and that had to be checked to make sure it was secure and off it would go in the wagon. And the wagon then, would go down a chute to be onto the wagon.

22:30 And the wagons used to come out mainly, do you know Angel Place? That was one of the outgoing, and some would come out of Pitt Street. I think they worked that on special days or times so there'd be no crashes anyhow.

And you're aware, as far as you know, that you only ever made one mistake?

Yes the country mistake. No, I couldn't tell you which one it was. But that was the only time I got, I think

23:00 a form came back.

How could they trace who'd made the mistake?

Well I was in charge of that division, where that mail would've come from.

So it was maybe one of your workers who'd made the mistake?

Oh no, when you were in charge of a division, the letters would be wheeled over to you, all the mail that was in that particular area, would come to me.

23:30 So if I made the mistake, it was easy to check back who was on shift that day or night.

And was mail also coming in from overseas as well?

Oh yes, everywhere.

So you'd only be obliterating the stamps on the mail that'd been posted here?

Yes. Then you had a section of mail, like fruit cakes, a lot of fruit cakes came, coming in,

24:00 and that'd be another section you'd be on. Then there was the dead letter section, you'd have to try and trace, it might've been ripped in the mail, been caught in water, you had to try and work out the address and try and get it to where it was supposed to go. No you didn't stop.

The dead letter office, what sort of volume of letters did that involve?

Well I would say it kept about four people

24:30 busy on a shift.

What methods would you try to use to trace…?

Well I think you looked up the phone books of the time to see if you'd find something. Or you might send it back if you could find out just where it came in from, you'd send it, it'd go back to that post office, and then they would try and find it. But everything was done to try and get the mail out .

25:00 Then I worked for a time on parcels, small parcels. And another one of my friends tells me we worked up at the main parcel office at central station somewhere. You know you go up from George Street. But I don't think I ever worked there. I don't remember it.

25:30 **When you came in on a shift, how were you designated where to go and what to sort?**

Well I think that I would say each shift was set up each week. And if you were just on the wires basically, that's where you went to. Or if it was that week you had the shift on a country division you just went straight to there.

26:00 Bit hard to remember a lot of the little detail.

What days of the week?

Seven days. The mail was that heavy they had to keep going out. When the army mail'd come out, sometimes it'd be banked to the ceiling, bags and bags and bags of it, and everybody as far as possible would work. You did get holiday,

26:30 but it was hard to believe that there could be so much mail coming in.

When you go into a post office today, what do you think of it?

Well it's very different, you've got post cards and thank you cards, things for sale, which weren't in post offices then. And I know I had a lot of mail coming here,

27:00 I'm Woods Parade, there's a Wood Street at Manly. And I'll tell you what happened. I took them up and they said, "We can't, we don't handle that." I said, "Well who does?" He said, "Go down to the….it was down Condamine Street, Balgowlah. Post offices and the sorting of mail are two different things today.

27:30 And I just put it on the counter, I said, "You look after it." I said, "If no-one buys your stamps, you know, you're out of a job, so you look after it." But that's what the post offices are today, they don't do much. The people from who the postal, they come and clean the boxes out, the post offices don't. The post office is entirely a shop.

28:00 Whereas in the old days it was all straight off, the people attached to the post office, everything, did a lot of work. We had a big postal outlet up here on Sydney Road, well now they've just got a shop in the Totem and that's going before long because that's the next thing they're trying to rebuild the whole of the Totem Shopping Centre. But they're just shops, they'll tell you that,

28:30 'We're just a shop,' they sell all sorts of things, toys, books, cards. It's an entirely different world from what I know.

Do you think that's a shame?

Well I wouldn't know, it possibly suits today's world. But everything is so different. And there's not so much mail because of computers.

29:00 You know, you can do anything on a computer they tell me. I'm getting one before long I think. Friend's moving and she can't use it, she's an artist, and I said, "Well I could learn." "Sure, I'll drop it down to you."

What obvious signs of war were there around the GPO? Were there any preparations, fortifications, defences?

29:30 No, because once they started pushing the Japanese back... they had that time when they came into the harbour, you know, you've heard of the miniature

30:00 subs,[Japanese submarines that entered the harbour] and they sunk the[navy ferry] Kuttabul I think was, the Kuttabul?

What do you recall of that?

Well we were living right on the cliffs of Bondi and we all went downstairs, we were up two floors and as far as being there, where we were, we knew nothing what was happening in the harbour until the next morning I think. And when nothing happened, that was

30:30 no other sirens or anything, eventually everybody went back to their own unit , and we never knew about it until the next morning Bondi Beach had [barbed]wire in case they came up, I don't think that would've stopped the Japanese. No, they had a

31:00 net across the harbour but I think not long after that, I think they were beginning to understand the Japanese way of fighting. And I think the next thing came after that was [the bombing of] Darwin, but we weren't told about Darwin until a matter of just a few years ago, unless you had a son, and I don't think they would get through the censor, because your letters did get cut about [by the censor].

31:30 I know some parks had searchlights but they didn't leave them in the parks very long, not long at all.

And where you worked were there any sand bags or taped windows?

I'd say taped windows. That's funny that, the 9th Division came home and I was in DJ's [David Jones' department store] getting a hair cut and there couldn't have been

32:00 anything there because we were all leaning out the windows. And another time in the GPO they were asking us to buy more war certificates, war bonds.

War bonds?

I remember that very well. We dropped work when the 9th Division came down and up George Street, we were all lying right out of these big wide stone windows, you know, so there couldn't have been a great deal.

What sort

32:30 **of news did you get of the progress of the war in those early couple of years?**

Well I don't think you ever knew whether you were getting the truth or not. Oh I think you just got day to day, that was more, you felt it more if your next door neighbour lost a son...

33:00 I think it was just a case of everybody was doing their best to help. But certainly I got letters from Harry but he couldn't tell you much or it'd be cut out, and you just had to guess.

How would you describe the spirit of patriotism that was around at the time?

Oh wonderful. Very good. Except me who didn't want to brush and fold

33:30 lots of army tunics. And then, well we knew that they were going to the, use the 9th Division having all the experience, but they'd had no jungle experience by this time, all the militia units had had about

34:00 twelve months of jungle training. Like they got there and all shorts were stopped, they got them long trousers, and a lot of them were dyed, you know, very dark because they reckon it was no good sending them green because New Guinea was green. And they had to wear all long trousers because of malaria and everything. And then

34:30 really what you could get through in letters, what you knew more than the papers. And there was no doubt it was touch and go whether the Japanese if they could've got to Port Moresby. They tried, Milne Bay, my brother was at Milne Bay in the Beaufort bombers. They beat them there, then they went round the other way to come in, and the idea was to push them back through the Kokoda Track. And

35:00 then they got to the top of the Kokoda Track and they'd pushed the Australians back and then they bought in all the 'chocos' [militia]and that's who pushed them back. And in this last war book of my husband's, it gives you day to day what was happening. And on the 19th was when he was the new signal to go out, and where they were they could smell the Japanese'

35:30 breakfast, they were that close trying to find out what was happening. And next thing all hell broke out

and nobody would admit it at the time but it had to be the Australian guns because the Japanese couldn't lob gun [shells] where they were, and he was hit. And then he was in a trench, somebody, I don't know who it was, got to him, but he looked, put his head up to

36:00 see if it was all clear, the snipers were there. And the next thing he got shot and they just, both of them, one dead and one half dead in the trench until they could get them out. And when they did get Harry out the medics, they said, "Here's a bloody gun and shoot anything that moves." Because he didn't carry a gun, he had his wireless, on the back, not hand. And

36:30 they finally got the wounded out, nearly the whole unit, and got them out to a field ambulance. And he said he remembered they gave him a shot of something, he's internal [wounded], that as soon as they could they'd get to him. And...

37:00 that's when he could see the doctors operating and they had no feet. And he said, his stretcher was sinking into the mud. This is not upsetting me, I'm just a cry baby. And beside him was a young bloke had had his, this cut off .The Japanese they were cannibals. And

37:30 when they did get him into the doctor, he was operated on, and they had a tent there that they put them in and the doctor gave him a couple of morphine tablets. "Now," he said, "I can't come back, but" he said, "if the pain gets bad, take them." So Harry said, "I took them there and then." And that night there was a bombing on and they thought they had everybody out of the tent and into trenches and everything, and when they came in, in the morning,

38:00 the canter was ripped to pieces and there he was, sound asleep, still in bed.

So as far as Harry knows, he was hit by what we would call friendly fire today?

Yeah quite likely. They said they couldn't see how else but no, I don't think anybody was ever accused of anything. You could imagine what it was like, Harry was one of the older ones, you had all mainly kids, nineteen, twenty. What was

38:30 it like, you know.

In what part of the body was Harry wounded?

This leg was smashed, tibia, fibia?

So the right shin.

Yeah fibia or tibia, tibia I think, I've forgotten.

Right lower leg.

Yeah.

And why did he think the doctor had no feet?

Well he sank into the mud, it was just mud. That's what it was, mud. And he

39:00 said, "Yes, I could feel the stretcher sinking," and rain was coming down. Hard to believe really isn't it. It's all hard to believe. And later on in life, somebody asked him, 'Did he believe there was cannibalism?' and they called him a liar.

So what was the evidence of cannibalism that he saw?

Buttocks and calves cut off. Then people came to live to us next door and I, talking to

39:30 her one day, her husband had been putting roads through New Guinea. And I asked her, and she said, "It's true." She said, "I've seen women with their breasts cut off." But it was true because various men have

40:00 spoken [about it] in the papers. It was true, they were, they got pushed back, or they stretched their lines too far and they had no food.

What was the date when Harry got wounded roughly?

19th of December '42. Well the next thing I knew I had an abscessed tooth, I was in pain, couldn't get a dentist, it was impossible. So a woman in our

40:30 block of units at Bondi, she rang her dentist, he said, "Right." So we walked out the front door, a telegram boy gave my mother a telegram, it was for me, She said, "Oh my God, Harry's dead." So, I couldn't care. I went up to the dentist and he wanted to know about the tooth. And he bought his wife in, settled me down,

41:00 got the tooth out and did I bleed. Got back home, Mum got the mail out of the letterbox and she said, "Oh it must be the last letter he ever wrote." She gave it to me. And I said, "Where's the letter Mum?" I read the letter, I said, "No he's in Baulkham Hills in a hospital." Nobody knew where Baulkham Hills was.

Tape 5

00:33 Well as I said, when I got back from the dentist and my Mum cleaned out the letterbox, she said, “This must be the last letter he wrote.” Got upstairs and I said, “Mum where’s the telegram?” And the telegram said, “We’re sorry to let...” in fact I read it last night, “that Mr Davidson has been wounded.”

01:00 And the letter told us he’s in Baulkham Hills. Where was Baulkham Hills in 1942? So my young brother, he came home about then and I think he must’ve rang up somebody, I think possibly the trains. And they said, “Yes there’s trains running out there and there’s buses’ll pick you up at Parramatta station. So out we went, my young brother and I, and I’m still

01:30 bleeding. And we got out there and there’s Henry sitting up, yellow, bright yellow, happy as can be and looked well and had a big iron frame over his legs and all that. And that was Baulkham Hills. And he was there January then February, I was at the post office and I think my Mum rang me to say, Harry

02:00 was moving, they were moving him out to Kenilworth at Golman. Well Kenilworth hospital was the mental hospital so you think straight away, ‘Well, you know, what’s wrong?’ So I got off work and got out to the hospital but no it was taken over as a rehab hospital. And I went a few times to Golman with another friend, I knew her husband was out there. And I think about, let me see, May,

02:30 towards the end of April I think it would’ve been, this is ‘43, I went out and we seen him, he looked very well and so on, and he said, “I might be losing my leg.” And he was in plaster up here, the smell was terrible. And he said, “Monday they’re taking the plaster off, they think there’s gangrene.” Anyhow they took the plaster off, perfect healing and they found out,

03:00 they were one of the first people, these returned service men, they used sulphur , sulphur powder, and it made this frightful smell. Took the plaster off and he limped, and he had physiotherapy of course, and I think he was there until end of May, maybe early June ‘43. And then he, I think he had a couple of weeks' leave.

03:30 And they sent him back to his unit, he just didn’t want to go back, and you couldn’t blame him and he said he limped around everywhere. Then one night they were playing cards and he forgot to limp when he went out to the latrines and the doctor seen him. And he spoke to him the next morning and he said, “Look, I’ve got to send you back, nothing else I can do.” And so then his father was very ill, he

04:00 had bronchitis when he died. And where his father was staying with his sister and her husband, they knew, Tom knew if, he said that, “The father had died, the army wouldn’t give Harry release.” And he said his father was desperately ill and they let him home and that was July ‘43. And we had talked about getting married, because it would mean I would get, as a war bride,

04:30 I’d get seven shillings a day. And he went back to his unit and they were given leave and they were at Townsville, they were getting ready to go back to New Guinea. So we decided to get married and the piece of lace from Anthony Hordern’s was made up very nicely. We were married and had a reception at home. You couldn’t get white ribbon unless you were pregnant, so I had silver ribbon on the bouquet. We got a

05:00 cake from Anthony Hordern’s and sandwiches from somewhere and six quarts of beer.

Who attended your wedding?

Oh a few girlfriends and some of the other men who were on leave, not very many, but it went off quite well. It rained all day until about four o'clock in the afternoon and then it was nice, sunny,

05:30 August afternoon. And I hadn’t turned twenty-one, and when I got there, the minister met me and my, my Dad wanted to wear his hat. And I said, “No, carry my gloves,” I had doe skin gloves, I said, “carry them.” I think it felt, it gave him a feeling of reassurance or something. We got to the church, the minister took us in, I hadn’t signed the papers, well my Dad hadn’t signed the papers

06:00 saying I could get married. And we went off to Katoomba and we stayed at Wykehurst I think it was. But everybody thought we’d been married for a couple of years. And I don't know how long we were there, in fact I can’t remember how long , I know it was only a matter of a week or ten days, and he was back with his unit.

06:30 **So had Harry told you about his horror stories from New Guinea in that time that he was back?**

Didn’t talk much about it, no. A bi-monthly a journal comes from a club, and I’ve learned more from that in this last, perhaps five years. Men, the men are talking now.

So

07:00 **when Harry went back to New Guinea again, how much did you know about the conditions**

under which he was living?

I don't think you knew much at all. Not only did the men not want to talk but I don't, looking back now, I think we didn't want to talk. You know, what the situation, you sort of knew the horrors of it, but you

07:30 didn't want to talk about it, and they didn't want to. But I know he did not want to go back. And also he was a bronchial person, you know, chesty cough and that. But he was well liked and he said when he went back they had all these new young [men]... because the battalion was just about wiped out and they had all these re-fills from up Mackay, up the coast. And one, I went to something once and one of these younger

08:00 men, he was quite old then, he said, "We looked at these older blokes," you know, "heroes." And yet, isn't that silly to say, they didn't talk, even my brother, I don't know anybody, they just didn't talk. When the war was over he went to one reunion and he couldn't go again. He said that, "All the

08:30 fellows, not the ones that were in the front line, they didn't start the talking, others who never were in the front line." And he said, "Took my mind three months to go back, to relax and stop the thinking of what, all that happened." But I know conditions were, must've been frightful, really frightful. But he was glad when the Americans came into the war, he said, "We could never have won it without the

09:00 Americans. They had the numbers." They'd send forty out on a patrol, and be lucky if ten came back, where the Australians didn't have the men, they'd send ten out and ten'd come back, cause they didn't make all the noise. But the Americans, being a signaller, he said, "We ate well, we could tap into the American lines and if they were near us, we could go and get a good meal, ice cream, you name it, they had it." Whereas the Australians, it was, I think

09:30 just bully beef and whatever was going. But it didn't, when he came back in, when I seen him in hospital, certainly he was yellow from the malaria tablets, but other than that, I think that possibly all the walking must've done them good or something, although he was always a very active man. But no I look back now and I don't think they wanted to talk and we didn't want to talk.

10:00 Then when our son James was about nine, with another one of our friends, Chas Bissett, they decided they'd walk so the kids could see them marching, and then they dropped out when they got up to Hyde Park and we had a picnic in Hyde Park, they went no further. And it wasn't until we came over here and our son kept at him, you know, "Dad, go and try the lunches again now." And another chap just lived up the

10:30 road here and that's quite a story, Jack Fitzgerald. And he said, "I'll pick you and Jack Fitzgerald up and bring you back home." cause the, it's out at Eastwood RSL which is a fair way when you don't drive. And this other chap, Jack Fitzgerald, when they came back from New Guinea in May, the battalion was there in until May '43 and Jack couldn't go back, he just couldn't, and he was AWL [absent without leave], a deserter.

11:00 And he lived at Pyrmont, and the 36 Provos [military police] came and they picked a man up next door to Jack, and Jack said, "I was hoping they'd knock on the door and take me, but," he said, "I didn't." And I said to Harry, "Why didn't he just go and say, well here I am blokes," you know. And Jack, and my husband, "On no," he said, "you wouldn't do that." Even though he wanted to, he realised he did want to go back, but he couldn't walk out and say,

11:30 'Here I am, take me.' Men. Seems silly doesn't it? But then when my son came to get Harry, he went up and got Jack Fitzgerald, and the men thought none the less of them.

During war time, what do you think the women thought of men who didn't serve

12:00 **or deserted, do you think there was a stigma?**

Well I never knew that Jack Fitz, I didn't know until after the war that Jackie Fitzgerald didn't go back. And I don't think the men thought any the less of him, they went to New Guinea with nothing. My husband had a wireless on his back, but the men had nothing.

No weapons.

No weapons, nothing. And the day they got there they,

12:30 he went on, what was the boat he went on, MacDewie I think, and the Japanese bombers came over, and course they all dived under a house. And the Salvation Army man was there and he says, "Get out of there, get into a trench," he said, "the houses is what they go for." And they all into a trench and when it was all over they got out and the last bloke out was Bill Lester, and Bill only died in March this year. And he said, "I can't, I can't, I can't, I've been hit."

13:00 Well somebody got into the trench, they couldn't find any blood, and what it was, was a frangipani tree had been sliced and that was dropping on his neck.

I wanna go back to the GPO in Martin Place for a little bit. Can you describe the building for us? And I've been there in the last few years, but what was it like when you were working there?

13:30 Have you been inside and seen what they've done, the new hotel? Well I was very pleased to see what they had done, very much. Oh it was just like a huge post office, you had everything, telegrams, no shops, you'd buy stamps but nothing else. I think they had one area set up you could buy some war bonds and things like that. And where you go downstairs, that was where all the

14:00 trucks came in to bring in the mail and take out the mail.

Where, which street did the trucks enter from, do you remember?

Well there was an entrance at Pitt Street and also one at, you know Angel Place. Well some would go out through Angel Place and then others would come in through Pitt Street. But they used to turn, change that around, whether it was to fool anybody that was watching, I don't know, but that's what it was, it just... You had your job but

14:30 you didn't query what the others were... was a part of security I guess.

Did the trucks coming in and out downstairs make the air very dirty in there?

I wouldn't know, I was up on the next floor. The GPO, where all mail was done, ran from Pitt Street to George Street and then from Martin Place back to,

15:00 there's the opening in Pitt Street is still into there. It was very, it was huge.

So the floor that the cars drove in on, did that have a ceiling on top of it...?

Yeah, and we were there, that was like a basement.

Okay. How cold did it get in winter, it's a big, old building?

Oh with so much activity, I don't ever remember being... might've been down the basement, but of course we weren't allowed

15:30 there.

Do you remember how many floors high it was above the basement?

I, no I couldn't really say I ever bothered, and I can't say now that I've bothered to look. About three or four, because everything went on up above you, like...

Now it's all open, when I was in there before they've knocked down some of the...

Yes, they've made it, I think they've kept it rather well that, particularly

16:00 down stairs. And, oh and all upstairs has been changed, that's a hotel, Westin isn't it, the Westin Hotel. Yes I've been in there a couple of times, had afternoon tea and over and sat in the lounge and had a drink and thought of... all those years.

What did you like the most about the work you did there?

Oh I

16:30 think the friendliness of everybody and things you did , taking an interest in the rugby league ... and so on.

Who was playing rugby league while most of the young men were away?

Oh I don't know, I think I used to follow Balmain, we'd take our knitting with us and go up and, up in there. Then my father wasn't at all happy with me marrying but

17:00 as time went by he'd say to me, "Are you saving your money?" "Yes." "I don't want him to come home and find you've got nothing."

Why didn't your father want you to marry?

Oh I don't think they wanted me to leave home, that was all. You know, eldest daughter and so on.

What can you tell us about your friends at the GPO?

Well there was Eunice Fear, we're all much, my birthday was February

17:30 and I think then another one, Joy Fairly was March then Eunice, we kept in touch. Joy Fairly moved out to Oatley, she's still there, we still send Christmas cards. And she was known as 'Smiley', she had beautiful teeth and a big smile. And then Eunice Fear, she was more of a rather staid, religious

18:00 girl but she came around with us You know, you might just meet and have a meal in town, there was a beautiful fish restaurant up in King Street, we'd meet now and again. Oh, I don't know, I suppose we talked about letters, 'Have you had a letter from Harry, had a letter from John,' and so on. Eunice was going with a fellow for a couple of years, and he was in a different division to my husband. And

18:30 he invited her to go to Newcastle because they were leaving to go overseas, and he booked them into

the one room at the hotel, that was the end of that romance. And when the war was over, she went as a nurse down in Tasmania and came nursing. Then much, much later in her life she married a chap, she was his second wife, just here

19:00 at Greenwich, went over and visited them. And the husband told Harry that she wasn't as good as the first wife but she was looking after him. Well that turns you off marrying a second time wouldn't it? But where she's gone, we've completely lost track of her, we don't know. She could be dead, she'd only be a little younger than me, we've lost track of her completely. We used to just write notes if we couldn't meet

19:30 and cause Joy Fairly had a family, so did I. And then years later on Joy was the concierge in at DJ's .. so I'd see her quite often, we'd go off and have a coffee and a sandwich. But we just completely lost track of Eunice.

Do you think that the friendships that you made in the GPO

20:00 **were quite unique in the way they were formed, were they different from other friendships you had? Like with friends from church group or through the family?**

Oh no they, we were just all girls together and so on. Another person, she wasn't working in the GPO, Audrey Bissett, her husband was a sig [signaller]. with my husband.

20:30 So that friendship has kept going , it's still going, but she's in the retirement village, she has Parkinson's. And when they knew they were going to the Battle of the Beaches, her husband, which, I'm sorry, quite a young lot of them, developed illnesses and end up in hospital and she became a very nasty woman.

21:00 Quite often when we were there some of the things she said to me were terrible. And I think the worst was, 'Oh these men who went into action, went in with the yellow running down their legs.' And I said, "Oh if that's what you think." And, had I taken up tai chi by then? And I learned by tai chi

21:30 just say, "Well if that's what you think, think it." I found that a lot of these people, not only like her through war, but that's, people end up... she's years younger than me, she might not even be eighty. And I think there's some truth in that. Like the woman on the other side of me here, her husband was the secretary of the Sydney Morning Herald,

22:00 and she just thought she was Mrs Somebody. She's now in a nursing home, can't even sit up in a chair unless she's tied into it. And I think you do these things, it's going to play on your mind

When you were working and your dad was asking you questions about what you were saving, how

22:30 **did you manage your finances then?**

Well I guess I was still paying something to my mother, I don't remember but I wouldn't have been living there for nothing. Well you didn't have much to spend it on. And I was still, you would still do a bit of, we were all did a bit of sewing. And I know when the war ended I had fifteen hundred pounds, and I was rich. Yes.

23:00 **That's a lot of money.**

Fifteen hundred pound in 1940, Harry came out of the army in 1946 and I had fifteen hundred pound. Is that right? Fifteen hundred, yeah. One thousand five hundred, that's fifteen is it? Yeah, fifteen hundred pound.

How far would that go?

In those days a lot, Harry owned half of this Federation [style] home at Rozelle. We went back for two years and we were going to

23:30 move and sell. Well the only place we looked at was out at Pendle Hill and I said, "No, this is not for me." So we came back and we were there thirty-three years. I bought the other share so the house was in both our names and we made a wonderful life for ourselves in Rozelle. Back to the old Methodist Church and Harry, he did wonderful work with inner city kids. There was no sport so

24:00 he started football, the kids, and they gradually grew up and, in soccer. And then when the girls from the church all got to about twelve, cause then they said, "Yes, all you think of is the boys, nothing for us." So then we had an old concrete tennis court and we did that all up, it was still pretty awful, found the net and it was in a bad way and we started tennis for the girls.

24:30 Well that started more trouble because you know where the boys were when they should've been down the hill in the park. And my husband would come through the gate and he'd just give one look and they'd all up and go. But we did, we made a very good life there, we raised jumble sales, we had fetes. We ran one fete and I dressed a doll of

25:00 my daughters, she was blind, one of the first little walking dolls, about that big. And she was beautiful, she had a frock made out of a bit of my lace from my dress, she had a veil over her face, you couldn't

tell she had no eyes. But later on somebody lifted the veil and oh, went off, 'A blind bride wins the first the prize.' But the woman who was the judge came around and she said, "Well don't you ever think brides marry." So we got over that one.

25:30 And we stayed there until about '76, I wasn't at all well, I had a heart attack at forty, because I was a mad housekeeper, you know, curtains washed every month, the furniture turned round. Harry'd come home and say, "What side of the bloody bed do I get in to tonight?" because I'd change everything round. And I went to this man in Macquarie Street, I could see him for five pounds or go to Manly, Balmain hospital for

26:00 free. We could afford the five pounds so I went to John Raftos. He said, "Right, you're going to get a little job." And it was the best thing. I forgot washing the curtains every month and you know, changing the house round. And I ended up as a buyer for imported shoes

I stayed there

26:30 until all tariffs were cut. Well look at now, we import everything. And he did wonderful things with boys, they've all done well, every one of them. And but then the doctor said, "And how long since you've had a holiday?" And I said, "About oh, so many years." And she said, "You can afford it." And I said, "Yes but we got Helen's dog." She said, "Go home and tell him you're the dog." And I went

27:00 back and said, "We're going to Tasmania." She said, "No, you're not," she said, "I would say, somewhere, Pittwater, or Manly." I said, "Manly for a holiday?" We stayed at this old place, Eversham, falling down. And we came back three times in six months. And we seen Fairlight and we seen, not this unit, and it was about forty-five thousand and we came and had a look at it but it was

27:30 three bedrooms... one bedroom, two bedrooms you had to put your furniture in, it was so small. And we said, "Oh no, that's not what I want, I want to be near the water." And this man said, "Oh well, you won't like this one," and this is it. I think it was either thirty-five or thirty-seven thousand. And Rozelle paid for this, we weren't out in money. Harry wasn't, cause he was born in that home, and I can't buy it back, it's up, it's

28:00 in, Rozelle, one point two million. Stupid isn't. But when we came over here he walked, we were still walking, but I think the bronchitis gradually caught up with him.

We've come a long way forward, can I go back a bit.

Yeah, we jumped. Yeah, go back.

I just want to get the chronology right for a start. When did, Harry leave for war in early '42?

Yeah.

28:30 He'd been in the army since I made my debut. They used to go for about a week at a time then they'd go away for weekends, and I would imagine they made it a battalion in '39, early '39.

And what were the years that you worked at the post office?

Well I must've been there about four, no I was there in '40 'cause I found a photograph that had 1940-

29:00 and I was there, I left just before the war finished, I was getting very tired. And I think I got a doctor's certificate saying I was run down or something.

What kind of hours did you work there?

Oh full eight hours and it was all shift work.

So what would be the most obscure time of shift you might work?

I think it was nine until five, then two til eleven, then eleven til six.

29:30 **Okay. What did the post office think about hiring married women?**

Well everybody had to work, do something. And a few I know didn't seem to get caught up, it was called the, what was it called? They had a name, Manpower or something, and they would check on people, but others I knew they'd never get checked on. No, women had to work,

30:00 you had to be doing something. If you were expecting, I think it was different. And like today, the women work almost eight months don't they? So, it was, I think a great turning point for women, the war. It was shown what they could do. And I still don't think women get all the praise they should, or get as far as they should. You take our

30:30 political, there's not that many women. And I still think there's that in a lot of men, better watch what I say there... Women aren't capable of doing what men can do, but I think they've proved in lots of ways they can. Agreed?

Absolutely.

Still you can't lift, we've learned a lot about even about lifting.

31:00 And what, in big business now you've got everything to go under and pick the parcels up haven't you.

How did the mail come to you upstairs once it was delivered in the trucks, did you ever go down there?

Oh no, you weren't allowed because it was dangerous, there's trucks everywhere. That was something I've never seen,

31:30 I've never seen happen. I think it must've been undone perhaps down there because there used to be up high, belts, and there'd be mail, that mail would come along on those belts, drop down, go along, the stamps obliterated and then they'd gradually come around to where the sorters were.

How many sorters would work a shift?

32:00 Oh fifty easy.

Were you all in the same space?

All on that one big floor, which divided off onto various sections, and so on.

When one of the women you worked with got some bad news from the war, how was that dealt with amongst you as a group?

I don't think I ever saw one woman break down.

32:30 You would see a supervisor walk down and talk to somebody, might've been a woman or a man. And the women, just might keep sorting for ten minutes and go out, they might, some were back the next day. But the most I ever knew was two days and they were back.

Did you discuss with those women what'd happened, did you talk about that with them?

Yes they usually would say that, what they'd heard. The one

33:00 girl in particular I knew, I can't recall her name, but she said, "He's been shot down over," what was it, "off Dover somewhere." But she said, "It doesn't mean to say they haven't saved them." But I don't know what ever happened. Cause you were moving all, like who you might've been next to this week... and it depended if you'd

33:30 done another exam, well you might never see that person again, because you were in a different, you were doing a different job. You'd gone from a basic sorter up to a person who could run a division and so on.

And you ran a division, did you?

Yes.

What extra exam did you have to do to get there?

34:00 Oh I don't really know, just I think you had to prove that you could, I think you went off in a group and you would go through all the process of revision. And the bags were all set up on an iron thing, you know what a mail bag's like, a big one. And if I remember rightly, you were given bundles of

34:30 fake letters, parcels, and then you had to sort them. Then when you were ready you call the men who were there to take the bags off those iron divisions, they had to seal and check them. But before they were sealed or taken off, whoever was running that type of exam would check your bags that you had, put the right mail in, you know. And I think then you just,

35:00 for as many that were coming in, there's quite a few leaving too. Some felt that the hours they couldn't stand up to them. But I was used to working hard because in tailoring, oh I think that went most jobs, you had to work.

Who did you keep sewing for during the war?

Myself.

You only made your own clothes?

Myself and I guess I made a few things for my young sister and,

35:30 and maybe my mother.

What were the dress regulations like at Martin Place?

I just think you wore your own clothes and possibly they gave you a big apron to wear. No pockets. But oh and you had, if you had long hair, which I did, you had to wear a snood to keep it out, in case it was

36:00 caught in the machinery.

What's a snood?

You see them now and again on the film stars. You know what a hair net is, but heavier material. You could buy them or you could knit them or crochet them.

Okay. I know what you're talking about.

What do they call them now?

36:30 **I don't know.**

I think they'd still be a snood.

What else did you send to Harry apart from letters?

I kept knitting socks, I had knitted him a balaclava and everybody thought I was mad. But all the other blokes wanted one then, cause at time in New Guinea apparently was very cold with the rain, but I only ever attempted one balaclava.

37:00 Oh you'd make fruit cakes and then a shop opened in the Strand Arcade, Vienna Almonds. I think, no, I think they've gone now. The almonds were like a soft toffee caramel. Had you ever seen that? Can't be all that long since they went. And oh I'd send that off to New Guinea and... oh you'd do all sorts of

37:30 silly things. You used to draw things on envelopes like Jap bombers being shot down, all sounds stupid now doesn't it. But everybody, you'd do sketches of something on envelopes and...

Do you remember other sketches apart from the Japanese bombers being shot down?

No, because that's all you thought of, get rid of the Japanese.

38:00 **How satisfying were the letters that Harry wrote to you?**

Oh well you're always glad to get them, they couldn't tell you much, if they told you anything if would be cut out. So I had a number of letters would have panels cut out. Of course there was my brother, we had, didn't know what happened to him and we never knew until well after the war what happened to him. And so you were waiting on letters from him.

38:30 I don't know, I look back now, I think it was just a time where you kept going. And you had other things to think about, you couldn't overspend your food tickets, you got clothing, and to buy on the black market, well that was really bad if anybody knew you bought things on the black market. But a lot of people did.

What kind of things would be on the black market?

Well there was food, tea, things

39:00 like tea, coffee, dress materials, shoes, a number of things. But if people knew they were, they'd really look down on you.

Why do you think that was?

I guess you had your amount that you could get with your coupons and that was the whole idea to try and keep,

39:30 I doubt if there's any imports, but well it was just under handed.

How easy was it for you to get hold of the ingredients for the fruit cakes you sent to New Guinea?

Well you just about put all your coupons into that. The whole thing was you did anything you could to make life better for them, you know. And it was only after the war ended I knew that he had a darn good life. Cause once the Americans

40:00 came in they tapped into the American lines and, the signallers, they lived very well.

Was that under handed or was that okay?

No they, I guess they thought it was okay.

Did you ever get letters from anyone else aside from Harry and your brother?

No. No, don't be silly. Do you want me to get into bother with all those other

40:30 women?

When did communication with your brother finish and you said you didn't know what happened to him until long after the war?

Oh just that his wife, cousin came. And talking and he said, "How's Bob, is he over his accident and what happened?" And she said, "Well, I don't know what you're talking about." And she said, "I was ready for Bob when he came home that night." And he said, "Oh well it was pretty bad."

41:00 He was an armourer in the Beaufort bombers and this bomber came in from a flight or whatever and they were all beside the tarmac waiting for their particular ship. His came in, the crew got out, he swung in and next thing there were seven blokes dead on the tarmac. And fortunately the man in charge or the officer I guess, he told the crew, “Stop.” He went in there, into

41:30 the bomber and one of the guns hadn’t had their safety catch put on. It was either my brother’s hand or his trousers had set the gun off. And he spent a lot of time in the American mental hospital, one of the islands. And then he came home and he was down in Sale in Victoria. And finally he was discharged never to be sent

42:00 overseas again but he never told...

Tape 6

00:32 **So Gwen, just to clarify, your brother had accidentally discharged a weapon on a...**

Mmm.

And...?

Apparently whoever used the weapon hadn’t put the safety catch on.

And it obviously affected him very badly.

Well apparently, yes. But it was quite some years after the war before we knew. But

01:00 I don't know that, or I imagine he’s come to grips with it by now, it’s a long time ago. But I’m quite sure both him and his wife enjoy illness. I think we’ve all had our share of all sorts of things, but you just, well at least I’m a firm believer, ‘Well okay, take your tablets and keep going.’ But I learned so much through tai chi to pick

01:30 yourself up and go on.

Just for the record because I don’t think you’ve told us on tape, what unit was Harry with?

36 Infantry, Head Quarter Sigs [signals].

He obviously had no problem being a choco? [militiaman] Didn’t worry him, he didn’t want to join the AIF?

No cause they didn’t give him what he wanted, he wanted to be sent for the air force. ‘And they can

02:00 keep their army.’ He was a very spoilt boy, very. Only son after sixteen years of one daughter, then along came Gwen. Well they’re the heroes now.

When he was away, what did you, how did you cope with his absence?

Well you were busy

02:30 working. And my young brother and I, we were great friends and we went everywhere together.. And I said to him one time, “Why didn’t you ever have a girlfriend?” He said, “Because all the blokes looked twice at you.” What’s that, that’s pretty good from your brother isn’t it?

Harry was obviously flash enough to

03:00 **own his own suit then wasn’t he?**

Oh I got into trouble over that dinner suit. Gave it away. It’d been hanging there and also he was a much bigger man. And the girl, the grand daughter that went into the Gothic, she asked for it and I said, “Oh darling it’s just gone recently.” “Oh, nan.” And they never saw him as having disease, they took his long sleeve silk shirts, another one took his

03:30 dressing gown He had this touch with women, there’s no doubt about it.

How often did you write?

Oh well you might write a bit everyday and then post the letter off and you’d see things in the paper you’d tear out and enclose them and send them off. So you just kept writing bits and pieces and...

04:00 And you never seemed to get sick of it, it was something to do. And I wasn’t one for going off to canteens. I just felt my time was to try and rest a bit and do things for yourself. Because the ones who you felt going to canteens, they weren’t doing long hours working and... it was very tiring sitting up on these stools.

Did you ever have any thoughts of joining the women’s services?

04:30 No. I was quite happy what I was doing.

Why were you not interested in the women's services and joining that?

I couldn't tell you, I just heard about the post office and when I got through... I look back now, still look back and wonder how I got through those six weeks, but I did and I was very happy in there. It was, you could see what war was, you saw young blokes

05:00 who'd been perhaps early in, overseas, come back, and you, it was just a case of you kept going.

Imagine we're in 1943 and you're looking out the window of the post office there, what could you see? Describe to us the people and the fashions that you can see?

Oh when you were working. Oh...

No, if you looked out the window into the street,

05:30 **who would, what sort of uniforms, what sort of clothes would you see?**

Well, they wore the khaki and the big thick boots. And as for women, well it was much like a photograph I had there. I made a red, a red dress out of a piece of red flannel.

06:00 You didn't have as many clothes as you've got today, you made do with what you had. Shoes were a bit of a problem, they were scarce. But mainly I just, I was in flatties, might've had one pair of good shoes. And if you heard of somebody spending, what was it, twenty-nine shillings on a pair or shoes... wasting their money, you know. Now you, cost you that for the shoe laces.

06:30 Well I think the average person just dressed very much like today. But you can get an old dress pattern, which I've got, and you put a different face on that pattern and a different hairdo, it's the same as what you're going to pay fifteen dollars for a pattern in the shops. Things have changed a little bit, the last couple of years, they've got this new cross over thing, and if you'd had a dressing gown pattern, you could make that up without going and

07:00 buying fifteen dollars for a new pattern. People wore hats more, more than what we should be wearing them today. But it's only little things that make fashion change. We didn't have minis. Minis I can remember working and I made a grey flannel frock was above the knees.. Where I couldn't wear above the knee today. But I,

07:30 I don't know, fashion just changed a little bit. The time you look at all the young ones today, showing off their stomachs, I cut the top off a frock, was red with a big white flower to make it look a bit different. I'm living at Bondi, and I cut a piece out of here. So people go on about the young ones today, well that was 1940 when I did that to make it look like

08:00 it was, what everybody was wearing to Bondi Beach. So you'd just change things to suit yourself. I wear all mainly pants and shirts now, skirts to about there, because that's all I can do with my arm, dresses are no good. I can remember my mother, she always looked nice and tidy.

08:30 I think people wore more flowery pattern materials. You wouldn't dare go out without your hat and your gloves, and a hand bag.

What sort of fabrics?

Well there was a, one time there was a run on crepe, crepey material. Crepe, then another thing came on the market, was called

09:00 rayon, it was like a smooth, I think that was a mixture of cotton, you didn't get much pure cotton. And just the usual winter materials, you know, you'd make a skirt, flannel, or whatever you could get really. A lot of the polyesters and mixtures they hadn't come in until, oh I think towards the end of the war. Because I think they mainly all come from Asian countries now, I don't think there's much

09:30 made here. And hats, well there was a shop in the city, what was that called? And you could go in there and buy just an outline of a hat and come home and tie a bit of ribbon or a scarf around it, and you did the best with what you had.

Did you wear stockings?

Oh most certainly, most certainly wore stockings, you know, it was just the thing. Oh not down on the beach

10:00 of course, I did take my stockings off, but oh no, you always had your stockings on. In the winter months I wore like a thick lyall, because they were warm, and as I said, I did a lot of night shift work. And I think that's gone on to the family because this one that's a nurse, she works mainly night shift.

So what were your fashion extravagances then?

Oh well when I was off work I mainly

10:30 wore, went some months and you'd make shorts out of something and just a top. The winter was mainly

skirts....

Did you have a uniform at work?

No, you just wore, I think they gave you a big apron, no pocket though because you could put things in, you had to be very careful. Oh and I guess you had a frock to wear out at night.

11:00 And strangely, I have very few photographs of that time, only what, my brother is the one, he's got the good photograph album, really good. Now being a sewer I could run things up quick, quickly and that's where I think I did so well with my young brother, because whatever was fashion I had. You'd run them up out of bits anything you could find at the local shop or something,

11:30 possibly a local church fete.

Were there lots of Americans around?

Yes. Everywhere.

What impressions did you have of them?

Oh they seemed okay. They did fight over me at one time. I went to the races with my brother, young brother, and his friend, I forget his name. And

12:00 coming home on the tram from central railway was open tram. You remember, you wouldn't remember the old open trams. Well we were sitting here and there was no doors, there was a roof. There was Americans there, white, and on this side of where we were sitting, we had our backs to the Negroes and they started a fight over the top of us. We were sitting underneath all these punches that were going on.

12:30 But they gradually got off, I'd say they got off, around Darlinghurst they got off.

What was the fight about?

Heavens knows. I guess one said something to the other one and off they went. And there's my brother, his friend and I, and they're fighting madly over the top of us. I think on Bondi Beach one time, one came up and spoke to me. And

13:00 I don't think I was very interested and he just wandered off. But they were, they were everywhere. And as this girl, woman, or woman told me, "Don't bother with the privates," you know, "go for the captains."

And obviously there was a great presence of African Americans?

Yes, a lot, mmm, both.

Do you think they were looked down upon in Australia?

13:30 Well if they were I can't say I ever knew it. I didn't see enough of them because it was a great place here for their, what, R&R. But no, oh people used to talk about women chasing them, but if they did well that was their business. But mainly I think what we went to see a movie.

14:00 And I can remember my twenty-first birthday, there was a theatre, did you ever know the old Regent Theatre in George Street? Well right opposite that was the Century, I don't know what we seen. But with these two girls I was very friendly with, we'd had a meal and they'd bought me a spray of gardenias, and of course air conditioning wasn't known of then and between the heat in that theatre and the gardenias, I have never forgotten that night. And with my young brother, we would go to the theatre and we'd be saying, "Oh,"

14:30 it'd be that hot, I'd say, "Well take your coat off." He'd say, "I can't I've got no sleeves in my shirt," all he'd have was the collar and the front and the back. Today it wouldn't matter. Cause he used to save his coupons for other things, I don't know.

How did that clothing coupon affect your fashion?

I don't remember it ever affecting me. It might have some, but I can't ever remember it affecting me. Because

15:00 my mother's idea was, 'You can cut up everything but the lounge room curtains.' And I think we had a lot of clothes from my aunt's, which were, I wish I had them today, the most beautiful clothes. And you could cut them up and do something out of them, they were more like the '20's clothes. It was a case of, 'Give 'em to Gwennie,' I was the only grand daughter for many years, or, 'Just give them to Gwennie to play in.' And you wish you had them today.

So there doesn't sound like very much was wasted

15:30 **back then?**

Oh no, nothing. My Mum was an excellent cook, she made things go round, and I don't think anybody starved. And I think it's done my family good now. That, where it's the end of April and I haven't drawn my war widow's money once this month. My freezer's getting down now, it's just...

16:00 **The extra seven shillings you got, who paid that?**

Government.

So it was added to your salary?

No, that was a different cheque that came, I think about once a month. And that was, that went straight into the bank, pleased my father.

What was your dad doing during the war?

16:30 What was he doing? He was a very sick man, he died at sixty-three. I really don't know. He may have, through illness, he may have been off work. He had bad blood pressure and of course in those days

17:00 there wasn't much, the blood pressure or anything. And I know in the very hot days he used to swell up and he'd lie in the hall at Bondi, that's where it was cooler, he wouldn't go out in the heat at all. But no, I think he was, he was possibly an invalid pensioner.

You mentioned at one point that there was wire on the beach at Bondi?

Yeah.

How did that affect your swimming activities?

17:30 Oh well there was a part you could, like so much, like this room you could walk down and down through to the surf. Now I can't surf, I can't go in the surf, cause I can't stand up, if I fall I can't push myself up.

So there were wire defences but they were clear in one area?

There would be enough room to walk down to the surf, yes.

So you just had to hope the Japanese didn't have the common sense to...?

I don't think it would've stopped them, it was only about this high, you know.

18:00 I doubt if it would've stopped anything. If they came in on push bikes, which they used a lot, yes, but not a tank. A tank'd run over the top of it all.

In those early days when Japan did enter the war and everything was going their way, and Singapore fell and they were charging along through Asia, what sort of atmosphere was there here in Australia?

The atmosphere generally was that they won't get

18:30 here. Cause even in Singapore to the day they came in, the English were still saying, they were still partying and going on. And I recently turned the TV on, just sitting down having a cup of tea and watched, was that movie called Pearl Harbor. And I'd switched on just as the Japanese planes were coming over to bomb Pearl Harbor. And I thought, 'Well how, they say the British were stupid, well the Americans were too.' Because see, they had

19:00 this feeling that they couldn't touch them. But they were, they knew more about Australia and America than anybody possibly thought.

So do you think Australia was stupid in a way?

Oh naturally. Although we were out protecting England and everything, nobody thought they could get as far as New Guinea. Not that, I don't think we knew where New Guinea was, you just,

19:30 you had to get your atlas out and check out where they were. But when I saw that movie I thought, 'Well why did they...?' you know, when Singapore happened you'd have thought the Americans would've been ready. But as the Americans came into the war it was easily to see then that they were making the ships and, Liberty ships and guns, everything. It was just as well they didn't come in.

Was there any atmosphere of fear in those early days?

20:00 I don't think so, I think we all had this feeling. Although my older brother and I, we took an interest in them coming down through Manchuria and all that was going on. But we just had that feeling, we were the Australians, you know, and they wouldn't touch us. And this is a silly thing. When we were married and we had our honeymoon at Katoomba, and we bought this couple of little jugs.

20:30 It was only when we were packing up to come over here, you know, turned them up, 'Made in Japan,' and yet you bought them on your honeymoon. This, they're still down in the garage.

What did you personally think of the Japanese?

Well they weren't liked, they weren't liked as people before the war. Then when you heard the stories that were filtering

21:00 back, especially Singapore. But they just didn't seem, other than put searchlights in a park, wire on a

beach, which they thought they'd come through. As if the Japanese would've come through Bondi, they had so much intelligence people. No, and I think when the war got so close was, that's when people settled down

21:30 to work and really put their shoulder to it, to work and do what they could to help. And there was groups everywhere doing something for the war, working for the Red Cross, everybody. I was knitting socks, socks by the dozen, you know. And but there's no, I think it's awfully hard to think of the Japanese of what they were then and you've got to try not to think of it now, it's

22:00 very hard. And I watched a documentary that was made way back in the early '30's and it said that the Japanese were beginning to realise all these countries were colonising the world, except them. And they were a small island, or two islands, and the population was immense that they needed more land. And I thought, 'Well what do you know about that.' This

22:30 documentary was that old it was blurred and so that's how they really started, they were just going to do what the British were doing and the French. But they did it in such a brutal way. And oh some of the men that were in it, they talked, and they said that one of the things, they had to stab the prisoners. And the chap running it he said, "Weren't you, didn't you feel sick at doing that?" He said, "At first yes,"

23:00 but he said, "we knew we had to do it," and that was all their was to it. They operated on people without anaesthetic. They had somewhere in them that vicious something, and it just went on. And by the time they got onto Singapore and all that they, the viciousness was nothing, they were so used to it. But I found that documentary very interesting. Then if you ever read the book,

23:30 The Last Emperor, I've got the one written by a journalist. And he spoke in that book very much of what the Japanese were up to. And he said, "The war didn't start in '39." He said, "the Germans and the Japanese met at Baden Baden in the German forests, and really the Japanese they started off before the Germans."

24:00 But I guess you've got to forget it. You meet a lot of Japanese kids here, they're up in Saint Patrick's, was Saint Patrick's, Cathedral as a tourism industry, a hospitality. And you see these young kids at the bus stop and they ask you something, and you think, 'You can't be rude to kids can you, it's... they're not their grand fathers and...' I don't know.

You don't carry those

24:30 **same feelings today for the Japanese?**

No, I don't... well they were known as "slit eyed bastards" in our house. But then the Japanese, they knew nothing, the people at home, they knew nothing of, or very, very little of what the army was doing. So there's all sides to look at it. I never want to go to Japan,

25:00 I'm frightened I might hit somebody. In fact I've done more, I don't want to even travel. A girl here who knows everybody's business, she says, "Gwen, sell up your two bedroom unit, buy a one bedroom and you can travel." I said, "I don't want to, I'm happy with what I do."

So did Harry carry bad feelings about the Japanese after the war?

Well it was him that started the "slit eyed yellow bastards". Oh well naturally. Oh we all did. Bu you've,

25:30 you can't, you've got to move on haven't you? It's like a death, you've got to move on.

Tell us about your twenty-first birthday.

My twenty-first birthday. Well my Mum had a little dinner at home, I don't, haven't forgotten it. And it was all these little presents to be undone. And I was thinking to myself, 'You thought he could've sent me some little thing.' And nothing.

26:00 And I got to the last present and it was a box of flowers from Searle's, and I knew that wasn't from Harry, how could he be to Searle's you know. And when I opened it up, it was, and it had a card in it. And what'd happened was the Salvation Army would get the cost of what the flowers would be and they would send that to Searle's who were in King Street with whatever you, Harry wrote, and that would come to you on the day. So I never

26:30 forgot that. All I could think of was, no doubt, by now he was in Rabaul, and they had the Japanese blocked up into one end of New Britain which was another big story. And but I thought, 'My God, you'd have thought he's sent me something for my twenty-first birthday.' The poor bloke's fighting the Japanese but there was this box of flowers from Searle's. Then that happened a couple of times, for various things. Because see he went away,

27:00 we were married the 7th of August '43 and I think by ten day's time he was off again. And he didn't come home until July '45, nearly two years. Yeah. But life went on and you worked and kept going. And saved my seven shillings a day.

Two years on a very new marriage must've been a hard burden?

27:30 Oh well I don't think, because, you were working, so busy, you were doing your bit to bring them home. Was a different outlook to what it is today. It gets me today where they're sending the troops to Iraq, which I don't think ever should've been done. But those men joined the army, and if you join, they possibly want to go on trips and over seas. I don't say they want to get killed, but I don't think this is a war that... oh, I don't know.

28:00 **You said there was a story behind Harry being up in New Britain?**

Yes well they shepherded all the Japanese that were on New Britain right up into the corner, around Rabaul, but they still had to be very careful because they would come out on patrol. And he was telling me, the worst time he ever came across them, they were doing really a practise run with some new sigs. And they had to lie in the grass,

28:30 and the Japanese were calling out, 'Harry, Bill, Bob,' and all that. He said, "Not to answer was terribly hard," you'd lie there in the long grass, trying not to breathe, not to do anything, until you gave them a good ten minutes, they were out. They were out. And there was a big write up in a paper, when the war ended September '45... No, he came home had leave,

29:00 then he went up to teach sigs. to a new water unit at Petrie, and I went up and stayed on a farm for a few weeks. And would you remember Lady Cilento, would you? Well her daughter had been married to Sean Connery, one, a very lucky woman. And I met this Lady Cilento and she wanted me to stay up there and so on. And then I came home from there

29:30 and Harry wasn't discharged until February or March '46, he was teaching sigs.... What was the question you asked me, I think I got off the track.

Getting off the track's fine, I asked you about Harry up in the north of New Britain?

Oh New Britain. Yeah, and I read this, it was in a newspaper up in Brisbane, but never had the sense to tear the page out and bring it home. How this battalion

30:00 of something like seven hundred men kept these thousands of Japanese cornered, up into New Britain.

Was Harry ever affected by malaria?

Only in a small way, I don't, no time at home, he might go down for a few days but not badly like some of them did.

30:30 **As the war wound down into '44 and '45, did the atmosphere and the level of interest at home change in any way?**

No, I think everybody was still, you, I think the feeling was there it could flare up, because little bits would flare up. Like the Japanese almost got over the Owen Stanleys. And was only luck that, Harry knows

31:00 of course, only luck that then the Australians had to pull back, and then the Japanese were running short of food and cause they'd stretched their lines, but they were able to push them back onto the beaches at Gona and Buna, Sanananda. But no, I think right until the very end people were, you were still doing all the same things because you knew that

31:30 if they could get new troops in they could've done anything, they could've come in a different way.

What are your memories of hearing about the end of the war?

Where was I? Ended in August, or July. August, no.

The atom bombs were in August I believe.

About the seventeenth of August

32:00 wasn't it, something like that. Ten, seven and ten, ten, about that. I think he mightn't have gone back to his, to Townsville, cause he was AWL a few times too.

What about you, what do you remember of hearing about the atom bombs and then the surrender?

Well everybody thought the atom bomb was the thing, mightn't think it now. But it was a case of more deaths on,

32:30 on both American and Australian sides. It was a terrible thing to happen but I think the war could've gone, lasted, you know, longer. Where was I? I have an idea Harry was, he came home, I think he just came home before the end of, he was away a year and eleven months, so that was August, he must've

33:00 came home just when, just before the war ended. I think we went into the Martin Place that night and it was absolutely packed, crowded. People just went mad. Oh there was a lot of excitement and big relief and everything. But then again the war didn't end for him because then they sent him back, didn't end until '46 for him. And quite a lot, they didn't just all say,

33:30 close the book and say, “Right, you’re out,” you know, there’s a lot to be done.

What was going on in Martin Place that night?

Oh everybody was just singing and walking and dancing. All a bit mad. Oh no you could hardly move in Martin Place. And I think that was the same the next day, more people were coming in to the city.

34:00 And I think there’s a photograph you’ll see a man dancing up Martin Place, quite a few men said it was them but I don't think they’ve ever proved which man it really was. But, no it was, it was a pretty hectic time.

Were you working on those days?

No, I’d just given up work, I was very tired and my father was utterly shocked, I was going to be out of work.

34:30 And I said, “No, I just can’t keep going,” and I thought I’d have a break and I’d go back. Well the war ended and there was no need for me to work. But oh no the city went mad, went really mad. And in Martin Place I can remember there was you know, you’d join a conga line, or there was big circles and dancing, singing, all up Martin Place.

35:00 In fact the whole city, Pitt Street, you couldn’t get up Pitt Street. And but then life settled down because there was very little work, there wasn’t much work, it took things, you know, to change. And Harry went, he had been at Bennett & Woods for a number of years before the war years, he went back there. What happened after

35:30 that? And we moved over to the house at Rozelle.

What state was your and Harry’s finances in when he came home?

Well I don't think he had anything. I found his money book today, army book, or last night I was going through some books. He got, for six years in the army, he got a hundred and fifty-six pound and so many shillings, so I

36:00 was the rich one. And we decided we’d move over to Rozelle for a couple of years and stayed thirty-three years. But he got himself together, he did wonderful work with the boys and inner city kids, made a life.

In general, how do you think those returned servicemen were treated?

I think it was up to you, your

36:30 self really, you could apply for a pension. Harry could’ve had a hundred percent pension, but he’d say, “No, I’ve still got my legs,” because he looked like he’d lose it. When you look back now he lost thousands of pounds. He was very stubborn, spoiled bloke. And really he knew very little about the army, burned out service pension at sixty. It was

37:00 only when we came here to Manly for this holiday when I hadn’t been so good and we met a couple from Melbourne. And, and he told Harry about it, and then he started to look into it and see what it was. We were in no debt, we owned Rozelle and then he found out at sixty, he could retire and get the burned out service pension. It wasn’t a lot but it was also in keeping with today.

37:30 And I couldn’t get a service pension of course but when he retired he got the burned out service and I got... where he got everything, dentists, doctors, everything, I just got a bare pension. But then when I became a War Widow I now have my own gold card and I get everything. Glasses every second year, doctors, physiotherapy,

38:00 teeth. I had to pay for my own teeth before that. And but I think, really I think it was up to you to get the forms and find out, but he, I really, I just think he didn’t want any more to do with the army.

All those things you’ve talked about are physical health, how do you think the mental health aspect of men who came back from World War II was treated?

Oh

38:30 shocking, they weren’t helped. Then somebody was telling me about recently Vietnam [veterans], did get a bad beat but they, had physio, psychiatrists they could go to. Second World War, First World War men, they had nothing. Because psychiatrists weren’t thought of, you were really gone up here you know. But I do think, because he

39:00 would wake up of a night, and I was lucky I didn’t live in black eyes. And his arms’d come up behind his head, you know, and that’s how he’d sleep. And I used to often get up and I’d sleep out in the lounge because, and I think he was you know, dreaming and he’s knocking things off. And when they were on New Britain he said, “The crabs at night,” he could hear the crabs, they were that huge. He said, “These huge crabs,” and he could wake up of a night, he could see those huge

39:30 crabs. But you never thought of going anywhere to get help. He couldn’t go to army battalion because

he said, “The men would start, the ones who’d never been near a front line would start as if they had been.” And he said, “Three months before your mind went down".

Do you think a lot of wives, like yourself, suffered through that lack of counselling?

Oh I think so. But I always,

40:00 I look back now and you really didn’t understand it. I think we were as much at fault with you... but they just didn’t want to talk about it. The only time they talked about it was a funny thing, but other than that, they just didn’t talk about it. I know that we had friends, Alf and Eileen Reid. Friday nights we would go up, no, we’d go to Norm Clarke’s and play cards, push the

40:30 pram, we all had prams, and we’d play cards. And then Norm’s wife died so that ended that. Then Alf and Eileen Reid, we used to have card nights, they were way down Drummoyne, but you’d push the pram and off you’d go. And if you heard a burst of laughter you knew they’d thought of something funny but that was the only time. Then the Reids moved to Port Macquarie and we went up and seen them a couple of times. And Harry and Alf would go off on their own and I think that’s

41:00 when they talked over things. The same as the Bissetts, they were up in the mountains. Charlie Bissett only died, what, last year, he had leukaemia. And they’d go off. And I often seen them just slide a packet of cigarettes and I’d say they’d have a cigarette, a sneaky cigarette, and they’d go off and have a smoke. But yeah,

41:30 they just didn’t talk.

Tape 7

00:32 **What was your relationship like with your husband’s family?**

Well there was only an elderly sister and her husband, oh quite okay. Except when we wouldn’t become Jehovah’s Witnesses, but we still visit them, we still did visit them. They were most upset but we just felt, ‘What was the point of doing something that you weren’t going to be happy in?’

01:00 **What role did religion play in your life then?**

Well I think in the first place you go along, it’s like as kids your parents pack you off and later on it’s a, sort of you make friends. And it’s only now I really think more of religion, and I don't know that I do believe all that I’m supposed to believe.

01:30 **When do you think, we talked before about the different unions, the Protestant and Catholic unions...**

Yeah.

When do you think that started to change in Australia?

Well I think it was just a gradual thing after the war years. I know when we got up to teenagers, we went to dances, the Catholic kids that we’d been shying things at, and they at us. We mixed and went to the, then the men went to the war

02:00 and they seemed to all mix. So I think after Second World War gradually there was a change. And there’s a big change now because, well Catholic Church are finding it hard to get priests and, or nuns. I’ve just read about that recently, that they’re working on a different system altogether. And the churches have had such a bad name with, what do you call

02:30 it, the way children were, have been treated , and even the Salvation Army recently was on TV, their treatment of children. So it’s all, it’s gradually, I think there’s been a big change. People ask questions more now, you question more and we read more into what the academics on all sides write about. Now if you followed Easter at all,

03:00 they’re now saying, ‘Did Christ die?’ Now that’s not the first time I’ve heard that, that the way he was on the cross, you know, the chest was out, that could’ve stopped his breathing for a short time or maybe he’s breathing much shallower, and maybe when they put him in the cave for three days he restored. So people are thinking more.

03:30 And I know the Catholic school don’t teach the Immaculate Conception, and even the Pope has said, ‘There could be no such thing.’ So just whatever you believe in isn’t it?

How easy was that to be an independent single woman in the ‘40’s?

04:00 No, I didn’t find it hard. I think we were away from our parents more, that you weren’t being told, ‘Don’t do that,’ or ‘Don’t do this.’ And I think it’s just a gradual thing but a lot of women today are still frightened to do things or their husbands’ll be upset. The only thing my husband was ever only upset

04:30 with, was when I took up tai chi, because it was something he couldn't do.

Tell us about tai chi for you?

To me it's a way of life. Makes you think. Read different books. You'll go home tonight and I think most people would go over and over it for days, but I know I won't. It's something you learn to do.

05:00 The mere fact that my son doesn't come and see me, I don't let it worry me. He's got more to worry than I have. It was just that his partner, a very aggressive woman, and I'm not sorry I don't see her because she would come here and say, "Oh for heaven sake, put more colour into your bedroom. Do this." And if they came here I'd say, "Look I'll just go and put a

05:30 clean pair of pants on," and I think that worried her that I still took an interest in myself. And I don't see why my son can't say, "Well I'm going to go and see Mum," but if that's what he wants to do, that's alright. My daughter's never been very close to me since her father died, but there again I just say well, "If that's the way you want to be." I've written her notes because, when her husband died,, her two girls -

06:00 , Jilly was only sixteen months, Brooke was about seven, and we raised those girls until they went to high school here. And I still see Brooke, looks after me, and but I rarely see Jillian, she said, 'Look I'm just far too busy nan.' And I know she is but I think sometimes I should say, "Well darling, I'm sorry I didn't learn those words until about twenty odd years ago," but you don't.

06:30 And this is what you learn. People hurt themselves more than they hurt you, if they only realised it. And I love the exercise. And I, you say tai chi, I did much more than that, I do a shabatzi, I did the dao-yin. And the cardiologist I go to now, my, when my man retired, my doctor had to write and tell that her what I was,

07:00 and what I did. And she said, "I see you do tai chi." She said, "Do you know the dao-yin?" I said, "Yep." She said, "That's why your heart's so good." My blood pressure's my trouble, my heart's good. I did the dao-yin, stupid exercises you ever seen, but it worked on the heart.

How, you had a heart attack when you were forty?

Yeah, about thirty-seven.

How did life change for you after that?

Well fortunately this cardiologist he said to me, "You're going to get yourself a little part time

07:30 job." Which I did, told a few lies, That I'd worked in shoes with a local shoe shop at Rozelle. And I was there for a number of years, oh, when I went back and told him I was doing shoes, he said, "You'll get out of that." He said, "That's the hardest thing you can be in." Because you've got to get down and he said, "Get into a frock shop where you give them the frock and they go and try it on." But I'd learned the shoes by this and I stayed there. And then I had, later

08:00 on, the opportunity to go into a new company that started in the city, round about the time, they had to get out of New Guinea, they were coffee growers, and they bought into this shoe importing. And I enjoyed that very much because you got little bit of bonus of what you thought was nice. A man went overseas and did the buying, when he come back he'd ask the few women there what they thought,

08:30 and if what we thought sold well, we always got a little bonus of some sort. And so that was a good few years and I stayed there, oh when [Prime Minister] Mr [Gough] Whitlam bought in the tariffs, no more imports, I finished there about 1974, '75. And oh I got involved in other things, so I didn't go

09:00 back to work.

What do you think of Australia's involvement in wars since the Second World War?

Well the Second World War of course we had to fight but I don't know about Vietnam, it was a terrible war and what it's caused. It got nowhere.

09:30 Oh I think a lot of wars are unnecessary, where does it get you, unless like we had to fight to save our country. But going to Vietnam, those people will always fight, people come down out of the hills and raid the villages, and it's always got on, that's if you can believe what you read.

What about the current conflict

10:00 **in Iraq?**

Well I don't know why George Bush went ahead with it when they found none of these bombs that he was so sure that, what is it, Saddam had. And even the American people are getting very uptight about it. Why did he go in?

10:30 Solved nothing has it? Not to date. And the Americans are losing, they're dying, it's amazing how many men they've lost. And it's breaking up peoples' lives. I can't see Saddam ever attacking America, so what's the point of it? But I've, as far as men go, if they join the army like that, well you got to be

prepared to be, go where you're sent.

11:00 **What do you think that your contribution to the war was, the war effort?**

The Second World War? Oh well I helped get the mail through and knitted my socks. Never refused to work if a big mail come in, the supervisor would just work

11:30 along and say, "Can you work tonight?" and you said, "Yes," and in every way, in every little way you were doing your bit to help something. It was a big thing I think that you kept getting the mail out, quickly as possible, and getting it in as quick as possible.

Do you have any regrets?

About working? None whatsoever. None whatsoever. It was hard work

12:00 but then it was hard work learning tailoring too. And obviously hard work doesn't kill you does it?

Do you think that what you were doing at the GPO was a form of national service to Australia?

Oh I'd say so. If the women hadn't of applied for jobs, the mail would've been much slower. Because the men that were there

12:30 were mainly elderly men who'd retired, came back, and gradually a few young ones did come back from, wounded I guess, or that, of war. But on a whole, without the women, they could never have, never have got the mail out.

How important do you think serving your country is, in general?

Well it's Australia.

13:00 I think it's worth fighting for.

INTERVIEW ENDS