Australians at War Film Archive

Joan Coxsedge - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 16th May 2000

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Tape 1

NB. This transcript is of an interview filmed for the television series, Australians at War in 1999-2000. It was incorporated into the Archive in 2008.

20:18 **So I won't use any of my questions, so tell us about, and mention the name Save Our Sons movement so we know what you're talking. Whenever you're ready?**

20:30 I joined Save Our Sons in tandem with the broader anti war movement in the mid 60s, 1960s, and I did so because it provided something very special and specific for women. Many women who had never been involved in anything before and it sort of provided space for them to take or act at whatever level they felt comfortable in. And I think it was a very important part of the anti war movement.

21:00 Some of us of course, did you know we were involved in…

Have another lash at it but try and just focus on Save Our Sons,

21:30 **it was a group of…?**

Save Our Sons was a very important part of the anti-war movement. It started in the mid 1960s and it was set up to focus on the role of women inside that movement. It was made up of all sorts of women. You know,some women had young babies, some were near retiring age. They were professional women, they were businesswomen, they were women at home so in some ways we were everywoman and we took part in all

22:00 sorts of things. We had our rallies and we had our vigils and we gave out leaflets and we wrote letters to parliamentarians and as time went on we also did some more radical things. We, like a lot of other people at that time were prepared to break the law to make their point and some of us did, and some of us ended in jail, but at all times we had the support of these women and that was very, very important. So whatever we did, at whatever level we operated at

22:30 this group was a very important support group and so therefore if you like it provided a network before that term became somewhat abused. Well I was a foundation member of the Moratorium movement and a lot of people see the huge rally that came in 1970, but they forget all the hard work that created that Moratorium and one that followed it. And we used to meet every couple of weeks

23:00 in the Railways Institute building in the city and we were made up of all sorts of people, some with great passions, ideological commitments, so in a way we were again very representative of the community because there were full blown socialists, there were Communists, there were anarchists, there were Christians, there were Jews. You know there were women, there were professionals and of course you know, the fights were just unbelievable and we sometimes would

23:30 drive each other crazy you know, by arguing over one point in a slogan. But of course what turned out, the people who actually wrote the slogan decided anyway so it was pretty pointless, but out of all of that, out of all of that passion came an agreement around a common cause if you like, and that was to do what we could to stop that war and to oppose conscription. So in a way the arguments were also I think, representative of our strengths

24:00 because it also meant that the people who represented this wide spectrum of society went out to their various constituencies, if you like, and were able to argue the anti-war message. And I think that helped in the development of the movement, but of course we can't leave out the television and the role of television in showing people, the ordinary people watching their TV sets just what was going on in Vietnam and the horrible pictures coming through and the dreadful images

24:30 really got to people which is why wars now are so much more sanitised than they were back then. You know, journalists back then could get and see and report on what was actually happening. They can't now because the people who like wars decided that that wasn't such a good idea, and so now you've got all sorts of people with barriers going across ordinary journalists so they can't get within a bull's roar of

where the action really is. But back then it was different and through that people really saw things

25:00 that they couldn't countenance and that sent them onto the streets and, if you like, gave them an opportunity to support this movement in all sorts of different ways and some people, if they had high pressured jobs or high powered jobs didn't want to be seen up front. They are the people who would give you money. They are the people who would offer to help draft resisters and we were never short of people to help draft resisters. You know, and you're breaching the law. You know you're actually in breach of the

25:30 law by doing that. But that was no problem and so it was, it was an incredible experience and I think in contrast to today where there's a lot of pessimism around, there's a lot of cynicism around, back then we not only had the passion, and it was a global thing not just confined to countries who were sending troops to Vietnam, it was something that was sweeping the world at that time because not only did we want to stop the war we wanted to change the system that spawned it and that was

26:00 to change capitalism, to get rid of it and a lot of us did want to get rid of capitalism. I still do actually. I think it's a rotten system and I think even more Australians can recognise that now when they see what's happening in their own lives. But back then we thought we could do it. We really believed we could do it.

Can you talk about… make the distinction that your protest was

26:30 **not against those soldiers but the political system because that's an important point…?**

I think it's terribly important to understand that we were never ever opposed to the young men who went to the war. We felt that they were victims of the system and they weren't to blame at all

27:00 and that showed up later on because they were treated with absolute contempt by successive governments when they came back ill and they needed help and they didn't get it. And they were denied the sort of help that obviously they needed from being ill after the effects of all the defoliants and the chemicals that were rained down on Vietnam and they came back with great health problems and they were just treated as if they were making them up. And I think they had a rotten deal during the war

27:30 and afterwards and possibly they still are getting a rotten deal. I think it's very important to make it absolutely clear that the anti war people that I mixed with and certainly the members of Save Our Sons at no stage attacked the young men who went to war because we felt that they were the victims of this rotten war and victims of the government's policies.

28:00 One of the Save Our Sons actions that I liked least I think was this, we used to roll up at the Swan Street Barracks in Melbourne every time there was an intake of national servicemen, and this would be early in the morning, which was troubling enough you know, to get there at the crack of dawn, usually cold and bleak. And we'd be there with our banner which used to get caught up in the branches of the trees inevitably because there were loads of them in that particular area, but worse was that we used to

28:30 get abused by a lot of the parents or family members who were there to celebrate the departure of their young, the young man of their family and that was very off putting. You know they'd be there with their bottles of champagne and I found that, I felt that was an obscenity but we did cop quite a lot of abuse and I just hated the atmosphere there. It was very, very unpleasant.

29:00 Back then Reds [Communists] under the beds were in full flight. There were Reds under the beds, on the beds, above the beds and in the beds. There were Reds everywhere because if you remember that was the time when the DLP [Democratic Labor Party] was perhaps at its most powerful and influenced elections quite out of all proportion to the numbers you know that it had. But I mean we've always had that haven't we? There's always been that outsider blamed for something that goes on and if

29:30 people cast their minds back and just take a little look at history they will find you know the faults that dotted this country. They dotted this country to keep out the Russians long before the Revolution, long before the Bolshies [Bolsheviks] took over so we seem to have always had that fear. But I remember going to Andrew Peacock's [member of parliament] office and, with a delegation to protest about the war, this would have been about 1967 I think, and I've never forgotten, in his electorate office he had this huge map on the wall

30:00 and from China were coming these huge red arrows pointing right down to Australia and I thought yeah, that just about summed you up, Andrew Peacock. Well protest, you know the surveillance of protesters was very blatant. Nobody made any secret about it back then before high tech took over. We used to have the Special Branch plods [policemen] sitting at the

30:30 back of every meeting hall that we were at and they would have their notebook and their camera and they'd be taking down the names of people who were there and what was said and car numbers outside and all the rest of it and they made no secret of it and they'd have their cameras and take photographs of people. And I mean they went even further than that. They would actually come up to you. You know, they would make a point of this. They'd come up and say, "Now, how's Uncle Fred getting on at his job?"

31:00 Wherever he worked, in the bank say or, "How's Auntie Freda getting on?" You know, "She's had problems hasn't she with some of the kids?" and they'd run through all the details. The idea being of course that they knew everything about you and the idea was to intimidate you and to make you fearful

so that you wouldn't take part in these meetings and rallies. But it didn't really work. People sort of got used to them and they got used to their presence. But I would have to say this, that there was a more worrying aspect to it and particularly I think people should bear in mind that

31:30 Special Branch do the leg work for ASIO [Australian Security Information Office] so all the information that they did you know take down ended up in ASIO files. Now that could be used against people and was used against people and certainly they had great, and very tight connections with personnel officers in many business houses, big business places and they would just ring up, or the business person, the personnel officer would ring ASIO up and say, "Have you got anything on John?" And they'd look up and

32:00 they'd say, "Yes he takes part in anti-war stuff." and so on and so forth and the bloke wouldn't get the job and he wouldn't know that he didn't get the job or why he didn't get the job. But that's what used to happen and it was all orally. There was never anything written down so that they could never be judged later on or accused of anything later on. It was all done on the phone and that I think was one of the nastier aspects of it. Some people definitely had their careers

32:30 cut short and advancement cut short and that happened to my own husband. He worked in the bank, a very conservative institution indeed and he was also active in his bank union and the head of the bank said to him you know, "If you think you're going to take on the bosses and win think again." And of course with a name like mine, if it was Smith or Brown you're laughing but you know with a name like mine you could hardly say it's somebody else. "It isn't me, no relation." Just didn't work that way. So yes I think we all paid a

33:00 price. My kids paid a price. They got into some difficulties; particularly my daughter had a hard time at school. You know if you go to a school where the teachers are taking a pro-war stance they take it out on the kids. My young son who wanted to get an apprenticeship was knocked back because they said, "Is your mother Joan?" "Yeah my mum's Joan." "Oh bad luck we don't want ya."

Tape 2

00:38 When I went to jail in Easter 1971, I was terribly worried about the kids naturally and especially … When I went to jail for daring to tell young men what their options were as far as conscription, in other words, don't register or be a conscientious objector, and we were doing that during the registration

01:00 period which meant you were breaching the law. Sent to jail with four other women, the Fairley Five, bunged in just before Good Friday 1971. Terribly worried about the kids, particularly my youngest one Christopher who was at primary school. I shouldn't have worried. When I finally came out of jail after two weeks he came out to me very proud and he said, "Oh, the kids said is that your old woman who was on the news?" and he was as happy as Larry. So

01:30 there you go.

Just talk to me…

Well everyone felt very, very sad when Errol Noack [first national serviceman to die in Vietnam] died…

I'll just get you to say without the well.

Everyone felt very sad when Errol Noack died because he was the first Australian soldier to die in Vietnam and we thought he's the first of many and we just felt it

02:00 was such a waste of a young life.

The US base, tell us a little bit about that?

Part of the learning I suppose during the anti-war period was learning about the presence of the US bases on our soil.

02:30 One of the most important bases was definitely Pine Gap and that was established very secretly in 1966 and Richard Lee Stawlings [?] came out here in January 1967 and he actually helped to sort of supervise the building of the base and it was a CIA/NSA [US intelligence agencies] base. Now people might not know what the National Security Agency is but it's an American secret intelligence agency

03:00 which is vastly more powerful than the CIA itself and they were involved in the actual running of that particular base. So it was always a target, if you like for anti-war people because it was seen to definitely challenge the integrity and the sovereignty of this country. But of course no government wanted to talk about it and no government knew anyway what was going on because of the utter secrecy because all the information that they, it was like a giant

03:30 vacuum cleaner, and so they sucked up information in our region and that was sent back to the United States for them to look at it, you know and to determine the value of the information. But no Australian government had access to that information nor could they have. And it started off with two ray domes

and they're like huge golf balls and of course for people who don't recall Pine Gap, and it's still operating, now it's got twelve of those giant ray domes,

04:00 none of which are ever talked about of course but it sits at the foothills of the McDonald Ranges in a very isolated spot, not that far from Alice Springs, and there it is and of course the Americans wanted it there because we're a politically stable country and this is geographically very stable and they knew you know, they had compliant governments who are just quite happy to see it there and the first I think agreement signed in 1966

04:30 lasted for ten years and each government, regardless of political colour has just renewed it automatically. Pine Gap is an electronic eavesdropping base and it's the most important and most secretive of the American bases outside the United States itself and it spies on people. It spies on everybody and it was certainly a

05:00 prime nuclear target and yet the Australian people didn't even know it existed. It was never talked about in the media and the government didn't want to talk about it because they didn't know much about it. They just sort of agreed to it and then the Americans ran it from there and it was indeed something that worried the people who knew about it a great deal.

05:30 Errol Noack, the death of Errol Noack had a particular significance because he was the first Australian conscript to die in the Vietnam War and I think from that point of view it just, I don't know it generated a particular sadness because we knew it was the first of many. Reflecting back it was a period of incredible change politically

06:00 and every other way. It sort of was a watershed time I think. It was like an unleashing of a huge amount of energy that had been held back during the Cold War period of the 50s and the early 60s and all of a sudden this huge energy came out and it manifested itself in the anti-war movement. But it didn't even stop there really because all of that channelled [Gough] Whitlam into becoming elected in 1972

06:30 and that encouraged him to produce policies that, in a way supported more independence. Ironically of course it helped get rid of him in November 1975. Those same independent streaks were also his death knell. But the people who were involved at that time, a lot of the people kept on doing other things. You know and it was the forerunner or if you like the mother of feminism. That came out of it. The anti nuclear

07:00 movement, the environmental movement. So all of these movements were directly born, I think from that huge channelling of energy during that period and some of us kept going and are still going. Some didn't, some dropped off and went back and still talk nostalgically about that period as if it was the best time in their lives. But others just kept plugging away because we believe that we haven't yet completed

07:30 our political journey in turning this country into a place where human beings can live in harmony with each other.

INTERVIEW ENDS