Australians at War Film Archive

Alice Penman (Bobby) - Transcript of interview

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Tape 1

00:31 **OK Alice, I was wondering if you could start by telling us a little bit about your life?**

I was born in Rockhampton and my parents obviously came down to New South Wales and the main part of my life that I remember we moved to Bathurst, and I've forgotten how old I was but I began to remember things from then on. I went to school there and of course my father had a very high position,

01:00 he was restorer of antique furniture, but the war came, sorry, the Depression came and he was the head of the department of the business and the owner was offered work by three men from Sydney who would work for the same amount of money my father was getting, and of course they tossed him out and from then on you know, he had a rather hard time. He did all kinds of jobs then to support us. But right through

01:30 that time we had a very happy life and I finished school and there were no jobs in the country. I fiddled around, did a bit of this or that and something else, wherever I could make a penny or sixpence or something. Is that enough?

Yes, sure. Can you tell me what sparked your interest in nursing at a young age?

My father had

02:00 three sisters and they were all trained nurses and I had two sisters, and the sister next to me and I always wanted to do nursing, that was a thing. But in those days parents had to help a bit. My parents at that stage were not in a position to help and then I read a book called Testament of Youth and it was about VADs in England, they served in England and France

02:30 during the war, the First World War, and then in 1937 a detachment was established in Bathurst and my sister and I went along to see what it was all about and we both joined and from there we had two years before the war broke out really, and we did training every year in the VADs. You

03:00 had to do a first aid course for six months and then a home nursing course for the next six months and when the war began then it became very obvious we would go into further training and we were able to go to the district hospital and do training there, and then when the war, you know, took on,

03:30 a camp was established in Bathurst and the men came to there and if we had done our training in a district hospital we were allowed work in the camp hospitals and we did that. Then of course there were a lot of other activities in Bathurst. I belonged to the Red Cross. I was a Red Cross VAD and my sister and I stitched one garment per week, the ladies

04:00 would cut out either a coat for refugee children or a little dress or coats for doctors who were going to work with the boys and we made a garment each, each week. Then they established a canteen for boys, army boys and they all came in and ate millions of eggs and bacon and things and we worked every weekend there. So it was a very full time at that time.

04:30 **How did your family react to the outbreak of war?**

I am the eldest of the family and my brother was next and of course they were very concerned, but he was young, he was seventeen when the war broke out and then the war began, and they were very concerned. My mother had lost two brothers in the First World War and she was a bit worried about it all but they seemed

05:00 to think that it was right that we were doing what we could.

Had your father served in the First World War?

No, he didn't. I'm not too sure why he didn't, but he didn't.

Were there any influences on your life who had served, uncles or teachers?

Yes, two uncles, my mother's brothers were both killed in the First World War. I don't think that inspired me as much as the fact that I wanted

05:30 to nurse and I had the opportunity in the VADs and that was what I really wanted to do. And reading about this woman, Vera Britain, she and another woman called Holtbury, they were the first women to graduate from Cambridge in England and then they joined the VAD.

06:00 Vera Britain served in France and so I used to read this book and when I got to the end I used to start again and I think that was what inspired me to go on with it, but it was really my aunts, the three of them, trained sisters.

What was the book called?

Testament of Youth.

And can you remember the author?

Vera Britain, she wrote the story and Winifred Holtbury was her friend.

06:30 She lost her fiancé and her dearly loved brother in the First World War.

Do you recall where you were when you heard about the outbreak of war?

I was in hospital, my brother was a pillion rider on a motorbike and he had an accident in the afternoon and he was unconscious so we were at North Shore Hospital when the war broke out, Mr Menzies made his announcement.

07:00 **Can you describe the way Bathurst changed in that immediate war period once their base was established? Was there a large influx from outside the town?**

No, not really, but as I say, a camp was established but we had hundreds, I can't remember the divisions that were there, mostly the 8th Division, they went onto Malaya and Singapore.

07:30 My father was terrified when I, in 1939 it was when war broke out. We went into intensive training then and then in 1941 when the government decided to send, the needed extra women to replace men, my father then got very worried and

08:00 very upset about it, but that's what I wanted to do and he didn't stop me.

What was the period of intensive training, what did that involve? What sort of things were you learning?

Nursing, you know, we went into deep study. Yes, bandaging and all that kind of thing, you know, first aid and home nursing, that was the training we had.

Were there new topics that you

08:30 **hadn't already done in the past?**

Not really, no. Well of course going to a military hospital was a big step in one's life with all the boys there but they were in good spirits. I think that was the thing that prevailed throughout the service was the spirit of the boys, they were all very courageous and they all wanted to be in it and get going.

So there was a hospital established at the camp?

Yes, a camp hospital, yes.

09:00 The main time that I was there it was the 2/10th Field Hospital, Field Ambulance, then they went up and they became prisoners of war later on.

How did you regard the quality of the equipment you had there compared to the stuff you had at the district hospital?

Quite different but adequate, but it was for a different reason, the district hospital catered for the general community

09:30 and that brought about all kind of different situations. In the army they were all young, very healthy, but they got their eye kicked out at football or something like that, which I never agreed with. I always said that was a self inflicted wound and that should take care of themselves.

What were the main differences in the equipment that were there at the hospital? Were they any particular different elements to the field ambulance or was

10:00 **there just less equipment?**

It was more mobile, the field ambulance. It wasn't an established unit in that way. It functioned normally and very efficiently and I think they were very well trained and they were able to could cope with anything they had to, it was proved during the war.

How did you feel about the hygiene standards of the field ambulance?

The what?

The hygiene standards?

10:30 Excellent, yes the army was very strict in its hygiene and you know they placed health above all things and care for our soldiers, that was one thing about our government, it was always very aware of the care and wellbeing.

In the field ambulance there were VADs, were they army service?

No, they didn't have any VADs, they had trained sisters but we were just there, we were locals

11:00 as so we just served them as they required us to.

And the purpose of that, was it intended that you would be attached to the field ambulance or was it for training?

No, there was no suggestion at that stage that we would ever serve out of Australia, that never entered my head really but I was ready for it if they wanted me to.

Did you consider entering the army nursing service or one of the services nursing?

Well, I go back to saying that I always, all my life, I

11:30 wanted to do nursing, but when the war started I began to think I would be too young, sisters had to be twenty-five to go away and I would really just finish possibly. And I didn't know how long the war would go on for, but I reckoned that I wouldn't be, if we were called, I wouldn't be in the hunt to get away as a sister. So I put my chances on VAD.

12:00 **But there was no suggestion at that early stage that the VAD would go?**

No.

But you were hoping that that would occur?

Well, I was hoping, I thought it was a possibility, but in 1941 the Government decided that they would take women in, and when war broke out there were only the two trained organizations and one was the trained sisters and the other was the VAD and that was

12:30 established and trained by the Australian Red Cross and the St John's Ambulance Brigade but the training was the same as we found out later. I was Red Cross, but when we got together, in 1941 the government decided to send women away and in the meantime they had a lot of the VADs without any pay, they weren't paid a cent and they provided

13:00 their own uniforms and everything during the training time and a lot of them served in the military hospitals in the various states of Australia, so they got a lot of experience there. In 1941 when the government decided to take the mike, I was called up and I was in Sydney for ten days and there were twelve thousand VADs trained ready to go in Australia

13:30 and I would say that the training was so good for what they had to do that any one of those twelve thousand could have gone and taken the place that we got. They decided to send eight hundred to the Middle East and the first lot would be two hundred, and I came down to Sydney and ten days later I met some girls and they said they were on final leave, so I rang Victoria Barracks and said I had met some of the girls and they're on final leave and they said, "What's your name?"

14:00 I said, "Alice Burns," and they said, "You're on final leave." So I went home and found that my brother was in camp hospital at that stage with mumps and my youngest sister was getting the mumps and I was not allowed to go home, I was warned that that was so. So I went to our doctor and had a long talk and he was wonderful and he said you know, if I felt I couldn't go everyone would understand but if I

14:30 made up my mind to go, then I couldn't go home because I couldn't run the risk of giving whatever troop ship I went on the mumps. So I didn't go home, which was very sad for me and I think it must have been devastating for my parents. I have only started to, as a mother, I began to realise what it's like when you have to say goodbye to your children for happy reasons, so it must have been worse for them, but I really didn't take that into

15:00 consideration, I don't think.

Why was your brother in the camp hospital?

He had got himself into the military. You see, it was two years since his accident and they wouldn't allow him in the AIF [Australian Imperial Force] and, you know, he was very upset when I got into the AIF and he didn't.

What were the causes of him not making it?

He had this accident off a motorbike

15:30 and fractured his skull.

On the day that war broke out?

Yep, on the day that war broke out.

So as you left, I think you left on the [HMS] Queen Mary, was that right?

Yes.

It must have been a very difficult day for you given that you hadn't seen your parents?

Well, I saw them. I could go every day and speak to them, but I couldn't go into the house and run the risk of getting the mumps and of course they examined me thoroughly afterwards

16:00 to see if I had any sign of the mumps, but no, I didn't go. Yes, we came down to Sydney then and we were here for a couple of days at Victoria Barracks and came through various parts of things that we had to do and requirements and getting our gear together, we had to get our uniforms.

What did you pack?

I beg your pardon?

What did you pack to take with you?

16:30 We were given thirty nine pounds, which provided us with a trunk and a little case, and we had to buy, David Jones made our uniforms, made mine anyway. Some of the girls went to Farmers I think, and we had a great coat and a navy blue uniform and a summer uniform and a mess dress that was a navy blue dress, a blue dress with navy blue collars

17:00 and that was for going out in the evening, and we were allowed a pair of shoes with heels and some grey stockings, silk for evening wear. Otherwise you could take whatever uniforms you could pack, half a dozen uniforms, and you had one cardigan and a little cape, of course grey lisle stockings, lisle was a kind of cotton, very thick and very unattractive,

17:30 and black shoes.

Were you proud in your uniform?

Very, very proud, very proud to wear the Australian, you know. When we were VADs on our shoulders we had "VAD Australia." Later on in the Middle East we became, well, we were taken into the AIF and tested but they didn't remove the VAD and when we got to the Middle East they took the VAD off, the boys filed them off

18:00 and we just had the "Australia" on our shoulders. They allowed us to be sentimental and keep the "Australia." It was interesting because from my detachment two women left a month before us, I had forgotten to say that. Margaret Stevens was our commandant and she was a Bathurst girl, and Ruth Willman, and they both went to Colombo, and Margaret Stevens went as the commandant

18:30 and if you had rank, commandant, assistant commandant or quartermaster in VADs, you had to drop that when we went into the AIF and just we all became, and then they selected, specially selected women from each state.

Did you have any rank at that point?

No, I did become corporal later when they brought rank in for women, they didn't have army rank for women, it wasn't until we returned to Australia that we got army

19:00 rank.

How many of you from Bathurst left together?

Two. Margaret and Ruth went to Colombo and Mary Terry and I went to the Middle East and they decided of the two hundred that there would be a quota from each state. So there were fifty from New South Wales selected, and I've forgotten the number from the other states, which made up the two hundred, and we all embarked on the

19:30 Queen Mary in Sydney with the exception of the Western Australian girls. When we arrived in Fremantle to pick up the girls it was so rough that the Mary couldn't be close enough for them to come, so they spent the night on the wharf. At least we were in our bunks. But the Mary was stripped of a lot of her glory when we went over. There were five thousand on and they'd put wooden bunks in

20:00 the cabins and there were eight, we had a cabin and there were eight of us in these little wooden bunks.

Were you quite friendly with Mary Tully, did you say?

With Mary Terry, yes. She was a very fine person.

Was your sister disappointed not to be going overseas?

Yes. She wanted to, but of course she was far too young and she didn't, but later she did join the army and she served in Queensland but even then

20:30 she wouldn't have made the cut. No, she was too young.

What sort of period did you have in Sydney before you departed on the Queen Mary to get to know the other girls?

I don't think they were interested in us getting to know the other girls, we were also busy trying to get our stuff together and get it packed and be picked up by the army, and the army printed our names and everything had to have its

21:00 names numbers, and my number was NX76505, so I am very proud of that number. When I rang Victoria Barracks and I said, "They're on final leave," and he said, "You're on final leave," and I said, "Oh dear," and he said, "Come out and get your army number." So I went out to get it and he said, "I will write it down for you but you will never forget it," and now when I see a car on the street with 505 I say to my husband, "That's the end of my army number."

21:30 **Tell me what Victoria Barracks was like at that time when you went to get your number?**

A hub of activity, and it was extraordinary because nobody had time for anything other than getting ready for what they had to do and that was the feeling that took over in those days.

And what sort of news were you getting back about how the war was going?

Not very much. The communications were nothing like they are today.

22:00 I don't know if it's a good thing that we get so much so fast and we get it over and over again, you don't really know what's happening, its not all that clear now I don't think. But no, communications were very poor then.

Had you heard about the Australians fighting in the North African desert in 1941?

Oh yes, we knew about that, we knew about Tobruk and when we arrived in the Middle East of course the boys were back from Tobruk and my unit, I served with the 2/1st.

22:30 The 2/1st General Hospital was in Gaza when we got there, and so we were taken onto staff there and the boys were back from Tobruk and Greece and later on the 2/1st came home and I stayed with, the 2/6th came down, it had been in Greece and Crete, and they had had a terrible time and lost all their equipment so they were feeling very sad

23:00 and low when we got there.

Can you tell me, you departed from, you picked up some girls in Fremantle, where did you go from there?

We went three weeks. First of all we picked the girls up in Fremantle and we went down to Jervis Bay on that Sunday and we waited there for the Queen Mary to get her troops and then she joined us and we had two escorts, I can't remember the names of the escorts,

23:30 and they escorted the two Queens for a certain distance and then we were taken over by a couple of others.

Were you fearful of submarine attack?

Not really. The night before we sailed, I remember a major came on and he said that The Queen Mary was a very safe ship, she was built in three parts, and he said, "If a tin fish should

24:00 come through the middle she will still float. If it comes through the front she will still float and if it's aft, she will still float." By tin fish of course he meant a submarine, a torpedo, not a submarine, a torpedo, sorry. But when you're young you don't take any notice of those things and we were all terribly busy because of a thing called URTI [Upper Respiratory Tract Infection], upper respiratory system

24:30 took over from the boys and of course a lot of them were sleeping in hammocks over the swimming pool, so there were no beds for them and we had to have them all on the deck and if you've tried to nurse rather sick boys on the deck when you've recently had a small pox injection, you knew what it was about.

You had received a small pox injection?

Yes, we had all our needles, you see, we only had the ten days

25:00 to prepare for the whole lot, get everything together, because it was a new adventure. Women hadn't been taken into the army beyond the trained sisters of course but we were the first women to be taken into the AIF.

What did the small pox injection do to you?

It immobilised my arm for a while and it made me feel rather sick but I wouldn't let anyone know because I thought they would put me in a little boat and send me home. I kept it to myself as most of the girls did. On the day that we arrived

25:30 at Port Tewfik, that was a very heavily bombed bay and all the ship were sticking up all over the place, and half of us got off, which was a rather risky thing because we had to carry our kit bags and try and get down the side of the Queen Mary on a rope ladder thing, and so half were off and then there was an air raid warning and the Queen Mary made off out to sea again.

26:00 She was a very fast ship, and it wasn't until later that night that she came back and we got the others off. Then we got on the train and went across the desert to Gaza and when we got to Gaza because of the bombing the trains couldn't go into the station. The man was screaming out, or some man, I don't know who he was, was screaming out "Jump, jump," and so we had to jump and we didn't know where we were jumping, and he didn't put out his arms to catch us, so we just jumped, and

26:30 then we walked to about three miles to where the hospital was established, so it was a bit of rough going.

How did you find your way to the hospital?

We had guides, you know, the guards, these unknown men, they took us there, and when we got to the hospital and there were two wonderful sisters, Sister Peg and Sister Joan Page and they had prepared breakfast, which was mutton chops or something like that and I had never had a better breakfast in my whole life. We just

27:00 ate, you know, we were so hungry. They did give us a biscuit and a boiled egg before we got off the Queen Mary but it didn't sustain us for nearly twenty-four hours.

And what were your early impressions of the hospital?

The 2/1st, it was totally under canvas of course and it was quite different from anything we had ever seen and the boys had made our beds and had little notes on all

27:30 the blankets. All the blankets had little notes pinned on them, you know, private so and so, sergeant so and so wanted us to get in touch with them at a later date. There was a very mixed reception because the sisters and the nursing staff of the hospital didn't like the idea of these women. I think they almost thought we came from Mars you know, we were not well received except by these two wonderful sisters that prepared for us.

28:00 But they soon found out that every person, that every woman that went was there just to do the job and they were very pleased and we really, and I think I can truly say that we served well.

What was the basis of their concern initially, do you think?

Oh, they just thought we weren't trained, we weren't, you know the army was just sticking women in because they wanted to release men.

28:30 Unbeknown to us, Japan was becoming very aggressive and the worry began there, and so they brought the units home. The 9th Division remained in the Middle East, and in Palestine and there were no reinforcements so when El Alamein started there were no reinforcements so what they did,

29:00 I'm a bit ahead of myself, because the 2/1st then came home with troops they sent home, but we didn't know that it was to fight against the Japanese and so the 2/6th came down. It was in resting in Jerusalem at the Kaiser's palace, not that there was affluence there, but they came down and they took over the hospital,

29:30 and we packed one hospital up and sent it home and then we had to unpack the other, and by this time they had acquired a lot of equipment because as I said before, they had lost their equipment in Greece. They were thrilled to have us and we worked very well with them. During the El Alamein campaign, half the VADs went up to the 2/7th, which was up nearer to El Alamein.

30:00 It was more, it wasn't a clearing hospital but more a clearing hospital. Ours was a base hospital and we went up to twelve thousand beds under canvas if you can imagine it. And we used to have to clear wards at night and the ambulances would come down. I never knew how they got there because they didn't have any lights. We weren't allowed any lights at all. They would come down and the wards would fill up with the boys from El Alamein.

30:30 **How many staff did you have on to cope with twelve thousand beds?**

I don't know how many sisters we had but we didn't have a lot of them, and they worked so hard it was unbelievable. They were responsible often for two or three wards, and we would have eighty or ninety men in each ward and it was, you know, walking on dirt and mud and what not. The first winter that we were there was the

31:00 coldest winter for thirty years and on the Christmas Day we had no electricity, so we had hurricane lamps or whatever. We wore gumboots and rain coats all the time, all the staff did. And the men got boilers and things and managed some hot food, but in those days it was served on tin containers with

some water underneath to keep them warm, and we had to serve them

31:30 their Christmas dinner on tin plates, which was very sad to me, a great shock in the way of life.

Was hygiene a bigger issue there with the mud and the wet?

Well, yes it was a great difficulty, but they continued with very strict hygiene because there were various wards with infectious diseases and things like that, and

32:00 dysentery wards. They couldn't run the risk of any out break of disease. Ours was a wonderful, it was a base hospital and Colonel Money was our colonel and he was a neurologist from Sydney and he was renowned for his tremendous work, and the other nations actually set up a place where he could go and lecture some of their people, he was so well regarded in his work.

32:30 **I just want to establish what month did you get to Gaza? What month did you get to 2/1st?**

We arrived at the 2/1st on the 23rd of November 1941.

Just before Japan entered the war?

Yes, well they were getting busy about it. My father was worried that I might go up there, and of course he was relieved and he didn't know where I was. We weren't allowed to tell anyone where we were going, we were told we were told we

33:00 weren't allowed to say whatever ship we got on. I don't know how we would have told them because we had no telephones or anything. But that was his great worry, that I might go up north.

How long was it until you found out that Japan had entered the war?

I don't know exactly when I found out. I didn't know why the troops were coming home, were being sent home and we didn't know if we'd just get there and go back again after a few months, but

33:30 during the Alamein Campaign we just wondered why we had no reinforcements and they weren't sending any reinforcements over because we didn't, I guess the powers that be knew but they didn't relay all that information to us and there were no radios in those days. We had one sitting on a post up top and we used to go there about six o'clock to hear the news relayed from England and we had a

34:00 radio section in the hospital that was used for relaying a bit of music and stuff. We didn't get bulletins or news and every afternoon we would go up to hear the news relayed from London and then Mr [Lord] Haw Haw would come on and tell us that we were going to be all killed, we wouldn't see the morning. He was a nasty man.

How long were you at the 2/1st before that was packed up to be sent back?

34:30 About three months and then it came back to Australia.

As you were packing up did you think you would be going with them?

We really did not know what was happening. It was no use wasting your brain on thinking and you knew the army would tell you something when it wanted to do something and that was that.

So what did you think was going to happen whey they left and you remained?

35:00 Being in a big old empty hospital, just little VADs. The staff had gone, the sisters had gone, they all came home and the doctors came home. You know, the whole unit came back to Australia, then the 6th came down.

Did the actual tents and stuff remain?

The tents all stayed, yes, and our tents in the VAD lines, our tents were grouped in threes because of possible bombing, you know. They didn't put them all together, they were in groups

35:30 of threes, that's where we lived. We lived under canvas for four years.

And how long was it before the 2/6th joined you, do you remember what month it was?

Well it came down almost as soon, I think we were there only a few days. We heard rumours, or furphies they were called in the army, they ran rife all the time and you didn't know to believe anything or not. We head rumours that

36:00 we would go to Jerusalem to the hospital, but it came down to us because the set up was already there and they took all, during the El Alamein Campaign because they had no reinforcements for their units they took all our able bodied men, so then we had what they called the B class that could walk and do things and they helped us and worked very hard, and I must say that the sisters worked very hard,

36:30 but often on night duty we would be responsible, the VAD would be responsible for one ward with the sisters coming in between and maybe having three, depending, because some of them suffered an illness or caught a bad cold or whatever from time to time, so sometimes you were a bit short. The boys were fabulous and our rations were very poor of course. We had nothing, we had no,

37:00 we reached the stage where we had butter that was tinned and it was very bad and we would go without butter rather than eat it. The bread was awful, and the vegetables and things, we got quite a lot of those from the Jewish people, from the kibbutz, you know, they worked very hard, the Jews, and we also got some vegetables and things from the Arabs, but they

37:30 all had to be washed in a very weak solution of Condy's crystal because no one was very impressed with their cleanliness and that's how particular the army was that every thing had to be right.

You spent two, two and half years with the 2/6th or was it fifteen months?

Oh no, fifteen months in the Middle East, yes, and then we came home, but you know, we really worked. Sometimes

38:00 we were working thirteen and half hours a day and the next day would be fourteen hours, and we had no leave, there were no days off at all. And during the battle when we were getting a lot of casualties, we didn't have a lot of deaths, it was quite remarkable, you know, once we got them into the hospitals we seemed to, the wonderful staff seemed to cope and sometimes seven o'clock was the hour we began our

38:30 work in the morning and sometimes we had to come on an hour early and the night staff would have to stay on an hour longer, so that we all doubled up and then the same in the evening, but then when things calmed down if they could let you have a few days, they did. They were very considerate, the army. But for a couple of months we didn't have any time off at all, four bob a day.

39:00 How would you like that?

Sounds like our conditions at the moment, stop your complaining!

I know, whinge whinge, army whingeing.

Tape 2

00:31 **Alice, I was wondering if you could tell me now about returning to Australia from the 2/6th?**

Yes, we were told we were coming home, so we packed and we then had to pack the hospital up, and we didn't know what the arrangements were. We weren't told, and then we were put onto trucks and taken back to Port Tewfik and we were billeted there

01:00 for almost a week while they gathered all the other people. And the ground was just plain dust and the beds were two pieces of wood on four sticks and some bag hessian across. They were the beds they gave us, first class of course, and we were given food by the English. The English

01:30 were established there and they had a lot of prisoners of war, Italians and Germans. The Germans were well behaved but the Italians would spit on us, they were really dreadful, they really were naughty. So then after a week we embarked on the Queen Mary and I came home on the Queen Mary. Some of the girls didn't, we were scattered onto different transports. The Mary took on her

02:00 consignment of men and we then went out into the Red Sea for a week because the Australian Government, although the Mary was very fast and the captain was very angry that he wasn't allowed to bring the Mary home at that stage, she was the most heavily armed ship abroad, on the seas. She had a big mine sweeper in front of her and a number of turrets around that were manned by the 2/2nd Machine Gunners and so he felt he could home but

02:30 he wasn't allowed. So he had to go out into the Red Sea and wait. It was not a very well ventilated ship, so you could imagine we were all dying of heat and inconvenience and discomfort, and then it was the first time and in fact I think it was the only time that a whole Australian Division was on the water at the one time. There were five ships in the convoy, there were ten thousand on board the Queen Mary. There's a book, Commodore, written by

03:00 Sir James Bisset, and he said then that it was the worst trip or the greatest responsibility he had ever had in his life with ten thousand souls on board, and they were on board for just over four weeks altogether. We came home and every morning the army's idea of sunset is about two hours before it sets and they come along and lock all the portholes and no one

03:30 was allowed on deck and all the portholes were closed and we were there, locked in that ship. At sunrise they would come around and open the portholes and that was about two hours after that too. We were all soaking wet for most of the time with perspiration. The boys were once again fabulous. They had advice, we were privates, we were

04:00 classified as privates, but the Egyptian people, headquarters or whatever it was, had communications, I have got some of their copies of it, they were alarmed, they said as women we could not travel over

there as privates, we had to be, so they made us honorary officers for the time we were away and we were served in the dinning room. The boys had the main dinning room

04:30 on the Queen Mary because it was the biggest one and we had another smaller dinning room and we ate up there. As we would come out, we always got a piece of fruit at the meal, and we'd come out and all the boys would be around wanting our fruit, so we gave them all our fruit, they thought that was fabulous you know. Then one night, I don't know where it was, I can't tell you, we went down around Tasmania, something to do with submarines, the Japanese

05:00 submarines and we were told to go to bed ready to abandon ship, and so you know, some of the girls asked silly questions. The corridors on the Queen Mary are very wide and we would line up there and be addressed by senior officers, and we were told to, and they'd say, "Can we wear our shoes?" And the commanding officer would say, "I'm telling you go to bed ready to abandon ship and that means if you want to wear shoes

05:30 when you leave, you keep your shoes on." So we had great coats, everything, and we could take tin hats but no respirators, and of course it didn't happen. We all went to sleep and had a sound sleep because once again when you're young, you don't think of those things. We worked in the ship's hospital on the way back.

Were there many wounded that still required treatment on ship?

It was a troop ship. They sent the wounded home on the hospital ships.

06:00 Twelve VADs served on the hospital ship, Oranje, and that brought troops back from the Middle East, the wounded ones.

Were you generally treating seasickness?

Oh, all kinds, the boys got all kinds of things, had malaria, tummy wog and all that kind of stuff. Yes, we had quite a busy time on the way back. Between the boys and the women they formed a kind of concert

06:30 group and put on a few concerts for people, but you know, we were kept busy because going and coming we had boat drill every day, which was very, very strict, and we also had physical culture and all those kind of things to keep us fit.

Was boat drill the procedure for abandoning ship?

Yes. There were two boats unsinkable, they said. They were on the Queen Mary, one on either side, forehead

07:00 and they told us if the ship went one way we were to go to that one, and if it went the other way we were to go to that one. We had a big responsibility because no man was allowed to move until we were in the boat. Thank heaven it didn't happen. And also it was a very great terror almost to us,

07:30 they had big rafts, say ten feet square, and they were packed sky high on the decks of the Queen Mary and they were in the main, and the boys would have that and they had loops of rope around them and you could hang on to it. If anything had happened, it would have been a dreadful thing, added to which we knew from the moment we stepped on the Queen Mary in Sydney it was the target that Hitler wanted more. It was the prize he wanted. He really wanted that ship because

08:00 it could carry great numbers and move very fast. And midway over there, we'd hear that the Queen Mary had been sunk, all hands lost. He was only kidding himself, silly man, behaving like a man I'd say. That's the way it was and we survived the night but we were prepared to abandon ship

08:30 and so there were a few worries about the place. As I say, A, we were very busy and, B, we were too young to be bothered about it.

Describe for me the scene of coming in through the Sydney Heads and returning home?

I couldn't describe it, it was too moving, and added to which we weren't allowed on deck because they were afraid that the Queen Mary might tip and she

09:00 was a very big ship to come into Outer Bay and she had to come in steady as she goes kind of thing, so none of us were allowed on deck. Those that could poke out port holes did so, but you can't fit many people in a port hole I can tell you. That was the way of it and we didn't really have the glory of seeing Sydney Harbour and weeping because we were home. We just had to wait till we got there.

09:30 **And were there people waiting for you when you disembarked?**

No, no. There was no one waiting and I can remember one of the boys from home was hanging out a port hole when I got off, of course the ferries came out to get us off the Queen Mary, she couldn't come right in, she stayed at Outer Bay, and he was yelling out, "If you get home first, will you ring Mum and tell her I'm on my way?" It was all very exciting. It was also very very

10:00 sad I might tell you when you thought of the guys you didn't have with you. That wasn't very nice, but fortunately we didn't lose a lot from our hospital and I didn't know my husband then. I hadn't a clue. I suppose I would have gone swimming across. He came home on the Isle de France, he was in the 9th

Division, he was a gunner, he was at El Alamein.

10:30 What else?

Was there a sadness at that point of leaving a lot of the people that you had been working with very closely?

Oh no, we were hoping that we would join up with them later on. The staff you mean? Yes, the sadness was leaving the boys, and we lost one girl the day we arrived in the Middle East. We lost one lass from South Australia, she died of meningitis, so we were all quarantined when we arrived there of course. The boys

11:00 said that, one boy wrote to his family in Perth and said we looked like a lot of WAS DOUBLE QUOTE CHOOK s behind barb wire, and of course we collected a lot of uncles, cousins and family friends, they all claimed that they were out cousin or something. They were all waiting to say hello the Australian women arriving.

When you disembarked back in Sydney,

11:30 **did you get a period of leave?**

Yes, we were given a month's leave but some of it was taken up in preparing to go away. We had to come down and get prepared then to go away. We didn't know we were we going, but we went up to join a unit in Atherton. We got there and we were taken out to where the unit was going to be and it wasn't established at all, and where our tents were going to be the bulldozers were busy knocking down

12:00 trees and things. Then the tents went up and they put up the mess tent and it was about a mile from the hospital, so we had to walk across to the hospital. The hospital was under canvas in Queensland too.

Was this the 2/6th that had been brought back?

Yes, we all joined up together and we were all very happy to be together and we severed until the war. Actually, I was on draft to go to New Guinea

12:30 when I met my husband, or he became my husband. I didn't want to have anything to do with any nonsense about marriage or anything like that, I wanted to do nursing and the Australian Nursing Association offered us two years off our training if we were prepared to join and do our training for nursing, and that's what I wanted to do. But I met him and

13:00 from the day we met until the day we married, was three months. From the day that we decided to be married he had convinced me, he had been in El Alamein, he'd been fighting in New Guinea and he was on draft to go back to New Guinea, and I was on draft to go to New Guinea, and that's what I wanted to do, and he convinced me that he might not be coming back, so he wanted to be married. So we decided, but we weren't allowed to come down to New South Wales, he lived in Sydney, and so he said, "Will you be married

13:30 up here?" So ten days I had to get ready. My wedding dress on the day of the wedding I was able to, my sister had a lace dress that I had worn as a bridesmaid over something blue that made it look all right. It looked a bit silly for a bridesmaid in white, but I got it out and it had all the red dust from Atherton around the bottom so my bridesmaid and I had to wash and iron it on the day of my marriage. At four o'clock in the afternoon I tootled down with a couple of gerberas because there were no flowers up there.

14:00 You learn the hard way in the army, but it was wonderful and they all said, "It won't last." We'll he's down there and we've been married fifty-eight years, fifty-eight and a half years, and so it was great, and I forgave him for not letting me go to New Guinea.

So at that point did you leave the VAD as well?

No, I couldn't stay with the unit,

14:30 but we married in January 1945 and I was with the unit for just a little while longer, you see all my clothes had gone down to Ipswich and if I hadn't been able to find that old lace dress and wash it, I would have had to wear boot, and gaiters and pants and safari jacket and a hat. That was my going-away dress of course, and the CO [Commanding Officer] loaned me his car to go to the Barron Falls for

15:00 three days. They gave me three days, so that was all very exciting. None of this trooping to have your hair done or your nails done, you just went as you were, and I was as yellow as a daisy, I was on Atebrin you see, so was he, so we matched, we were both yellow.

Could you blame it on the photographic paper, couldn't you? You were both yellow.

It teamed with rain and they didn't get any photos.

15:30 The photographer didn't turn up, one of the unit was going to do it. But it was a wonderfully happy marriage, wedding I mean. It's been a good marriage, but it was a wonderful day and I got fussed around with all the people and they really wanted a party anyway because it was pretty dull just staging for a bit

So the 2/6th went to New Guinea and that's why you had to leave then?

Yes, they went up later. It was more or less

16:00 at the end of, they were only up there for a few weeks really and they brought the POWs [Prisoners of War] home and cared for them, got a bit of food into them before they brought them down.

So you remained with them in the Atherton Tablelands until what month?

It would have been, I only stayed with them for about two months after I was married.

Until about March, was it?

Yes, about March and then I was sent in charge

16:30 of an AWAS [Australian Women's Army Service] barracks in Atherton and I was in charge of the little section they had for, first aid section really, and if they didn't have to go to hospital, I looked after them. I had five beds and so I was more or less on call twenty four hours a day. And it was really hard work. I would just get to sleep nicely and someone would wake me and then someone else would wake me, but

17:00 anyway, that was the way it was.

How were you received in the AWAS? In that late period of the war had they grown to understand the quality of the VADs?

No, I don't know. I think they were a different unit altogether and they weren't in the AIF, they only ever had an N number, the X indicated the AIF. They were totally different

17:30 We got on well, we really did, but it wasn't the same thing when you are in unit. It's like man, when you are all in one unit you don't like to go into another unit, you know what I mean? Totally different.

So tell me about hearing of victory in Europe, May 1945?

Yes. I was, I will never forget that

18:00 because my husband then told me that he would like to play football. I didn't know all these things. When you only know someone for three months, you don't really know all about them. So he said he would play a victory football match. He did, and run into the goal post and dislocated his shoulder. So instead of him going off that way, he was sent down that way and I didn't know where he had gone and so then I decided, and this would have been May,

18:30 wasn't it? I decided that I would take leave, so I applied for leave and they gave it to me and it took me a week to get down because I had to travel on a troop train and the troop train had to go off, and I don't know if you know the Queensland Railways but their theme song was "I'll Walk Beside You" because that's how slow they were, and we had to go off because the passenger trains had priority and so sometimes we sat on the sideline for half a day

19:00 and then we'd get out and galloped across the paddock and they'd have soyas, and you'd dig into this. Don't tell me. However, we survived and there was a guard on the train, he was very nice. I got to Brisbane and I had to ring my in-laws and I didn't know them of course but I rang to find out to ask them if they knew where Les was and they said he was in Edmond Hospital in Brisbane. So then I had to rush around and frantically try and get leave so that I could stay in Brisbane

19:30 because I was on my way to New South Wales. So they were very good to me, they and allowed me to stay there. Now it goes back to hospital days because if ever the boys misbehaved, when they enter hospital their uniforms are taken away and they're given what they call hospital blues, and because they go to the laundry, the sleeves shrink and the pants shrink and the fat ones seemed to get pants that didn't fit around, and the tall ones got short pants

20:00 and they wore white shirts and it didn't matter if the collar was half hanging off and they had to have red ties when the matron came around doing her daily rounds. If they were up-patients they stood at the end of the bed and I always thought how dreadful it was. I couldn't bear those hospital blues they called them, so I always said if they were misbehaving, "I'll take a photo of you and send it to your fiancé or girlfriend or wife," whatever, just to show them how you look.

20:30 It was a real threat and it was a genuine threat. I did not like those things. So I went out and visited Les each day and then the time came when he rang me. I was staying in a hostel in Brisbane and he rang and said, "I can come into town, I will take you to lunch." So he told where to be. When he got off the tram guess what he was dressed in? Hospital blues. He was a freak. The only thing I knew was his hat and his boots.

21:00 He looked awful and we couldn't find anywhere to eat because you know the food was rationed and so we managed to have sausages, that was our first meal together in Australian, would you believe it?

So you stayed in Brisbane for a while then did you?

I stayed there until he was sent down to Sydney

21:30 to base and to prepare him to go to New Guinea, but he didn't go again and so then I followed down and then I got my discharge.

Do you recall hearing about the bomb dropped on Hiroshima?

Oh yes, I mean it shocked us all and we were all, that was the real frightening thing but it did end the war.

22:00 So I suppose it had to be. I don't know how long it would have gone on for, they were devils, and they didn't observe the Geneva Convention. We got a scare in the Middle East because when we had no reinforcements, as I said, our B Class men were helping us, and the intelligence had discovered that the Germans had planned to come down in behind us,

22:30 but they said if we were taken prisoners of war the Germans would observe the Geneva Convention. And we had brassards, we were given those before we left here and they were signed by the DDMS of the area to insure that we would be covered by the Geneva Convention and so we wore those for ten days during the scare, and so it was interesting times, frightening sometimes.

23:00 **How did you react to victory in the Pacific, or Victory over Japan, VJ [victory over Japan] Day?**

Well I was home then and we went out to join the throng in Bathurst, and just celebrated like everybody did, but at that stage there was always that element of you were sorry for the people you knew that weren't with you, the kids you went to school

23:30 with. So I guess it was a mixture, but we were excited and my wounded husband was there then.

Was he embraced by your family?

Yes, he was, and I was embraced by his too, and we lived with them for about six or seven months after the war and he had a big family

24:00 and they were older because he was one of the younger ones. I was the eldest of mine so mine were younger. My youngest brother was only six when I went into the war.

And at what point did you discharge from the VADs, sorry, from the AIF?

Well, I was turned into an AAMW [AAMWS – Australian Army Medical Women's Service]. I was an AAMW when we came back we were absorbed. This is why I am rather thrilled that the VADs are being remembered because we were

24:30 taken over by the Australian Army Women's Medical Service and so we were very upset but we had the most marvellous CO, Colonel Money, and he didn't like this idea, we wore blue uniforms and he didn't like this idea that we had to go into khaki uniforms. So he got a machine and he got a girl who could sew and they bought more material and if we needed a new uniform we got it, a blue one. He kept us in

25:00 blue uniforms until the end. He was a wonderful man and because we were spoilt the boys all called us "Money's honeys," but a most wonderful doctor.

Do you know the reason behind the VADs being turned into AAMWS?

Because when we enlisted in the AIF, we were given the same status

25:30 as a man, as a private, but afterwards the army got into gear if you like to put it that way, and they developed or established the AAMWS, and thousands of VADs went into it but it was taken over by the army. We were no longer voluntary aids. In fact in the Middle East we got private's pay, so we weren't voluntary aids there.

26:00 We served as voluntary aids but in actual fact we were in the AIF and we were given a soldier's pay book and a soldier's number and it had to change, we knew that, but we didn't like it you know. We were very attached and I'm still attached to the VADs. I belong to the VAD club and we meet in Red Cross House in town and so I've been

26:30 part of Red Cross for most of my life.

And when did you discharge?

In June 1945, just before war was declared over.

Why did you end at that point?

Because I was going to have a child, my daughter Elizabeth. We decided,

27:00 my family thought I was stupid, but we decided differently. If Les wasn't coming back he really wanted to know that he had a child, so we did. I didn't have her until the end of the year of course and that's why I got out then.

A beautiful story. How long did Les remain in the army then?

It wasn't long after that he got out.

27:30 When war was declared over and done with, then he got out. He stayed in until the end. He was ready to go away if he had to, but we didn't want him to, so you know, he really did, he was a gunner and he had a gun at El Alamein. You say it isn't long, but you stay then. I'll tell you another thing later on, a story.

So the immediate post war

28:00 **period obviously had a lot of plans for you in terms of becoming a mother and starting your family fresh. Did Les have particular plans that he wanted peruse?**

He went back into the bank, he was in the Commonwealth Bank before he went away and he went back into that. He did join the CMF [Citizens' Military Force] and he was in that for twelve years after the war. So he

28:30 trained a lot of young men and they wanted men with army experience.

And where did you base your family, where were you living?

Sydney. We managed to buy a house and put our deferred pay into it, and bought a house in Abbotsford and we were happy there.

And were you hoping to get back into nursing at some point?

No. By that time I

29:00 just liked being a mother, and between us we had quite a number of years. Well I had two years preparing before I went into the army, before war broke out actually, so I had a long time and he had a long time, but then I still stuck with the VAD. I became assistant commandant to the detachment at Haberfield and I became

29:30 an assistant commandant there and I served for a long time but then my husband had a very serious illness and we nearly lost him. So that kept us busy and then I had another child, and as they grew up, I then decided that I had to do things with the children, so I went back into brownies. I was a Brown Owl and I had a Brownie pack, 2nd Beecroft Brownies I had and I still meet.

30:00 We old guiders still meet. As a matter of fact they were here last week for lunch and we have kept together all these years.

What were the VAD's principle responsibilities and duties post war? What were they mainly attending to?

Mainly training, you know, until war started and then when they had the established war hospitals and camps and things, then we were allowed, if we had done our,

30:30 we had to have all our training behind us before we were allowed to go into a camp hospital.

I mean after the war, once the war was over?

After the war, well a lot of them served in different ways. Some went to Japan with the, what did they call it, BCOF [British Commonwealth Occupation Force] or something. Anyway they went up there, not as VADs, they'd gone into the army you see and of course rank was established then once the army took over

31:00 the ones that, some of them went into schools and became officers. Colonel Money kept all his VADs, none of them wanted to leave our unit, we all stayed. It was a wonderful unit, very hard working, we all knew what each of us could do. We got some reinforcements when we were up in Queensland, we had a lot of

31:30 patients from New Guinea that had come down. We had them. We had a lot of malaria and it wasn't quite as interesting then. I mean, I'm Australian and I adored all my guys but I always wanted to do for them what I was hoping someone would do for my brother because he eventually got himself into the army. In the end he lived a good life after the war, but the Kokoda Track he was on,

32:00 and that caught up with him and first of all he lost his legs and it was awful, and so he paid the supreme price. But it was interesting, it was different. I can't say how different it was, and they served in other parts. Some of them stayed on and helped in the hospitals with the POWs and things like that.

32:30 It was wonderful.

How important was it to remain in contact with those people and those friendships that you had established during the war?

Of the two hundred that went away they always would say that if there were only two of us they would all be there, you know, and a lot of them have gone and a lot are in nursing homes and it is a very sad time now saying goodbye to people who you have known your whole life. Our bonding was just

33:00 so great and you know we got on the Queen Mary and thought New South Wales is the best, we're the

best trained, we are the best dressed, David Jones has done a marvellous job, but we found that we worked as one, from South Australia, Western Australia, Perth, Tasmania and Queensland and you couldn't tell, after a couple of weeks you couldn't tell where they trained or by whom, whether they were Red Cross or St John's. The training was so well and that's one of the things I think about the Australian Red Cross,

33:30 it should be very proud that when war started they had all these women trained and established in detachments, and they were all trained and ready. As I said in the beginning, I would go so far as to say that anyone of the twelve thousand that were trained could have done what we did, you know. They were very strong about what they wanted to do and the way they wanted to do it.

34:00 **That's a really good coverage of the structure of your experiences, now I would like to go back to the beginning and start working through and pursuing stuff in more depth. I guess one of the things that interests me is through your reading and through your aunts, you had developed the desire to be a nurse and you were sure that's what you wanted to do. Once you started your training and were exposed to the sickness and maybe some**

34:30 **of the more real aspects of nursing, did that shock you, did you have any trouble adjusting to that?**

No, I just loved it and I think it's such a privilege to help people when they really need help. I'd never had any money so I didn't go into it for money because it wasn't important and still it's not important to me today and

35:00 if I were free, I would go back to nursing and I've always loved all my grandkids. All of them have spent time here and if they had a cold or something or anything wrong I would think this is nice, you know. I was lucky in that way that it has never left me and it has never left my sister. She really wanted to do nursing. I think it is a wonderful thing to do.

Did your aunts live in Bathurst

35:30 **with you?**

No, no. They lived in Sydney.

They were quite an influence on you?

A very great influence, yes, they were.

Were you doing Brownies at that stage?

No.

Did you have any association with the Red Cross or anything?

I was in a lot of things. What do they call it? Mistress of none, you do everything, but don't

36:00 come to the top of anything? I just liked doing things and I liked, wherever I've been I like doing the things that were being done, but as far as nursing was concerned, I didn't really have any regrets afterwards. I felt that I had a very fulfilling time and it was such a privilege to be with the boys and there were things beyond wounds. The wounds were horrible but there were things beyond those,

36:30 the needs they had. So if they lost their hands or their legs, it was bad enough but to see their inner struggle and their inner fears was something that was very, very difficult, and much harder than something you could see or something you could really tend to help them.

You wouldn't have had any training to cope with those sorts emotional

37:00 **injuries?**

Well, somehow it comes naturally and their needs were all individual needs. We had one boy who you know, he used to cry every night and he was quite a brave soldier but apparently he had done a marvellous job in his unit. But he would sit and cry every night and he would take all his bandages off his wounded leg because he wanted me to put them on again, you know. In the end they had to move me out of that ward because he had to realise,

37:30 but he was engaged and he thought his fiancée wouldn't want him back again. Some of them felt like that. One boy lost both his hands and the boys used to say that they would put wire around here so that he could have his smoke or his book, and someone would lie down and pretend that he was happy but he would be turning the pages of the book for the boy that didn't have any hands, and he'd go down to the bottom of the ward, he didn't like people to see him being

38:00 fed, you know, but there were all those things and there were lots and lots of them, you know. They had special needs and some of the sisters said that we did more nursing and saw more things in the time, especially when Alamein was on, than they had seen in the whole of their training. We did a lot of advanced nursing over there that we hadn't reckoned on or thought about, but

38:30 the sisters were always there and they were giving us instructions, so we learned an awful lot while we were away, I can tell you.

We're just at the end of that tape, Alice. I think we'll stop there.

Tape 3

00:31 **I am interested in how important the Empire was to you when you were growing up?**

Well, we always met on Mondays, we prayed at school on Mondays and we believed in the Queen and we believed in God, you know it was "I honour my God and I salute my flag" and something my King, and those things we believed in and I think we have lost it

01:00 in a way. I am not overly religious these days and especially in the last few days I've come to think there's a lot of hypocrisy, but it meant a great deal to me when I went to the war. I believed in loyalty to one's country and one's flag and to God, and the first day I arrived in the Middle East when we got to our camp on the Saturday late, and on the Sunday morning

01:30 I went to communion and the minister gave me, I was the first Australian women he'd seen since he'd been there and he gave me a little cross and it was a replica to one found on a man who had died in the First World War and so I still have that which I value to this day, and just little things like that, they are only small but they are wonderful.

Were you aware of the religious significance of the areas where

02:00 **you were working?**

Yes, and I didn't like it to begin with because it was so neglected and so dirty and so horrid, but I grew to love it and to feel the significance of so many people paying homage to one person, you know, because basically everything seems to be, the base seems to be that Holy Land

02:30 and pilgrims were there and that made it very interesting. We met people from all different nations and beliefs and made friends with atheists, it didn't matter what they were. But in Palestine it is the most remarkable country and we both love it and we have both been back to visit and we'd be back tomorrow if we could, it has something for everybody, historians,

03:00 developers or people who believe, or people who don't, there is something there for every single person and in spite, and it's got more high rise and more development now and they have got roads, these big main roads that we didn't have at that time, but nevertheless it has remained somehow as it was We call it Palestine, it is Israel now,

03:30 and we love it, we both love it.

Did you also have a sense of history of the warfare in the area as well as the history of religion, the conflict that had been going back and forth across that area?

Yes, we knew that there was great unrest in the Middle East. Also Gaza, you are not allowed to go into Gaza now of course, but Gaza was where my hospital was stationed

04:00 that was where the forty thousand Australian horsemen were in the First World War so as far as we were concerned as far as Australian is concerned it was historical. The religious beginnings and things were overwhelming really and still every stone, they never move a stone that they don't mark it or record where it came from or how it fits. We had a very good padre and I didn't like

04:30 it, it was very dirty and because of their wars, the women would scratch the children's eyes, the boys, so that they wouldn't have to go to war, so there were a lot of begging and things like that. I felt it was too sad and I couldn't see it, and this padre was totally horrified that I felt that way and he said, "I'll take you down." So he took a couple of us down and took us around and showed us the significance of the

05:00 Bible, the beginnings, and a totally different attitude I developed through that, and I got this great love for it and we saw the tomb where Jesus was and whilst there was still a kind of mystery about it, I don't know if I could believe if you like, I wasn't a total believer but I could imagine it, and in my imagination

05:30 I could see these things. We went to the Holy Sepulchre and that was an experience in itself and unexpectedly we had a bit of a lull and I was offered a trip to Jerusalem for a week. It was Holy Week and I went to communion and I'm a bad Anglican now, but I was a very good Anglican then, and I went to communion.

06:00 We were staying at the St George Cathedral but it's the St George Hostel next door, and I was staying there and I went to communion and an old man held a curtain aside for me to go in. It was very cold. So I told the lady who was in charge of the hostel who was a very strict lady and did things most beautifully and looked after us beautifully, and I told her that this old man had asked me if I would like to go to some of the celebrations in Jerusalem

06:30 over Easter and he would call for me, and I could ask another one of the other girls to come with me. So she was happy about that but she was infuriated because a young man knocked at the door and asked for me and she accused me of not being truthful, but I said, “But I was.” I discovered that the old man was the Bishop of Jerusalem, I didn’t know that, and it was his chauffeur that had come to collect us and she thought I was telling her a story. So we attended many of the ceremonies

07:00 over Easter Saturday and then on Good Friday, there were two of us friends that were there, and we met three English boys and they were all Anglicans. My friend was a Methodist, so on Good Friday there was going to be a broadcast to England and they wanted to go, but anyway, one of the brothers, two were brothers,

07:30 and one of the brothers came with me to the Church of England Cathedral and the other boy went with my friend to her Methodist. Then we all walked up to the Mount of Olives on Good Friday and we picked flowers and there were lots of flowers, it’s a dry country one minute and then it teams the next and up come all the flowers, you’d be amazed. Then they pick the flowers and a few

08:00 weeks later they were going up to Alamein and so the stopped by Gaza and they gave us the flowers that they had picked, which was rather lovely, and on Easter Sunday we went again to our service and the boys switched. The one that hadn’t gone to the Methodist went to the Methodist and the other one came with us. So that was very very interesting and we had the services and I have the record of it in my little book.

How important

08:30 **was your spiritual faith in coping with all the trauma and the more difficult things that you were experiencing in the Middle East?**

It’s like it is today, it is very very difficult to understand one side and accept the other, but I couldn’t work out people because they were Jews because they went over there, but they suffered a great deal if they

09:00 came from wealth to get into the Kibbutz, into their camps, they had to give that all into the cause and the ones without anything received the same care, you know. They had no status. They were all as one and they all had to take turns at their work. So I thought they were very sincere and very, very clean and very earnest in all that they did. The Arabs, I realised that it was their land,

09:30 but they had never progressed, they were still, you know, farmed as they had done thousands of years before and they didn’t progress and they went along the Via Della Rosa, that’s the fourteen Stations of the Cross and the first time that I did that was on Easter Day. It was run or organised by the Church of England, or the lot that I went with was, and we had prayers at each Station

10:00 of the Cross through the old city, it was really quite beautiful and that meant a lot and somehow you could understand they were each fighting for what they believed in and what they wanted, it really was of no concern to me, I don’t know if you can understand that but that is how I felt.

Did you need to turn to your understanding

10:30 **of God though, to deal with the difficulties you were experiencing in hospital and seeing the death of the injuries or the pain around you, was your spiritually particularly important to you at that time?**

Very important, very important. I don’t know, when I left, going back to when I was leaving home my father said, “I will give you as a gift a Bible or a new testament,” so I chose the Bible and he was a great reader and he believed that everyone

11:00 should read and he felt that no one would be lonely if they had something to read, you know. It was all fulfilling in his opinion and so he said it would be a lot of things to me, and he was a Mason so he put a little note in the back of it and he gave it to me and he said that I would have something to read if I went to the Middle East. He didn’t know where I was going, if I went to the Middle East it would be a guide to the Middle East, so that was his great belief and

11:30 he wasn’t a deeply religious man but that’s what he gave me. I still have it out there and in it I have a pressed violet that I picked in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And did sitting down to read your Bible provide you with an escape outside the hospital while you were there?

No, I did a lot of other things. I would read bits of the Bible but I wasn’t addicted

12:00 to it. I really did have a strong faith because we had a wonderful church and as I say my parents weren’t madly religious but I went to Sunday School every Sunday, and I went on to become part of the church and I just had the warm belief that they united me with my family, which was most important, and my home, and the things I knew when I was in such a foreign situation,

12:30 and I didn’t know the girls that I had, four to a tent, EPIP tent, and I didn’t know them but we became

very good friends. We had a fight occasionally which helped things along, but you know we became very good friends and very dependent on each other and I felt that they were all like I was, they had a basis of religion that helped them through. I don't think

13:00 we would have survived without some and that's why I think it's so sad that children don't get that these days to the same extent because if you do have to face something, stepping out into the world, and especially then. It's different now, all kinds of opportunities for young people these days, but in those days only the very well-off people could afford to travel and so there was none of that. But growing up in the country, riding horses and

13:30 riding bikes and seeing how far you could go without hands and things like that, it did give you a lot of confidence and you had this, I'm quite sure that religion helped me a lot.

Could I ask you to take that idea one step further and explain how the patients who did have a strong faith coped with their situation as opposed to those who didn't have a faith?

Well I think it helped them, mark you, I was far too busy.

14:00 We really were short of help and we were frightfully busy in the bad times but the padres always came around and we had one padre, Father Burke, he was a Jesuit priest, and before he left Australia, he taught over at the big one, what's it called? St Ignatius, and I met him, I had met him in Australia before and when the 2/6th

14:30 came down he came with it, and we called him "Pit-a-Pat" because when we cleared the wards and the patients would come down, he would always be there, I don't know but he was always in a hundred places at once, that man, and he would go to every single bed, every wounded man he would go to and ask what he could do, if he could write a letter, do anything, he worked ceaselessly, but he always knew who his own were and then

15:00 he would go back to them. We had our own padres too and so the boys got their spiritual help from those men who really were good, and I also think religion came out in people wanting to do things for each other and the fact that the boys, no matter how badly wounded they were, they always felt that their mates needed more help than they did, and that

15:30 helped them too. The majority of them, I found most of them had gone to Sunday school and most of them had belonged to a church group. Les grew up with a church group, and so there was kind of common bond there and I think it helped.

Do you think that would be the main healing for those emotional wounds you were talking about, the wounds you couldn't see or directly bandage?

16:00 I think there were lots of other things that helped, I think I can go so far to say that the boys felt because we were there and we were doing our best, I think that helped them emotionally, they really felt that we understood to a degree. We might've been pretty naïve, but we understood and we could do things and they were wonderful to us if we needed anything. On night duty our rations were shocking

16:30 and we would go on and when we were really busy we had to have a little hurricane lamp and we had to start the morning bathing them before they went to bed. We would work till ten o'clock at night doing some of them because we couldn't cope with them all at once, and then midnight would come and you would be given a kerosene tin, you didn't have plastic buckets and things then, nothing as good as that.

17:00 But the orderlies, the B class boys, would light fires outside and we'd have kerosene buckets and I would get a kerosene bucket full of bandages because we couldn't throw away anything. We didn't have supplies coming in, and so we had to wash them and that was one of the most awful things. We didn't even have rubber gloves. We couldn't afford them, but they have now, and we would wash them all and put them into another kerosene bucket

17:30 and that would go on the fire and boil them up and they would be used again for wounds and things. They had to go through the autoclave, but we didn't put them all through. The boys, being the bed patients, that was their job to fold the bandages, miles and miles and miles of bandages that we washed, they had to, so there was nothing, we couldn't throw anything away.

You said that you felt part of the tradition

18:00 **being there in Gaza as well. The Light Horse had been there in World War I, how important was that sense of tradition to your wartime service over all?**

Well it was just completing a picture of Australia, it was all part of us, part of our history, the Light Horsemen, and I felt so deeply that they couldn't bring their horses back because of quarantine and things, and so some of them loved their

18:30 horses so much they took them away and shot them rather than let the Arabs take them. And the Arabs didn't feed, they weren't very animal conscious. They knew they needed animals to help them but they didn't treat them all that well. Some of their animals were so skinny, it would just make you weep, you tried not to think of that side, you had to be positive. One thing, you did have to be positive and you couldn't indulge yourself. It was a waste of energy really

19:00 to indulge yourself in pity for the things that you couldn't change.

So on the one hand was that sense of tradition that you were part of an Australian tradition in serving overseas, was there also a sense of being a pioneer as one of those first two hundred being women?

I didn't think of it then, as I say we had one thing, to serve. We wanted to serve our country and I still want to serve

19:30 my country. I still think we don't give enough to our country, we don't think enough and we have reached a stage now where we want. I think we had been through a depression and we were all in the same boat more or less because a lot had suffered from the depression, some not as bad. Les, his family didn't suffer as badly as mine did, but at the same time we had a lot in common and we really didn't want anything

20:00 for ourselves. We thought we had the best country in the world and that's what we wanted, but we enjoyed meeting people from all the other countries, we had Poles, we had Germans, some Germans were brought over and they were treated the same as our guys if they were ill, and all that meeting of different nations, different cultures, different beliefs, the whole thing, it was amazing. I went to, there was a Trocadero in

20:30 Jerusalem and these three boys said, "We will go to the Trocadero." They didn't have any money, nor did we had very much, but we went to the Trocadero one night to see what it was like and it was packed out. There was some dancing and some food and it wasn't very expensive then but a lot of it was beyond us, but all of a sudden one of the waiters came and put a champagne bucket down beside our table and the poor boys nearly had a fit, they didn't like

21:00 to admit they could afford champagne, and then a bottle of champagne appeared and they were trying to say, "Take it away," and not be embarrassed in front of the two of us, but it was some Polish soldiers and they came over then and they said would the boys mind if he danced with me. About four of them came over and one fellow wanted to have a dance with me and he said, "That's why we wanted

21:30 to send the champagne to you, because you are here fighting," because all his country were under the German dominance at that time and he wanted to tell us that he thought we were very brave and very good to be there fighting alongside them, and so the boys accepted the champagne with very drawn faces, they didn't like the idea. We had a lovely evening and I danced with the Polish, they couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Polish,

22:00 so it was a silent dance, but he did say that he felt very honoured to be dancing with an Australian girl. It wasn't me, because he didn't know me, but we represented Australia, that's how we felt, and very honoured to do it.

What were your personal feelings towards the Germans when the war started?

It's a funny thing, you feel that there are all somebody's boys, they've got a mother, and we learned that they had the same

22:30 feelings of loss, the same feelings of sadness that we had. You couldn't hate them. I could hate the Japanese but you still had to understand and to make the boys that were killed or the boys that didn't come back or the boys that suffered on the railway up there, to make their effort worthwhile and the lives they gave worthwhile, we had to accept and have peace, so we understood that, but

23:00 I could never like the Japanese, although I have had some Japanese in the house, quite a few exchange students and things but you couldn't hate them, you couldn't hate the Germans. I've got a poem out there, it's a lovely one, "My enemy, I can't see you through the blinding light," it goes on, it shows you how they are part like us and they were some mother's boy and they were loved.

23:30 And getting beyond the war, there's a good story. I think it was 1973 and I was on the State Council of the RSL [Returned and Services League] and I'm a President of the RSL, and we have so few now, there are only about thirty left in our sub-branch, but in 1946 the Women's Services sub-branch received a charter from the RSL and we still meet in Anzac House, and I have been the President for about eight or nine years. It's not because it's an honour,

24:00 but I mean, I am honoured to do it, but it's simply because there is no one else to do it, there are so few members. But the RSL arranged this international gathering of war veterans and a lot of the Germans came out and the State Council was told to look after them. So I collected two of them from the time they were here and we went to lots of places

24:30 and one turned out to be a general. He was a German general and he had written a book which he has given to Les but we can't read it because it's all in German, and he came here for dinner one night with his friend who was a sergeant in the war, and they started talking and he was one of the German troops that were on that side shooting at Les who was on this side shooting at them. They had the most hilarious evening and at the end of the evening he

25:00 was very precise, he came around and clicked his heels and thanked me for dinner and thanked me for having them in my home and we actually became very, very friendly with them and he said, "I will give

you something that no other women in the world has," and he gave me a little badge. What do they call it? I will show it to you later, a German badge and he gave it to me. And only a couple of years ago, the 9th Division arranged another reunion and quite a few

25:30 of the Germans came out and they were shocked to see me wearing their badge, a woman wearing this badge. I've forgotten the name of the Germans, my mind must be going, but anyway, it was a wonderful meeting and so you know the friendship was very very strong and when they came out a couple of years ago I only saw them at one luncheon and they were horrified to see me with this badge on. They thought that wasn't the right thing for a woman.

But did you have such an

26:00 **understanding attitude when you left to go the Middle East, did you have that attitude that they were other people's boys as well at that stage?**

No, I didn't, I found that out.

How did you feel towards them when you left for the Middle East?

The same. I felt that they were loved, they were part of a country and they were doing for their country what they thought was right. They had been brainwashed. We were never brain washed in our country. We always had the freedom to,

26:30 especially as far as women were concerned, we didn't have conscription of anything but you know the history of the Germans. It was very sad, they trained little boys to betray their parents and things like that and I mean that totally horrified us and if you could imagine it was a madman that had the power, and if they didn't observe what he wanted, then they paid the price and it was a very high price

27:00 too.

Did most of the troops in the hospital at Gaza have the same attitude as you or was there a hate amongst those boys?

No, I don't think there was ever a hate. No, I don't think so. There was a great desire to win the war, I mean that never left any of us. I mean we would do what had to be done but I think they all,

27:30 well, as I read it and I am no authority of it I can assure you, but as I could see it and what they all said, it was them or us. They were in the same position if you know what I mean. No, they accepted them. We were very upset that the Italians weren't very nice to us but then they were prisoners and they resented that we were free and they were made to do some work for us. I told you at

28:00 Tewfik when we were staging to come home they were serving meals and things like that.

Did you have to treat German or Italian prisoners in the 2/6th?

We had a couple of Germans at one stage and we had a couple of Italians. I don't know where they came from but we had different nationalities, we had a lot of Poles and we had one little boy who could walk but he had

28:30 lost the use of one arm and we had two nights a week that we could go out on leave and we had to be in by 23.59, that's a minute to 12.00, and so this little boy was so black we called him the "Twenty-three fifty nine," and he became a pet. He was black as the ace of spades. And he was a delightful little boy and he would come over and we couldn't speak

29:00 his language and he couldn't speak ours, but he'd come over to the dispensary and carry the day's medical supplies back to the ward, you know. If he saw us going to do something he would hop over and see if he could do it, and the Poles were always wonderful. The English were very snooty at times but the English, we got on very well with.

Did you notice the difference of the attitude then of the English and the Poles towards the Germans? Was there a greater intensity

29:30 **given that their home land was directly threatened?**

I didn't notice it, but ten I wasn't with them enough to really analyse or go into deep thinking about what they felt. We really were busy most of the time, and if we weren't busy we had to have a route march or something, they kept us on the go.

Just to linger on the topic a moment more, could you explain why your feelings towards the Japanese were so different?

Because they were so cruel

30:00 and even then we got filtered news. We didn't know about all the atrocities that they committed, but when we had this fright we were hoarded together and told not to worry if we were taken prisoners of war, that our government, all precautions would be taken to be made sure that we would never be taken simply because we'd be a very expensive hostage because the government would work

30:30 very hard to have women returned and so for one woman the might want a battalion of German prisoners of war freed. We were told that the Germans would abide by the Geneva Convention, the Japanese would not. They would not sign the Geneva Convention and the point is they were really brought up, I have forgotten what they call death by their own hand [hara-kiri], but they were

31:00 a lot like the suicide people are now. For their country they were prepared to die. For our country we were prepared to do anything but we weren't going to die if we could help it, and we weren't expected to. Their country expected them to. It was a disgrace if they were caught or you know taken prisoners of war. They were very cruel in those days. They were a very cruel race. The Germans were more humane.

31:30 **Was it the Japanese system of culture rather that you hated rather than the individuals?**

Yes, their culture. Yes, more than the individuals of course. For a long time, Les and the boys hated the Japanese and I suppose that influenced us, and when they came down, that Singapore was a dreadful battle, a dreadful thing. Mark you, I blame to some degree that the English were not prepared, they were still living their opulent life up there and

32:00 getting on, and the Japanese were able to come down behind them. I don't know what the Australians were doing either, they weren't properly prepared up there.

I'd like to move back to your trip across on the Queen Mary and the treatment of troops that you were doing up on the decks. What were the main injuries or illnesses that you were treating?

It was this URTI it was called,

32:30 Upper Respiratory System Infection, and it was colds and things in the head, and it was really only keeping them lubricated if you like, keeping fluids up to them because they had high temperatures and they were very sick little boys and they needed a lot of care and attention and if they didn't get it they made out they were sicker so they would get a bit more. No, it was really quite an outbreak

33:00 and all the women worked very hard and the medical orderlies that were there on the ship, and we had a lot of reinforcements to the regiment going over. That's why we had no reinforcements when the battle of El Alamein was on I couldn't understand why, but they had all come back. Some had gone to the various units, but it was a sad time, the El Alamein thing, and I think the Australians did very well. General

33:30 Alexander had a parade before we came home, you can read what he said, he said, "Under my command fought the 9th Australian Division." He was very proud of that, he said he was. They had this big parade before we left. I was invited to go and they presented arms in honour of the guys they were leaving behind, you know, the ones that were killed, and when they presented arms with fixed bayonets you could see

34:00 this whole division with all the bayonets up in the air, it was just a sight you would never forget in you life, it was like a mountain coming up in front of you, and so it was probably a higher mountain because I'm short. But no, it was a wonderful salute to the ones they were leaving. We've been back, Les, we recently went to El Alamein and Les went to Egypt to his guys and said hi to them and I have a friend

34:30 and she lived in Queensland but she was educated in New South Wales so she had come down to the school and there were two boys living near there and they would come down with them and they went to Shore, the two boys, and the years passed, left school and the war broke out and they enlisted these two boys. One was called Cody and the other was called, I will have to ask Les.

35:00 Anyway, they were two boys and they, when we arrived in the Middle East these two girls were sisters and they went over with us. They were part of the New South Wales group and the two boys were up in the desert somewhere or up in camp and they came rushing down to see if they could do anything and all that kind of thing, and we did have a dance over there one night and these two boys came down so we all got to say hi to them. We didn't know them.

35:30 So when Les and I were going back to Alamein, my friend Anne said to me, the two boys, they both became captains and they both got an MC [Military Cross] and were both killed, and Anne said, "This is Cody's grave and this is the other boy's grave." I think one was Cody and one was Bode, B O D E. It sounds silly, Cody and Bode, and she said, when all the formalities were over because we were in with a group

36:00 that were having this big ceremony for the occasions of the Australian War Memorial. So she said, "When they are finished, would you mind going around and see if you can find their graves?" So I said, "All right." When we got there it was most beautifully organised and the whole thing was very well done and the Australian War Graves Commission does a marvellous job, and the war graves in Alamein,

36:30 are just the ground, you know, reclaimed part of the desert. But I was very disappointed because the Italian [German] War Memorial at El Alamein is enormous, it's just a big area, and each German boy is remembered by a stone plaque in this big mausoleum and it's got a prime position looking out over the ocean.

37:00 The Italian War Memorial is almost equally as grand and so as we went up in the coach the driver said, “That’s the Australian War Memorial,” and I thought, “That’s dreadful!” and when I saw the other two I was really angry but that was their major battle in the Middle East. Alamein was the Germans’ major battle, and why they didn’t go on with it, I will never know. They were within sixty miles of Alexandria

37:30 and it was silly. However, these two big memorials, but when we went to the ceremony afterwards, there is a brick wall right along in front of the Australian War Memorial and inside a beautiful garden, a beautiful chapel, everything is just perfect and the boys are all out there and they each have a head stone and if they didn’t know the name it just says, “Known unto God,” and there is just a cactus plant in between them.

38:00 So we did all that and they had a complete list of the graves and the names of all the people, so it was easy. Les had nine friends who were killed there so he went around and I took photos of him with his guys, and then we found Cody and Bode and they were lying side by side. That’s a sad story and a wonderful story in a way. I took photos of each of their graves and Les was able to stand with a hand on either head stone with a cactus in the middle of it and I sent it home to Anne.

38:30 I had it developed straight away and sent it home to Anne and she in turn sent it to one of the boys’ uncles who was still alive and she said that he wept because that was the first touch that he had had with the boys. So at least we could do something when we went back but it goes to show what it means to some people just to have that tiny connection.

What did it mean for you and Les to go back?

39:00 You do these things with mixed feelings, it is very difficult to describe you know, what you felt but he wanted to go back, I didn’t know if he did want to go back and I was worried because he is a sensitive sort of creature and I thought he does feel things but, and it is going back in memory is, you know, but anyway, he said he wanted to go, so we went. We joined up with a group

39:30 from Melbourne. We left it so late that we couldn’t get in with their group but we could meet them over there. Their accommodation was filled, so we had to go over, so we spent a week by ourselves in Cairo and they all arrived and we all joined up and that was the group that we went with. It meant a great deal to Les, it really did. I think he came to grips with a lot of things. We had rather a bad time for a while for a few years after the war.

40:00 I said to the doctor, “He drives me mad, he tried to destroy the bed, he wants to kick the bottom out of it.” It was a reaction to all those things because he is not a person who is cruel, it was against his principles and yet he was on a gun, you know. I don’t know, you have to think positively, you can't start to have pity for them or yourself or anything, you’re useless. You’ve got to work.

We’re right on the

40:30 **very end of that tape there.**

Tape 4

00:32 **Alice, I was wondering if you could walk me through an average day, if that’s possible, at the 2/6th?**

Our work?

Your work, an average day for you?

Right, seven o’clock, this is the busy time, at seven o’clock we would go on duty and the first thing we would do would be to go along and prepare breakfast on very limited rations. The breakfast would

01:00 come around but we had to serve it to them and for the boys that couldn’t feed themselves we had to feed them, so it was very intense working at that time.

What foods did you have to prepare? What was in the rations?

The food was prepared by the hospital kitchen and as near as possible they had a normal breakfast, you know porridge and whatever they chose to eat and

01:30 toast, which was awful and tea or coffee, which was pretty weak, we didn’t have a lot of rations. So we would get that all over and then we would go along and tidy beds and remake all the beds and put on fresh linen if they needed fresh linen and get the boys that could get up, help them to get dressed in their hospital blues and then we’d do any general

02:00 work that had to be done around the place. Temperatures were taken three times a day, and especially for the very sick ones and then there was a lot of nursing and they would want the general things that people would want when they are ill in bed and can't get and get it themselves, and so we would be doing that and that would keep us busy until morning tea came around and we would go through the

cupboards to see if the Red Cross had given us something but mostly it was water that they had, but it was hot and a bit of flavour

02:30 in it, They thought it was wonderful and were very gracious about it and they teased us and they all had dogs or something in the wards and they would say, “Nurse, be careful, don’t kick him, it hurts if you kick him.” They thought they had their dogs tied up besides their beds, well they had to have something to amuse them.

They were imaginary dogs?

Yes, imaginary dogs tied up to their beds, and we had to be very careful and we had to give them a it of, “Have you got anything left for the dog?” And we would feed the dogs.

03:00 **Were they seriously delusional?**

No, no.

It was just a joke?

It was just fun, it was just fun, they had their own dogs. They played cards and they weren’t supposed to bet but they. If they wanted to have a really good time they would have their cards or whatever they had and they would have someone looking out for the CO or the matron that might come around or someone who would dob them in,

03:30 as they would say, and you know we had a lot of fun in that way and even sick boys that couldn’t get of bed and were really very sick, the boys that could get out of bed were just fabulous, they’d look after them and they would get them and they would fetch and carry and we would get the local papers and get a bit of news from that. They would read to them all and we would write letters if we had a minute to spare, then would come the lunch on the tin plates again.

04:00 We only had tin places for them and that always worried me, I didn’t like tin plates. They get very shabby and they rust but then there would be more temperatures and then we would have a break from say two o’clock till six o’clock. We’d go off and the other lot would come on and they would work through then and we would go back at six o’clock and work until nine.

04:30 **What would you do in your time off from that two till six period?**

Just collapse, we’d try not to eat anything, we had to wash our clothes and we had a laundry and some irons available and the latrines were, we always said we were going to Mecca, they were about half a mile away, and we had to dodge the slit trenches. There were slit trenches outside,

05:00 and so by the time you walked to Mecca and then you walked to the laundry, if you wanted a shower there were no roofs on the shower section, if it was cold it was cold, and so you know all those things it was, it kept us busy and we would collapse on a bed. We had little fold up beds which you had to be very careful on how you got into them because they had three lots of crossed legs, I don’t know if you have seen those little camp beds, well, that’s what we had,

05:30 and two blankets and I don’t know how we kept warm but we did. I think we wore clothes to bed as well and we tidy our rooms and we only had a box beside our bed for a dressing table and if we were lucky, we had a bit of craton to go over it to make it look a bit pretty. We had a hurricane lamp and that’s all we had, little hurricane lamps, and then we would do all that and then we would go back, we had our own mess and we would have a meal and we had our cooks.

06:00 Then we would go back on duty till nine o’clock at night. And if it was during battle time, we’d just start, as I say, the washings and the wounds and re-doing the wounds. It was a bit difficult to recall and I just know that it was hard work and I’m not afraid of hard work but it was hard work.

Would you use that four hours to write home or anything yourself?

Yes,

06:30 if we had time, as I say. We had to be responsible, our uniforms had to go to the laundry but the laundry was so hard on them that we used to try and do them ourselves. We’d wash them. We did have running water.

How important was writing home to you personally?

It was important but it was frustrating because we weren’t allowed to say, I was not allowed to, say, “I went to Gaza for lunch.” We were not allowed to say we went to the Dead Sea. We were not allowed to say

07:00 anything. So it was all talk about yourself. You couldn’t say what you were doing and if you did say it, when it got home it looked like lattice, you know the censors cut it out and we did have green envelopes, what they called a green envelope, and you could write a letter and put it in a green envelope and seal it and sign your name and they were randomly, at random they were

07:30 censored and if they found anything in that, you were liable to court martial and they were very severe about it because you were not allowed to indicate anything, you couldn’t say you went on a coach, you

couldn’t say you went and visited the Gaza War Cemetery, you couldn’t say anything really, it was frustrating.

Who were you writing to principally?

My parents, and they just passed it on to, as I say my brother was six.

08:00 I had a sister eleven.

And would the girls or the lads within the wards pass their letters around and share their letters?

Everyone shared everything, everybody shared everything, not the personal little bits, but you know we had a bag up on the wall that someone had made and it had a little pocket in for each person and as the mail came in, there might be four or five get a letter

08:30 and so they’d tell their news at meal time. Communication was very very difficult, I’ve got a list out there that I could show you of numbers, they were in different categories, if you wanted to say an affectionate messages to your parents you could choose three numbers. “I haven’t had a letter” was number 1, “I love you,”

09:00 “I am well.” That seemed to be the message that went home and that number would be relayed to Australia and they had the words here that they put on a thing and sent to the parents, so it was a very impersonal approach. I laughed the other day when the boys and girls came back after four months away, a lot of communication and a lot of things, for fifteen months our communications were almost nil. We did

09:30 get some letters, you know I did get a letter occasionally, I got a cable from my brother at one stage and they had telegrams in those days. You could get an occasional thing through and that’s all.

Through the sharing of each other’s letters did you feel you got to know the girls you were with or the patients whose letters you read, got to know more about their lives?

Yes, you did, it widened our knowledge,

10:00 because as I say, not very many women from the whole of Australia, and they came from the country and the cities, and not very many of them knew another person. So for us to blend together as we did, you know, even with all these women there never seemed to be any fights, everyone was so busy, there was an awful lot to do.

In the 2/6th at Gaza what were the

10:30 **main illnesses you were seeing, other than the battle wounds, what were the main illness that you had to treat?**

We got a lot of tummy troubles, I said that. You see, they were all young and they didn’t have the troubles that older people get, but we got a lot of fevers and a lot of things that were unknown. Actually at one stage there they had a, I still have the page out of my pay book, I can show you, they got a scare because one of the

11:00 hospitals, it wasn’t one of our hospitals, it was one of the hospitals established there, got a scare that there was typhus. In Queensland we dealt a lot with scrub typhus which comes from the bugs that come off animals. In the Middle East it was typhus, it comes from rats and it’s a very serious disease and there was no known cure for it at that stage,

11:30 so the hospital went through people that had perfect health and as it happened I was one of them, they selected them that had never had anything wrong and they then held a meeting and told us what had happened, that these case of typhus, and that they had to prepare just in case, they didn’t know what

12:00 an injection of typhus would do to us, so we could volunteer and we weren't asked to have it done, but we could volunteer. So I was up for anything for Australia and I was one that volunteered. It didn’t ever happen but if it did happen, it was to be totally isolated from our hospital, the area that they would nurse these people, and we could only work for four hours in twenty four and we had to go through,

12:30 you know, go through a delousing room when we came out, so it was a little step that we never expected to take. I had two injections and it was no worse than taking aspros as far as I was concerned.

So they were trying to test immunising, the effect of immunising?

No, it wasn’t just trying to test, it was preparing a group of people, doctors and nurses and VAs and nursing orderlies that could if it happened, they could be called upon to do the work

13:00 but right away from the hospital. It wasn’t going to be part of the hospital.

What did typhus do to those who were afflicted by it?

I don’t know a lot about it, I really don’t, but the scrub typhus in northern Queensland in Atherton gave them very, very high fevers and if it wasn’t caught early enough it did kill a few people but I didn’t have

any injection for that, but we did nurse them. That wasn't as contagious

13:30 as this other things was said to be. I don't know that they knew all that much about it. That was one of the good things that came from war, in burns and medical advance and science, it all developed and we didn't have the psychologists and psychiatrists and all those kinds of people to help. We had one case that was very amusing in the Middle East, one boy lost his eyes, he had a gun shot in the face and he was

14:00 totally blind and he was very young, so all he wanted to do was die and he wanted everyone around him to know that he wanted to die and nothing could get into him, no way. There was another fellow in the orthopaedic ward and he had lost his legs, had no legs, and so he was in a similar situation and he wasn't as naughty as this one, but he was worried about the family and what his future

14:30 life would be like, so the doctors decided to put them together, one from the eye ward and one from the orthopaedic ward and put them together. He told the boy without eyes that the other boy was very depressed and didn't know what his future would be without any legs, and they told the other fellow without legs what, and they became the most wonderful friends you have ever known, and the boy without the legs was eventually well enough to be given a wheel chair and the boy

15:00 without eyes would push him and the boy sitting in the chair would tell him where to go and they frequently ended up in a slit trench or a gutter somewhere, and they were laughing their heads off and after the war they remained very, very close friends for a long time. Well, till I lost touch with them, we used to see them some times and hear about them on Anzac Day, and in the end we didn't. So they were all very human stories, if you know what I mean.

15:30 But there was a lot of joy and understanding and a lot of help for them and it never seemed to be at the time, it never seemed to be all that sad. It's a funny thing to say, isn't it, but that's true.

Did you ever find yourself becoming too emotionally involved? When the emotions would become too over whelming?

No, I think, I keep, I repeat you had to be very positive about

16:00 it. If you let yourself go then you were no help to any of them. I was mostly scolding them and they loved that. They thought I was terrible. I would really tell them that they were very naughty and things and they loved being told that they were naughty. They spent time trying to think what else they could do. In northern Queensland you know, I said they had their dogs, well the same, different people altogether of course, but they still had all these imaginary things around them

16:30 and they'd say things to try and shock me and we weren't as up to the things that they are today, and I'd just ignore them and say, "Well, you are not worth bothering about," so it was a different technique in a way. Well I don't know if it was technique but dealing with them, but up in northern Queensland they had a parachute group, a battalion up there, and they all jumped out of planes

17:00 and they would end up in hospital with broken arms or a broken leg or being tangled up in bushes and one day they were there and they said, "Oh nurse, nurse," and they were trying to shove all the things away, the games that they had been playing that they shouldn't be playing and, "Here comes Jumping Jesus." Well, I was so angry and so shocked, so then they put on an act, "Oh Jumping Jesus, look." Do you know what it was? He was their padre and he had to jump too with a parachute.

17:30 They all had this kind of humour that you would never find anywhere else, it was really remarkable.

Was it a dark humour, a black humour?

No, it was a happy one and they would all laugh and enjoy it, and it wasn't rude when you stop and think of it, Jumping Jesus they called him but he was the padre, and the padres would write letters for the boys and they were very good.

18:00 **And did you have problems with misbehaviour with any patients who had been there too long or whose mental health**

No, it was strange. We knew some of they boys were not very nice boys and you knew some of the histories, but never once, and I can truly say never once were they anything but nice to me,

18:30 to all of us, and no matter how good or bad they were, I think they respected the fact that we were there doing whatever we could do, and we, I mean we weren't stupid and we knew some of the boys were really rather naughty. Les had a real crook in his unit, a really nasty person, but he always behaved in the unit. I mean we were under rigid discipline.

19:00 **Can you tell me, take me to the day when the first casualties started to come in from El Alamein?**

Well of course the first patients I saw were battle worn if you could say that, were in the 2/1st and they were from Tobruk. They had been living in the, so there were quite a few wounds and

19:30 a lot of trouble from there because they lived, well they were called the Rats of Tobruk because they lived underground for a long time, but no.

Can you take me back to that day and what it was like to receive those battle wounds?

We were very busy, the only people you saw as you passed, the staff would be rushing this way or that way.

20:00 You didn't have any time to think about anything, you just settled on getting these people comfortable. We had, you just met it as it came.

What were the range of injuries coming out of Tobruk, what were the main?

Oh there were bullet wounds and broken bones from shrapnel.

20:30 A variety of things, I can't remember exactly what I saw. Sir Roden Cutler was in the 2/1st and he lost a leg at Tobruk and I don't know if you know he was the Governor here for some time. He was Australia's first VC [Victoria Cross] and he got his VC because he, sorry,

21:00 no, he didn't get it then, I don't know where he got his, but we had Edmondson, he was Australia's first VC, and the officer he carried out was a fellow called Austin Mackell and Austin Mackell married one of our girls in Jerusalem. So you know we had a connection with him, we have the 2/17th was nearby when we got to

21:30 Gaza. I'm sorry I've gone off the, when we got to Gaza, so Kath Mackell's brother was adjutant of the 2/17th Battalion and he come over to see her and he brought his friends and one of them was Austin Mackell and the other was John Dinning and John Dinning married one our girls and Austin married one our girls and they were both married in Jerusalem. We didn't get up to their weddings, but it was very interesting and a few others came from, one was John Broadbent

22:00 and he's a general, Broadbent, and so I always tell him, "I knew you when you were only a captain," because he came over too. We knew a lot of the boys then. Another thing that happened in Gaza on the Christmas night, my friend Alwyn and I had finished our work and over the loud speaker they said if we wanted a pie at nine o'clock, they were importing pies, I suppose they were full of camel, we always said they came from a camel,

22:30 up at the mess, and so at nine o'clock it was teeming with rain. Alwyn and I paddled our way up to the mess and we could only have one pie each, so we came back and we had a little stove, I don't know if you have seen them, you put methylated spirits into them and you light them and they heat things and we had a tin of Nestles condensed coffee and milk and you put a spoon full of that muck into a cup and you could heat it.

23:00 A pannikin it was, you could heat it on this little stove. And so we came back and were preparing to do that but as we came back we had ground sheets on and it was teeming and one of the guards was walking up and down and Alwyn said, "Oh, we should give that poor man a pie?" It was her idea and not mine. I wasn't as generous as that. So we gave him a pie and then we had to come in and share her pie, or she gave him her pie and we had to come in and share my pie, so we finished all that and we went to bed.

23:30 It was midnight and Beryl Foal who was also in our tent, came in late. She had been, a minute to twelve, but she'd been out somewhere and so when we all settled down, we all started talking then. There were four of us in the tent and then we started talking, and then we said goodnight to each other and we were going to go to sleep, this was Christmas Eve, the "Old and Bolds"

24:00 were nearby and they were supposed to guard our area, which they did but one of the silly men started playing "Home Sweet Home" on his mouth organ at midnight on Christmas Eve. We nearly washed the tent out with tears you know, it was terribly, we were all so homesick we couldn't speak. What a silly thing to do, "Home Sweet Home" on a mouth organ at midnight on Christmas Eve with the rain teaming down.

24:30 It just made big babies of us. There were emotions there but there were times when we kept them in check.

How important were those girls you lived directly with, did you reach or hold on to them strongly, the girls that were in your tent?

No, I think we were all fairly strong and we were all individuals. We all did our own thing. They smoked and I didn't and I couldn't bear the smell of it and

25:00 you know, we lived, and they would go to different things to what I would go to. The boys had a lot of parties when they were free, and it rained a lot over there and they would send these enormous trucks and we would climb up onto the back of the truck and sit there, and on these dreadful roads we would go all the way to the dance and we'd get there, and the floor was so wet and it was always just on cement

25:30 and dancing was just hard work and most of the time we were in gum boots but then they would put on some kind of food to the best of their ability, and we would be loaded back on the trucks to be back in camp by twelve o'clock. So that was any outings we had. It was very elegant.

Far from glamorous in gum boots.

Yes, we went to one and it was so wet and everything the gumboots wouldn't work on the cement, so one of the boys had the

26:00 bright idea, he went and got some washing powder and sprinkled it all over and then we couldn't breath because of the fumes that came. I tell you, the events and things. The British had a big battle, I don't know a whole lot about it but it was called Cambrai. They celebrate Cambrai Day and so they had a big celebration and they invited a lot of us over to their celebrations and we had rides in Bren carriers, which was very exciting. We also had, the army were very

26:30 good for people who were off duty, they arranged sports meetings on Gaza and I was only looking the other day and I saw one of things where one of our girls were taking part and Les Penman was taking part, his unit was there and he was a great sportsman, and he was there but I didn't know him then, I didn't meet him until the end of the war, as I said when we met.

Were there any sports that you enjoyed particularly?

No, I was never, I played tennis before the war and I played hockey over

27:00 there against the Palestinians Police, but I was not really a good hockey player. I think they were short a man, so they put me in, we girls played the Palestine Police.

How did the local Palestinian people there respond to the Australian presence?

Wonderfully well, yes, everybody was kind, they all were, we got on very well and we made friends with some of the civilian people, the English people that lived in Gaza and they invited us home.

27:30 None of them had very much to spare themselves, but they shared it, which was rather wonderful.

At the hospital there were obviously different wards for the officers and the soldiers, is that right?

Yes, they had the officers' wards and the OR [Other Ranks] wards but there was one special ward and that was the CO's ward and he was a neurosurgeon, he had regardless of rank, from a general down to a private,

28:00 or from a private up to a general, anyone who was really seriously ill went into the CO's ward. There was one boy who came down from Syria and he had some kind of an explosion of an acid and he was in bandages. The only parts that weren't were two little holes for his nose to breath and

28:30 he had to have a tube in his mouth for feeding and as I say I don't know what they would have done today but he kept on burning and so they had to have gallons and gallons of normal saline, that's salty water, and we had to pour that over his bandages and there had to be someone there the whole time pouring water over these bandages. I think he died in the end, they took him away. They were sending him back to Australia, and they were making special preparations

29:00 for him to go back, so I don't know what happened to him. There was another boy who came down and there was an explosion of some kind of fuel and he was very badly burnt and we had one sister who was totally dedicated to him, she didn't know him, but they constructed a special room inside a tent ward of nets, mosquito nets to keep

29:30 anything away from him and they had a bed for him and a normal saline bath. If he was going to have his saline bath some of the boys had to come in and get him by the sheets and lift him into it because his fingers would fall off and his toes would fall off. And the army was wonderful, they flew his brother, his brother was in the army as well, they flew him down from Syria to be with him.

30:00 He lived for a long time and they learned a lot about burns. It's different now the way they treat it. The sophistication of medicine now is amazing, but they did learn a lot from the Second World War, it was one of the plusses if you could find a plus in war. I don't think there is one really, but that's one and it has advanced science.

I imagine it was quite inspiring despite the amount of

30:30 **death and injury that had been caused to see the lengths that people would go to, to save these lives?**

Yes, we didn't have a lot of deaths in our unit because the hospital ships were coming all the time and taking boys back that had a lengthy illness ahead of them and things, but it was, it was inspiring to see their courage. That was the thing, it wasn't what we did or were not able to do, it was

31:00 their courage, and as I said, they always thought that their mates were worse off than they were, regardless of how very ill. Getting back to Pitter-Pat, he knew we were so busy and he'd come along and he'd take out, you know, when we had finished washing the patients, he would take out the water and throw it out and bring in the next lot. These boys that couldn't feed themselves, he would sit down and feed them just like a mother would. He was just so wonderful.

Was Pitter-Pat Father Burke?

He was Father Burke, They called him Pitter-Pat

31:30 because he used to pitter-pat through the wards you know, and we remained friends after the war, we remained very close friends and they always laughed because he ended up being the parish priest in Seven Hills in [South] Australia. It's where they make all the sacramental wines, but he was the priest, he wasn't the wine maker and Les and I went over and visited him there and our girls went over and Elizabeth was a pianist and so

32:00 she played the organ, and it was one of the first settlements in South Australia, Seven Hills, and he had a lot of sacramental garments there that were absolutely exquisitely beaded and the story of the Bible in the garments and it went on and they would always laugh and say, if any of the tykes wanted to know where Father Burke is they rang Alice Penman because he always came. And we had a party here for him for his

32:30 eightieth birthday and we then became friends, and his brother came, who was an engineer and he and his wife came and they said that was the first thing that they had ever been to because the Jesuits are very strict, eleven years they take before they are ordained, they have to go to Rome to be ordained, I don't know if they still do, but in those days they had to go to Rome to be ordained, so for a Roman Catholic Priest, sometimes our little chapel, it was a little a tent,

33:00 and sometimes I would meet him over in the store room when I was getting clean sheets to go on the altar and he would be getting his lot, so he would carry mine to the door and say, "There you are, you go into yours." We argued a bit about religion, but it was amazing that I learned a great deal of humility and understanding from him. He was a great teacher I thought. I still kept in touch with his sister-in-law, his brother died. He died in South Australia, he was wonderful.

33:30 He wrote once, "I don't want you to think I'm skiting, but you'll find out and then you will say that I didn't tell you, they have named a park after me." He was so thrilled because he would hear the birds and everything when they named a park after him. It wasn't, and when he got there, it was a car park. He always liked to joke on himself. He was a really great guy.

I just wanted to

34:00 **go back to the technological developments we were talking about, the medical advances, what were the significant changes you saw in the treatment of patients from the beginning to the end? Were there any major changes in the way you did things?**

No, I'm not qualified to go into the particular things that developed because I was just a nursing orderly, but you know,

34:30 I do know that it contributed largely to the advancement of science and the treatment of patients in all the different areas of medical care.

You don't recall any procedures that changed?

No, nothing changed while I was there. Penicillin came in and that changed a lot because it took over where wounds developed complications earlier on, the penicillin was a

35:00 marvellous thing and it stopped a lot of that. In the First World War they found that a lot of people came in and their wounds were blown by blow flies, you know, they had been lying about for some time and they were surprised to find in the end that the blow flies saved lives because the blow flies would only eat the bad flesh and they would eat it and then gangrene didn't set in as some that got into hospitals when gangrene took over and that's why they lost,

35:30 if they weren't lost in combat, they were lost because gangrene set in, and they learned a lot from the blow flies but we had a lot of wounds and we had to irrigate them and some wounds would take up to four hours for the dressings.

What does irrigating mean?

We would have normal saline and we'd irrigate and wash off all the bad parts and things, some of the wounds were horrendous.

36:00 We had one boy who was in the ward and he had his buttocks shot off, and he didn't have any, and he was really very seriously ill and he was so ill that we couldn't move him, but one night I was on night duty and he was very very restless, and Reg Seal was his name, and he was the most handsome boy you could ever imagine, and he was very restless and we weren't supposed

36:30 to do anything to touch him, but I went to him and he said, "Oh, I just can't bear this another minute." The bed was driving him mad, and I said to him, "I will do something," that I shouldn't have done, but I went and got some clean sheets and we had a method you know, you put the sheets along the side of the bed and you could roll them over and do all that, then roll them back, he was so relieved because the bed bugs had got in and they were biting him. So he was so thrilled that I got him some clean sheets and things.

37:00 I told them the next day, I had to report because you have to write down everything you do, and I told them what I had done and I didn't get into trouble, but you know, don't do it again, but he needed it very badly. But he recovered and they did some grafts and he wanted to go back and they wouldn't let him.

He wanted to go back and fight?

He wanted to go back to his unit. They all wanted to go back, it took a lot to get people away from their unit, it was like taking a dummy from a child,

37:30 a baby. We became very, very involved with our units, very much a part of it.

How was penicillin administered?

In those days? They could give injections but they also used it like they use sulpha, they sprinkled it on. I was not up to that lot, the doctors did that and the trained sisters.

38:00 **And what were the major painkillers that you were using?**

Well they used aspros and we had a lot of aspros then and we didn't have all these new drugs. For the extreme cases they used morphine, but they didn't have, we just didn't have all these things and we couldn't throw anything away. It was just amazing. But you could give them injections, the doctors could give them injections

38:30 if they were really in great pain. Mostly they were controllable things and we were able to, they were given a lot of TLC [tender loving care] and comfort.

Were there other distractions, art materials or music or anything like that in the wards?

Some of the girls formed, yes, we had some music off this little man, Spragg, I think his name was, that controlled

39:00 the music and they would get lines across the hospital and we had some music but it wasn't wonderful music but then some of them had, you know, some of girls had knowledge, the VADs were a very complex lot. Some of them were typists, stenographers, some of them were graduates and all these different skills they brought in, and they formed a music club

39:30 and we would go along and listen to discussions, music discussions and things like that. We didn't have a lot of time off. We didn't have a tremendous staff at any time really. We had a lot of picnics for the boys, we would take them out on picnics. And up in northern Queensland, we didn't have anything in the Middle East because we couldn't get anything, but we did have a soldiers' club in Gaza, they'd established a club in there and we could go in there and have a meal.

40:00 And we could go to some little cafés, they had Vienna Schnitzel or whatever they called it. We always kidded ourselves that we were not eating camel but we were suspicious that we were. But anyway, just to get out or go from the army food and stuff like that. We put in a little bit of money, we put in a bob a week or something like that. It might sound silly now, but a shilling a week did something, and

40:30 we would get a bit of extra food. The cooks could go and buy a bit of extra things outside.

OK Alice, we're right on the end there of that tape.

Tape 5

00:33 **We are ready to start now.**

I had a friend, Susan, and we had a rather amusing afternoon and I was to go on duty at six o'clock and she came in and took a reclining position on my bed and left me to sit on the floor in my tent and we talked about all kinds of silly things, and she was really quite amusing, a journalist graduate of Sydney University.

01:00 So when I came back off duty at half past nine she had written this poem, "If I should leave this earthly life tomorrow and you should live till four score year and ten would you remember that brief day of sorrow when you too left the world of men? Would you remember how I taught you swearing, then told you hurry up and be a wife, then said I'd see you never more for daring to teach you things not sweet in your sweet life. You might know me blue dress, brown plait

01:30 aged twenty five and fat. Would I know your grey hair, dark frock aged quietly with the gently ticking clock? Could age meet youth in that far flung off day, come back to equals and talk the self same way? Could you bear talk about this present nation with all its long forgotten silly discontents? What would I know of rehabilitation and future war and peace and international events? Could you still laugh at childish speeches, eat sour

02:00 plums and two ripe peaches like when I stood on a religious mat and told you I had once been a kitten

eating cat? Would I be interested in your maternal prattle about Jack the doctor and Tom with his cattle? And all the grandchildren precious as gold for you must remember you'd be old, and I'd be young as young as now with childish worries across my brow and you would have lived a normal life contented mother and happy wife. The question is there to be answered, no, for no one

02:30 knows where the other will go. Climb the next hill and look over again and you will find just another empty plain."

A wonderful poem.

She ended, at the end she had said, "For Alice, so that you will remember at least this deliciously childish conversation." She was gorgeous.

What special memories does reading that poem bring back to you?

Rather emotional

03:00 one I'm afraid. We had a lot of fun and she was a wonderful person and she was a leader and she was one of the very gifted ones and she had the opportunity to go to officers' school but she wouldn't leave the unit either. She arranged musical evenings for us and things like that and she hated sewing and she did some stitching for me when I was married, so she was a wonderful,

03:30 wonderful friend and it affected us deeply when she died. The strange thing was when I met Les, Susan was on leave and when she came back, she was furious because we had to write in a book where we were going when we went out and I had one part in the bush where I used to take my friends for picnics. Father Burke was one of my regulars and when she came back I had written that I was going for a picnic, so she went down,

04:00 and I wasn't there which made her infuriated and then she found out that Les had arrived with his friend. That's just when I met Les, and she had been at the university with his friend, so when we were married she was my bridesmaid and Innes Wood was Les's best man. He came too, he was the godfather to our daughter

04:30 Elizabeth and he came to her two year old party and brought her a big top and I took a snap of him taking the top, and that night he took his life, and they said it was as a result of the war, you know, and he had been doing medicine before the war and once they interrupted their course, he wanted to go so he did go, and he couldn't resume the medical course when he came back and then he became totally

05:00 depressed and he died in November and she wrote from New Guinea and said great waves of disbelief had been going over her and she couldn't believe so she got out all her books and thought of all the happy times they had had at university and the happy times meeting when we met and she died the following April. She died on the 24th of April the following year, so it was quite

05:30 extraordinary, and they were both very strong and warm friends.

When I hear that poem it seems to me it talks a lot about the future?

Yes, it's incredible, isn't it? That's why her mother, when Susan died she had a copy of it. I had a copy, my original copy is in the War Memorial in Canberra because I gave some precious things to them, because I thought, you know, that's what I wanted to do

06:00 and her mother wrote and said it was so pathetically prophetic, and that's true.

What were your thoughts at the time the poem was written?

I was hoping that I would be a nurse. I wanted to do nursing and Susan was hoping that she could go back to her own work and she always said that she would marry a British diplomat or a poet. She sent me a cable from, of course she went on to New Guinea, and she sent me a cable which I still have in my desk, and said,

06:30 "Officially buried one British diplomat, engaged to Devon Minchin," and she said he was almost a diplomat because he had written a book called Potato Man and he was in England when war broke out and he flew in the Battle of Britain, then he went into the army. So he was a very all rounder.

Were you familiar with the First World War poets, before the Second World War?

Well as I said, what did

07:00 I say his name was?

Rupert Brook?

Rupert Brook, I love Rupert Brook. Yes, I was crazy about Rupert Brook, I've still got the little book I took with me to the war.

These poems, did they shape your expectations of what war might be like?

I had an idea, his poems were very deep and lovely.

Tell me what those poems meant for you, why did you take them?

They gave me a great deal of comfort

07:30 and I loved the poetry and I couldn't take a whole lot so I took the ones I wanted, I had "The White Cliffs," a couple of extracts of the "White Cliffs" and I just, we shared it too because it gave others joy when you read the poems.

Was that something the nurses did often in times off?

No, we didn't have a lot of time

08:00 with them. If we had time off they were on duty. When we on duty it was difficult to get together. Only friends could really get together at times.

Were the soldiers interested in poems and things?

Yes, a lot of them were, yes. Yes, they loved their poems and I would lend them my scraps and they enjoyed that and we gathered a few books, everyone had a book or two,

08:30 and we put them in the library so that everyone could read them. We would turn them around. We called it a library with about a dozen books.

Tell me what books you brought with you again?

Well I took Testament of Youth, and only one other book I took, a reading book, and I took my Bible and the padre gave me a prayer book, that was my personal library. There was another book called

09:00 Tell England, I suppose when I think about it, they did fashion me in some way. Tell England was written by Ernest Raymond, it was about three boys, English boys, at one of the colleges in England and they felt they were privileged, because they were privileged they felt they should give more to the First World War, and then one of them wrote a book

09:30 and Doe Ray Me they called themselves, and they went to war, although they were very privileged and they, one of them wrote the book, Ernest Raymond of course. He wrote the final chapter and said that if he didn't come back it was to be printed, and he didn't come back and so it went in with the book. There were several

10:00 pieces of wonderful poetry in that, really wonderful.

Were there other poets that you admired, Owens, Sassoon, Greaves? Were there others?

There were others that I read from time to time, but you couldn't take everything so Rupert Brook and I became very close friends.

I'd like to hear now the other poem you have selected from that volume?

"This Is The Enemy.

10:30 "To my enemy." This is a poem that I really love. I think, I was trying to explain something about enemies and I think this will explain.

"To my enemy, I cannot see you through blinding sand, I only hear your bullets whining, the days ending and the night will bring us close together in this strange land, each trained to kill

11:00 and in each nervous hand strong tools of death will strike a fuse and spring, if we meet tonight steel will ring and we may die before we understand, But at the end, when all our debts are paid, Should we live on being too young to die, When men grow weary of a lost crusade and leave their lifeless cities to the sky, There may be some place where you and I can meet again unarmed and unafraid." And the number is

11:30 N78508, so that's a lovely, do you think?

That's a wonderful poem, yeah. So who wrote that poem, do you know?

I don't know, it's just an army number there.

Tell me where you came across that poem, how you found it?

I cut out lots and lots of poems out of books and papers and things and that was out of a war magazine over there. It appeared

12:00 in one of the papers and I cut it out. I couldn't keep all the papers but I kept that. I kept similar scraps. I have lots.

Tell me in what way and why is that poem particularly special?

Because Simon [interviewer] asked me a question, what we felt about our enemy and I said, "They are someone's loved ones," especially with the Germans, and we know that they had the feelings we had and I think that explains,

12:30 so it seems so stupid that we were there trying to kill each other and we didn't know each other. I mean it was stupid but it had to be them or us.

This feeling arose over time, did it? What was it like when you first enlisted, your feelings towards the enemy?

Well, I didn't think as deeply as that, you know, we were just keen to get on to be

13:00 prepared for what we might face. I don't think any of us thought about the future in any great degree. You didn't know if you were going to come back or you weren't going to come back, you didn't know. When at home I always thought that the women who remained at home were the bravest ones. I thought they were tremendous. We were doing things and we were so occupied that we didn't have a lot of time. But for the mothers, the young women that had

13:30 children and remained at home, brought up their children not knowing if they would see their fathers again, their husbands and the father of their children, I think that must have taken enormous courage. I was very grateful that I didn't marry until the end of the war so that I didn't have to suffer all that.

Did you see soldiers missing their loved ones? Is that a big part, you interacted with the loved ones?

Of course they did, they had their photos, all their photos

14:00 there and their snaps and they would tell you all about it and they'd think you had an hour to listen to their stories of how wonderful their wives where or what their baby did, or what their child was doing, its progress through kindergarten or school you know. It was wonderful, it really was wonderful, and that helped them because they could talk to someone that had an understanding of children.

Do you think it was made easier that they had a female to talk to?

I'm

14:30 sure it did. Yes, they all said so. "Nurse, I haven't spoken to an Aussie girl since I left home," they'd say. The English boys used to like to talk to us because they were brave, they were courageous. They weren't only suffering facing the enemy and doing what they had to do but they knew that their loved ones were at home being bombed you know, and that must have been really shocking, and I really didn't know anything about the bombing of Darwin or anything until we got home to Australia,

15:00 and of course not because of the secrecy, well, they couldn't allow the progress of what was happening out and a lot of it was withheld until quite recently.

Did you know of the fall of Singapore while you were over there?

Yes, we did know about that.

How did they tell you about that?

Well, it came over the air from London really, we were all very distressed and very

15:30 unhappy but you know sometimes a Dad would die or a loved one would die at home and we didn't hear until, but there would be always someone there that would be all things to you that they could be, family, whatever . Some would lose their fiancés up in the desert and one lass was married and ten days later her husband was killed and things like that happened, but there was always someone around

16:00 who would act like a family would.

And were you very conscious that death might be just around the corner for almost anyone?

Yes, I think we were, but then it can happen in ordinary life, can't it? You are not aware, not so acutely aware of it. I think we all thought we were going to live. I don't think it was a real worry with us but sometimes in a quite moment or if everyone else was on duty and you were on your own for a while, you thought oh gosh,

16:30 I wonder if I will see my father again and I wonder if I will see my mother again.

How did feelings of home or homesickness affect you personally?

At times it was very hard to think about, David McNicoll explained that, the aching, taunting thoughts of home, it was true.

And how would you cope?

You would get busy. You'd think I better go

17:00 and do something or you would be so glad and normally you would think, oh, it's time to go back to work, back to the ward and if you were in that kind of mood, you would thank heavens I have to go back to the wards and they're all worse off than I am. They have got wounds as well as thinking of their homes.

So hard work was a useful distraction?

Definitely. If we hadn't had the hard work I don't know that we would have survived.

When you were over there were you thinking then

17:30 **about the women at home or was this something that arose later?**

No, I always thought they were very brave and I was always glad that I hadn't reached that stage, being married and have children and having to see someone going off. I was glad I didn't know anyone that affected me in that way. I was affected by the boys that I had gone to school with, about my brother and I knew my sister was in Australian and so she was all right. You know, Bob recovered and he

18:00 got his commission in the field actually in the end on the Kokoda Track. So I worried about him because he had been so ill a few years before but you know, you just worried.

We have spoken about the apprehensions about the future, I just wanted to ask a bit about the past now. Before, was World War I a big factor in peoples' minds?

18:30 Yes, it was only twenty years before but I think to begin with we were too young and I could never understand my mother used to weep on Anzac Day. I couldn't understand that and any talk of the war and she would have a good old weep, and I was to learn why but at a later time. In that way I don't think it had a big bearing on what I did or what I didn't do.

Did you notice in the years before the war were there

19:00 **any lingering resentment against the Germans or Germany as a result of the war?**

Not that I was aware of, no. I wasn't aware of any problems. I think they were worried that it had happened a second time, they thought the First World War would end it all but Hitler rose from wherever he came from.

What sort of things did you

19:30 **hear about Hitler before the war?**

Well we knew the power that he had and wondered how he had got to such a position, and hate him and want to kill him or anything, but he must have been a remarkable person to have that power, but of course he got them all into the army and they did as he said or we didn't hear from them again. He was a very cruel man.

20:00 They had no choice as to what they did, that's why we could understand it. As individuals you couldn't hate them.

So are you saying hatred was centred pretty much on Hitler?

On Hitler, and of course you have got to realise that he did a lot for Germany. They, he had roads built and all kinds of things. He was a tremendous power and I don't know fully

20:30 his history but you know we had heard about that before we went into the army.

Could I ask about feelings about the Empire and the importance of the Empire to your family?

Well it was important and we were a very young country, and we're still young,

21:00 but then we were very young and I think it was the building up of the power of Australia and becoming an individual but they still wanted to have the company of the Imperial set up. My father, they were very loyal Australians.

What do you think was your main motivation for wanting to help

21:30 **get involved in the war effort personally?**

Well I have mentioned reading the book that I took with me and I read it again and again, I thought I would like to do what she did, and if, you know, and the people that you did know as you were growing up and they were joining up and going away and we had these long, every morning the newspapers brought out these long lists,

22:00 casualty lists, and you felt that you couldn't really cope doing nothing. As I say, that was one thing, the women did have their children and they knitted socks and they knitted camouflage nets and they kept themselves busy too and they did wonderful things and they gave all their saucepans to make aeroplanes. I mean, the sacrifices they made were just unbelievable and so you felt

22:30 it was up to you to do something as well.

Were there a lot of boys from Bathurst going away?

Yes, a lot. I don't know the number but there were a lot of boys, as I say there were four from my detachment, four females, and they were the first lot into the army.

Tell me about the, you went to Sydney, becoming one of the two hundred,

23:00 **what was the test that you did?**

Well I did explain, we had to do our training, we were Red Cross VADs and that was established by the Red Cross and we had to do the training they required. Well we weren't allowed a uniform for the first six months and then when we passed the first aid test,

23:30 and they boys in actual fact, it turned out the boys really liked us to bandage because we bandaged. That was one of the things that we really learned to do well and they felt very comfortable when we put the bandages on and they didn't think the doctors were up to bandaging so well. So we were very well trained and we were ready for it and then we had to have, in actual fact I did the advanced home nursing and first aid before I was allowed to go the district hospital. We had to have so many hours

24:00 working in a district hospital before we were allowed to go into a camp hospital, and then to qualify to be called up to be interviewed, and a lot didn't pass, you weren't allowed to have a blemish anywhere because you had to be very fit to take them away. They had to pass the test when they came down to Sydney. To qualify they had to have all that behind them, all that training

24:30 and the times working in hospitals.

And was the test a mixture of theory and practical?

Yes, and then health. They had a team of doctors down there and you had to have every medical test known to man, at that particular time anyway.

Tell me then a bit about how they assessed you, were the assessors watching you performing bandaging? How did the actual test work?

25:00 No, they didn't test us on that so much, but they didn't watch us doing any of the practical stuff, we had to explain to them what we were doing, what we would do if this happened and that happened and the other thing. So it was really an oral test and we had to take the certificates to prove that we had qualified. As I say there were twelve thousand fully trained.

Was there any interview aside from the testing?

25:30 In Sydney?

Yes.

Yes, we had to go before a, they had a board set up, and they seemed to test us to see if we were suitable to cope with what might happen.

And how did they assess your suitability?

I don't know, that was their secret. They didn't explain that much to us.

Well what sort of things did they ask?

Well, how would you if there was an emergency of this or that

26:00 and I can't remember exactly what they said, but they would put a case to us and watch how we would respond, and as I say they had their own methods but they didn't explain to us.

How did you feel walking away from the tests?

Flattened. It was worse than sitting here. No, we had no idea if we had passed or we hadn't. That had to come later. They told us.

26:30 But I only had ten days' notice to get myself down to Sydney and I think it was the 8th, altogether with final leave, I think it was only about three weeks. I think my call up was the 8th of October, or the 18th of October, and we sailed on the 1st of November.

How did you spend those ten days?

Frantically getting ready. We had to

27:00 make sure, my mother said, "Put everything you want in this," and do that and do something else and we had to cope with all that, but as soon as I got my call up, I did that. Fortunately, because I wouldn't have had it fixed. I wasn't allowed to go home because of the mumps. They couldn't run the risk of Mary getting the mumps.

Tell me more about your parents' reaction or the advice they might have given you?

They were shattered and they didn't like it, but

27:30 they didn't stop me and my father said, he had a thing that said, "We have absolute faith in what you have been brought up to believe in and the family live with," and they made me feel I would never let them down no matter what happened, so that was a brace or a guard for me in everything that I did,

that I wouldn’t let them down. They were simple people, they weren't sophisticated or anything.

What did

28:00 **mum say?**

Well my Dad gave me a Bible and my mother said, “I only have advice, you’ve had a good upbringing, and although the Depression was there we had a lot of fun and a lot of love in our family.” She said, “You will be treated as you behave.” They were very strong words and I tried to live up to it.

Were those words true, did you find that was

I hope so, yes. I did

28:30 what I thought she would want me to do. I thought I did what she would approve, but I, you know it was a busy life.

Can I ask seeing you just mentioned it, how did the Depression affect your family?

I think I said earlier that my Dad lost his job. He was an expert, he restored antique furniture. In fact he could

29:00 make it, he made my desk. He was quite brilliant at that and he was in a big firm, he was the head man but when the Depression struck and it got really bad, some men came from Sydney and offered a man and his two sons, and they took over and in the end they weren't competent people and they had a very serious accident and one lost his hand in some of the machinery and then

29:30 the man that owned it, Mr Stanley, that owned the business, came and asked my Dad to come back and help him, which he did. We thought he was silly, but he was glad to get a job. My Dad cleaned bricks in the cold to make sure that we had independence and we were looked after. We had a car and he was able to keep the car going and I don’t know how. We’d take the back seat out and go out and have a wonderful picnic and pick

30:00 blackberries and gather mushrooms, all kinds of things in the country you can do, put firewood in the back of the car and sit on that to go home. So we made out and we were only, Australia was only just picking itself up when war broke out and jobs were very hard to come by, it hadn’t got back to being established. A lot of the men had come back and some were wounded, casualties from the First World War that had come home.

30:30 **Were jobs difficult to come by in Bathurst?**

Very.

Were a lot of the boys enlisting looking for a job?

I guess some of them did and some of them were quite young and they had been living at home, we weren’t able to go out and establish ourselves in a unit or a flat of our own in those days, you had to live at home.

31:00 **Now I would like to ask a bit more about the voyage on the Queen Mary, did you stop off at Colombo on the way?**

No, went into Trincomalee which was a very deep beautiful beautiful harbour. But no one was allowed off, the Queen Mary couldn’t get in. We stayed there for a few hours, I don’t know what they were up to but some of they boys dived off and they were fished out. They almost had a fishing net and

31:30 brought them back on board. I suppose they were given some kind of detention or punishment or something, but they thought the experience was worth it.

So you were only there for a few hours?

Yes, only there for a few hours and then we went straight on to Tewfik.

So you were pretty much at sea for the whole time?

Yes, the whole time, three weeks. Coming back it was just over four.

Did you get seasick?

No, the Queen Mary has stabilisers.

32:00 She did get, there were some very rough seas but she was a beautiful ship and you know it must have been in its day of glory it must have been just magnificent, but they did have one swimming pool open, it was in great demand by the boys of course but we were given an hour sometimes and we could go and have a swim, and it was salt water.

32:30 They had a purifier but they couldn’t cope with the masses of people.

On board were the VADs and the troops fraternising much?

Yes, we saw quite a bit of them but we were kept busy because as I said boat drill every morning and then we had, one of the girls from Western Australian was a graduate of the university in Physical

33:00 Care, Culture or whatever you call it, so she gave us exercises but they weren't the running and, you know, they were more, she taught us to relax and when things really got hectic she taught us how to just give it a few minutes and totally relax your mind and body. It was almost like yoga and she taught us how to completely

33:30 relax.

Can you tell me some of the techniques that she passed on to you?

I guess in those days it was probably simple. I don't know much about physical things, but she would say, "Something terrible has happened and you are really het up and everything, so sit down, then lie down," and then you relax one arm and that was her technique, you relax your whole body until you get to your head

34:00 and brain and let it go and force yourself not to think about anything and, you know, sometimes when it got a bit hectic at times, you could revert to that and just take a couple of minutes out and if you do and calm yourself down, it is amazing. Joan Whittington, her name was, she had a sad time too because she married a padre and a wonderful man called Ben and

34:30 he wasn't supposed to, but he went out stretcher bearing in New Guinea and he was shot and killed and she had her child the same time that I had mine. She was, they were married up there on the Tablelands, she only had the one daughter and she became a doctor and so we all, so we all had lots of aunts. I can tell you, we all had lots of aunts and we had Robyn come over here and stay with us

35:00 for a while, you know, we became totally entwined, two hundred went away but it still left us time to develop our own lives and do our own things.

Were those bonds life long?

Absolutely, we met just before Christmas, last October we met in Canberra was our latest get together and there weren't many of there, I might tell you,

35:30 but the same old things they say, "If there are only two, we are all together in spirit," and there are a lot of spirits about at the moment.

That's very interesting about the little relaxation technique you told me. It's a little detail I haven't learned that before so it is very interesting. Can you tell me about coming into, you said the first time you saw all the

36:00 **sunken ships when you came in?**

That was in Tewfik.

In Tewfik?

That worried us, bits of them sticking up out of the water and things. It had been heavily bombed.

That was the first time that you had really seen the effects of war?

Of war, yes. We did have one bomb drop on our hospital which wasn't supposed to be because it was covered by the Geneva Convention and had a bit red cross on the top, and they destroyed the theatre, we had this big old theatre.

36:30 It was only really a big shed and that was bombed and other than that, I think that was a mistake, they shouldn't have done that, but we had an air squadron over further away from the hospital and I think that was what they were aiming for.

Could you just tell me a little bit more about your impressions of coming into Tewfik and seeing the sunken ships?

Just frightened. What are they going to do

37:00 to us we wondered, and the Mary did get the call, she got a warning that there was an air raid coming and she went back out to sea and left us stranded and we didn't know what was going to happen to us then, I can tell you we were frightened then, but we didn't tell each other.

So you had landed?

Yes, we had landed, half of us got off.

Was that including the troops, half the troops?

No, no. I don't know, some of them might have because they got off on a different part

37:30 of the ship. The ship was like a city, it was so enormous.

That fear and apprehension you described, would you say that was all across the ship?

No, I wouldn't say that, I don't think the boys were afraid, we were more afraid, not about anything else, we were more afraid when we got off and the others went back to sea. We didn't know where they were going or whether we would see them again. Nobody told us anything about it, you see.

38:00 **How long were you there for?**

We were there from early morning until later, early evening, then we got on the train when the others came back.

So tell me what you did that day?

We didn't do anything, we just waited around to get the call to go somewhere. NAAFI [Navy Army Air Force Institute] was the English Comforts [Fund] kind of people and they provided canteens and things for their troops and they took care of us for that day and

38:30 I was rather fastidious and that's why I didn't like it over there, I didn't like the dirt around the place, you know, but we got off and NAAFI decided to give us a cup of tea and a bun and the man, a very, very large black man came around with a big basket of buns and he put a big black hand in and give each one, and I thought normally I wouldn't have eaten it, but I would have eaten his hand

39:00 if he hadn't taken it away. You do get used to some of the things you don't like.

Thanks Alice, we're just right at the end of the tape.

Tape 6

00:35 **Well we left off landing at Tewfik. Tell me what happened at the air raid warning?**

The Queen Mary went out to sea with its people. One thing that did make us jealous was they got a decent meal and we only had our bun and that was that.

So was there an air attack?

No,

01:00 well it didn't come, but you know they had guns over there and I don't know if it started or not be we didn't see anything of it.

And then you got the train, can you tell me about that story when you were placed in quarantine?

The day we arrived in Port Tewfik, that night, one of our girls died, Joan McEwan was her name, she was from South Australia.

01:30 She got meningitis and she died that night and we were all absolutely, we didn't know until the next day. Why we knew was because they put barbed wire all around the top of the fence and it was because we were in quarantine and nobody could get in and we couldn't get out and they were very much afraid that there might be an outbreak, but they contained it

02:00 or whatever. There was no problem. Her parents were very devastated and very angry. They wouldn't forgive that she had died.

Had she been sick for a while?

I don't know, see I wasn't exactly with her group.

The area that they put the barbed wire across, what was that like?

It was around our tents because we were living in tents.

And how long was that in place?

I think we were only,

02:30 about ten days I think we were closely watched. We work, we did lots of things that had to be done but we didn't go into the wards, the 2/1st AGH there.

Could you, you were about to tell me a story about the colonel?

The colonel's ward.

I'd like to hear that.

We had a lot of fun in that because the boys, as I said before, regardless of rank they went into the colonel's ward

03:00 and there was one boy, an English boy, Sub Lieutenant Hogg was his name, and he was very, very English and his father was a high ranking officer in England and he had been on a submarine for about four months and they had done a lot of work and they came into Haifa for some leave and he had one or two drinks that he shouldn't have had and he walked out a window

03:30 and he broke his spine, his back bone, and was brought into the colonel's ward and he was really very, very seriously ill. They didn't know if they would save his life, and he was paralysed from the waist down forever, and, but he, I would have to ask the boys to come and help me turn Butch over and things like that, and regardless of whether they were good boys or bad boys, they would just come and

04:00 you didn't ever feel any embarrassment or anything because he had tubes everywhere and you had to lift the tubes and lift (pts? UNCLEAR) and so we did that, and the boys nicknamed everyone, they had some kind of funny name for everyone and they called him Butch. So they would go up to his bed and say, "Well come on Butch," and he wouldn't respond and he couldn't lift his head anyway and they would say, "Butch, do you want your dinner?" and he would say, "My name is Sub Lieutenant Hogg," and, "Oh sorry, we were looking for

04:30 Butch," and they would walk away and he had to come down in the end and allow them to call him Butch, or they wouldn't leave his dinner. He was a very colourful man, very very colourful and a wonderful person he turned out to be, and he, you know, the Australian boys were quite different to the British boys, so he really almost became an Australian, and the CO became a very close friend of his as well

05:00 and only recently in the last eighteen months I have met two of Colonel Money's daughters. Colonel Money is dead of course, and they were very keen to know all about the hospital and their Dad and so I told them this story and they said, "That's strange, because he came to Australia after the war," and I knew that Colonel Money kept in touch with him and they said, "Oh, he came out and stayed with us," and he became a barrister and he worked in Australia and they had been over to

05:30 his home and he has done very well and is still alive, but totally paralysed from the waist down.

When you said the British and the Australian boys were quite different what were the main differences?

You know the happy go lucky lot the Australian boys are, they can turn any event around to the way they want it to be, but the British were very staid and did what they were told and they needed to be told to do things but the Australians would find a way

06:00 around anything. They had lacked the initiative that our boys had, the fire if you like, if there is something to do the Australians get up and do it, the British had to be more organised to do it.

Did you find it a different approach to nursing a British to an Australian?

No, the nursing was very similar, we had no problem with that,

06:30 not that we, you know we didn't see a lot of the nursing but we made friends with some of the nursing people and the nursing staff and the British and you know, we saw a bit of it but it was very like ours and once again we seemed to be freer you know and we could be happy with the boys and help them in that way.

I was also thinking of the way in which you might communicate

07:00 **with an Australian to a British person, did you adopt a different way?**

No, they had to take our way and they liked it.

Yes, I got that impression from that Butch story.

Yes.

You also mention both the good boys and the bad boys helped Butch. What was a good boy and what was a bad boy?

We'd just knew that some of them were bits of rascals. You know, they had been naughty in civilian life and stuff.

07:30 They weren't all good boys, but we never knew who the badies were. As I say Les had an underground man in his unit and finally they came back and he didn't ever misbehave in the army. Finally when he came back he was shot in a gutter at Kings Cross and you know he took up his old life again. But there were a lot of gamblers and a lot of people that

08:00 did naughty things but we had total respect, I always felt that, and we had total safety and we felt absolutely safe, you know we don't have to raise our voice and you could speak to them all in uniform. They were just like us.

What were the relations between the British and Australians?

Very good, very good. General Alexander was an Englishman and he spoke very

08:30 highly of the troops and their cooperation in working with the others. And Rommel of course, none of them could understand in the end, Rommel was a wonderful man and a very good soldier, even when we went back, we still saw evidence of the battle and he was only sixty miles from Alexandria and everyone wondered why he went back, I don't know. I think they ran out of supplies. That was what

09:00 they said anyway.

What did the troops, what was their attitude towards Rommel?

Our boys? I think everybody admired Rommel as a great soldier, our boys mostly in the main were all great soldiers and they were dedicated and they were responsible for what they were doing, and Rommel was a very very responsible man.

09:30 I think he committed suicide, didn't he? I think that Hitler was not very nice to him, I have an idea that he committed suicide, but he was a great soldier and our troops all admired Rommel and still do, they still consider that he was a wonderful soldier.

Did you have much contact with German POWs?

Not a lot, no, not a lot, we had some

10:00 and at Tewfik we had quite a bit of contact with them. They were nice to us. We didn't fraternise with them at all, but they were nice, they were polite.

Were there any ones that you remember particularly?

No, we weren't there long enough for that, it was a dreadful place. You put your foot out of bed and go down four inches in the dust, it was shocking.

That's a bit of a contrast

10:30 **then from the Italians prisoners you encountered?**

Yes, the Italian prisoners were rude and they were bitterly opposed to us, they didn't like us at. I guess I wouldn't have liked waiting on them either. I could understand that. They were serving meals and doing things like that, but the meals were terrible, they were shocking but once again the NAAFI, what did I say it was called?

11:00 The British comforts people, they had a canteen in that particular staging camp and they would open that about six o'clock at night and you would see a long row of Australians paying their one and sixpence or something for a meal. Mils they were over there, seventy mils or something, but very cheap meals supplied by them and they were not too bad.

That was better than the rations that you were issued with?

Yes, the rations

11:30 in the staging camp. The rations in our hospital weren't really bad, they weren't like you get at the Ritz but they were very substantial and everybody paid a certain amount, maybe a shilling a week or something. It wasn't a lot because we only got a few shillings a week and they would go out and buy extra food and there was food available in the Middle East but not a,

12:00 in the restaurants it was fairly expensive, even then. In Tel Aviv, they would go mad down in Tel Aviv with slushy cakes. I can't eat cakes today because I can't bear the though of what we, but you know all fancy rich cakes. The Jews seemed to like that.

Did locals come around selling food?

No, they weren't allowed, but when we went on route marches or if we were out the little boys would come along and say "Five for five," you know, five

12:30 oranges for five mils and we had, we were taught to quarter them and not to handle the skin any more than we had to because their produce is beautiful, their lemons and oranges. They have very prolific growth of lemons and oranges over there and of course when we went back they had had some Australians over there helping with their

13:00 agriculture and they use water very cleverly and they don't waste water at all.

Did you ever have shortages of supply that you had to deal with?

Well we had a shortage of everything when Alamein was on because as I have already said, we were cut off from Australia and we had no supplies coming in from Australia at all. We had no hospital supplies and everything had to be very, very carefully used.

13:30 **How about water?**

Well we had water. I mean we didn't have any gardens, well we might have had an odd flower but they didn't grow anyway, we had a lot of rain over there and we didn't use a lot of water. He had showers and we did some washing but their water supply was a bit of a problem now but it wasn't much of a problem then.

14:00 And of course with development, Tiberius or the Sea of Galilee, that's a bit of a worry to them now and we didn't have the worry in Egypt. Water came down, it flows down and each year they depended on the water coming down and the silt came and nourished the fields, but now

14:30 they've got that big electric thing up in the Aswan Dam. We went back at one stage and it was amazing the stuff they've got there, and they use a tremendous amount of water and now they are suffering because the water doesn't come down and the Aswan Dam is beginning to silt up because it used to depend on the water coming into it, great flushes of it and it would clear it out, so the engineers are a bit worried.

15:00 But we didn't have that worry when we were there, there was a lot of water in the dam.

How about blood supplies for the hospital?

I didn't know a lot. I wasn't in the blood supply section, I don't know what they did for blood, I really don't. Sorry about that.

That's OK. Tell me, I have got a few questions just about the work practices, you mentioned before you

15:30 **wrote reports, was that after every shift?**

Yep. We had a book and we had to write down if there was anything untoward. If it was normal you didn't have to do that, but you had to say that all the temperatures were taken and if one temperature was up a bit high or something and of course we, some of them, we were watching that they wouldn't haemorrhage and a tourniquet was a kind of rubber thing tied at the end of the beds,

16:00 that's the way we would cope if we had to, to stem the blood that was going to disappear.

What were the sort of things that were important to record if they happened?

A rising temperatures or a boy with a severe headache or vomiting. Those kinds of things, the things that were adding to complicate his progress or anything at all

16:30 that was just not normal in his condition, whatever it happened to be, whether it was dysentery. We had a lot of dysentery and we had special wards set up because they had to be very careful of that.

Were there any wards that you didn't go in or did you do the lot?

No, I had a go at most of them, we just went where we were sent. When we were on night duty we were there all night and we had a tent set aside and if you were on night duty,

17:00 you had to go into those tents right up away from the general lines. I said before the boys were kind. When I got back to El Alamein when that was at it's best or worst, we would have to start the morning washes at night and would work on until about ten or eleven o'clock and then do our bandages but the boys would trundle along, you would hear them trundle along in their wheel chairs or whatever they had, on their crutches

17:30 and they would make tea and you would come in and there would be burnt toast and tea that you could stand a telegraph post up in, and they were so proud of what they had done, "Nurse, please sit down and just have this," and so we would sit down to please them and you would think all the time oh my God they have used the rations, what am I going to do for breakfast? But they were just so kind and just so wonderful.

Sounds as though they were just desperate to help out in any way?

Yes,

18:00 they were. I can't remember any trouble we had in any ward at any time, and the saddest ward of all was when they were, we called it Ward 17, it was where the shell-shocked boys went. They would fight a lot and we had a lot of trouble with them, just squabbling over bits of coloured glass they would find on the ground or something. They would fight like little children, you know.

18:30 They were the saddest lot because it was very hard to get into them, but they sent them back to Australia as fast as they were able, but we called them, bomb happy.

What sort of nursing did they require?

It was just general nursing, they weren't wounded. They didn't have wounds, or some of them did of course, I'm not making a covering statement. Some of them had wounds, but in the main it was in their minds.

19:00 They were people who just couldn't cope with the situation and so it affected them.

Was there any way of treating that?

I don't know if they had any special ways, we weren't up to the mental health that we have got today, but I don't know what they do in mental health, there is not a lot that you can do for them, just to be very kind and very patient. I think you need really

19:30 an abnormal amount of patience with some of them and try and talk them into just doing, come and sit on the chair. Some of them would object to that and get very cross if you tried to make them sit on a chair and do something for them. But I always felt it was the saddest part of the war.

Was it a frightening ward to visit?

No, there were one or two at times we had to keep an eye on, but you didn't

20:00 turn your back on them. No, no, we didn't, well we didn't have any incidents, I can say that, but we were aware sometimes of someone who was a little bit beyond the norm.

Tell me then about the patients helping out, was there a formal arrangement for more healthy patients to?

20:30 Well, it wasn't formal but they volunteered. If they could walk or do things, they did them and they did all kinds of things, they carried food for us. There were times when we just couldn't cope with the amount of work that was to be done if we hadn't had help from them but normally we had men orderlies as well that did the heavier work carried the big things of food and things like that and buckets of water, but when we lost our help

21:00 because they went up to be the reinforcements, that was hard work then and the boys had to help us if they were able, and B class boys, they were the ones that were mostly walking patients and they could come and help us, just hand out food, and do things for us.

So was there A class boys as well?

The A class boys, they were the really wounded ones, the people who were in bed and the B class boys

21:30 would come and they would say, "I'm only a B class man you know," if you asked them to do something. They helped with the washing up and they helped to, you know, serve what we call soup at morning tea time. I feel ashamed now when I think of it. It was really only coloured water. No, we were really short of things during that time.

Were there other classifications of wounded?

Only the different ones, there were the orthopods, the orthopaedic ones with limbs

22:00 and then there were the mentally affected ones, bomb happy ones, and then we had the dysentery ward which was out of bounds to everybody except the staff who were working there and they had to be very strict about you know their hygiene, and they had the general wards, you know, for all kinds of wounds and things and there was one boy called Jacobs,

22:30 I have forgotten his Christian name, but I knew his father, I didn't know him, but he came down in one of the convoys one night and he wasn't classified as one of the worst wounded but when I eventually got to him, he had a wound from his knee to the back of his buttock that you could put your arm in it and he said, "Would you like to read a letter from my Dad, Nurse?" And I said, "Yes," and he wanted me to read this

23:00 bit of the letter and it said, "Naturally at this time your mother is very worried about you but don't let that make any difference to the job you've got on hand." And there he was very wounded when he got back to the hospital and got that letter. And of course the Red Cross played a very big part in that, every boy that was wounded came back into the hospital got some tooth paste and toothbrush and some soap and a face cloth, every one got their letter bag from the Red Cross and they had Red Cross workers there as well and the Salvation Army

23:30 were just without, you could never say enough that's good about the Salivation Army, they were fabulous and they were right up with the boys and they were right behind them when they were in hospital and no matter where you turned the Salvos were there.

Tell me a little bit about coming in there as a VAD, was there a period where you had to win acceptance from the army nurses?

Yes, at the beginning.

Tell me about that?

Well, not a lot to tell, they were very sceptical

24:00 if I can put it that way, they didn't object to us but they were very sceptical of what we were capable of doing, but as soon as they saw us being to work and as I said regardless of if they came from Perth, Adelaide, Queensland, they all worked as one, they were trained. They really were very well trained as VADs, they hoped in and they did anything that had to be done. They were telephonists, stenographers

and typists and

24:30 I was a ward orderly, and then we had cooks. The cooks were classified and they got a bit more pay than the ordinary old soldier and so you know they had the classifications right throughout, and some were in the theatre, they were trained in theatre work, they really were very useful and all the books now go to say that, that they proved their worth over there.

25:00 **Was the fact that you were being paid when you were over there, was that important in terms of recognition?**

Not so much in recognition but you needed a bit of money if you were away and I think we got a third of a soldier's pay and so we needed a little bit of money and we were working very hard so that's what it was. But over there we were still classified VADs, but we had army numbers

25:30 and army pay books and we were treated exactly the same as the soldiers and exactly the same as the sisters, but when we came back they had formed this AAMWS and we were taken over into that then because that was total army, it was only a change of name, that's all. That was the only difference, we didn't do anything differently, we just changed our name from VAD to AMWAS.

26:00 **So you simultaneously felt part of the Red Cross and the army?**

Well, I have always felt that I was a Red Cross VAD because I have been involved with Red Cross and I still am, and I am on a committee in town, and yes, I consider that I am Red Cross but when we went into the

26:30 AAMWS we were army totally, but I still feel to this day that I was a Red Cross VAD.

Where did the male orderlies come from?

They were enlisted boys and if they thought they could do it, but I'm not too sure in how they sorted them out, but when they went into the army, they did as they were told, they were allocated different jobs and I suppose to some degree that some boys would have liked to do it. I think some of the boys probably worked in hospitals or

27:00 doctor's surgeries or something beforehand but they were doing lots of things that we took over to do when we went over. The sisters always said that we were more inclined to be nurses than the boys were.

I'm wondering if there was any stigma in being a male orderly rather than fighting?

No, there was some stigma in being a Provo [Provosts – Military Police],

27:30 that was a Military Policeman. The boys didn't like that lot and they showed it and told them so as well. Non one could mistake the fact that the boys did not like the Provo corps.

What sort of things would they say to them?

Oh, I'm not too sure. I think that was between the boys but it was never polite, I can tell you that. But they were Military Police and they had to put law and order into the place and stop them doing the things that they weren't

28:00 supposed to do, and they did get up to a few tricks, our boys. They were very smart at times, trying to hoodwink the powers that be.

What sort of things would they do?

I'm not too sure of that either, they visited places that they shouldn't, and every morning the routine orders would go up on the board and would say, "You are not allowed to go to the house with the red roof," or something. We didn't understand it in those days and we weren't very worldly wise, but we soon learned about it.

28:30 **What did you feel about the Provos?**

I didn't have any real feeling, I just joined in the boys not liking them, but as I say, any time that I had contact with a Provo, they were just one of the boys. They were very nice and they had a job to do and they had to do it. The other people that the boys often got a bit snooty about was the transport people, they were the ones that drove the trucks but they did a magnificent job because they had to take all the supplies up,

29:00 you know, the ammunition, some of them were on ammunition trucks and they took that up, which was a very dangerous job really, and so you know, the various jobs. And everyone in a particular unit thought they were the best, Les thinks his was the best because he was in an artillery unit and so that's the way in the army, it was all light hearted in the main. I mean even as far as the Provos were concerned there was no hate at all,

29:30 nastiness, but they just didn't like them and told them. I don't know, easy to tell them.

Was it about the transport people?

Oh, because they just said they just sit in trucks, they don't have to walk anywhere. They all had to march everywhere and when we were coming home it was a secret. They took all identification marks off the whole lot, and the logo for the 9th Division was a Platypus

30:00 and that was on all their things, and as they came down from the desert, the Arab kids would all call out, "Good on you Aussie." They were supposed to not know, but the Aussies wore tan books and the Pommy boys wore black boots, so the Arab kids soon found out which was which, "Good on you Aussies," they would call out and they liked the Australians and the Australians were very good to a lot of the kids you know, they would give them lollies and

30:30 and give them some faluce. "Amma maskene," they'd say, "Amma maskene." Faluce was money and amma maskene was I am very poor, I am very poor, give me money.

In the hospital you said you all had nicknames, did the nurses have nicknames?

Oh yes, they gave everyone. I was Bobby and they sometimes called me Shorty like the family do now. I'm the shortest

31:00 in the entire family including my twelve year old grand daughter, which makes me mad, so I go Shorty a lot of the time. They had all kinds of nicknames for people. I don't know where they got the ideas from, but they got them, and yes, the sisters copped nicknames as well, and the officers got some very undignified nicknames but the boys didn't tell them about that, but our officers were very good. We had splendid doctors, really wonderful

31:30 doctors totally dedicated and they worked like nobody would be expected to work on this earth.

You had officers as patients as well?

Yep, there were some officers, not a lot but quite a few, yes, from time to time.

Was it different approaching an officer?

No, they got the same treatment only they were in their own special ward and they put more money in. They paid more money for goodies to come into them

32:00 If they were able to they were allowed a grog a day but that was very restricted too.

Obviously there was quite an informal bantering sort of friendship between the men and the nurses. Was that the same with the officers and the nurses?

Yes, I didn't like this nonsense when we came back to be, you know, corporals and sergeants, I think things changed,

32:30 we didn't have the same kind of feeling of respect from the boys, it just wasn't the same feeling because they a bit agin [against] ranks. So I got, the CO called me and said, "Why didn't you apply, when you were supposed to put your name down for it?" And "No, because I don't want anything, I just want to be me. I want to be a VAD." So for a punishment he said he was going to give me one stripe. It was very bad to get one stripe.

33:00 So I was working in the officers' ward and I can show you the thing they put it on the board, "Spike, did any one tell you how very important you are?" and the soldier said, "No, they haven't." He said, "Well where did you get the damn idea from?" What gave them the damned idea that you were important with one stripe? So they called me Spike because I got one stripe then the CO decided that I had to have the other one, so I got the other one.

Tell me, when did they decide to

33:30 **promote**

Women?

Yeah.

While we were away they took the women in and the sisters were officers anyway, they were classified as officers, the trained sisters, but as I say we were made honorary officers while we were over there, but when we came back we were made into very good privates very swiftly, but they then wore the same pips and things

34:00 as officers, the sisters just remained just as they were and their uniforms didn't change at all. But when we came back to Australia they were given pips and some of our girls went off to officers' training schools and they got pips when they were through but in the main only one person of Colonel Money's unit left to go to officers' school because they all wanted to stay with Colonel Money, he was great, he was a wonderful man, and Father Burke was wonderful, we had wonderful staff.

34:30 Ours was the best hospital. As a matter of fact when Colonel Money came back to civvy street he was the leading neurologist at Prince Alfred [Hospital] and when he retired the hospital gave him a big party and we were all invited and he stood there with tears, this great man with tears running down his face saying, "That great hospital with all its modern

35:00 advancement and it conveniences and its equipment didn't do any more than our hospital was able to do for twelve hundred beds under canvas," you know, he really believed that the work they did was of the highest possible standard and he didn't lose any, I don't think he lost any patients, some died from their wounds but not very many, very few in fact.

35:30 **That's remarkable.**

He was a remarkable man. Colonel Nieche, Colonel Nieche has two boys here who are doctors now, he was a fabulous doctor, wonderful. They gave a great deal, those doctors, because they were so dedicated.

Tell me about working in the canvas hospital? What were the biggest frustrations for you?

The cold breezes coming in under the flaps.

36:00 It was more a marquee, the wards were marquees, and you know the size, the big ones, and sometimes we would have up to eighty boys in what was considered a ward, and in the middle was a slab of cement and they had the sisters room in there and the administration part because everything was recorded. So it was all kept there and then down from that

36:30 they had an ablution block for the boys. I'll tell you one story. No, I'll tell you later.

So you're saying the cold draft?

I think the cold draft was the thing that worried us the most. Even in the heat, they were quite well insulated those tents or those marquees you know and so we didn't feel the heat as

37:00 as much as the cold but I often think our uniforms were really only kind of cesarene, which was an unsophisticated linen if you like. They weren't linen, it was cotton and that was all we had over there for the coldest winter in thirty five years. They had snow in Jerusalem.

And do you remember being particularly cold?

Yes, I was frozen a lot of the time.

37:30 **You mentioned before, the dust around?**

There was always a lot of dust, sometimes we got a sand storm but we weren't really close to the desert, Sinai, we crossed that to go to Cairo.

Did that ever make it difficult to keep wounds clean?

No, I think there was a lot of skill in the nursing, the nurses and the doctors were just fabulous.

38:00 No, we had very good conditions and anything that was really serious was taken into a special room and they would close that off and do dressings and things. You see a lot of the wounds especially in the orthopaedic ward, had plasters on them and some of their arms would be up here like this and if their hands were smashed they had their fingers on a frame, quite different to what they do these days, but they would have them on a frame and

38:30 so they were closed off and they were frequently not looked at again until they were back in Australian and it used to be a very smelly ward because some of the wounds were very bad.

OK, thanks. I think we might change the tape.

Tape 7

00:36 **I'd like to ask now about, I'm still in the hospital, I was wondering about the security there against enemy attack?**

Well the Old and Bold Battalion, and they were the ones that were about thirty or thirty five or something like that, but they were men, a lot of them were First World War men. They

01:00 were a bit older than that probably and they weren't able to be in combatant units, they supplied a lot of the music, they had a band, and guard duties all over the place, so they were our guards, they had guns and we felt very safe with them around. The Australian Army was very, very careful

01:30 of its troops, the men and women and they made sure everything possible was done to keep them safe and life was very precious to Australia, as I said, not so with the Japs and I just always felt safe.

You mentioned an incident before that there was a fear of being taken prisoner?

At

02:00 one stage, yes. We were told that our intelligence had discovered, that was a plan they were thinking of doing, going down behind and taking us prisoners because the boys were all up in the desert but I don't know how they stopped them, but they didn't come. For ten days we were forced to wear this brassard around our arm with a big red cross on it, but in any case we were covered by the Geneva Convention.

02:30 One of the boys gave me a Lugar, he was a patient and he couldn't bring it back because he was coming back on a hospital ship and the hospital ship was totally alight at night, every bit of it, and it had a big red cross on the top so they couldn't mistake it, whereas a troop ship was totally blacked out and they had all their equipment on board, so it was all right for me to bring it back and my father was furious and took it to pieces and threw it out. He didn't like me having it.

03:00 But that was the difference between a hospital ship and a troop ship, and the boys you know, no one was even allowed to smoke on board because you know the light reflects on water and they had to be very careful with the convoys.

Was there a drill or a procedure in case of an air attack on the hospital?

No. Oh yes, well, we had slit trenches and there was a big whistle

03:30 they put up and this big whistle would go and that meant that we had to have drill. We used to hop in the slit trenches but we jumped out quicker because we were afraid of the things that were in it, spiders and little asps and things like that, nasties and little snakes. So yes, we had drill in the event of, but we didn't, we only had the one bombing and that was over at the theatre and did a bit of damage with a few things.

04:00 **Were there any injuries?**

No, not from that. But I used to hate the slit trenches and we had a slit trench outside every tent.

As a safety measure?

As a safety measure, and as I say, we had the drill and we had to jump in and stay there till the whistle went.

And you said before there was a deliberate scattering of the tents?

Yes, the tents were

04:30 in groups of three, threes right throughout.

Did you ever have any trouble with spiders and snakes getting into the hospital tents?

I didn't know of any that got into the hospital tents, but some got into our tents from time to time and you know there were a few screams would go on. That was the main part of it.

When you arrived

05:00 **the patients were coming in from Crete, were they?**

A lot of them were there. They had been in Crete and they had been in Tobruk and they were being cleared out as fast as they could, as I say, the hospital ships came and took them and brought them back to Australia.

What was the morale like for the ones that had been evacuated from Crete?

Quite shattered, some of them were,

05:30 but others felt well that's what they were there for and they had to expect. The nurses had a very bad time, you know it was pretty tough on them. But no, they were back and ready to work, they were all working, getting on with it.

What was particularly tough about that time?

Well, they spent a lot of time, you know running away from the overtaking troops and the spent times

06:00 in open fields and things, and a pretty rough time, you know, no accommodation on the boats that brought them back to the Middle East, back to Palestine.

Were you aware of the difference between them and the troops coming from Alamein?

We didn't see them coming straight from action in Alamein. We saw them, they would go down to the clearing station and would be brought straight on

06:30 just as they came from the battlefield during the El Alamein battle. But with the others, they were more or less or most of them were in the hospital when we got there and they weren't coming straight from any battle at that time. It was finished. Tobruk had finished.

I just wondered if there was a difference between the morale of the troops coming in from a defeat verses victory or withdrawal?

Well they finished off in Tobruk.

07:00 It wasn't really a withdrawal, they finished what they had to do there, but Rommel was advancing all the time and so that was the difference and we only saw them for a little while, the ones that were there we only saw them for a little while and they were sent back, and as I said, the hospital closed and it came back to Australia. So it was only for a very short time.

When patients were coming in from the clearing stations, how much notice did you have?

07:30 We just cleared the ward ready to receive them when they came. We would clear the whole, we would get as many out to other places and have the wards ready to receive the wounded as they came in. They came in every night when it was dark and the ambulances didn't have lights. We didn't have any car lights over there, they were all covered with black cloth and there was just a little strip of light so that they could see each other coming down the mountains or whatever it was.

08:00 **And when you cleared a ward where would you clear the**

Oh, we would clear them to other wards that weren't the intensive care they got in the wards that the wounded were coming into, the ones that were able to be moved because they were well on the road to recovery or they were ready to be taken back to Australia or something like that. It was all done methodically and nothing was left to chance.

08:30 **What sort of advance warning did you have of how many were coming in?**

I don't know, I think that the administration people had that, but see they were a different lot. There was the nursing staff, and it is just the same in any hospital, the administration block arrange for the numbers to come in but they took as many as they possibly could and we were really flat out trying to cope with it all.

And what was that like knowing that

09:00 **you would be receiving quite horrifically wounded men?**

We had lots of wounds and we didn't know how many and we didn't know what they would present us with, but the sisters would check, or the doctors would check the seriousness of their wounds first and who had to be done first and who had to come along and who could be treated later. And this boy, Jacobs, was one of them.

09:30 They didn't think he was the most serious but they were all in good spirits. As I said, their biggest worry was what was happening to their mates.

Can you give me an idea of what you would be in charge of doing when they were coming in from the clearing stations?

There was no special job. We had to do what had to be done. Sometimes the sisters, the doctors would assess

10:00 the degree of wound or what it was and say what had to be done and the sisters would tell us what was required and we'd go and get all that and bring it in. And if it was a really serious wound they did the dressing and stuff and we'd finish it off and do the bandaging, and it it wasn't extreme wound, we'd cope with that, we knew how to do it and we could do that ourselves.

10:30 **What severity of would you allowed to treat yourself?**

Almost anything, arms, legs, some of them had ulcers, you know, all kinds of things. There was a drill that we just knew, it is hard to recall exactly now after all these years. But no,

11:00 we did a lot of the work and it was all, we weren't special on anything, we just had to do everything as it came and we coped as best as we were able to. It was very good nursing that they got.

Was fatigue a problem for the VADs?

No, strangely enough, I think we had it but we didn't have time to indulge in it, that's why they gave us leave when they could you know, let's go off for a few days.

11:30 **Where did you like to go for leave?**

Well it didn't come very regularly, but I did go for some days to Syria, to Beirut and Syria, over the fifteen months, and the other time was this unexpected visit to Jerusalem and that just came out of the blue, there was a vacancy, somebody didn't want to go or something, someone got sick

12:00 and they just said, "There is a vacancy, does anyone want to go?" and I was able to go. We were a bit in limbo at that moment, and another time I went to Cairo for a few days. But other days frequently we didn't have a day off because we couldn't be spared. We could go into Gaza in our time off in the afternoon, if we had a break you know, in the afternoon we could go into Gaza and if we could cope

12:30 and not be too tired because we had to come back and be on duty at six and we could, and Alwyn and I

often walked over to the cemetery, which was about three miles and we'd go over there and sometimes there was a funeral from one of the battalions and if they were forming a guard of honour, we always fell in with them and stood there as well. We had one sister buried, Sister Gay she died, I don't know what she died from,

13:00 but she died before we went over there but she was buried in the Gaza cemetery and the little McKewan lass was buried in Jerusalem cemetery and they have an honour roll in Westminster Abbey and her name was on it because she died on active service.

Did the soldiers talk about

13:30 **their wounds to you?**

Nope, too busy trying to play their cards or do something like that, looking after their dogs, they spent a lot of time playing with their dogs, it was really funny.

Can you tell me a bit more about the dogs?

Well they had dogs tied up at the end of their beds you see, and we had to be very careful where we put our feet and they always wanted us to save a little morsel for the dogs at the end of a meal or if they had anything to eat. They were very kind to their dog.

14:00 We had to watch it very carefully and so you know it was routine a lot of the time. It was just routine work, temperatures, bathing wounds and bandaging and washing took a lot of time and some of the boys weren't able to wash themselves, you know, so we had to do the chores and change the beds and things. We had air warnings

14:30 or air raid drill sometimes in the hospitals and we had to lower the beds, the boys had to get under their beds if they were able to and the ones that were too ill, we had to, their legs were iron, and we to fold those under the bed and lower the beds onto the floor and that was a bit hard, that finished a few backs.

You have retained pretty good health?

15:00 Right through, yes. I only ever had two days in sickbay, I have always had good health and I still have, touch wood.

Would the soldiers ever discuss what they had been through on the front?

Not really, no, they never wanted to talk about that and when we came back, and I think this is the result of what happened when we came back, we didn't want to talk.

15:30 Nobody wanted to hear what we had done during the war, and they didn't talk about what they had done at home and they knew what we had done and we knew what they had done, it seemed to be just neutral and nobody wanted to know anything about it. Over the last few years they have realised that children have missed out on a lot of history, Les and I have done quite a few schools, you know, we have been asked to go over, or not necessarily,

16:00 we have been to a few schools but they have asked if some of their students could come and interview us and we had one boy from Masada College here at St. Ives, and I'll never forget, he came into my, his father brought him down and he said, "Now Mrs Penman," he had seen my earlier, "I want you to be comfortable," and he sat me down on the settee and he asked, "Would you like a cushion and would you like anything? Are you warm enough?" and I said, "Yes." Then he brought all his

16:30 paraphernalia out and did an interview and he got a first prize up at Masada College. Just before Christmas one of Les's nieces rang and asked if her child, had to do a project on the war. She was doing year 12 and so her mother brought her over and she interviewed us, I don't know what she got for her project, she got 100% in the higher school certificate

17:00 at Ravenswood and she is at the university now doing medicine and also last year I have a granddaughter who is fourteen and last year she was in Year 9 at PLC [Presbyterian Ladies' College] Croydon and she had to do an interview and she asked if she could interview us and she got, anyway, it was plus, plus she got for it and they said, "This is

17:30 valuable work, don't ever lose it," the teacher had written on it. So we have done a lot of work with the children like that from time to time.

Can I just ask a very obvious question? Why are passing on the stories important?

Because it is the history of Australia I guess, why otherwise? Lots of these things have been written about but for these children apparently to meet someone that took part in it,

18:00 I don't know. I don't know that, we just do as we are asked.

I'd like to ask about the importance of the symbolism of Australia to you, for example the flag, could you explain what that means, you told us that story about

The flag?

Yeah, the man who was buried

18:30 **at sea in the flag. Explain how, can you tell me that story and how that made that symbolism important to you?**

Well I think I did say it made me realise that that was his last connection with everything that he loved, whatever his family were, I don't know where his family was, and I hated going off and leaving him there on the sea but that stayed with me for a long time and I just didn't like it. The ocean is

19:00 so big and he was so small but it made me realise the importance of the flag to anyone who is serving, that is their last connection, their very last connection. They don't have a service at home or anything like that if they are buried overseas, I repeat that the Australian War Graves Commission does a magnificent job. We've been to Singapore and

19:30 oh, lots of them, Alamein and Changi and anywhere where there are war graves they are beautifully cared for and maintained, and so you know, and I think it also tells the children that there are men lying beyond our shores that we should honour and think about and I really feel very strongly about that because they were young men,

20:00 hardly begun, you know their lives had hardly begun at that time and they gave up the whole lot and it's a big thing when you stop and think about it.

Can you tell me again what happened that day on the ship with the young shot soldier?

Well we were just told that there was a church service to be held on the deck and we were to attend it and when we got up there we realised it was a funeral service. It was a beautiful beautiful service.

20:30 I can't recall the words or anything now but of course some of the girls did keep diaries, but I did as I was told, we were supposed not to keep diaries about all those things. It was, you know, just like I said, the happiness book had to be buried because they didn't like anything recorded, but it was the most beautiful service. And then when the committal, you know the committal service moment, and they say farewell to the body

21:00 and it just slipped from beneath the flag and that made me realise, I repeat myself by saying that's the last connection they have with their country, their parents, their children if they have got children or anything, it is the very last thing when they are a long way away, and it was the middle of the ocean where that happened, and so to me the flag is very, very important and

21:30 I'm going to have it over mine and I don't care if they put me in a cardboard box, that won't worry me, in fact that's what I'd like. You know the stories, there was a padre Noel, I have forgotten his name, an English man, and Russel Braddon, one of our authors wrote a book about him, The Naked Island, I don't know if you have read it, and they said in that that he was the biggest liar and cheat, he was a padre, he was the biggest liar

22:00 and cheat they ever had because he would go off with a body from Changi and he'd come back and say that he had heard the news that Australian was winning and they'd soon be free. It was a wonderful story and he was a wonderful man. They said it was all fibs, he came back just to boost the morale. It was strange because one of my sons-in-law is a doctor and he finished his PhD [Doctor of Philosophy] at Cambridge and this Noel Duckworth, that was his name, Noel Duckworth, and Noel

22:30 Duckworth was their coach for the rowing on the Thames and the padre for the college, and in the end my daughter went over later, and he was a local boy and went to school here, and they were married over there by Noel Duckworth. Isn't it a small world?

It's an incredible coincidence.

It's a bit aside, but he was wonderful in Changi, he was a prisoner of war in Changi, so the stories that came out of Changi

23:00 were very brutal.

Was boosting morale an important part of you job?

Of course, we had to maintain at all times a feeling of letting them think we were more confident than we were and it was no use going about worrying about yourself, so we were supposed to keep the boys going and some

23:30 of them were cheeky and we had lots of fun and we took them on picnics and we took them, and as I say, the Jews were very good and we'd take them down there for lunch or whatever they were invited to. We had a lot of rapport with the boys.

What were some of the things that they were frightened of?

They didn't tell me, and I didn't tell them.

24:00 They weren't going to go and say, "I'm frightened." You big sook, what are you doing if you are frightened? Go home? I couldn't swim that far I'd tell them. But no, you never knew what anyone was

frightened of.

You said before if they said they weren't afraid, you knew that it wasn't true?

Of course it wasn't true. Everybody was afraid sometimes, if you thought that, you know, there were all kinds of things that could happen

24:30 and if you liked to indulge yourself and not be positive you could begin to think am I going to get out of this, or why did I come? You had to stop it straight away and nip it in the bud, it wasn't healthy for oneself or for any of the people that you had to try and help. When death came close like for some, I didn't, I was fortunate, they lost their

25:00 husbands, that was a bit later but they would lose fiancés and of course they weren't allowed to be married and stay in the unit but they lose a brother or a fiancé up in the desert and that always shook us a bit, not as bad as old age of course. As I say we are on the slippery end of the twig.

25:30 **Were there any instructions about remaining cheerful in front of the troops?**

Yes, we were told that was part of our job to be normal at all times, in other words, I wasn't a funny person but I could bring out a laugh occasionally and they loved teasing me because I was a bit prim proper and it gave them great delight in saying something that might shock me and they produce poetry and

26:00 they had their dreams and sometimes they talked about those, what they proposed to do when they got home and in the main they were all positive and they were all coming home and so that was a shock when some of them didn't, but they are remembered and at least we keep them in our hearts.

I was wondering about, obviously there was a close bond between the nurses and soldiers, were any

26:30 **soldiers becoming particularly emotionally attached to the nurses?**

There were a few marriages but that came later. Yes, there were quite a few romances one way or another, I mention Garth Suthers, and he met Beryl his wife, he was one of my friends and she was a Queenslander, and they met over there but he was one of the ones that was sent home. He was sent home and she stayed in the Middle East

27:00 and they, the day she arrived home from the Middle East, he was back from New Guinea and they were married. He said, "What about we marry on Tuesday?" And she said, "That only gives me three days home and I have to give my poor mother a bit of time," and so I think they married on the Friday. And so but a lot of them met their fate or whatever. We had one, Tubby Leonard, he was a very nice person and he was very dear to me

27:30 and he was in a commando unit and engaged to one of my friends, Betty Beythien from Perth, and the night he went off, he had to go away to do whatever he was going to do, because the commando were exceedingly brave people and they did a lot of kind of undercover stuff and so Tubby went off and we arranged to meet in town and then he said to Les, "Will you stay

28:00 with Betty when I have to leave?" We brought her home and so shortly after that Les and I married and I sent an invitation to Tubby and got the letter back and we were married on the 17th of January, and I got the letter back to say he was delighted to be asked and he couldn't come as he was out on this job and he couldn't say what he was doing, and then we got the word that he had been killed two days before our,

28:30 two days after our wedding. So you know, those kinds of things were kind of the norm, but it didn't happen all the time and there were always strong people about to help things.

Were there ever difficult moments when a soldier was sweet on a nurse that wasn't really interested in him but obviously had to keep nursing?

I think they all loved us but they all had fiancés at home or something at home,

29:00 and I didn't ever have any romances. Actually, I did meet someone before I went, it was brief and he went off to the Middle East. He ended up a prisoner of war but he dumped me, you know, he wrote a letter and said, "I don't know which one it will be," but I think he met me in haste and anyway I was busy most of the time, so that was a protection for me, I wasn't going to be hurt again and I don't know why I fell for Lesley but I did.

29:30 **Tell me about your decision to marry before he went north?**

To the Middle East? Back up to New Guinea?

Yes.

He talked me into it, he felt that he had been at Alamein and he had been in action a lot. He had a gun, as I said, shooting at the Germans, and he'd got a very bad skin complaint and then he went up to New Guinea and it was very tough up there, apparently

30:00 and they put wire down because there was so much water and muck around and they had nowhere to sleep part of the time and he had been in action up there, he had been in a lot of action up there with his gun and he thought, and he was on draft again as I was, and he just thought that he wanted to make sure he had something even if he didn't come back, he had me convinced me that he mightn't come back,

30:30 so we married without thinking of the future too much, I think most of them did at that particular time.

Was that because of the uncertainty of the present?

No, because he had been in action twice, very heavy action twice. There was one time up there he had been on duty with his gun and he found a whole lot of Japanese coming up the river behind, so he rang headquarters and asked for

31:00 some extra help, but they said, "You're okay." It's funny but as I said, one of the Japanese used to stand up and blow a bugle and then they would try and burst our lot with fire, and Les's gun is an anti-tank gun, anti-aircraft I'm sorry, anti-aircraft gun, and so he couldn't get it down to a level to shoot at this boat, and so one of the fellows said, "If he stands

31:30 up there again I'm going to shoot him," so he stood up and blew the bugle and one of Les's friends, they all had their own guns as well as the anti-aircraft gun, I know if you have seen a Bofors, it's got this long spout up and it's for shooting aeroplanes and they got one down and anyway they managed to collect this lot, they were all killed and then Les had to go out and dig a common, or help did a common grave for them all to go into. So there were very sad stories about the whole thing.

32:00 I don't like to think about them really but they just pop up now and again.

What was Les like when he came back?

Well, he had fits at night. Well, he was perfectly all right, perfectly normal in the day but terrified at night. In his sleep he was terrified, he was always fighting the Japs and I don't think he ever fought a German in his nightmares

32:30 because he didn't like the Jap and I think he was afraid of them actually, they were sneaky and in the jungle it was very hard.

How long did the nightmares continue?

Oh, five or six years and he still has an odd turn.

Also, how about your own adjustment to post war? Was it difficult?

Yes, I thought

33:00 rehabilitation was harder than going into the army. It's a funny thing to say, but you know living with hurricane lamps and make believe, and any box that you could scrounge that you had beside your bed to put a few little trinkets in, you lived a different life and if you went out you might go out on a truck and coming down, I went into a family, my sister-in-law was having a baby at the same time I was having Elizabeth,

33:30 and I couldn't really adjust to the finesse of the things at home. It seemed totally foreign to me, we had a very high standard in our mess and we kept as much to being ourselves as we could but it didn't seem, life didn't seem worthwhile, I don't know, when I came back. So that took some adjusting and as I said, I enjoyed thoroughly being a mother

34:00 and my eldest grandson is thirty-one, Friday of last week, so I have had three of the children have had their second birthdays here while their respective parents were overseas. So you know, it continued on and I have never regretted anything and I have lived my own life as well, I wasn't swamped being a little stay at home mother together, but the family, no matter what I have done in my life, my family come first.

34:30 **What was it about the service that made life seem so worthwhile?**

Well, I think because, I keep on going back which I don't really want to, but the guys that didn't come back with us, you know, they paid such a high price and to come back to normal things didn't seem right and I didn't think I deserved them,

35:00 it was harder to accept the nice things that were there when they weren't going to get them.

And how long did it take you to settle in?

Oh, till I had a squawking baby to look after I suppose. I think that would've been the length of time. I recovered but then I didn't have the things that he had to suffer.

Did it make it harder for you the fact that you were also

35:30 **dealing with Les?**

No, I think we understood each other and he understood what I had been through and I understood what he'd been through and you know, it was a long trip back on the Queen Mary and he was on the Isle de France, but we were in the same convoy and you had to time to think about things then and we'd think why should we be coming back when others weren't.

36:00 Those kind of things run through your mind, you can't help it. I don't dwell on it, I have had a happy life, I got on with living and we have a lot of interests in life that we have. I've got to admit I'm a Liberal Party person and we've got this big garden and we raised about fifty thousand dollars for the Liberal Party by having BBQs and things here and

36:30 all kinds of things like that, and we really have been very busy, and I have worked with the returned men and women through the sub-branch, I joined the RSL when I came back from the war and we got our own charter in 1946, I just joined the RSL to begin with, but we got the women's charger in 1946 and so I have been involved with that in one office or another, or just as an ordinary member for all those years and I still am.

37:00 I belong to the Red Cross because I believe in that despite the problems it's in at the moment but I think it does a mighty job in the world.

Was the women charter,

Under the?

RSL.

RSL, yes.

Was that difficult to accomplish?

No, because we were all returned and only returned women could join the sub-branch in those days. We have got some others in now that weren't in the

37:30 AIF or didn't go away, but in those days it was very, very strict and they, but I think we had several hundred anyway when we started in the RSL.

Do you feel that you received the right recognition for your service?

No, but I don't think we wanted it. It wouldn't have been welcome. We went to do what

38:00 we had to do and we didn't want anything more. But the only thing we got was we were tacked on to the end of the, the 9th Division marched through Sydney and took a salute at the town hall and they tacked us on the end of it, but that was end. As far as Les was concerned he has been under a specialist skin doctor for fifteen years and the DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] wouldn't even allow him to have any consideration, he has never had a penny until he turned eighty and

38:30 they gave him the Gold Card and they gave me a Gold Card earlier on because the women who served in the Middle East we were given a Gold Card quite early, but Les, being in the Commonwealth Bank started to pay private insurance through the bank when he first went into the bank, and he was only, you know, after he had done the Leaving [certificate], he went to Fort Street, and so paying in all those years we feel now we use our bank insurance

39:00 health cover because if we use the Gold Card we think tax payers, and we're still tax payers, the tax payers have to pay if you use your Gold Card, so we use the bank health card. I mean it costs quite a bit each year but for the two of us it covers us and we like to think that we are not taking from the country, we still feel the urge to give something to Australia.

Thanks Alice, we're

39:30 **right at the end of this tape.**

Tape 8

00:35 **I'd just like to ask a couple of questions about the Middle East before we move on to Queensland. I was wondering about, did you come across any cases of self inflected wounds in the hospital?**

Well it depends on what you say. I said that footballers were self inflicted wounds but they didn't agree with that.

01:00 Then we had a special hospital that we found out, I didn't know about it before, for venereal disease and that was regarded by the army as self inflected wounds, it was separate from our hospital, it was the 8th General Hospital it was called. I threw a spanner in the works, I went over there one night and I asked "Why is the 8th so special?" and you know they hustled me outside and explained the whole thing, venereal disease, which I really didn't know about,

01:30 and so that was regarded as self inflected and the soldier's pay was stopped, which I always thought was very cruel, but as I said the routine orders went up on the board every morning and any house they were suspicious about, they, it appeared and so we soon learned about that bit.

What other sorts of self-inflected wounds were there?

I don't think I knew of any

02:00 others, I heard of a couple and I know of someone who shot himself, a distant relative of our family up in New Guinea, but I think he suspected, I don't know if it was true, but he suspected that his wife was having an affair with someone down here and that was the very sad part about the boys, they did worry and that happened often, you know,

02:30 I don't know whether the women got tired of waiting or if they just met someone they couldn't help falling in love with or something, we had several cases of that and they needed a great deal of care and help. A couple of boys sent their wounded friends home and they became over friendly with the wives and that was a big worry for them, it was something that was never really brought out but it did happen a number of times to my knowledge, my personal knowledge,

03:00 and I know the family connected with the guy that shot himself in his tent, but otherwise I didn't see anything of it. But anyone in the 8th was regarded as special, but they didn't have any women, they had more men orderlies in the 8th hospital.

Was that part of the punishment?

No, I don't think so, in those days they thought it wasn't probably suitable for a woman

03:30 to work over there. Anyway, we were so involved we didn't have any spares.

What was the soldier's attitude to self inflected wounds?

Well I didn't have a lot to do with it, I think they thought they were rather foolish, they were warned and had been given good warnings apparently and good talks and we didn't have those talks until we came home and then they gave us lectures on those kind of things, but Les tells me

04:00 that they did all receive warnings and they knew what they were on about and it was on their shoulders if they fell by the way side you know, a lot of men thought they deserved what they got, as for killing themselves straight out, I don't know about that, I heard about one or two but I couldn't speak about that, and the footballers.

Tell me about the footballers?

Well they would come in with wounds when they played football and I said they deserved it

04:30 and they were self inflicted and I couldn't see why I had to waste my time in looking after them, but they had to be looked after so they got it.

What did they think about football injuries?

The boys themselves? Part of the game. Part of the game, nurse. If you played football, you would find that it is exciting and it's a break. I granted them the fact that it was a break, and of course they smoked and of course I couldn't tolerate smoking in any form at all. I thought it was dreadful.

05:00 But the army supplied, you know, the Salvation Army supplied their cigarettes, the Red Cross supplied cigarettes and then they came back and they made claims then that they got illnesses from smoking. I felt that was self inflected but nobody agrees with me and that's my opinion.

Was there any drinking in the hospital?

That was very strictly observed. I didn't ever see

05:30 a lot of drinking in the army, but you see, I was away from Australia where it was handy for them to get drink, there were some hotels up in Atherton [Tablelands] but we occasionally knew that someone had a bit too much but in the main I didn't see a lot of drinking. I don't think they drank a lot.

How about the nurses?

No, some of them liked a grog. I didn't, mainly I think there were two reasons

06:00 I didn't like it. My parents didn't forbid us to drink. In Les's family he came up in a very strict Methodist family and his family had, you know, total control, no drinking at all past their lips except when he got into the army, he drank like a fish. That was the silly part of it. I kind of went on the way I was living, I could have a slight drink if I wanted it but I never wanted it, didn't like it.

06:30 I also thought you lose control if you drink and I still think that's a fact in lots of ways. No, I didn't see a lot of drinking. In Atherton, our hospital was seven miles out from Atherton really, you had to hitch hike in or go in on the bus if you could get on the bus.

I'm interested in how the patients

07:00 **were taken from the Gaza Hospital to the hospital ships?**

They had ambulances, lots of ambulances, that was part of the army. We could always get an ambulance and they were taken by ambulance to the ships. I didn't see inside a hospital ship and I didn't see a hospital ship but I have friends that served on a hospital ship,

07:30 twelve VADs served on that and the ones that went to Colombo and those that went to the Middle East, they were the only VADs that served in, because after we left, as I say, the ambulance was formed. So as VADs that was the only lot that served outside of Australia.

So when you were getting ready to, did you have much to do when a patient

08:00 **was taken out of the hospital and taken to the ambulances to go away?**

If they were stretcher cases we just prepared them and gave them things that they needed and made sure they had their toilet bags and things like that and spruced them up a bit and the ambulance men would come, the stretcher bearers would come and take them, and take their belongings and collect their uniforms and take them off. There were some walking patients that were,

08:30 their wounds in the foreseeable future, they didn't think they would be as good as they should be and they could walk to the ambulance and go

So you would have said a lot of goodbyes?

Oh yes, tears all around, shake hands, send our love to our family and some of them would ring when they got back. One padre came back and he wrote a letter to my parents and told them we were doing a good job and that would have pleased them, that we were working actually.

09:00 **Tell me about those feelings of saying goodbye to them?**

To the boys?

Yeah.

It was terrible. We felt our brothers were leaving us, you know. We became attached to them all, all of them. I can't think of any that I didn't like and we liked the staff and we were sad when they parted our hospital and on Anzac Day there were only two of to represent my unit, I marched on Anzac Day and there were only two of us,

09:30 one was Sister Greening, she was Dorothy Greening, she was an absolutely fabulous person, we became very friendly and attached to the sisters too, and I think they returned the affection we had for each other and Dorothy Greening was just fabulous and when she came back from the war she did medicine and became an obstetrician and gynaecologist and

10:00 she went through with Marie Bashir. They're very close friends and I saw her crossing the lawn on Anzac Day after the march so I raced after her and we embraced each other and we were so thrilled and we the only two 2/6th people there, most of them are gone and some of them are scattered around New South Wales in the country and they don't come down and there are still quite a few of them in Victoria because

10:30 a big part of our unit came from Victoria.

So saying goodbye to the wounded, did you think about them after they had gone?

Of course, we do to this very day. I have spoken about the boys, they were some of the outstanding ones that I remember because their wounds really were very bad. Oh, there were dozens of them and we were very sad when we said goodbye to the English boys, we were sad when we said goodbye to the Poles.

11:00 We had Polish boys in our hospital. We were sad when they left, there were always goodbyes and they were always very sad, we thought our brothers were leaving us, you know, and it was such a wonderful strong feeling but there weren't very many romances, a few, but not a big number. I think the boys felt their future was uncertain, and they were very honourable as far as women were concerned and

11:30 they felt they had nothing to offer for the future and as far as we were concerned our hands were very full with that thing called work that I have spoken about and we were all very busy and we also felt we didn't want any commitments. We wanted to be free, a bit selfish perhaps but we could do more if we were free than if we were attached. I'm so glad I didn't know Les until the end of the war. I'm sure I wouldn't have given

12:00 in the same way.

Why would that be?

Because I would have been more involved with him, think is he all right, where is he and what's he up to and things like that. When you really fall in love with someone you want to know that they are safe and they're all right. As I say, I thought of my brother a lot but I just treated all the boys as I would like

someone to treat him.

Was it hard sometimes not to form a particular bond with a

12:30 **particular soldier, did you have to resist?**

No, because I think we all thought that they were all tremendous, they really were a tremendous lot and we all grew fond of them and we would go in and say, “Gee, so-and-so, isn’t he wonderful, he is so courageous and never complains about himself. He always wants to see that we do something for his mate.” His mate’s got a pain or his mate is sad or his mate’s had a letter and his girl tossed him over or something. They were always concerned

13:00 about anything that happened to their mates and so we all fell in with that and we’d go and pamper their mates and look after them, and I suppose there were a few crushes around. My Greek boy, I had no idea what he was thinking until he was taken to a Greek hospital and then he wrote me this letter telling me he had fallen in love with me and he couldn’t write to me to right English so he had got a friend to write his love letter, and said, “Your loving sweetheart, Tony Farkaros,” or whatever his name was.

13:30 You know he was just a patient as far as I was concerned, I had no feeling for him other than that he was very handsome and he got a very high award from Greece for something or other that he had done and Princess Helene of Greece came to the hospital and she gave each of them, you know the Greek Guards they have at the palace? She gave each of them a little slipper with a pompom on top of it. He gave me his and he insisted that I take it, but that

14:00 was the nearest I had that he thought anything special of me, I mean all the boys thought we were special. They really did.

Did the soldier surprise you in their courage?

I hadn’t realised that they were so courageous and were eager to do anything and they would do anything for us,

14:30 there was never any whingers in those days and they all wanted to give and they did. They gave themselves and they gave their lives.

Were your expectations of what you would find over there anywhere near the reality of what you saw there?

Well I imagined a whole lot of things and in some ways it was worse and the shock was greater and in other ways it wasn’t so

15:00 bad, so I suppose it all came out equal in the end. I had my hair cut short because I didn’t know if I, just imagine, there was nothing, you didn’t think of any future, you didn’t think of any tomorrows. It was always today.

In what ways was it worse than you imagined?

Well, the suffering was worse than I had kind of imagined, I hadn’t lost anyone, I hadn’t seen

15:30 anyone really from when I left, so to come up against it all of a sudden a few weeks later it was worse than I thought and yet we coped better than I thought, you know. Everyone helped everyone else, you never felt alone.

When you were over there did you

16:00 **get much news of the Pacific war?**

No, I think a lot, I grew up with a boy, my family were friends, they were English and my Dad met them and we became very close friends of theirs and for our whole lives as kids we grew up with this family and Austin was going off to war and I didn’t know,

16:30 he didn’t know where he was going and eventually he went up north. Now I didn’t know, but he professed he loved me. He wrote a letter to me in the Middle East and said that he would like me to marry him one day, but I couldn’t marry him because he was too much like my brother, I had played marbles with him, we had played with a bit of stick and an old battered ball we had played cricket and all kinds of things, and we had gone and picked blackberries together and done all kinds of things and I loved him but I couldn’t imagine life with him

17:00 forever. I knew it would be like going with my brother. So I wrote him a letter but it was returned to me and that was the first indication that I had that the 8th Division was in some kind of trouble and I couldn’t get any news from anyone and the letter was returned and said, “We advise that this letter could not be sent on to the soldier,” and I was always sorry about that.

17:30 He came back, he was a prisoner of war in Changi, and I still visited his mother for years and years and I met him too of course, he married eventually and was happy, but his Dad, my brother sent me a telegram to say that Austin was coming home because as I say the whole family were friends and his

Dad came down to Sydney and he carried him off the boat, that's how much he had lost. He was an accountant in Canberra. But he married a very

18:00 wonderful lass and he had a very happy life, so but you know, I spoke to his mother about it and she understood that we were two entwined as kids growing up and it is unusual to have a romance when you are very young and carry it on and we didn't have anything, it was a surprise to me, he said he had gone to communion like he always did, except that it was on the stones and it was very hard.

18:30 So that made me very sad. I smoked one cigarette while I wrote the letter and it was returned to me and it was the only time that I smoked in my life.

How long was it before you heard that he was a prisoner?

I didn't hear. I didn't hear until towards I think the week we were coming home, my brother wrote and said that, "Austin is a prisoner of war in Changi." They didn't know he was a prisoner for a long time.

19:00 They didn't know if he was dead or alive or anything else, but he did live.

Did you hear about the sinking of the Centaur when it happened?

No, no. I don't know, sometimes we did hear these things, they came through from London, to my knowledge I didn't hear that. We didn't have any personal radios, we used to go up to this thing on the post and we would listen to it every afternoon.

19:30 Then we would have reveille and it was all very military and very nice.

Was the loss of that hospital ship as a nurse, was that a particular shock to you?

A dreadful shock. Of course they told fibs about it, they said it was carrying things that it wasn't, and as I have already said the hospital ships were protected, they were lit from stern to bow every night and this big red cross was illuminated on top.

20:00 That was to state that they were covered by the Geneva Convention, that was what we got angry about, we thought the Japanese were going to bomb it anyway when they did it, and Sister Savage was, Nell Savage was she on the Centaur? No, she was up in the islands, she was one that escaped, wasn't she? And when I had to take my baby off to the centre, you know,

20:30 they had centres then, the mothers took their babies off to the nurse and she was there, Sister Savage. Yes, I think it horrified all of Australia, and any decent thinking person it would horrify them to think that they would sink a hospital ship.

Were any nursing friends of yours lost during the war?

Two.

21:00 Bland, I can't think of her Christian name, it's hard, there are so many of them. Yes, she and I became very good friends, I was jealous of her, I did have a crush on a boy and we didn't ever speak, I just thought he looked gorgeous and I didn't know what he was like. He got engaged to Joan, Joan Bland. He got engaged to her and they both went on up top,

21:30 but she, poor darling was shot by the Japanese, she was one that was shot, and I knew Sister Jeffrey's very well but we weren't friends but we knew each other quite well, but Joan Bland and I were very close friends, but Jeffreys lost her life up there as well.

How did that happen?

Well the Japanese sent them out into the water, they escaped from their ship

22:00 and they were trying to hide and the Japanese found them and forced these women out into the water and shot them, and then there is a story, The Survivors I think they have called themselves, and the story was written about their suffering up there. A lot of them were captured and taken as prisoners of war and the Japanese would come with an awful looking bit of meat and throw it at their feet. They were really very cruel people

22:30 and the women did all kinds of things to live, just to exist and they helped each other, they were fabulous I believe, and their story is a very compelling story that they write and none of our girls were ever taken prisoners, so we always felt very deeply for them all. A lot of them return, Bullwinkel came back and,

23:00 no, it was Sister Savage was on the Centaur and it was Bullwinkel was up there with them and she was the sole survivor of the ones that were taken at that particular time and shot in the water.

With your friend?

With my friend, yes, and I don't know what happened to her fiancé. I never ever heard. I know he was taken prisoner of war but I don't know if he came back or not.

Did you ever meet Sister Bullwinkel?

Yes, we met her. We also met Nancy Wake.

23:30 She joined our sub branch for a while. You've heard about her, the "White Mouse," and she was a fascinating kind of person. So yes, we met a lot of interesting people, I think that was one of the compensations, that war was a very levelling thing in a lot of ways. If you were there doing it, it was as though we were all doing it together.

24:00 It was good.

Was there a sense of the girls in the VAD were all very different in their own way?

Well just like ordinary life is, they were all very different. Some were very strong, we had a few that, I wasn't the only one that wondered if they were up to it. One lass was always weeping and that was unsettling for anyone else. I think that is why you had to be very positive and think strong all the time

24:30 because you didn't want to upset anyone unnecessarily, there was enough to be upset about anyway. But she was very emotional at all times and I don't know how she was chosen because you know the board were very strict in their requirements, but obviously she passed. She worked, she wasn't a drag on us but she was very hard to live with when she would burst into deep emotion from time to time and weep madly and want her mother.

25:00 **Was homesickness a big problem?**

I think everyone suffered from home sickness but they didn't spread it around, no one wanted to unsettle anyone else and as I said in a moment of losing, I didn't, I'm not speaking of myself, but in the moment of one of our girls losing a loved one like a Dad or a Mum or sister, or having a brother or a fiancé killed up

25:30 in the desert, there was always someone there to act as family would, they were loved and cared for and they shared everything. If they got a letter they'd share, they didn't necessarily give it to you to read but they would tell you of the good things that were happening and what was happening at home, they had had rain or they hadn't had rain, whatever, just something about Australia that we longed for all the time.

26:00 **Tell me about coming back to Australia from the Middle East, did you have much time with your family before you went up north?**

Yes, we were given a month's leave and then we went up and I didn't see them again until just before I met Les, which was nearly two years later and I came down on leave, and when I went back I met him and that was that. I didn't go home again, I mean, I went home for visits but I didn't ever go home again.

26:30 **I lived in Sydney.**

What did you tell your family about your overseas experience when you came back?

Not much, they didn't want to know. I couldn't tell them in letters because we weren't allowed to say places or say where we had been or what we had done and I abided by that. Some of the girls did keep diaries and they were very interesting later on. I relied more or less on what I could remember and I cut scraps out of papers. I have a whole heap of scraps everywhere and poetry I loved and

27:00 essays and things that people men said to help people, men or women, said throughout the world that were interesting about the war, or about their service or about the terrible thing in England. The bombing was shocking. One of the men, one of the Englishmen lost his wife and two little kids in the bombing and a lot of them were serving in the Middle East, the English, and their children

27:30 had been sent to America or to Australia, you know, it was very hard for them. It made the suffering worse for them.

Did you feel different in any way when you came back after that incredible experience?

I felt more independent

28:00 and I felt that I was stronger and a stronger person and I hoped that I was a bit better person. You know I have never really been interested in material goods since because you learn somehow that they weren't important and so I never worried about what I didn't have. Some of the girls were very well off and had a lot of money

28:30 and I was one that didn't and there were a lot like me because we had all been through similar situations and so I lost the desire for material goods, I didn't think they were that important and I think Father Burke who was prepared to take his shirt off and give it to someone if they wanted it, he had an influence

29:00 on me that took away the need for material things.

How was your family when you got back? What was it like to see them?

All fit and well. My Dad had developed, he had retired from his job and taken on, because his health wasn't the best, he had a bit of heart problem but he survived it and he lived until after Edwina was born,

29:30 she was my last child and he lived a good life.

Tell me about the second goodbye when you went up to the Atherton Tablelands? What was that like?

Well it was awful too but I was going back to another family, you see and it wasn't quite so bad and we were going back to the family that we loved up there, the whole lot, we were a very,

30:00 very happy unit, we were a very happy unit and Dr Money had us all believing that we were all a very strong unit and it says so in anything that he wrote, he said, "The strength of our hospital was just the best." They're his words, not mine.

How did you travel up to Queensland?

The first time we went up, there were fifty of us in one carriage and we spent a week in it, it took us a week to

30:30 get up because the troop trains had to go off the line, the passenger trains had priority and sometimes we were waiting half a day but the Australian people were fabulous, every station that we came to, if we stopped for five minutes they were there with food and they were there with hand basins of water, so we could wash our hands and our faces. They were no facilities in the railway carriage, and so you know, we were feted all the way up.

31:00 People just, it didn't matter, there were a lot of Americans in Australia by that time and a lot of Americans on our troop train going up, and they made hay while the sun shone anywhere they stepped. I didn't have much to do with the Americans, I steered clear of that lot.

Why did you steer clear?

Oh I just felt they were a bit self opinionated kind of people and felt they were very important and all out to win their blue ribbons or their purple hearts or whatever

31:30 it was, and they thought that included us and they made a mistake.

Did you have any particular encounter with Americans?

Oh, just occasionally. Yes, they tried to wriggle their way through the roof part to get into our compartment but the girls put a stop to that, we didn't want Americans, we had enough on our hands with trying to sleep. Have you been able to sleep for a week in a carriage going up there? It was terrible.

32:00 But the Atherton Tablelands were very beautiful, they have two lakes. Have you been up there?

Many years ago.

They have Lake Eacham and Lake Barrine and they are subterranean and they have never worked out how they, they are tidal, but they don't seem to know where the tide came from. They did have a story we were told again and again, an old Chinaman went down in a sulky in one and came up in the other, I don't know if that was just

32:30 one of their little local stories they indulged in.

Tell me how the facilities compared with Gaza?

No better. No, we had no real facilities up there. We weren't so short of supplies, Australia was short of everything and there were rations, the civilian population was very heavily rationed and we were also only given a couple of,

33:00 we didn't have very many coupons at all because we could get clothing from the clothing store, you know, stocking and things like that were then supplied by the army and of course we weren't VADs up there, we still said we were but we weren't. So we got it from the army then, any replacement of clothes we wanted. So we didn't really need anything and that's why I had to wash my dress. I couldn't go and buy a bit of material or anything because I didn't have any coupons.

33:30 The facilities were no better. There was a slab of cement about twice the length of this room and a series of cold water showers that was our ablution block and we had tin dishes and if we wanted a hot bath or a hot scrub there was a soya outside and we would say to the boys, "Don't bring us flowers, bring us bits of wood," so they had to bring us wood and we got

34:00 friendly, because the railway went all around our camp, and we got friendly with all the drivers of the trains and they would throw us out some coal from time to time, and the man about the camp that did all the odd jobs, he would light the soyas in the morning and we would get some hot water out with that but we had to get it out with a tin bucket and carry it in and sometimes we would sit in one bucket and put our feet in the other and someone would get a bucket of water and pour it over us and that was the

nearest we got to a warm bath.

34:30 No roof on the ablution block at all, and the trains were further over as well and no, there were no mod conveniences up there at all.

How about the work, was it different?

No, the work was different. Of course the work was different. We didn't see the wounds that we saw in the Middle East. It was totally different, and we had some of the boys come down from the battles but they were exhausted

35:00 more than they were wounded and we did get some that were wounded and some, I repeat again, were badly shocked mentally by their treatment up there. It was a very cruel, the Kokoda Track especially was very wicked part of the war, and of course they were starved, they didn't get supplies in there and the Japanese were very canny in what they could do,

35:30 and their camouflage and that kind of thing.

Your brother was on Kokoda?

Yes, he was on the Kokoda Track, he didn't get to the Middle East. He was on the Kokoda Track.

Did you have any communication from him from New Guinea?

No, not really, he actually, I go back to when I met Les, I met him and my brother was very angry because it was the first night, and we met through a mutual friend.

36:00 He came over and I said, "Tell him I'm out," because I had arranged to meet my brother and go out to dinner with him and he wanted to see me, because he had married in the mean time, I didn't get to his wedding because I was away. He married a friend of mine and wanted to speak to me about if he didn't come back, the things he wanted to do for his wife, and he met these two men that had arrived and Ken Brutenall-Woods I had

36:30 known for many years and he was a friend of Les as it turned out, and he came and I said, "Tell them I'm out," but he heard me and he said, "I know you are not out, I can hear you speaking," so I went out and he said, "I've brought Les because he is bored stiff with the army. He's bored stiff with the camp and he's been in action a lot and I told him I'd come over and you'd give us a barbecue." I said, "Oh, did you?" and he said, "Yes," and they wouldn't go.

37:00 They stayed and Bob arrived and he was furious, and he was an officer and he sent his vehicle back to Atherton and they told their vehicle to go back too, Brutenall-Woods said, "We're staying here," and so that's how I met Les, and my brother of course then went back to New Guinea and he had a terrible time and he survived for some years after wards, he lot his legs and things but eventually

37:30 DVA gave him a little motor scooter and he scootered around and did all kinds of things. He kept himself busy, he had a good life. Unfortunately, he came back and his lovely wife, they had a child, when the child was eleven months old, his wife died and so we didn't know whether in the end that he would go into a lunatic asylum or a mental asylum I

38:00 suppose I should call it, or gaol. We thought he would be sure to end up in one or the other. Anyway, he saw it through and my mother, my parents looked after the baby for some time and he, eventually the child took over brought him back to being normal. But there were lots of things in the war caused by, but you couldn't say that the war did it to them,

38:30 they weren't war wounds, they were other things. I have always felt sorry for the people that came back and the women who have had to nurse men through all kinds of conditions, situations, and illnesses and that's gone on for years and years and they are the kind of things that you don't associate with it in a way, but they are the things. And part of my job, I have always been happy to be the welfare officer in the RSL,

39:00 so I've been around all the hospitals and all the nursing homes in the whole of Sydney I think and it has been my job and I have been with a lot of them right through until they came to their end, so you pay a price for growing old, you say goodbye to your friends and they get very thin.

Thanks. We're right at the end of that tape.

INTERVIEW ENDS