Australians at War Film Archive

Agnes MacDougall (Helen) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 18th June 2003

http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/518

Tape 1

00:30 **Good morning.**

Good morning.

I'd like to start this morning . . .

You'll have to speak a bit louder.

Can you tell us where and when you were born?

Yes, I was born in Neutral Bay on the 29th April, 1910.

01:00 The only child of Alan and Ethel MacDougall, and my father died when I was three. My mother owned her own home, and one of her sisters was widowed in the same year, but she was penniless. She had two children, one five and one seven, and she'd been nursing her sick husband for years,

01:30 so the two of them decided they'd have to do something, so they took a little weatherboard cottage on the mountains called Westella. And Auntie Nan was very practical. Mother wasn't. But Mother turned out to be a very astute business woman. Anyway they put their heads together and they started to take guests, and in no time it was thriving, so Mother sold her home and bought Westella,

02:00 and when it was sold in 1951, they were accommodating 120. Anyway by the time 1921 came, they decided that they could afford a good education for one of my cousins and myself. And they'd heard all about Abbotsleigh from Miss Murray Sister,

02:30 who was a nurse at PA [Prince Alfred Hospital], so we came down to see Miss Murray in 1921, and I was told, "Now look at Miss Murray when she speaks to you and speak clearly." I was a quaint little fat thing. And my cousin and myself started as House Girls. Now we never used the term boarder, at Abbotsleigh in 1922, my cousin was rather, well very shy,

03:00 but very pretty, and she didn't enjoy school very much but she was there for three years. I was there for six. Now I maintain, I tell everybody this, the fact that those two wonderful women, from nothing, that could give me that education of six years, started me off on a career, that I feel was successful within my ability.

03:30 Now, my first career was to get to a diploma at the Australian College of Physical Education. We were in the Depression years. I was no good at Advanced Gymnastics, I carried too much weight, but my forte was my ability to teach. My first job was at PLC Pymble [Pymble Ladies College]. And when I answered the application,

04:00 Miss Jamieson was just about to say, "I really…" That's as far as she got, "I want someone with more experience." And I said, "Well if you don't give someone experience we'll never get a job." That was the most wonderful start off, that would have been about 1931. Because PLC was a beautiful school, it had a magnificent gym, so you can imagine for a new teacher,

04:30 with lots of multiple apparatus. I was there for the nine months, without being contracted for, then I started at my old school, Abbotsleigh. And I worked, as an assistant to Lorna Palmer, and she had trained at the same college, and she said to me, "Now I'm going to have a rest now you're here. You can take all the PE [Physical Education], you can take the junior basketball, and you can start hockey,

05:00 and cricket in the summer time." The headmistress was Miss Gordon Edread, you may have heard about Miss Edread, she was there for forty years. She weathered us through the Depression, and the Army, and she gave a chance to Jill Kerr, who's now very famous as Jill Kerr Conway. Anyway I worked with Lorna, and I had the greatest fun out, starting hockey.

05:30 Because all the mothers wrote and said they didn't want their daughters to play hockey, because they'd

have teeth knocked out, or a black eye or something, and Miss Edread was wonderful. They laughed about that, because when I did get to play hockey, all the youngsters wanted to be forwards, because they think that was a glamour job. However we survived, and then Mother's partner, who was the practical one of the two, had her first slight stroke,

06:00 so I went home. Because while I had inherited some of Mother's business acumen, I was also practical. So I went home and carried the kitchen, until war broke out, and Mother was determined that she was not going to stand in my way. In 1941,

06:30 the army decided there was need for enlisted women. Darwin had been bombed, the Japanese were practically on top of us, and American wasn't in the war. So we were wide open to invasion. And we were listed not to serve overseas, but to replace a man to serve overseas, and the late Cybil Irving was appointed our controller, natures' greatest gracious lady,

07:00 very suitable for that appointment, because she had two brothers high up in the army and also a father, and she'd frequently inspired all of us that even though we were doing a man's job she always wanted us to be proud to be women. Well, the first recruitment course was 1942, and I wanted to enlist for physical education,

07:30 but they had such a stream of youngsters aged 21, my application got knocked back until Major Manning, who was the controller for New South Wales, realised they needed somebody else for physical education. At that time, Else Campbell, who trained with me was trying to carry the load of training in New South Wales, so on the 2nd January, 1943,

08:00 on the hottest day ever recorded, I enlisted. It was a tremendous thing for Mother to do, but I just thought I would be able to hop home every time I got leave. Didn't work out quite that way. And we had to report to Victoria Barracks, we had to do an aptitude test to find out where we were most suitable.

08:30 Then we did our medical, we had injections, cholera, typhoid, smallpox, all the rest, we were given a hearty lunch, we took the Oath of Enlistment, we were marched to a tram, a tram to Central Railway, a steam train to Ingleburn, to Liverpool, bus to Ingleburn, but by that time it was dark, so the adjutant read

09:00 standing orders the next morning. We were told to pick up our little bit of luggage and find our hut. Mine was 21, and when I arrived at 21, there were a few people already in there, beds soldiers books, and the dear little girl on the bed just beside the bed here, was engulfed in tears. I must tell you this one because it had wide-reaching effects. And I said, "Look, you must be tired."

09:30 Not that we weren't all tired. And I said, "Is anyone sleeping in the bed next to you?" And she said, "No." We couldn't have been a greater cross section of women if you'd gone looking for it. Now we maintain that the reason our friendships are so strong, is because we were all made to do a recruits course. Which meant that it didn't matter who you were, or what you were, you were all brought down to size.

10:00 Now when that recruits course is over I said to this dear little girl, "Now what are you going to do now, Mac?" And she said, "I'm going to be a cook." Well, I went on to do physical education, the feeding in a battalion of 1400 strong then, there wasn't enough food coming in, and the sergeant cook ruled by fear, and the CO [Commanding Officer],

10:30 Joyce Whitworth, Major Whitworth, who unfortunately has since died, she called me up and said, "I'm taking you out of Physical Education and I'm going to give you the responsibility of the feeding of the battalion." Now it sounds a big job, but as I had the background, and I have a philosophy, that I learnt in a very, very minor management course years ago, hasten slowly. So I had to be made a warrant officer

11:00 to be able to sergeant cook. And I met her, and she could have killed me, so I just went on with my hasten slowly. So I went around and spoke to all the corporal cooks, and I spoke to the butcher, and I got the same answer from the lot, that the food wasn't coming in, and they'd spoken to the sergeant and she'd done nothing about it. So the CO, said, "Well, you've got to go down and see major somebody or other."

11:30 And I said, "Oh, no, not me. I'm just a very new, brand new WO [Warrant Officer]." And she said, "Oh, you'll get on all right." So I went down and that very nice man, I saluted him, and then he said, "Oh, come on, Miss MacDougall, we'll have a cup of tea." And I put the problem to him, and he called a young officer in, and he said, "I want you to get on to this problem now, and I don't mean tomorrow." Well, within about a fortnight,

12:00 they found out where the thieving was going on. It had nothing to do with the battalion. The food came in, oh, it was magnificent. So we had a battalion of 1400 all feeding well. Well, then I was sent to an NCO [Non Commissioned Officer] school. Oh, I had to find a sergeant cook, so I called the corporal cooks together, because I didn't know who was the best, and they said, "Oh, Mosedale."

12:30 Tall, quietly spoken, oh, she demanded respect. And I said to Major Whitworth, "Mosedale," and she said, "Oh, that quietly spoken so and so." And I said, "Well, you're so busy listening to somebody raving like a raving lunatic," you know." Anyway, I went off to the NCO school and most of it was superb, and when I came back I wanted her to go and she didn't want to go. So in early December

13:00 they sent me down to the officer's school, and when I came back I wasn't only with the feeding of the battalion, I had to do the feeding of the officers' mess. And I went outside and the kitchen was soiled, and the little cook looked soiled, and I said to Sergeant Mosedale 'Pick me three cooks for the officers' mess." And she said, "Oh, but Private McPhee,"

13:30 the little girl that stood next to me in rookies, "she's way ahead of the others." So up came Mac, and of course she had to salute me, and I shook her hand, and I said, "Mac, we'd like you to work in the officers' kitchen. But if you'd prefer a big kitchen, you say so." And Sergeant Mosedale nearly died, because she thought I should have said, "Private McPhee you're going into the officers' kitchen." But I didn't.

14:00 Anyway that was the start of a friendship. So I've given you a sample, and that was Mac who was on the phone this morning. She's now a widow, she's eighty, and she's got three children. Now, you can multiply that by all kinds of incidences, however, I was sent for another couple of jobs outside the battalion. Not for very long, just to fix up their catering,

14:30 then when the war was finishing and the recruitment lessened, we were made into a company, and Major Whitworth went off somewhere in Melbourne and we were given Captain Mona Hornsby who we called Bill. Now, I had worked with her in the battalion, when for a short space of time she was 2IC [Second in Command] to Major Whitworth. She played hard, she worked hard.

15:00 She told me she had a fiend of a temper, and if she got into it leave her alone. I never saw it, but however. She was sheer joy, and by that time I was adjutant quartermaster, I was responsible for the, oh, all the drivers. Now, I had a driver's licence,

15:30 a heavy driver's licence too, so I drove a truck if it was necessary, and things were going swimmingly, and the officer in charge of 64 Armour Barrack, housing 400 troops, but lived in the barrack, and went outside to work every day, contacted Major Aspinall, who was the Controller, and Colonel Richards,

16:00 who was our Liaison officer, for the men, and said she needed trouble in the barrack. Her adjutant quartermaster was not only a highly strung person, but she was never well, and she was a heavy smoker. And the barrack had got out of hand, could they send her a strict officer. Captain Hornsby said,

16:30 "Podge, that's you. You've got to go. You're the strict one of the company." These people, these troops, had all been told that a strict officer was coming. They were going to give me curry, but they forgot that the strict officer believed in hasten slowly. So when I got there, I can't remember this officer's name, who was in charge of the barrack, but she was a particularly nice person. She came from Melbourne, she said, "Podge, you go ahead and do what you like." I said, "Oh, no. You'll have to know what I'm doing."

17:00 The grass was up to knee high, the garden was full of weeds, their huts were filthy, so hasten slowly, with Colonel Richards help. A troop of fellows came and cut the grass, and the Corporal Noble, the cook, gave them a good morning tea, they weeded the garden and then I had to stand in each of the huts separately, while they sent someone to clean them.

17:30 Oh, they were filthy. And I said to Corporal Noble, who was the cook, who I fortunately knew, "What's the food like?" And she said, "Well, we're not getting enough." Now, the butcher was the most ooooh, repulsive looking creature you could have come across. So, I got myself into the butcher's shop one morning, and he said,

18:00 "Officers don't come in here." And I said, "Well, this one does." 'Well, I'll be paraded." And that's just what I wanted. That meant he could go over my head. I spoke to Colonel Richards, and he said, "Send him in this afternoon." Well, he didn't come back because he was keeping two butchers' shops. So Colonel Richards rang Captain Hornsby and said, "Could we borrow the cook from the company?"

18:30 And that was a man named Gundemar, which sounds a German name. He was not only a wonderful butcher, he was spotlessly clean. At one stage someone had said he'd been thieving. Well I wouldn't have it. So I broached Captain Hornsby and I said, "I'm going to speak to this butcher. He couldn't be a thief if he tried." Well, he had corporal stripes then,

19:00 so she said, "All right, we'll call him up and tell him he'll lose his stripes." So we called Gundemar up and Captain Hornsby said Miss MacDougall had spoken for him but he'd have to lose his stripes. Oh, he was thrilled to bits because he didn't have to leave the battalion. Anyway he came and helped me out at 64 Armour Barrack and to cut a long story short, before I was transferred everybody was coming in for dinner,

19:30 we were even having dances. At just about that time, I got a letter from Mother's doctor, Dr McIntosh, who said that it was only because the war was over that he would write this letter, but my need at home, he felt, was more needful than the army. So I sent the letter on to Colonel Irving, and I came out

20:00 on a compassionate discharge. 1945. So Mother was determined then, as they'd got on all right during the army days, that if I kept my weekends free to work at Westella, I could have a job in the city. So I applied for one as Assistant to the Executive Director of the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association].

20:30 She had been brought out from America to put them on a business footing. She was magnificent. Now, my best help to her was to familiarise her with our modern methods in Australia. She stayed for three years, and it was easy to see,

21:00 that as soon as she left that they would go back to their own silly ways, so I resigned, too, and I applied for a job to David Jones Production Branch. It was eleven hundred strong, in those days, and they manufactured all their famous lovely clothes. They had the laundry there, they had everything.

21:30 And Mother wouldn't allow me to send references because I was applying to a paper advertisement. And while I was waiting for my discharge, and I couldn't keep coming up and down from Katoomba everywhere, I got a part time job at David Jones, and when I told Mr, I can't think of his name now, that I'd managed to get this job at the YWCA, (UNCLEAR) they asked him

22:00 and he said, "Oh, get Miss MacDougall." So I started there as the assistant personnel officer, and then Mrs Anthill retired, and I was the personnel officer. And we had the most up-to-date personnel organisation than, I would say, anywhere in the city at that time. But our controller of factories was found

22:30 to be running his own factory. And the late Sir Charles Lloyd Jones was furious, quite irrational. He said that everything he had introduced had to go. What a decision. So he called me up and I had to go in and see Sir Charles Lloyd Jones, in an office surrounded by all his ancestors,

23:00 to be told it had nothing to do with me, and I was given three months to completely cut all personal objectives out of that factory. He brought back a dear old man for the manager. He used to say, "Good morning, Miss MacDougall, go ahead, go ahead." Oh. So I did it in three months, which nearly killed everybody in the factory,

23:30 including myself. And I was given my shopping card for six months, and about that time Mother was thinking of selling Westella. Auntie Nan had died at 39, and I thought well, I must get back into the city, so I applied for the job of the training officer at Farmers. Now, you two are quite young. You might not remember Farmers, that was the most up-to-date department store,

24:00 then in line with David Jones. Poor old David Jones is trying to keep it up now. Mr Wilson was the Managing Director, and I had heard that they hadn't had a training officer for nearly six months, and the one that they'd had was an academic and she didn't mix. Which of course was quite wrong

24:30 in a retail store. So in my interview, Mr Wilson called Mr Bellingham in, who was one of our personnel people. And he said, "Miss MacDougall will report to me." And I thought, "My goodness. Something has gone wrong." So Mr Bellingham politely said yes. Mr Wilson, who I didn't know was very reserved, said, "Now, Miss MacDougall,

25:00 I expect great things quickly." I said, "Oh, you've chosen the wrong person. I believe in hasten slowly." When he got over the shock, he smiled. Now that made a bond with Mr Wilson and myself, which I wasn't aware of then, but I could see him on the floor after that and I'd say, "Good morning, Mr Wilson." And everybody would say, "Fancy saying good morning to Mr Wilson." Anyway I went round to the training department, and I was greeted by two delightful young women,

25:30 Miss Robinson aged sixteen and Miss Saville, aged eighteen. And they greeted me with, "Nobody likes us. Nobody likes us." And I said, "Oooh, how about a cup of coffee." Oh, they couldn't have a cup of coffee. Now you must remember, this is '51, and things were very strict in those days. It's a pity they're not strict now. So I went and asked Mr Bellingham if I could take them for a cup of coffee,

26:00 because I knew we would talk much better if we were relaxed. Well, those two girls were magnificent. They both stayed till they were married, and they both stayed till they were having their babies. Elaine, unfortunately, died of leukaemia, and Beverley, who is now Mrs Millart, we have the most wonderful friendship, she's in that picture, (points to picture) so from the sixteen she's now got ten grandchildren.

26:30 The most wonderful friendship. Anyway I carried on at Farmers, and when Mr Bellingham took me around and introduced me in the afternoon, every buyer without exception said, "Welcome to Farmers. I don't believe in training." Huh. Well, I got down to the cash desk, and Mr Batterby was in charge.

27:00 He came forward and shook my hand and said, "My goodness, I'm glad to see you. But my goodness, you're going to have a hell of a job, but we'll back you up." Because you can imagine his job, every buyer was sending dockets down, and different kinds of things. It's hard for you to imagine now because of the computer registers, but I mentioned (UNCLEAR). Well, to cut a long story short, when I retired I was 69.

27:30 We'd built up the training department. We had executive training, supervisor training. Now, Mr Wilson was well behind me, which was an absolute joy, but he'd ring down and he'd say, "I want you to include public speaking." Now, he wouldn't want it introduced tomorrow, he'd want it introduced yesterday. But when he ran down about public speaking, I hired myself up to the University Extension Board,

28:00 I was greeted with open arms. They had just introduced what they called the speakers' kit. And they were having great success with monetary organisations, but they didn't have a commercial one. Well, now if there was ever any brilliant way of teaching public speaking. You got a folder of leaflets starting

off with reading out aloud, making a small speech, proposing a vote of thanks, speaking in discussion, and the meeting, etc.

28:30 But at the same time, you learnt to give, and accept, constructive criticism. Well we had such success with it, we found our buyers and group buyers were ringing down and asking could they have a course. So Mr Byrne by that time, Mr Wilson had retired, said, “Well, if you don’t mind working back at night.”

29:00 I’ll just tell you this funny little bit, One of the group buyers blew into my office one morning and said, “My wife’s coming in to see you this afternoon.” Before I could say anything, he’d disappeared. Well, she came in that afternoon. I think you can have the name now, because it’s a long time ago. And she said, “My husband told you I was coming?” I said, “Yes. Mrs Gilpillin.” “Well, when can he start?”

29:30 I said, “He didn’t tell me what you were coming in for.” She said, “Well, he was best man at his brother’s wedding on Saturday night, and got up and sat down.” And so she said, “I said to him you’ve got to go into one of those Speakers Kit courses.” I said, “He’s a group buyer.

30:00 Can’t possibly go in with all the supervisors and executive trainees.” She said, “Oh, he wouldn’t mind.” I said, so anyway he got some people of his own standing together of late and that man did brilliantly. And then he said, “I want to teach,” and I was fortunate that Mr Wilson said he wanted the executives to teach, and I said, “Only if they learn to teach.”

30:30 Now, both you young people here have seen very brilliant people get up in front of an audience and get a fly on a wall, or something like that. It’s pathetic. But once they learned to deliver their message. So that was a great help. We went on, until when I was just over sixty I went up to Mr Byrne and said I’d like to retire. He said, “What do you want to retire for?” He was furious. I said,

31:00 “Well, just to stop you coming down, and saying, ‘Miss MacDougall, you’re over sixty. I think you’d better retire.’” Well, he went on like a raving lunatic. So he said, “Go off and have a holiday.” So I went to South America, and when I came back I was told he wanted me to join the Internal Audit Department. And that was working on cash shortages,

31:30 and the internal auditor was a man named Richardson. So he employed another young man. And by that time we had five stores, not one, and I could appreciate that I had the contacts because of my job. You see, I knew everybody because in the training department you trained young people to come on and be personnel officers.

32:00 Well, in no time we cut down those shortages. Now, of course there’s some thieving. But the bulk of those shortages were wrong dockets. Something like that, so anyway, then I thought I’d better retire, I was sixty something or other, and I said I’d retire, and they were opening a store in Belconnen in Canberra,

32:30 and the young man that had been posted to be the manager, he said, “I’ve already asked for you, you can’t retire.” So away I went to Belconnen and when I came back they said, “Oh, you can’t retire now till after Christmas. The Christmas sales.” So I was just about to retire when we were introducing computer registers. And I said, “Why isn’t the training department doing it?”

33:00 because once I was out I was out, and they said, “Oh the training department said they couldn’t do it. They’re not practical,” so they kindly engaged five women to work with me, and by that time, Kay Walker, who’s up there (points to picture), was one of the personnel managers, and she said, “What qualifications do you want?” I said,

33:30 “Don’t worry about the qualifications, but they’ve got to have the ability to get along with people.” So I could write a book on going from cash registers to computer registers. The buyers went on like lunatics. Because they talked about my register. Now, the computer registers that we introduced were not like the ones today.

34:00 The ones today are even working more for the staff. You go in to buy something simple today, and the sales assistant, if you’ve got an account, or you’ve got one of those credit cards, you press goodness knows what. So it works for you, it doesn’t work for the customer. But however, then I retired, eventually, and I worked for eleven years

34:30 with the Smith Family and I volunteered to work for the Royal Blind Society, and they asked me my background, and I saw two girls and a boy through their degrees at Macquarie University, and one brilliant young woman was a tutor at Sydney University in the field of social work.

35:00 And she could see night from day, but when she set the assignments, Claire Hoben, she couldn’t read the answers. So I used to do that for Claire, I did it for five years. And by that time I thought I would give it away. Now, I was sixty nine when I retired, and everybody wants to retire now at fifty or something like that. Even Kay, up there (points to picture),

35:30 said she was going to retire before she was sixty. And I said, “Oh, Kay.” And Kay said, “I’ve got enough to live on.” And that’s not my way of thinking anyway. Kay did retire, but I’m confident that my years in the army and the fact that my mother and Auntie Nan

36:00 gave me the opportunity to go to a good school. Now, there were three hundred something girls at

Abbotsleigh, when I retired, when I left, and I'm very close to Abbotsleigh now. I join in everything, because being single I've kept in touch with them, and they, in the centenary year, which was about eighteen years ago now, I think,

36:30 Kath McCreadie, an old girl of the school was head mistress, and . . . . Thirls Thomas, one of our brilliant people, both in the army at school, I said to Thirls, "What about asking Kath if we can endow a scholarship or a prize of something," and she said, "OK Podge," so I went up to see Kath McCreadie and she said, "Oh, we haven't got one for the Dux of the school."

37:00 So I said, "I'm sure Thirls wouldn't like that." And I said, "What will we call it?" She said, "We'll ask Thirls. "I think the Centenary prize is appropriate." Well now, the girls that win those prizes are required, really, to write and thank you. And Thirls and I must have got two letters in ten years.

37:30 And I'm so sad about it because the last three duxes of the school, have all written, they've been here for lunch, I've met them, two are doing medicine, I don't know what the other one has doing, I've forgotten. And it's given me so much happiness. And then they had a prize for citizenship at the junior school,

38:00 and Mrs McGaw, Beverley McGaw, who's PR [Public Relations], she rang up and said would I like to do this. Now, I can only do this because it's tax deductible. And you do it for so many years. You see so many people do this for so many years, and then they don't want to do it any more. But so that's how I captured, I took over the citizenship prize for the junior school.

38:30 And the first little girl was Stephanie Boag, She's been an absolutely sheer joy. She's now in Year 9, and the little girl who was the next one, didn't contact me at all. So I don't know what happened to her. But last year's was Katy Henderson. A beautiful child. I've got a lot of pleasure from Katy. And those children keep me in touch.

39:00 And Abbotsleigh now lets me have a magazine called the Shuttle every week, because it's very hard for me to accept the speed with which the schools work now. Now, we all realise that it's got to be much more complicated, because they're not only educating girls, but training them to face this,

39:30 what I call, angry world we're living in. Whereas we lived in a very simple world. When I started at Abbotsleigh, there was no wireless, there was no refrigeration, we travelled by steam train, and when we got to Milsons Point, we got a ferry across to the Quay. That Pacific Highway was called Lane Cove Road,

40:00 and it was a two lane, unsealed road. Now try and compare that with what's going on now. Can't do it. And Mrs Weldon said to me recently, the Head Mistress, well she said to quite a few of us, "Were you girls naughty when we were young?" and we all said yes. And she said did we think naughty girls made good prefects" We said, "Yes, because they were more tolerant."

40:30 So she said to me, "You were naughty." I said, "We were wholesomely naughty." And she's never let me forget it. But we polished the floor for slippery dips, and fed the possums and things like that. The children would be bored to tears now, and want to play the computer or something. You can't compare it, two different lives.

41:00 But however, that's as far as I am at the present moment, except just a fortnight ago, they're doing something about the archives at Abbotsleigh, and Margaret Holmes, who was Margaret Reeve, is now ninety five, and she started off with what they called Kindergarten, although we didn't have a Kindergarten in that way. And then I came next at what they call Year 7 now,

41:30 and then various other girls up through the years. And they have a very nice young man who they employ just to do interviews. And we all had to go up to be interviewed. According to the flyer, three hundred and sixty five of us at Abbotsleigh. There's fourteen hundred now. So there you've got the life history.

Well, that's very nicely done.

I'll just tell you . . .

Tape 2

00:30 **Helen, you've been in the privileged position of having lived through both World Wars.**

No, not the first one. It was over in 1918. I was four when the war finished First World War finished, 1914, you see, I was born in 1910.

01:00 I can well all remember one of Mother's cousins coming home from World War I.

What stories did you hear from returning people?

I don't remember anything about the World War I. Beyond Mother's cousin coming home in a uniform.

Oh, I think Barry and I had to dress up for a play once.

01:30 But I don't think you can compare the two wars really, just as much as you can't compare this last one. Now, there was a big march in the city today. Try and compare that to the men coming back after World War II.

02:00 They've only been away four months, and they're all professional soldiers. There are no enlisted soldiers, well, I'm all for giving them a good, but it's totally different. This is all to kill that terrible man. They haven't killed him anyway.

02:30 **As a young girl in the 1920s, what days of significance were there, something like Anzac Day. What do you recall of that?**

There wasn't, I don't recall anything of Anzac Day. I recall the Queen's Birthday. Before I went to Abbotsleigh aged eleven, I went to the local, what we called public school in those days and

03:00 I can't remember Anzac Day at all. Whether it had been decided on then, I wouldn't know, but we always saluted the flag every morning, and the Queen's Birthday. We did all those kinds of things. Oh, the public schools in those days were strict. We had a Mrs Greenleaves,

03:30 as our form mistress, and if we were naughty we were given the chance to either have the cane, or stay in for half an hour. We all chose the cane because we'd put our hand out and she'd do that, (indicated striking across palm) and we'd put it under here (under the arm). Go out and play. It was a very, very small world.

04:00 **Well, I'm just wondering, you were an only child. What childhood friends did you have growing up?**

I had all the friends from the school, and I used to invite them down to play, and Auntie Nan who was the practical one, and Valerie, Nan used to say I always choose the poorest, because before they went home she used to give them a good feed.

04:30 Oh, plenty of children. But we played. Now, you had a birthday party and you all played until you were called in for afternoon tea. But you have a birthday party now, it's the most highly organised thing out. It's very hard to, it was such a simple world.

05:00 I enjoyed my school life at Katoomba. Mind you, this is why I think what those two did was so important. If I had been left, to just finish in Katoomba, I would never have had the opportunities that came my way from going to a secondary education.

05:30 You live in a different world. Most of our girls then came from the country, or their fathers were doctors or something like that. It was quite unusual for the child of a widowed mother, and the widowed mother earning her own living. I came up against a bit of snobbishness, but not much.

06:00 If I said anything to Mother about it she'd just say, well, it was all right with Miss Murray. Mother was strict but terribly fair, and our united life was wonderful, but I wrote to Mother in my first year at Abbotsleigh and said we couldn't eat the food. Now, there was nothing wrong with the food, but we didn't like tapioca and sago

06:30 and all those kind of things. Weeks went by and in her weekly letter she didn't say anything about writing to Miss Murray, and eventually I broached her again and she said, no, she had not written to Miss Murray because the last time I was home I looked particularly well. Never got any change!

You said that your mother went out of her way to put you into Abbotsleigh school.

07:00 My word! She didn't really go out of her way. They never had a holiday, they didn't do anything, to cope with the cost

What responsibility did you feel, or pressure even, to perform at school?

I wasn't aware of any. We wouldn't have been made feel that there was any pressure,

07:30 except that we went home for holidays and did things like that. You see, these days the mothers are faced with the girls wanting to go on this tour here. Some girls have just come back from a tour to Japan at Abbotsleigh. Last year they went to those, something islands, with all the weird animals on. And the parents try to live up to those.

08:00 Now, my mother and aunt would never have been able to afford anything like that. I would have just, the last year I was at school, they had their trip to the Snow country. That was the first one I'd ever known. I didn't go. I'd sooner go home. We got two mid terms a term, and then our holidays.

08:30 I don't think any child of our age in those days, would have been aware of the pressures. But Mother and Nan wouldn't have let us worry about the pressures. They'd have put on a smiling face.

Later on, times were difficult for many people. I'm wondering how much the Depression affected you.

Well, now, during the Depression years,

09:00 Mother was told several times to reduce the tariff. And she said no, she wouldn't. She just held it. So, the most thing I can remember about the Depression years were the families that used to come to our back kitchen door and wanting food, and Auntie Nan used to say,

09:30 "But why have you come down here?" and they'd say, "Everybody said Westella wouldn't turn us down." So, Auntie Nan used to feed one particular family, and you know those big tins, as long as they were clean, and the children used to bring them back, had to be clean, and one little boy said to Auntie Nan one day, "Mum said not to make the curry so hot." And Mother and Nan were wonderful that way.

10:00 They helped out. When they wanted to extend first, Westella, the block of land on this side had a cottage on it, had a big frontage, it was a lovely block of land and the lady in it was a widow and she had a little girl. And she wasn't very well herself, and Mother and Nan fed that mother, and I can remember Mother dressing the little girl and getting her off to school

10:30 and when she died she left it in her will that the two widows had to be offered that block of land first. That's the only way they got it because the people on the other side were trying to stop Mother and Nan developing, so that, like they, I tell you, they helped everybody. I always wondered how they helped everybody. They had a brother

11:00 who had four daughters, and he was a gambler and Mother and Nan set him up in business four times. The third time they went, they lent him the money and they went bond for it, well he never paid it back so they paid it back,

11:30 and he had a wonderful wife and when she died she left in her will, even though three daughters were still living, that Mother and Nan would look after him. I could have killed her. I don't mean that unkindly, she was wonderful. So he came and lived with us too. I tell you, when I think of what those two did, they could have been multi millionaires.

12:00 They looked after their younger sister who made a bad marriage. They looked after their elder sister who made a bad marriage. They looked after the lot. And then, I looked after them. And when we get up reunions now, they always say, oh, Podge will come. Podge will get somebody else to come.

12:30 But they've got to remember I'm their family.

Well that's an interesting point, because once you've left school, your mother has perhaps shown you an example of looking after herself.

My word. My word.

What steps did you take to do that for yourself?

Just came naturally. I've often wondered about that.

13:00 It just comes naturally to me. People say to me now, but Podge you care for everybody, or you keep in touch with everybody. Well, one of the reasons is I haven't a family, but it just comes naturally to me. If you've been brought up in a household where the two main people did nothing else but look after people, you must inherit some of it.

13:30 Oh, sorry, I leant forward! Just part of my life. Now, I've just had my ninety third birthday, and I got thirty five birthday cards. Now, I'm not telling you that boasting, but I get birthday cards from girls that I trained and one particular one is now a grandmother,

14:00 and because of her severe asthma, she's never lived in the city, and she still insists on sending Christmas cards and birthday cards to Miss MacDougall. I say, "Oh, but Enid. Helen." 'But I never knew you as Helen." But it's lovely to be remembered. Now another thing I think too, is that so many of your friends have died, and any of the others, like yourself,

14:30 can't get round without someone taking you, or something like that, if you can't see people, you remember them by letters. My handwriting's appalling but, my godson who's not a relative, is very happy to do the typing for me. He's the paymaster at Shore.

15:00 But I think you grow up in that atmosphere. They'll tell you in this block of, Lodge where I live, "Just leave that. Helen will fix that for you." Part of the makeup.

Well, I'm wondering what it was in your makeup that made you want to get involved in the studies that you did. Physical education training.

Well I did that because I couldn't go to the university, and I've proved that I'm a natural teacher. Now, you learn later that there's such a thing as a

15:30 skills lesson and a facts lesson, and I often see coaches at Warrawee trying to teach people to bowls and using a facts lesson. And the poor old pupils are standing on one leg and then on the other leg, and the coach is rote, you know, chatting on, chatting on. I was fortunate that Bill Cox was our coach, and ooh,

he understood the skills lesson.

16:00 And he was strict, but he created such a lovely atmosphere. We laughed at ourselves and laughed at each other. And he said, “Now if you want to get on you play in other tournaments.” There’s a very nice lass, well, she’s been our champion several times.

16:30 She’s quite willing to be the skip for inexperienced pupils. And we’ve done brilliantly. That’s because she’s been the ideal skip, and we’ve been prepared to play in outside tournaments. Oh, it’s wonderful.

Well, Helen, you were involved in teaching for some years until the war started.

17:00 Yes, I was teaching, oh, I was teaching for about seven or eight years at least.

What was, what were your feelings when the war began?

Well, when the war began and all my friends were going in, I wanted to go in. I have five friends in the first course. And I knew it was asking a lot from Mother,

17:30 but she was determined that she wasn’t going to let me sacrifice what I wanted to do, to keep Westella going.

And when did you enlist?

1943. The first enlistments were ’42. And they were at Killara. And then they outgrew Killara. And there is the most wonderful thing that Thirls wrote

18:00 about the first course. The men felt that, that it had been a school, and it hadn’t been used for some time, and the army men said they’d left it clean. So they marched the first course in, Major Manning was in charge, when the senior male officer

18:30 came up to interview them, he found them scrubbing the floor. The place was full of cockroaches and goodness knows what, so they had to send the raw recruits home and really clean it up. Well, we lived under canvas, but they had those bell shaped tents, and somebody crawled in and put up the things, and if you weren’t quick it fell down on your head.

19:00 And we slept on palliasses, and my NCO school was in the middle of winter. It was freezing, we all got chill blains, but when I did the OTS [Officer Training School] we had to live under canvas at Balcombe, way up in the mountains, and we had a different kind of tent, but we slept on a ground sheet with just,

19:30 just our greatcoats and things, and we had to build our own meat trench and our own latrine trench. But that was hard work, but it was very exciting at the OTS.

Helen, before we get into your service experience, can I ask why you enlisted?

Why enlisted because I wanted to.

20:00 We all wanted to. You must remember, young men were volunteering for enlistment by droves, and all putting their ages on. Not the atmosphere we’ve got now, with everybody wanting, well, I don’t know what they want to do. Well, you’ve only got to take what the teachers in some of the schools have got to put up with.

20:30 Well, in some cases, it’s the teacher’s fault, because rank imposes obligation. And if you go to teach, looking like goodness knows what, how can you possibly expect to be looked up to by the students. I think it’s appalling the way, the behaviour of the schools now.

21:00 Huh. I don’t know where to put the blame. Some people say that it’s because the mothers have to go to work. I’m on the side of the mothers in those cases. A lot of the mothers only go to work because they couldn’t tolerate their child going to a government school, because of the lack of discipline, so they want to send them to Abbotsleigh, or PLC, or Ravenswood, or somewhere like that.

21:30 But that doesn’t mean they’ve got to neglect their children.

How much a part in your enlistment did patriotism play?

Pardon?

Patriotism.

Oh, all. Definitely. You wouldn’t ask anybody in World War II, but they’d tell you the same thing. We all wanted to get in and help. You’ve got to remember, Darwin had been bombed,

22:00 the Japs were in New Guinea. America wasn’t in the war till December of that year. The whole country was wide open to invasion. And the interesting thing is, that we have never been recognised. All kinds of people have the gold card, but we don’t. Now we’re not bitter about it, but it’s not fair.

22:30 I have a very cherished friend, who’s the second wife of a returned service man. They were married for about twenty years. And the first wife is still alive. And Noel died, and who got the gold card. His second wife. No, it’s ridiculous. We’re all over eighty. I think perhaps

23:00 the youngest of us has got to be about eighty seven. And they're refusing to honour us with the gold card. We've got ladies living here, very wealthy. And they all have the gold card. Good grief, and the way they use it too. It doesn't make us bitter, but it's just not fair. We were much more useful

23:30 releasing a young man to go to war. Now if you're in a WRAC [Women's Royal Army Corps] now, if you've been in the WRAC for four years, you can go into the WRAC to get a career. I've got a young third cousin, who's now a doctor, and she did it all through enlisting in the WRAC. Can't compare it.

24:00 I mean, it was the only thing we thought of doing. Going to see what we could do.

Well, you mentioned events like the bombing of Darwin. What did something like that make you feel, or think?

Well, the bombing of Darwin brought the army

24:30 to the need for the enlisted women's army. They had to get men from somewhere, and the only way they could get them was to enlist women to do men's work and release young able men to enlist. We needed the troops. When America came into the war, as you know, they had to make them lose, what was it, Pearl Harbour,

25:00 or something. I'm right behind Mr Howard agreeing to go into this debacle that's going on now, because we wouldn't be here if the Yanks hadn't come into it. When we were in camp at Ingleburn, the Salvation Army had a big hut, a lovely big hut, and they used to have dances there

25:30 on Saturday night, and Major Whitworth, quite rightly felt it was good for our troops to go to those dances, instead of having fourteen hundred women all linked up together. When the early Americans came into the war they were staging at Warwick Farm. It was called Camp Warwick.

26:00 Now, those lads used to come to our dances. They had so much money they didn't know what to do with it. And they were overfed. Our troops tended to leave their underpaid Australian type of solder, and go out with the Americans. We had some fun at first,

26:30 and then those fellows used to, they were extroverts. Our young men weren't. They'd come to the orderly room on Monday morning with a bunch of flowers for Private So and so, or something like that. But anyway I had an interesting experience. We used to chat to these fellows, awfully nice fellows, and they were what they called Mexican Trash.

27:00 They weren't, didn't get a chance to enlist. They were all recruited. And they had never seen so much money or food in their lives. Now, the sensible ones made allotments to their mother, or something like that. The others just spent in madly. The first time I was in America after the war,

27:30 I went to pay the taxi driver, and he said, "Oh, no, you're an Aussie, you're not going to pay the taxi driver. You were too good to me." And then a friend I met, an American friend I met, coming down from Alaska, she came over and she said, "Oh, you're English." I said, "No, I'm an Australian." She said, "Oh, Australian. I'm coming to Australia next year

28:00 as the visiting professor to the new Sydney University." Well, that was a lovely friendship. And I was visiting her some years later, and she said, "I'm taking you to visit an interesting friend of mine and he doesn't want me to tell you who he is." He was the Vice Chancellor of the University of Southern California. He was charming.

28:30 He said, "I was one of the American trash, and I made an allotment to my mother, not only for food, but to put some aside for my education because," he said, "I was determined that I was going to be educated." And there he was,

29:00 the Vice Chancellor of Southern California. Really and truly, the eye opener for those lads was unbelievable. But he also told me that as they were just like privates, they had to carry far too much. They carried binoculars, cameras, can you imagine, a private. And he said when they were in New Guinea and in other places, and they were on route marches, all this equipment got so heavy,

29:30 they'd drop it and our characters would pick it up.

Well, Helen, I'm wondering, you've said that after enlistment you reported to Victoria Barracks.

Yes.

What were you supplied with when you were first kitted out?

When we were first given our kit. You mean our, well, the first thing we were supplied with were giggle hats and giggle frocks to do our recruits course in. And then we had to go through the clothing store,

30:00 and we were provided with, we've always laughed about this, with our outer garments. Nobody ever wondered what we had underneath and what we slept in. Our uniform, a jacket and a skirt, and they

were excellent, and a hat. Because Colonel Irving

30:30 didn't want us to look masculine. Now some of our troops, including myself, that had to work on trucks and things, of course we wore trousers and things like that. But when we went on leave or on parade, she wanted us all to look feminine. Now our summer uniform, I don't think I've got a photograph of that, was a lovely, perfectly straight frock, and a fairly large hat,

31:00 and we wore those in the units. People living at, wear them. Now, it was a lovely uniform. Khaki of course, but it was feminine. Oh, we did get issued with shoes later on. But nobody ever thought about our undergarments. Oh we got stockings later on, too, and Captain Drury,

31:30 whom I had the pleasure, or the horror, of working with for a while, if you wanted some new stockings you had to go and show the old ones to Miss Drury, and she'd go though them, and if she found the slightest little tear or whatever she wouldn't pass them. So what did you do? You bought your own stockings.

Well, what could you take into camp with you, of your own personal belongings?

32:00 As little as possible. They told us to take as little as possible. So I suppose I took a couple of pairs of pyjamas. And some of the girls had never worn pyjamas before, and they couldn't possibly go out to the latrines at night in their pyjama dresses, in their night dresses. As little as possible, and it all had to fit in one suitcase. Because before you left after your recruits course,

32:30 you were issued with your uniform. Now, many of them put on weight. I didn't. I went from ten stone to eight stone seven, because I don't take heat. They used to march us up hill and down dale. Mother nearly died when she saw me. And I had to have all my uniform replaced, and of course, the girls in the clothing store wouldn't listen to me.

33:00 And when we settled down, I put on, some of the girls put on a tremendous amount of weight, but I'll tell you something interesting. When I went back to Abbotsleigh to teach, a lass named Margaret Armstrong, who eventually became Mrs Spain, was one of the early enlistments, and she got her commission, if I can be unkind, far too early.

33:30 She was too immature to carry a commission. Anyway she was the staff officer. She never knew how to live in a unit. And she came up to the battalion one day, just for a job, and I saw her coming and I forgot that I was in giggle uniform, and sweeping the footpath,

34:00 I said, "Hello, Marg." She said, "Officers can't be seen talking to privates." How about that? So anyway, when it was so terribly hot at night we had to hose the mess hut before we could have our evening meal, and we were allowed to wander around without hats on, so it didn't matter if you were in you were Number 1 Company,

34:30 or 2 Company or 3 Company, you mixed together, and Thirls Thomas, my wonderful Thirls, she was the CO of Number 3 Company, and I was wandering around, "Hello, Podge, how are you getting on?" There's the difference between the two girls. Oh, fancy, fancy Margaret not being able to say to someone who had been teaching her,

35:00 she didn't even say hello. She just said, "Officers can't be…" So I just thought to myself, "Oh, well. What a pity you didn't let her trip over your broom." Oh, you have some wonderful experiences.

Well, it's interesting your mentioning this, because you entered AWAS [Australian Women's Army Service] when you were in your thirties, a lot of girls are at least ten more years younger than you.

Twenty one. I think they lowered it to eighteen for a while.

35:30 **What sort of relations does this provide?**

Well, you met them as you found them. Some of them, mind you, after their recruits course, they went to their postings. They went all over the place. Only, don't take this the wrong way, but the standard of troop

36:00 that was kept in the training department had to be good, because, after all, we had to set the example. And yet it was terribly happy. Everybody accepted discipline. When Captain Hornsby came, Bill as we called her, as I told you, she played hard

36:30 and she was very strict, and she said to me one day. I had to do rounds once a month, and, "Next time you're going on rounds, Podge, I'm coming." So we had this wonderful team of twelve young men, that had a latrine block in our quarters, and they looked after our flowers and things like that,

37:00 and I said to Corporal Ward, who was in charge, that Captain Hornsby was coming on rounds with me, and when she got there she said, "Ward, are the latrines empty?" she said, "Yes." When she came out she said, "Ward, there's no toilet paper. Get some toilet paper immediately!" We went, aaaghh. Got the toilet paper. So about a few months afterwards she said, "Podge, next time you're going on rounds, I'm coming."

37:30 So I thought I'd better warn Ward, and I said, "Ward, what's the sanitary paper like in the latrines?" He said, "Ah, they've got enough to hang themselves!" But one afternoon, I answered the phone and it was an officer from another unit, and they were entertaining some very senior officers that night,

38:00 and they only had one roll of toilet paper. For some unknown reason, their issue of toilet paper was less than ours. And he said, "Oh, Miss MacDougall, can you help us?" And I said, "Yes, send a truck over the ration shed." So I went down to the rations shed and Corporal Mahoney, who was magnificent, and I said, "Mahoney, can we let whoever it was have a dozen rolls of toilet paper?"

38:30 and she said, "Oh, not a dozen. Give them a gross." And they sent back all kinds of lovely things for the troops to eat, but those are the funny little things. I give you another one. Driver Islip was an excellent driver and I could trust her too. And I was told one night in mess that I was wanted in the kitchen.

39:00 I thought to myself, "That's Mac." And I said, "Mac, something wrong?" And she said, "Driver Islip wants to speak to you." So she said a couple of these lads, three of them I think, had just had too much to drink and they weren't aggressive, they were over friendly, and she knew that if they were caught on our lines they'd be on a charge sheet. So she'd been trying to get them into the back of a ute,

39:30 and she wasn't successful. So she came up and said would I help here. And I said, "Certainly. Just a minute until I get my hat." She said, "Don't put your coat on." It never dawned on me why I wasn't to put my coat on, but however. I went down and I said, "Now, come on chaps. Do what Driver Islip wants you to do. Get into the back of the truck with me." So eventually we all got into the back,

40:00 and when we got out of our lines, she was frightened they might come back again. So she drove closer to their huts. By that time, they were having the time of their life in the back of the truck with me. We had great trouble to get them out. Eventually we got them out and Corporal Woods said to her the next day,

40:30 "Who helped you last night?" And she said, "Oh, I've forgotten." Because if it had been an officer they'd have been on a charge sheet. But those are the things that made life worthwhile. Don't you think so? Oh, dear or dear.

Well, Helen on that point . . .

We'll have a cup of tea!

Well, it's coming to a close, so we'll pause there.

Righto! I've talked my head off.

Tape 3

00:30 **Well, I'd like to ask you, Agnes.**

You can ask me anything.

I know this might sound like a very simple question, but . . .

Righto.

What does AWAS stand for?

Australian Women's Army Service.

And what did you see the role of AWAS?

Well, I really went in, one because I

01:00 wanted to represent Mother, and at the request of Major Manning, for Physical Education. And I was having the time of, after I did my Recruits School I was made a corporal. And I was taking the PE, on the flattest block of land I could find, and the shadiest, for the three training companies.

01:30 And of course, the food was so appalling. That's when Joyce called me up. She'd stayed at Westella many times with her mother, and said she was taking me out of PE and giving me the responsibility of the catering for the battalion. And I said, "I came in to do physical education." She drew herself to her full height, and told me I came in to serve the army where I was most suited.

02:00 Which was right. So she made me a warrant officer, because Sergeant Kilgore-Roberts was the sergeant cook then, she ruled by fear, you know, but she had to make Kilgore-Roberts responsible to me. So we met. And Killie, as we called her, looked at me as much as to say, if looks could kill I'd be dead. But you see, I've got this philosophy of hasten slowly.

02:30 So I didn't take any notice of Kilgore-Roberts and went around and found out that the food wasn't coming in, and spoke to all the corporal cooks and the butcher, and that started me off. So I was really in the right vocation.

Well, earlier you were talking about being at rookies at Ingleburn. How long did your rookies course go for?

03:00 Recruits? I would say four to five weeks, and during that time you were literally moulded, I would say, to accepting discipline, which was fair. Certainly deportment and marching.

03:30 Not only marching route marches, but the correct procedure. The route marches, the silly rabbits, in the middle of the day, it's no wonder we lost weight. But, and various lectures on army background and routine and personal hygiene, and I think we would all say that it was,

04:00 I've never heard anyone say, that they thought that the recruits course wasn't well done. Mind you, having to go out to the latrines at night or go out for our showers, I think a few found that difficult. You see, I'd been at boarding school so I was used to, but to look out at a hut twenty two beds, and just bare soldiers books,

04:30 that was tough. And the day we arrived, after we'd all selected our beds, our corporal came along and said she was going to show us how to make a bed, and it had to have a ten inch turn down. So she showed us how to make it, and then she said if it isn't a ten inch turn down, it will be stripped, and you'll have to make it again.

05:00 Well, you know, some of the girls that night hardly slept in bed because they were terrified of not getting the ten inch turn down. They weren't arbitrary. I mean, if you didn't learn the first time, they probably turned it down, but you got used to the ten inch turn down. That's, all these things were early disciplinary things. So they didn't kind of bang it into you.

05:30 Now, we had a lass in our hut, I think she must have been a milliner. When you went through the clothing shed and they asked you what size head you had, I said big, which really wasn't right. I've got a high forehead and the hat they gave me came down here, you know, but however, she had, she used to stand up at the hut at night and say, "Girls, girls, will you be on, will you be on." We wouldn't know what we'd be on for,

06:00 but nearly everyone in the hut said yes, and she decorated our huts up. We had pork pie hats, we had all kinds of hats. And we went on parade the next morning with all these giggle hats. And of course, we got a fatigue for that. But the beauty of it was, well, I thought anyway, that everyone in the hut was in for it. And one fatigue was to scrub the mess hut,

06:30 and another was to weed around the latrines at lunch time. We all did it. Everybody did it. I thought it was, I never came across anybody that objected to it. I mean, there were a few growls, but that's only nature isn't it? Number Two Company we were.

07:00 You had to pass a medical there, to go in, and the first sister we had was excellent, but she retired and we got a sister who'd been abroad with the 2/1st AGH [Australian General Hospital], and she was humiliated, huh, huh, to think she had to serve in a women's unit. And she arrived with a great big tin trunk.

07:30 But she learnt. She turned out trumps. But she was terrible when she arrived, you know. She was really good. I can only remember, when I was adjutant quartermaster, getting two confidential letters, that two of the troops had been sent. I had to send them, had to go to sister,

08:00 because they had, supposedly, connections the night before or something, with a lad who was supposed to have had gonorrhoea or something. But anyway, nothing happened. But it was all done so tactfully, and during Captain Hornsby's time, she got a note one day to say we were having two re-enlistments,

08:30 and she said, "Podge, if you or I ever transfer from this battalion, those have got to be torn up." We are not having these two victimised because they're re-enlistments." Anyway, she went off to New Guinea, and as I told you I had to do this sixty four hour barrack with Bully. Betty Bull was our orderly room sergeant.

09:00 I'd have trusted Bully anywhere, so I left them there. But do you know, they were two of the loveliest girls. They were both from the country. They both wouldn't have had any answers. And in the early days, if a girl became pregnant, she had to stay in the holding company, just doing nothing, or light duties or something, until the birth was imminent, but fortunately,

09:30 that was changed very early and as soon as the pregnancy was confirmed, they were discharged. Which was right. But these days, children of five and six know more than I did at seventeen. And these, so many of these girls came from the country and they were terribly naïve. Wholesome.

10:00 **Can you explain a re-enlistment?**

A re-enlistment? You would have to be, an honourable discharge, for some reason or other. But you see they proved that these two girls, lovely looking girls, had not been responsible. So they brought them back. But sometimes you got a re-enlistment from someone

10:30 who'd gone AWL [Absent Without Leave] because they failed, out of sheer fright, to come and share their problem with their senior, and they'd just go AWL. For some distress in the family or something

like that. But I only came up against two re-enlistments. Dear, they were nice girls.

11:00 **Well, I'm wondering, at rookies, whether you learned how to use a gun at all?**

Whether we had?

Whether you learned how to use a gun?

No. Under no circumstances. That's the WRAC. Now you can carry one. No way. We weren't enlisted to fight.

11:30 We were enlisted to replace a man. No, we never held a gun. Matter of fact, we never saw a gun. I tell you, these WRAC now, it's used as a convenience. Now, we've got some, we had some army girls

12:00 serving in this last war, but the one before it, as far as I'm concerned, the women are at their best behind the lines. Now, look at the trouble the navy is having with the women in such close proximity on the boats. I think we have to learn to appreciate how far we can go.

12:30 I know I wouldn't be much good using a gun with my eyesight. I was no good at map reading either. When we were doing the OTS, we had to go map reading at night. I'd have lost everybody. Some people picked it up so quickly, but

13:00 after some of the nurses and physios [physiotherapists] came back from overseas, because the war was getting too tight here, they were required to do a course down at Grong Grong. And for some reason I was sent, and they were all senior matrons, oh, and there were some officers and things from us.

13:30 But those senior matrons, they weren't going to be disciplines. Matron Cahill never got out of bed in the morning and smoked in bed. Julie Harris, who was an absolute dear, never liked missing reading the paper for the races or something like that. And our mess was an open mess at night, and we'd all have a drink, and there was one lovely girl there,

14:00 and she was looking at a précis one night and I said, "How are you going?" And she said, "Podge, I really don't know, but I think I've got it upside down." Well, I was cross about that course because I thought that was wasting the government's money. But, oh it was good fun, but we weren't in the army for good fun. And certainly, it did them good,

14:30 because they had come back from overseas and they had to come back and kind of get themselves billeted at some Australian posts. One of the senior nurses I met, Gwen Pegg, she was Gwen Cox then. She didn't get abroad again, she was the matron of the 3rd Women's Hospital. And that was where our troops were sent if they needed rehabilitation or something like that.

15:00 But to get back to the company, we used to have to go to officers' dinner, somewhere at a lovely home at Woollahra, one night a month, and Driver Islip used to take us all in the three-ton truck. And we had an officer

15:30 who used our facilities, and she was the clothing officer, Mrs Childers, who we called Chilly. She was a difficult woman. She was always trying to get Driver Islip to carry liquor. Anyway, she managed to get her licence and Driver Islip, who was an excellent driver, and myself,

16:00 every now and again she used to say to me, "I'm borrowing you truck today," and stalk out. So she said she was going to take this ute, and that Peg Wright, who was head of the NCO school, a very close friend of mine, had said she'd go with her and an officer from Melbourne, that we were just housing.

16:30 And poor old Driver Islip came to me in great stress. She said, "She can't drive." So I went out to her and said that Driver Islip, "Do you think it's wise?" and do you know what she said? "I did the officer's school before you, and therefore I've got seniority, and you can't stop me."

17:00 Well, we were beside ourselves. So I said to Peg Wright, "Peg, don't you think you're being very foolish?" And Peg said, "Oh, Podge, I think you're fussing too much over it." Anyway off we went in the truck, and we got there, and Major Aspinall said to me, "There're three officers missing." And I said to her, "Well, I know madam."

17:30 And she said, "Podge, you shouldn't have allowed that." Oh, she was furious. So I tried to explain that I'd lost my seniority. And she said, "Oh, how ridiculous." Anyway they didn't arrive. I don't know what Chilly did, but they all landed in Lewisham hospital, and someone said, "Oh, these women are soldiers," and packed them off to Concord.

18:00 Well, Chilly got a fractured skill, and Peg got something wrong with her spine, I don't know what happened to the others. But, we were asked to go an identify that little ute. I don't know how the officers lived. They all had to be discharged. But, oh dear, she was difficult.

18:30 But Major Aspinall said I should have referred it, because it was our unit, but I don't know. It was a bit difficult.

Well, just going back to rookie school for a moment. You've mentioned a couple of things. I'm

wondering if you could describe what a giggle hat is?

Oh, it's, you'd call it a rag hat now,

19:00 only it'd be in khaki. Just an ordinary rag hat, no shape at all. You'd just try one on, you see you had to wear a hat. You can't go out in the army without a hat. But not only that, you couldn't have gone out without a hat because of the heat. No, giggle hat and giggle frock. The giggle frock was just a perfectly straight frock with a belt around the waist. No glamour there.

19:30 And in the rookies course, or course, you provided your own shoes. They were all in khaki. Everybody used to say, "If Mother could only see me now!'

You've mentioned that rookie school was fairly short, but I'm wondering, was there a graduation?

No. No. But during the course,

20:00 certain people were made corporals, just to help manage it. And you were called an acting corporal and I learnt afterwards, I wasn't made a corporal in my recruits course, and everybody was querying it.

20:30 And I learnt afterwards that Helen Spate, who was the OC officer of us said, "What's the good of making Podge a corporal? She didn't have anything to learn, she'd already managed people." But I just took it all in my stride. But they gave the corporal's job to quite a few girls to see, test how they could manage people.

21:00 And some of them did a good job, others didn't. But still, they got their opportunity. There were one hundred and fifty in each rookies course. I think we were fairly united. We certainly were in our hut. That was our platoon. Oh, we were very united.

21:30 A cross section of the community. But we all learned from it, dear. You know, there's something good in everybody if we go looking for it.

And where were you posted after Ingleburn?

I kept on at the training battalion, for physical education. I wasn't posted anywhere.

22:00 Oh, of course, I came out of the rookies into a company hut. And when you were made a sergeant, when you were made a corporal you were put into a staff hut. And when you were made a sergeant, you shared a room with three others. And one of my close friends now, well, Noni's always been a close friend. Noni Hosgood,

22:30 she and I were sergeant at the same time, and she used to, Noni's got a lovely speaking voice, and she used to say, "Podge, I can't understand you. You speak to the cooks in the same tone of voice as you speak to me." Don't know how she thought I was going to talk to the cooks, but I never remind Noni of that. But she's just got a lovely nature.

23:00 She lives in Noel Village. Mary Cadman who I rode in the jeep with, was in the battalion for a while, too. Some people didn't like living outdoors. Quite a few of us did. You get used to it. Joyce Whitworth who was our CO, and she was transferred to somewhere else,

23:30 she was a great friend of Barbara Donkins, who was an ambo, and they joined with us, and Barbara was the head of the ambulance, and Joyce was absolute problem with punctuality. You didn't dare be, well, you wouldn't be a minute late,

24:00 and it takes quite a while to line up a battalion. Barbara joined us as head of the ambos, and Barbara had no idea of time, and Joyce . . . Barbara would arrive as much as quarter of an hour late. But Joyce didn't say anything. Of course, they were very new. But later on, when Barbara was in the company, Joyce came up to visit her,

24:30 and Joyce, typical, was up early and she was roaming around very early in the morning, and she didn't have a coat on, just a hat on, and she said, "My word, Podge, your staff are cheerful. I said, "Thank you." But she said, "No one salutes." I said, "You haven't got any rank up,

25:00 they don't know who you are." She said, "Oh, Podge, I'm sorry." She was just roaming around, and they wouldn't have known who it was. I'm sorry Joyce has died. She was a very good CO. She was in the first course too, I think. Thirls was. Peg was.

25:30 But they had no idea they were going to take on so many women when they first started, dear. You know, they found that the women did so well, they needed more women. And that's how they transferred to Ingleburn. The hottest place on earth.

26:00 **And at one point did you stop wearing your giggle hat and frock?**

Oh, well, as soon as you finished your recruits course, you went on leave in your uniform. Even if it didn't fit. They were pretty good in the clothing store, and so many of us lost weight

26:30 because of the heat, which meant they had to give us all new uniforms, but oh, no. I think our uniform was excellent. I think everybody would agree with that. We used to laugh about not getting any underclothing. We got stockings later and shoes, and or course,

27:00 some of the girls wore nighties when they came in. and they couldn't wear nighties when you were running to the latrines and the showers.

Well, you've just mentioned that when you finished rookies, you then got some leave.

I got leave, yes. Three weeks. And then we came back to whatever posting you were given, and I came back to a staff shed and got on with teaching PE.

27:30 Oh, the troops loved it, but certainly I was transferred to something that I really knew about. But not only that, dear, you have to adapt yourself to the people you were working with,

28:00 you know. Now these women who were corporal cooks, were very charming women. And in most cases educated, but that didn't matter, but I mean, they knew what respect was and everything like that. Oh, they were wonderful and they all went on to be sergeants, and one, strangely enough,

28:30 General Northcott, who was our governor, his wife was a very bad, oh, you know, drank too heavily. And Sergeant Anderson, one of our cooks, cooked for her all her life.

29:00 She was well looked after and I actually met her sister, by accident, down in Melbourne, and it was a great tragedy to them that she was an alcoholic. And of course, he was one of our wonderful governors. I never heard what happened to any of the others,

29:30 but we've got this magazine called Khaki, which we all love, and I suppose it would be two years ago now, they asked me, Joan Weir, who's the editor, asked me to write a, something on the funny things that happened in the battalion. So I did that, and then just recently,

30:00 last year, at our battalion reunion, Livvie King, who's now Livvie Halteway, and Noss who's now Mrs Comans, and Bully, who hasn't married, they get it up. And they said, "Podge, will you write the thing for them, about the reunion this year?" And I said, "What about you people?"

30:30 "Oh, no, Podge, you write it." So anyway, I wrote something. And a lass rang me up, well it isn't a week ago, and she said, "Is this Podge?" and I said, "Yes." She said, "I'm Joan Atkins. Remember me, Podge?" And I said, "Well, I think you were on Else Campbell's PE troop." She said, "That's right, and you were for a while." I said, "Yes."

31:00 "Well," I said, "What occasion is this phone call?" And she said, "I was talking to somebody West," and she said, "I said to this lass, West, Oh, look I'm going to ring Podge up. And West said, "She mightn't be Podge now." And she said, "I'll give it a go."

31:30 And that would be sixty something years, and she told me that she's now married, she's a war widow, she's got three adult children, and they're all married. And she lives at Gosford. That's interesting isn't it? So we all think Joan Weir does an awfully good job with Khaki and if you want anybody, now Livvie puts the fact of our re-union in an early Khaki,

32:00 so we don't have to send out notices, and if you think somebody hasn't seen Khaki you ring them up and say, "Don't forget the re-union," and Roseville RSL gives a lovely private room, and we all pay for ourselves. Now, we've cut down as much overhead as we can, and what's-a-name came down from Gunnedah last year,

32:30 and Pearl Crystal came and she hadn't been for ten years, and Driver Islip came, and she hadn't been for about eight, and some of them say, they won't know anyone. And we say, "Come on, come on, of course, you'll know us." So I think it's wonderful that we're still going, don't you?

Can I just ask you about your,

33:00 **after your leave and your return to Ingleburn, and you started teaching PE, what were you teaching?**

Well, the three training companies, they were all in for five weeks. You had to take them separately. I could take Number 1 Company, and then Number 2 Company, and then Number 3 Company.

33:30 Oh, they loved it and so did it, because PE by that time was ore relaxed, you know, instead of the rigidity of discipline.

And what type of class did you devise?

Well, first of all I had to go by the numbers, and I didn't want too many, and I'd teach them country dancing, and things that were quite different from the training company,

34:00 and they always used to like to end up with some type of a relay. A team, or something like that. I did my level best to make it as relaxed, as against the disciplinary. But march them down, and march them back. I know Major Whitworth used to come down and stand behind a tree and see what we were doing.

34:30 And we, the troops used to say, “Did you see Major Whitworth?” Oh, well she was justified, seeing we weren’t fiddling our time. She told me afterwards she thought I worked them too hard.

And why did you have a reputation for working them too hard?

I suppose, you see, you go by your own stamina.

35:00 When I was teaching at Abbotsleigh, Miss Edread was the headmistress, and sometimes she’d come and watch a class, and I used to jokingly say to her, of course she was superb, “Miss Edread, what about joining in?” and she’d say, “I wish I could, but I haven’t got the stamina.” Oh, I wouldn’t, I didn’t overwork them,

35:30 but I don’t think there’s anything worse than a teacher having long intervals of the troops not knowing what to do. Oh, it was an excellent training. It’s still going, except it’s boys and girls now. And they, we got a diploma, they get a degree. What a lot of nonsense. A degree for Physical Education.

36:00 **And what were the girls wearing in their . . .?**

Giggle suits. These were rookies. All giggle suits. If they hadn’t managed to get one to fit them, they just wore one of the frocks they brought in themselves.

Well, I was going to ask you what they would wearing for the PE classes?

Oh, just a giggle suit, dear. Some of them would take their foundation garments off, or something like that. Make themselves,

36:30 oh, there was no respect for what they wore. I mean, when Else got the PE classes going, they got permission to actually supply their own, you know, their own outfits. We wore a black tunic with our crest on here, and of course, we wore stockings. They don’t now.

37:00 Oh, the PE now, the gymnastics is mainly individual. Oh, the gym at Abbotsleigh now is absolutely famous. They have all kinds of the most intricate gymnastics.

37:30 **I’m trying to get a picture of what your classes looked like, and what you were like during those classes.**

Well, dear, according to what I was teaching, they could be in rows, or rings, rings. Never standing at attention or anything like that. You had to be very relaxed.

38:00 And definitely you class would be, you’d say what you were going to do, and you’d say, and they’d all get into rings or lines, or something. Oh, they were wonderful days. There’s too much accent now on the will to win, and when I see what

38:30 the top gymnastics classes at Abbotsleigh do, oooh, they do the most amazing things. But a little bit too individual. But that’s just mine. You see, I’m a believer that all team games should be character building, but now the accent is too much on the win. And when you see the cricketers, jumping up and down and hugging themselves,

39:00 Bradman would turn in his grave. We played cricket at Abbotsleigh in my day, I managed to get my colours at thirteen, but that’s because I’ve got a natural aptitude, but Margaret and Barbara Peaton were at Abbotsleigh, and we learnt to play cricket correctly, and Margaret captained the first Australian team to go to England. And Betty Archdale was the one that captained the one from England,

39:30 and I get so cross because they give so much publicity to Betty Archdale, and completely forget about Margaret Peaton being an old Abbotsleigh girl. But the only school we used to play against were Frensham, because they played cricket, and you won your pocket those days for sport.

40:00 Now you win your pocket for all kinds of things. And when I got up to Abbotsleigh, some of the girls have got things right down to here. They get them for all kinds of things. I don’t mind what they get them for, provided it’s for some kind of a team game. I mean, it could be in the choir, or it could be in the orchestra. But, you learn to mix with other people.

40:30 I get exasperated with all they do, but still, I suppose they’ve got to do that to cope with the world we’re living in.

And where at Ingleburn, where would you conduct your PE classes?

On the straightest block of land I could find, under some trees, but later on it because a netball court.

41:00 Of course, Captain Hornsby liked to play tennis. She liked to play, and we used to play then against the WRANS [Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service]. Some lovely games against the navy. Not quite so many against the air force. And they did everything they could to look after the health side of the troops.

41:30 **Well, you’ve just mentioned that you were a cricket player. I’m wondering if you organised friendly matches of cricket?**

We tried to. It was the hardest thing in the world to get eleven people. And so it was for hockey. But we did prosper more than we did cricket. Because cricket now is much more prevalent in girls schools, but it was

Tape 4

00:30 **Helen, how long did you conduct PE classes for at Ingleburn?**

Oh, not long, I suppose three months, might have only been two because Joyce was worried about this mountain of food. They didn't have enough and this cow, Kilgore-Roberts, she was ruling by fear, and I mean,

01:00 when I went around and talked to the corporal cooks, and I said this Sergeant Kilgore-Roberts, "Oh, yes," and one said if you were brave enough to say anything, "It's no wonder Joyce was worried, in charge of fourteen hundred people

01:30 and not getting enough nourishment." But still I had the same problem in 64 Armoured barrack. You've got to feed people properly. That really was a task they gave me to do.

When you finished doing the PE classes, what was your rank?

Corporal.

02:00 And then Joyce made me a WO1. That was because I had to be senior to Sergeant Kilgore-Roberts.

So, can you just tell me, you stopped doing the PE classes and then what happened?

I went straight into controlling the battalion for feeding. And I just went around like my normal self,

02:30 and talked to the corporal cooks, and that's hasten slowly. I've never yet regretted having to follow that hasten slowly, because it paid me dividends in the army. Especially in 64 Armoured barrack, and when I started at Farmers, and we changed our Administrator here, see,

03:00 we used to have a nurse administrator, but now it's got so big we've got a male administrator, we've got a nurse coordinator, and another nurse. We have twenty four hour a day, but when Carolyn Craig left, who was the first administrator when I first came, nature's lady,

03:30 expert, and they brought in another woman that was a trained nurse, and said she'd had plenty of experience. She practically had the place to herself in five minutes, because she wanted to dismiss the cook. Do this, do that and do the other thing. And I knew they had to get rid of her,

04:00 and that was just a glaring example of not doing the right thing. And then the, see the Village now goes right down to Calga Road. It got beyond a nurse coordinator for the administration. So Mr Bead is there, Noel Bead, and Val Carter is the nurse coordinator

04:30 and she has trained sisters and carers, so we're covered for twenty four hours of the day. And they're all extremely experienced, but not only that, they've got the right personalities for the job. Which is terribly important, isn't it?

Can you tell me when you went to NCO school?

05:00 Yes. Oh, must have been July. January, February, March, April, May, Oh, might have been June of my first year. I can't give you the right date but all I can tell you is it was freezing. It probably would have been about June, dear, because by the time I got the, more food coming into the unit, and the battalion, that was when I was sent.

05:30 So it wouldn't have been before June, but the officers Training School, was late November, beginning of December of the same year. Had to go to Melbourne for that. By jove, that was something where you were watched all the time. Oh, it was very pleasant.

But first, before you went to Melbourne, you went . . .

Oh, yes. To the NCO school first.

06:00 **At Killara?**

Yes, dear.

Can you tell me a bit about that?

Yes. Well, you arrived and the first thing you had to do was pitch you tent, or at least try, and then you had to go and fill your palliasse, and you were allocated to a tent,

06:30 and then you came over to the main building for your shower and latrine, and also your meals. And the

CO was a Melbourne officer. The adjutant was Rose Taylor, who was my hockey captain and I knew Rose very well. But Rose didn't understand anything about food.

07:00 We used to have beetroot and white sauce. Ooooh. The food was terrible. However everyone got chilblains and one thing and another. And the sergeant, male, who was there to train us in giving orders and one thing and another, he was superb. And he quite understood that a woman's frame is a bit different to a man's.

07:30 And we all had to have turns making short public speeches. And the first ones, we were all given a subject, whether we knew anything about it or not. And you had to speak for a quarter of an hour. So, I've forgotten what my first subject was,

08:00 but it was something I didn't know anything about, so I had to make it up, and then you drew for when you came, and then you had to make a speech on a subject of your own choice. You see, that was all character building for administrative work, and then you were all tested on your ability to handle others. So you all took it in turns to be in charge of a certain number of people

08:30 to test whether you thought, "Oh, I can do it myself' and didn't get them to do it, or whether you persevered with them. And that was fun. Some of them you practically had to say, "Would you mind doing this for me." Or something, you know. But however, and then certain passed and certain people didn't pass.

09:00 But there were about sixty or eighty of us there, and I thought we were a very good team. And we had to walk from Killara down to where the school was, which was right down the bottom of Stanhope Road, freezing nights, but we used to have to take marches around the various streets, and in those days the baker would be in the high cart,

09:30 before your time, the high cart, sitting up here, and all the bread would be in a thing at the back, or the milkman delivered the mild to the customer's back door or something. And we'd be marching along and these carts would go by, and they'd oooh, aaah, (waving) Somebody would blow a whistle and that meant it was an air raid, and we'd all have to go and fling ourselves in the gutter, and these fellows would think it was a huge joke.

10:00 You know, sitting up in their carts with all the army girls in the gutter. Oh. They were lovely men, those men. You don't see it now, because nobody gets milk delivered, and I don't think anyone gets bread delivered, do they? No. But when I was very small, I suppose about six, I was staying with my cousin, they lived at Petersham.

10:30 And she was a trick too, and we were coming home school one afternoon, or coming home from something, and the baker stopped his cart, because it was pouring with rain. And he said, "Come on children, I'll put you in the back." So he put us in the back where the bread was before that, and when we got out we were covered in bread. I know the aunt was furious. But Josie and I never forgot that.

11:00 Good baker who stopped us from getting wet in the back of his cart. They were such simple days, dear, you know. This wonderful friend of mine that's the grandmother of ten children, she's very experienced with the computer and one thing and another, and the other day her youngest grandchild was standing by her, and Beverley was looking at something, and Gabby said, "Grandma, I can help you. Do so and so."

11:30 And Beverley nearly died. Five year old telling her how to use the computer. I suppose you can, can you? Use the computer?

Well, I'd just like to ask you, you were a corporal when you went to the NCO school at Killara.

No sergeant by that time. No warrant officer. I was never a sergeant. WO.

12:00 **Well, at NCO school, what were you training for, or what were you training to become?**

An officer.

Can you tell me about that rank?

Well, dear, that was when I went back to the battalion and got on with the job, and was sent out to be an officer to come back as,

12:30 I came back just as an officer, which was a thrill, and I worked Miss Drury as, on the QM [Quartermaster] side, but fortunately I still had the feeding of the battalion. But Miss Drury wasn't easy to work with. Oh. Some people told me she was kind. Three of the girls in the QMs office

13:00 went down to the beach for the weekend, and you know that sunburn is the self-inflicted wound. And she made them come on duty. I said, "Oh, Miss Drury." She told me to mind my own business in other words. And each one of those girls fainted. They couldn't sit down,

13:30 because the silly rabbits got all behind their legs sunburnt. People say, "Oh, Miss Drury, she was so kind." And I'm sorry, I can't agree. But when the ambos came in, Barbara was in charge of them, their idea of discipline was about ten streets below ours.

14:00 And Joyce Whitworth said, “Come on, Podge, you’ve got to bring them into line.” Well, first of all, none of them were punctual. Secondly, they were sloppy about their dress. But they had the dearest little officer who was their quartermaster, and Miss Drury said I had to get a blanket count, and I had two days to get it.

14:30 So I said to this dear little woman, “You and I have got a job to do. She said, “Oh, not another job.” I said, “We have to get a blanket count.” My dear, she nearly swooned. She said, “I wouldn’t know how many blankets we’ve got.” I said, “Well, I’ll tell you how many you’re supposed to have.” She said, “Oh, Podge, no.” My dear, they were two hundred short.

15:00 Because some of them had taken them and made dressing gowns out of them. I’ll never forget trying to tell Miss Drury that they were two hundred short. Oh. Anyway I briefed Joyce, because I said to Joyce, “Look this is quite wrong of me, but this is the problem.” And I said, “Please don’t let Miss Drury be rude and everything.” Because I said, “She’s the dearest little woman,”

15:30 and I said ‘That’s the way they’ve been living.” And we went around to their huts after that, and found all kinds of dressing gowns made out of their blankets. Oh, we had a great struggle getting those ambos into line. Well, I mean if their officer arrived twenty minutes for a parade, they were lovely lasses.

16:00 You see, when they came back from the Middle East, they were all in the Middle East as VAs [Volunteer Aid]. And you could either stay on as a VA and just work in the hospital, or you could enlist and join the army. So you had a mixture of both. Some of them would have thought, well, we’ll enlist, not realising the big difference in the discipline. And some of them stayed on as VAs.

16:30 They’d all been in the Middle East, so they weren’t children. Do you want my life history.

Agnes, I think we’re going to stop for lunch.

Not Agnes. Helen. Podge.

Helen. Sorry. Podge. Well, Helen, I’d like to take up you story where we left off. You were just telling me that when you got to Killara you were required to pitch tents.

17:00 But I thought we got down to the officers school.

Not quite.

Righto dear. We pitched the tents and they were bell shaped tents. We filled our palliasses, and we were allocated a tent, and we went over to the main building for our showers and our meals. The food was tragic ,

17:30 we were in this, the sergeant or warrant officer, male, who was in charge of us was excellent, and I think I told you, he realised that women bodies were different to men, and we had masses of marching, basically to include how to give orders,

18:00 one of the lasses said, we were all marching along and she said, “I’ve forgotten what you have to say, but whatever it is, what about stopping.” She was gorgeous. We each had a chance of doing that. We all had to make a speech, the first speed the subject was chosen for us. And the second speech we made ourselves.

18:30 Our table manners and our ability to entertain was taken into account, but nothing like the officer training school. We went on quite a lot of route marches, and I think I told you the milkman and the baker went past and we we’d be lying in the gutter, because we’d obeyed a whistle that meant there was an air raid on.

19:00 The girls that failed were whisked away very tactfully, I felt. You looked around and said, “Where’s so and so?” And the others went back to their own units, or they were transferred somewhere else. I went back to Ingleburn and I was there till, I think, late November when I was sent down to the officers training school.

19:30 I think we got as far as that, and that was very well supervised. You practically felt they were sleeping in bed with you. But anyway, it was very happy. We each had an opportunity to be the officer on duty for the day, and when we went on the sleeping out, the young officer on the staff said,

20:00 “We’ve all chosen to give it to you Podge, because you’re the only practical one here.” So we went and lived at Balcombe for nearly three weeks. Had to pitch our tents and we slept on ground sheets, and we had our greatcoats for a pillow and a few blankets, and we had to dig our latrine trench, we had to set up our shower,

20:30 and we had to dig our cooking trench, and we had to, a certain number of lectures during the day time, quite a bit of marching, and then map reading at night, that I couldn’t do. But it was very happy. It was more relaxing.

21:00 Then you came back and you were called in to our controller, the late Cybil Irving and told you had passed, and handed your pips. And we were the first course that were given our pips on the job. And the others all had,

21:30 when I got back to Ingleburn and went to report of Joyce Whitworth, she said, “Good gracious. You’ve got your pips already, I thought I was going to give them to you.” And I said, “Well, Colonel Irving gave them to me.” I think two or three girls didn’t get through, but they, one of the girls in our course was Joan Gordon-Bennett, you know, whose father was Major-General Gordon. I felt sorry for Joan, she was a delightful girl. She lived in Western Australia.

22:00 Of course, he father was coming under all kinds of criticism over Singapore. But, oh, I enjoyed that. When we had written exams, I often came bottom with 86, 87, because some of the girls were very academic, they’d get 99, or something like that, but half the time they couldn’t carry out what they had written. It often happens,

22:30 doesn’t it. So I said to one of the lasses that was on the staff, “Gosh, I’m always coming last.” She said, “Well, last isn’t bad because you’re getting 87, 88. You couldn’t get much less, could you?” but anyway, there’s the officers’ school. And then the next one was quite a while later. I think I told you.

23:00 I was sent down to what they called the ‘Big Girls’ school. Some of the matrons from overseas, they wouldn’t do what they were told. Matron Cahill always stayed in bed and smoked. Girly Harris was good fun. As long as she put her bets on the races.

And when you completed the officer training school at Melbourne,

23:30 Oh, about the second week of December, of the second week in December. I was just home, I suppose about a fortnight before Christmas. So literally, I came right through in one year. But I think, you worked hard, dear, and you had the ability, they were only too pleased to upgrade you.

And what was your rank at the end of that term?

24:00 Only a lieutenant. You’ve got to understand that some people could have got more rank, but if they were in a mixed unit, a men’s unit, it would be very hard for them to get a captaincy. And a tremendous amount depended on how many your particular unit could carry. It might be listed as one officer, so many lieutenants,

24:30 so many sergeants. So you could be a very senior officer. Well, dear, I was very happy to be an officer, at least I got a room to myself. And I think it’s good for you to come through the ranks. I don’t think it’s any good being something without knowing what everyone else had to do.

25:00 It’s good. You’ve come through everything. Especially the recruits course. We all agree on that one.

And what qualities do you think you needed to be a good officer?

I think the ability to manage people, dear, because you’re talking to the wrong person,

25:30 because I believe in discipline. You’ve got to be able to manage people, and not have favourites. That’s your downfall. And I mean, it comes more naturally to some and not to others. I have two friends, and when they were told they’d got their officers pips, they nearly died. Well, they didn’t know how they were going to tell anybody what to do. I said, “Well, just tell them, but don’t order them. Tell them.”

26:00 We only had one or two officers that went through the battalion that got frightfully, frightfully uppity because they’d got their pips, and that didn’t go down. You no, nearly everybody that got their pips just went on being themselves. But certainly not playing favourites.

26:30 Oh, I don’t know, we had a wonderful staff and we all got on well. I was telling you about Margaret Armstrong telling me, “Officers can’t be seen talking to privates,” when I was busy sweeping the place with my giggle frock on. Well, Betty Bull, who was our orderly room sergeant, they used to ring every day and say

27:00 what troops that were in holding company waiting for their postings. Their postings had come through. And Margaret probably was the one that spoke to Bully, and she’d say, “These people are to go to…” I’ll say what? “Bougainville tonight.” And Bully would write down. Now she had no appreciation that first of all we had to find Private so and so.

27:30 She’d be in holding company, she could be on leave, she could be away sick. Margaret thought with a stroke of a pen she could do that. So one day Bully was away and she said, “Miss Armstrong speaking.” And I thought, “Oh, jump in the lake.” I said, “It’s Podge here.” ‘Where’s Sergeant Bull?” I said, “She happens to be away.”

28:00 So she said, “Are you ready?” and I said, “Yes.” ‘Well, there’s three to go so and so.” And I said, “Oh, well, I’ve got to find them, you know.” “Don’t be flippant!’ I said, “I’m just being realistic.” That was the type of person she was. When Bully came back, Bully said, “Oh, Podge, you didn’t say that to Miss Armstrong.” She was Miss Armstrong then. Well, dear me, with a stroke of a pen

28:30 she expected to find people to go here, people to go there, people to go somewhere else. Because they had no idea of what it was like living in a unit. Bully often teases me about that.

Well, having gone to officers school, and become a lieutenant, and also meeting Cybil Irving,

I'm wondering what your impressions of how the AWAS was being run.

29:00 Excellent. I've no criticism. I literally have no criticism. Because they were, well, everybody I had to deal with was human. There was no unhumanity.

29:30 I mean from the corporal up who looked after us in recruits school, she was strict but she was fair. And I think I told you she said, "If your beds haven't got the ten inch turn down, they'll be stripped." But they were tolerant. If the next morning someone's bed wasn't quite right, it'd be just turned back. And they wouldn't put the boot in

30:00 unless someone was terribly lazy. But some of the girls were terribly frightened that they wouldn't have a ten inch turn down and they'd sleep on the floor or do something like that. Oh, no. Mind you, I think some of the eighteen year olds. You see, when I enlisted you were twenty one years old, then they, when they wanted more recruits, they let it down to eighteen. But nearly everybody was,

30:30 well, they weren't children any longer. And I think they realised that you don't get anywhere unless you're well disciplined. I literally have no comments to make, other than the best. And I think that would go for all our girls.

31:00 Nobody was unfair. Fairly treated.

And what type of difference did you encounter through your promotions?

Oh, more authority, dear. You made the decisions and people carried them out.

31:30 You didn't have to revert it to somebody else. Bill Hornsby was very strict. We had women officers from a couple of other companies eligible to use our officers' mess, and Bill Hornsby would not have the bar open at lunch times, and we agreed,

32:00 but these couple of women put on a bit of an act and they used to open the bar for them, and one in particular, whether deliberate or not, forgot to pay for her drinks. This is one of the things I put in the Khaki. One weekend I came home from leave and I saw a notice on my cupboard.

32:30 'Podge, don't faint when you open the cupboard door'. When I opened it there were all drinks from the officers' mess. That was to stop those two women coming over and soaking in the weekend and not paying, so she hid all the drink in my cupboard. But we didn't think that you were a good officer if you wanted to drink at lunch time. If you wanted a drink of soft, something like that.

33:00 We only ever drank at night. And I think I told you I didn't drink and when we had to entertain these officers, male officers, they'd bring an awful lot of liquor with them, and Elsa Storey who unfortunately has died, she said, "Podge, you've got to drink something. Whisky and water is a safe drink. And if they keep hammering you,

33:30 just turn around and throw it in the aspidistra." So anyway, Mother, I was at home for leave after that, and Mother was entertaining some business people, and I was looking after the drinks, and someone said would I have a drink, and Mother's younger sister was there, and is said, "I'll have a half brandy, half whisky,"

34:00 and when Mother was going to bed at night she said Auntie Nell said to her, "Oh, Ethel, I told you if Helen went into the army she'd start to drink." But you couldn't, I mean, Stall did the right thing to make me fell more relaxed. Have a whisky and water and if nobody was looking, pour it into the aspidistra, and then I'd be ready for another one. I don't think I was the only one that didn't drink.

34:30 But you couldn't drink, and I can't drink sherry now. I might drink creamed sherry and soda water. Because I think it's very powerful, it's all spirits. But I mainly drink half whisky and water. It's a safe drink. I think the worst thing was the number of girls who smoked,

35:00 and two of my closest friends in the army have both died of emphysema. Now Enid Rogers was in charge of Number 3 Company when I was a sergeant, and we'd run out of officers and Terry White and I were both on night duty. You know, prowling the place.

35:30 I've forgotten what we came across, and Terry said, "Oh, Podge, I think we'd better refer this to Enid Rogers." And Enid was sitting up in bed smoking. Now, she literally never had a cigarette out of her mouth, and her last two years of life, she wore something like that (indicates hands in front of face), you know, and Joan Denver-Stevenson

36:00 was a sergeant when I was a rookie, and she said to me, "Do you smoke?" and I said, "No." And she said, "Well the canteen won't serve me now, so I'll get you to buy my cigarettes." So Private MacDougall, I was up there one day and asked for cigarettes and the sergeant in charge of the canteen said, "Private MacDougall, do you smoke?" and of course I innocently said, "No."

36:30 "Well, you must be buying those cigarettes for Sergeant Denver-Stevenson. Well, you can't have them." She died of emphysema. Patty Melville, who was a terribly clever girl, lovely girl, she smoked heavily and she was sent to the battalion for me to have in Q, and give her any kind of job I could find

37:00 that kept her away from the desk. So Patty said to me, “What are you giving me to do, Podge?” I said, “Oh, plenty of outside,” “Oh, Podge.” So anyway, I hammered it and every now and again I let, gave in and let Patty have a desk job, because you see you could smoke. But she hadn’t done anything,

37:30 she got two degrees after that, and she had the most terrible death from emphysema. People are still smoking, dear. It never appealed to me. Don’t know about you.

Well, I was just about to ask you, during the 1940s, smoking was very popular.

Oh, terrible. Especially women. And you see

38:00 the issues of cigarettes to women in the army was very liberal, and if you didn’t smoke yourself you could bet your bottom dollar your friends would ask you to bring cigarettes home for them. And I think more women smoke than men now. I think they give it up after a while, but . . .

And whereabouts was smoking allowed when you were in the army?

38:30 Anybody smoked, smoked in bed, smoked anywhere. Oh, you couldn’t smoke in the officers’ mess. Not until after we’d passed the port. You couldn’t smoke during the meal. After we’d passed the port, you know, it went from one to the other and didn’t touch the table. And then you could smoke. Oh, but some of them smoked terribly. Very heavily.

39:00 They couldn’t smoke when on duty, but they smoked in the hut and, ah, well, they all suffered the consequences.

Well, I’m very interested to hear that in the AWAS officers dining room you would pass the port. Where does that come from?

I hate to tell you,

39:30 but you had an official mess, say, once a month, and each one took it in turns to be the officer that started off passing the port. And it went from one hand, it didn’t touch the table. And you learnt that at the officers’ school. Oh, it was a lovely tradition.

40:00 I’m a great traditionalist. Passing the port. And you all had to be at dinner, at night, before your senior officer came in. As a matter of fact, Joyce Whitworth was very strict about the officers being to breakfast before she came in. That was, I think that was quite right too,

40:30 give someone a hurry up out of bed. It didn’t affect me because I had to be up very early to see that all the kitchens were going and one thing and another. I suppose I could have got somebody else to do it but I didn’t. Oh, no, passing the port was lovely. But you’re talking to a traditionalist, dear. You’re not talking to a republican.

41:00 **Well, I’m very interested to hear what other traditions you took part in, but we might just going to change our tape first.**

Tape 5

00:30 **Helen, I’d like to take up your story again by asking if you could tell me about any other army traditions that you enjoyed.**

Oh, well, I suppose the most liberal one is that you have to salute an officer. I think that’s the most, and then of course, there’s this other petty one that I think, officers can’t be seen talking to privates.

01:00 I just think rank imposes obligation. A private would never walk in front of an officer, but on the same hand, I don’t think many officers would put a private in that particular position. You know, they’d either step in front or something like that. I don’t know any other, but the absolute necessary was, you had to salute an officer.

01:30 **And can I ask you, just going back to the OTS in Melbourne, who were your instructors?**

In Melbourne? Oh, various senior officers, not all female. The military side was all male officers.

02:00 Traditional things, such as correct procedures at mess at night, would all be female officers. Personally I think they were all chosen very wisely. We had none that couldn’t keep order, but on the other hand they didn’t really have to keep order, because if you were there to try and be an officer, you really weren’t going to play up.

02:30 The Q officer, I felt, was very good because she had to inspect how we kept our rooms and one thing and another. We all had experience in entertaining, you know, such as a very senior officer coming, and we had to do the proper routine

03:00 for entertaining and looking after. Oh, no, they were pretty well chosen. The original army people, in many cases, who got promotion, were all senior guides. They relied very heavily. Now, Thirls,

03:30 who is the most ultra modest person I ever came across, her great friend of army days, was Peg Wright, and they formed the friendship because Peg happened to be in one of Thirls's groups. And Thirls had to teach them how to tie knots and a few things like that, you know. And Peg, who I don't think had even made a bed before she came into the army, she was hopeless.

04:00 And that's the great joke between those two, always. The way a very practical person had the patience to try and teach someone who'd never done anything like that in their life. But the senior guides were a wonderful help, dear. Because you don't hear much about guiding now, unfortunately, because they're all crazy about the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. It's got its merits but it's overcoming your own things,

04:30 because I like things you do in groups. Which you hardly ever hear about guiding now, they're all crazy about getting their award for the Duke of Edinburgh. And they used to have to do one night's or a certain number of hours in the bush on their own. But they've had to stop that now, and one of the father's, or something like that,

05:00 they're not supposed to have any contact with them, but they won't allow them to go out now because of all the terrible things that are happening, but they still do it.

And can you recall what classes the men took you for at the OTS?

Mostly the physical side, oh, I think we had one officer, male officer

05:30 on army tradition. The man that we had in the NCO school was purely physical. Everything to do with physical education, marching, giving orders, and things like that. I'm not sure who they invited in. We would have had the officer in charge of the NCO,

06:00 have three people judging little speeches we made. And, no, not much contact. I think we had one man that came up to Balcombe, just to see that we were digging the holes and things correctly. Oh, no. As I said, I think most of

06:30 these women who did these jobs were early guides. You don't hear much about them now, unfortunately.

I asked you because I'm interested, whether, or how the men in the army responded to a new Women's Army Service.

07:00 I don't think I ever heard an army officer, male, say 'just a woman'. I think the fact that the women pitched in and did so much of the men's work, did nothing but win praise.

07:30 No. I think we all worked very well together. Mind you, some women might have got back what they gave out. Well, I'd say, serve them right. There was never any officer I worked with, I can only say I held them in high respect. I didn't have any difficult ones at all.

08:00 I wasn't very happy about Captain Clancy. She was Joyce's adjutant, and I was a corporal then on the staff of Enid Rogers. And before the war, if I wanted to come down to Sydney for a dance, Mother knew Mr Wellman, Harvey Wellman, who was the manager of Ushers Hotel,

08:30 which is no longer, and he had an excellent housekeeper and even if they were full, they would find somewhere for me to sleep. Well, then, Joyce was sent down to Melbourne for six weeks, and we got this officer up who we didn't, well, I suppose we tolerated her, but she stopped all night leave. Oh, it was terrible.

09:00 And Miss Clancy rang, to me, and I was in the Orderly Room, and said would I book accommodation for major so and so, for Usher's for the weekend. And I said, "Harvey Wellman had already asked me not to do it, because all kinds of people were using my name." And I said I couldn't do it.

09:30 She said, "I'll make it worth your while." And Enid Rogers heard it and she said, "Podge, she stinks!" And I thought, "Well, so she does." I said, "I'm sorry I can't." So I said, "Well, I suppose I'll be a corporal for the rest of my life." Enid Rogers said, but that was terrible. 'I'll make it worth your while." So I never respected Edna Clancy after that.

10:00 But I think when Joyce left the unit, I'm not too sure what Edna Clancy did, but she never won my respect. Can't say that to do that to a corporal. And I don't know where the officer went for the weekend.

10:30 **Well, you just mentioned that you didn't have very much contact with men from the army . . .**

No. But she was a woman taking Joyce's place for six weeks. She cancelled all night leave and when Joyce came back she said, "Podge, nobody's smiling. What have you been through?" And I said, "Oh, well, it hasn't been easy." And I said, "I think the first thing was it was terribly cold,

11:00 and we only had little stoves, and she cancelled all night leave." Joyce nearly had a stroke.

So, when you left the OTS, you're now a lieutenant, and where are you posted?

11:30 I was taken away from the company to clean up the 64 Armour Barrack. I think I told you they asked for a strict officer. Captain Hornsby said, “Podge, that’s you.”

And where was the 64 Armoured . . .

Strathfield, dear. There were four hundred troops going out each day to their own particular field,

12:00 a wide variety of jobs, and some of them in their own particular field, were sergeants and corporals, and it was a magnificent old home, and a beautiful block of land and they put up all these huts. Each hut holding twenty two troops. And an ablution block, and a latrine block and mess hut.

12:30 It was really beautiful and this very nice officer from Melbourne, what’s her name, and she had this problem because her adjutant quartermaster smoked heavily, Pamela Stevenson, and she was never well, and she felt the whole place had got out of hand. And it certainly had. And they asked for a strict officer. When they were told I was coming,

13:00 they were all going to give me curry, but they forgot about the hasten slowly, you see. I was very thrilled that that was successful, because, before I had to retire, we were having dances. I said, and the CO agreed, that they could have dances provided everybody was off the

13:30 premises by midnight. And really, they were wonderful. They had lovely dances and that was all because they were being strictly looked after. And fairly looked after. You can imagine an officer coming from a training battalion, where everything has to be right, coming into a barrack, where troops came on parade in the morning with clips in their hair,

14:00 half their pyjamas hanging down, and goodness knows what. Can you imagine what it was like to me? Oh, god, I nearly died. And they weren’t staying in for meals. So, hasten slowly. Practice it any time you get a chance.

Well, before we go on to hear more about the 64 Barrack,

14:30 **can I just ask you when you received your heavy truck licence?**

After I what, dear?

When did you get your heavy truck licence?

Oh, I got it before the army. I had, Mr Shannessy ran the tourist buses in Katoomba. He rang me up to see if I was willing to give it a go, and I did the exam and I passed, and I used to drive the tourist buses,

15:00 and then the people that owned the big laundry, rang to see if I’d drive the laundry cart. If they’d send someone to come with me, but the tourist buses were a scream. People would go to get in, and they’d see me, and they’d practically not get in. And mind you, it wasn’t easy like now, when they have, you know, automatic. We had to change gears and one thing and another.

15:30 I did that right till I was called up. And sometimes at night, the local doctors would be training the Red Cross Aides, and they’d call me to drive the ladies to where they were to find the scout that was supposed to have the broken leg, or something. And then these darling ladies,

16:00 they’d look at the scout, they’d bind up his leg, and fix him up and then we’d have to get him back to the hospital. And I can remember one doctor I could have killed. They went to so much trouble, binding this fellow’s leg up and everything, and when we got back to the hospital the doctor came along and he said, “Is this what I’m supposed to be looking at?”

16:30 and they said, with all pride, “Yes.” he said, “Well, he’s dead.” I could have killed him. You see, they’d forgotten to take the blood pressure and whatever you have to do, you know. “He’s dead. He bled to death.” I could have killed that doctor. Why couldn’t he have been more, and said, “Ladies, you’ve done a wonderful job binding the leg up but you’ve forgotten something,” and they would have said, “Now, what did we forgot,” and done it properly.

17:00 But he said, “He’s dead. He bled to death.” Those poor women. They were beside themselves.

Well, I imagine that having a heavy truck licence could have been quite useful in the army.

Oh, very. Because sometimes at the weekend, if the girls were on duty, Bill Hornsby would like to take them for a swim.

17:30 So I’d take them for a swim. Of course, the others would be. But the main job really was to go and collect the troops from Liverpool station. Because the drivers found that the lads were a bit difficult, well, of course, when they saw an officer driving the truck, I’d say, “Come on fellows. Out you get.” And some of them were reluctant,

18:00 so I’d say, “Well, we’re driving off a truckload of troops, and if you hang on, you hang on at your own,” and some of them used to hang on for a little and then, or course, drop off. But they made it very hard for the drivers. So, I’ve come in handy that way.

18:30 And often on the weekend, when we wouldn't have a driver in that had a heavy licence, and Bill Hornsby would say, "Podge, are you willing to take them?" There were a couple of places around Ingleburn, I don't know where, St George's River or somewhere, where she used to get me to take them for a swim. Bit rocky I felt, but she was very good that way.

19:00 Everybody worked hard. She liked to show them that, you know, she appreciated it.

Well, at the 64 Armoured Barrack, who was the CO?

I can't tell you. But a Victorian officer, a captain, and I think her name was Thompson. But I wouldn't like to say so, but she was extremely gracious. And I would say, very good.

19:30 But you see, four hundred people, with an adjutant quartermaster that wasn't backing her up, things were not getting done, and having this pig of a butcher, who was thieving, and the food wasn't coming in. I felt she did the right thing in calling for help. That really was an exercise.

20:00 And they didn't admire themselves for it, dear, when they all got into, you know, just got a bit out of hand. Dear oh dear, will I ever forget it.

Well, four hundred . . .

Four hundred troops in the barrack, and they all went to their own particular fields every day.

20:30 There would be base posts, oh, all kinds of things. Engineering workshops, some of them were drivers. Oh, there were a multitude of jobs and some of them were corporals and sergeants in their own particular field. And then they'd come back here and behave disgracefully. Oh, they all admitted that it just became a snow ball.

21:00 Fancy someone coming from the training battalion to watch troops come on parade in the morning with their hair in pins and things. Oh, it was a nightmare. But soon we got them well fed.

And out of that four hundred, how many were privates?

21:30 Oh, I wouldn't know, dear. There would be certain sections. I would say the bulk would be private. Or drivers. For instance, you never, you would humiliate a driver

22:00 if you didn't call them Driver so and so. If they were a driver, they liked to be called by their category. I don't blame them.

And can you tell me a bit about the different personalities?

Well, I told you about Amy Taylor, who I admire immensely.

22:30 I think I told you a bit about Noni Hosgood. Who said, "I can't understand you, Podge. You speak in the same tone of voice to the cooks as you do to the sergeants." I didn't have any other, I never had any major personality problems at all, except Chilly, who was in the officer

23:00 charge of the clothing store, that I told you insisted on taking the little ute to the officer's mess, and Driver Islip knew she couldn't do it, and I knew she couldn't do it, and she said, "I have superiority or something above you

23:30 because I did the officers training course before you," and of course, Major Aspinall said I shouldn't have accepted that, but I did. Oh she was, then of course she ended up with a fractured skull and a few other things. The truck was worthless. I don't know how Peg Wright went with her, but Peg did.

24:00 And got a fractured spine of something.

And how long did you spend with the 64 Barracks?

64 Armour Barracks. I suppose nine months. I was just about to go back, and when I got the other, Mother, Dr McIntosh asked me to go out on

24:30 compassionate leave. And that took six weeks to come through. Well, I can't, he did the right thing because the war was over, and I was needed more at home. And of course, they knew I came in with a widowed working mother, and that was why I wasn't eligible to go to New Guinea. But I wasn't eligible to go to New Guinea anyway, because my blood count's too low.

25:00 I tried to give a blood transfusion three times, and been told by the Red Cross not to come back and waste their time. So it's interesting, because little Dorky, who's only quite petite, she could give a blood transfusion every month. And they used to come round to Farmers, once a year,

25:30 to see how many people could give blood, and they urgently need blood now, but they have to take many more precautions now than they did years ago. You had to have a very high blood count, to live in such an atmosphere of New Guinea. You know, it was very humid, and they said they had to wear trousers, they said the conditions were terrible, and some of my friends that served in the Middle East,

26:00 they said the living conditions in the Middle East were excellent, but in New Guinea they were terrible.

Ah. Fortunately the women were medically, you see, a lot of our men were sent without a proper medical, and they all had to come back.

26:30 They couldn't live there, whether you'd want to live there, that's your own affair, but you don't want to be a nuisance to the army. Oh, and they had all kinds of monkeys and goodness knows what, hopping around the huts and that. Oh, Amy Taylor's quite interesting, and Curly's quite interesting, and so is Gwen. But it's not fair you know.

27:00 You had to be in a certain category to be selected to go to New Guinea. You had to be some type of a clerk or something like that. And those girls all get the gold card. It's very unfair. But we're not bitter about it. Fancy the second wife of a returned serviceman getting it, when the first wife's still alive.

27:30 But we did try recently to get it for troops over ninety, and most of the doctors thought we'd get it, but I don't know. If you get cancer, say you have breast cancer, well you get it for breast cancer. You won't get it for your whole body.

28:00 I've got two army friends, two officers, and they get any help they can if they have to go somewhere or do something. Of course, breast cancer, but that's all.

And can you describe your hut and where you lived, at 64 Armoured?

Oh,yes, dear. Well, you couldn't get much petrol,

28:30 but I sometimes had to bring it to the city, and I'd be driving home to Katoomba. In those days you'd be driving on your own. If something went wrong, you'd just get out and wave somebody. But if I saw anybody in uniform, I picked them up. You never gave it a second thought. Because if somebody saw you in uniform, they'd pick you up. But you wouldn't do it now.

29:00 I used to drive all those distances by myself. You never gave a thought to it. But sometimes if Mother needed something urgently, I'd go up after work and come back the next morning. But all these silly people that are driving I don't know how many miles. I play bridge

29:30 at our bowling club, once a month, and my cousin's wife, Beatrice, who I've got high regard for, she loves to come. She lives at Double Bay. And she picks one of my friends up, and not this Monday, but the Monday before, she was picked up at ten o'clock in the morning for driving over forty miles an hour in a school zone.

30:00 She didn't know where the school was anyway. All the schools on the highway. You ought to be careful driving through North Turramurra after, because you drive right past the school.

Well, you've just mentioned that when you were at Strathfield, you sometimes went home for the night . . .

No, not at Strathfield, dear.

30:30 When I was working after the war.

So just to go back to Strathfield then, when you were at the 64 AWA barrack, where were you living?

At the barrack. We lived in the house. We all had single rooms in the upstairs of the house. None of the troops lived in the house.

31:00 I think the sister did, the nursing sister, but all the other staff had their quarters in the huts. And the butcher had his tent. Ooooh. Terrible creature.

And how did you get on with the other officers?

Well there was only the senior one,

31:30 who was in charge of the building, in charge of the barrack, Captain so and so, and I took Pamela Stevenson's place. There were only the two of us. Dear, I didn't not get on with anyone. People would say I worked too hard, or something like that or, "Leave it to Podge," or. But I found

32:00 that it keeps coming back to me, both in my work life and in my army life, "Podge, you were strict but you were fair." And that's all I want. I was just strict because I suppose it was the way I was brought up. Now, in one of my rounds, one weekend, I came across a miniature hairdressing salon. And I said, "Who's the hairdresser?"

32:30 and Driver Islip said, "I am." I said, because she was such a good driver, she was so honest, she did much beyond her call of duty, I just said, "Well, carry on but don't overdo it." I wasn't going to reprimand someone, and I found out afterwards that she used to set some of the officers' hair.

33:00 She was an outstanding hairdresser. She had two salons and sold one and went into the army, and put a lass in to manage the other one. And she was terrified that she'd be put into hairdressing, and when she had to do that aptitude test, she put down that she was very adaptable, with tours and things,

33:30 and she was sent to the Cowra Training Unit, and we had this one driver, that we were worried about, because we used to think that Chilly got her to carry liquor, and I wasn't happy about her, so the CO said she could be transferred, and she said, "When you ring Cowra,

34:00 we don't only want a safe driver, but we want a mature woman." And they sent Grace. Oh, our troubles were over. And they used to come to me in the morning and say, "Driver Islip is going to so and so today. Could she drop some milk into my aunt. She goes right past her home." And I'd say, "Have you asked Driver Islip?"

34:30 "Yes, and she's happy to do it if you agree." "Okay." You see, and if the girls were going on leave for the weekend, she'd drive them up to the, we had a big dairy near us. She'd run up to the dairy and get them milk. And it wasn't carton milk in those days. You'd buy it by the bottle or something. So they

35:00 could take milk home for their families on the weekend. You can do all kinds of things that are sensible.

You had a very unusual life in that you've chosen a working life, and a business career and an army career over a family life.

35:30 If you had a mother and an aunt who worked all their life. We were a very closely knit family, but they worked all their life and gave me a good education, which I am convinced started me off in my work life, and I also feel I've been successful in my ability.

36:00 I couldn't have done better than being at Farmers and rising to be a senior personnel and a training officer, but you see, I loved people and they all tell me I was strict, but those girls don't forget me. That was my 90th birthday, we had a lovely 93rd birthday recently,

36:30 and the army people are just as good. And you've got to remember they've all got families. Now this holiday weekend, I thought well, I can't do anything, and I thought I can't go out, because they're all doing something with their families, and you can't blame them for forgetting someone who hasn't got a family. But I mean, Bruce and Bea are wonderful but they've got other obligations. And Graham my godson, who isn't a family member,

37:00 at the present moment, he's not terribly well, but he used to do my typing, because nobody could read my handwriting, and if I've got business letters to write, I like them typed. And Graham types them for me, and he'll do some shopping for me. So I'm very grateful for what I've got. And you also have to remember, the older you get the few friends you have.

37:30 Because they've died, or Libby Holdaway, Libby King, she and I are very close, but Libby lives in Mosman, and she has my problem, and the Mosman community does wonders. Like Libby goes out for trips in cars and buses and that, but don't ask Kuringai to do it.

38:00 They won't do a damn thing, excuse my language. Now Jan Haskins, my doctor, who strangely enough, went to Abbotsleigh, wanted me to go up to the surgery. She normally comes here. That's her idea. And she said, "I know a wonderful man, Ted Head, he drives for the Community Services,

38:30 and I'll give you his name and his telephone number and he'll bring you up to see me and take you home for five dollars." And she said, "Now, don't forget to give him a chance because he's an awfully nice bloke." So I rang the number, and I asked for Mr Head. She said, "Wrong number." And I said, "Well, I don't think so. Doctor Haskins has given me this number." "It's one of the drivers. What do you want?" I said, "Well, Dr Haskins

39:00 said he would bring me up to her surgery." "You've got to qualify." So I said, "All right." So she said, "How old are you, and where do you live?" I said, "Huon Park." "Self care?" I said, "No. I'm in the Lodge." And listen to this. "We can help the self care

39:30 because they are making it their responsibility to live in their own home, live in their own home, and all these people in self care have come out of their homes, one, because they like to travel a lot and it's safer, and two, their husband doesn't want to do his gardening. He'd sooner go and play his golf."

40:00 Now they'll help the self care, even if they've got a car, they won't help us. Jan was furious, that's Dr Haskins. She said, "Well, I'm going to take that up, and can I use you as a test case." She didn't get anywherethey said. We could, that is, the Lodge, the nurse coordinator could hire a car for us. You can't get a car for under

40:30 twenty dollars or more, so all these people in self care, can go to the doctor, the eye specialist, anywhere like that, even do their shopping, for five dollars. Now how about that. And Libby, her Mosman business, the same as Kuringai. They take Libby shopping,

41:00 and Libby goes on all the outings and things like that. So don't live in the Kuringai area. Not fair, though, dear. I've go a Mrs Bessemer who drives me, and some of the ladies who are going to bowls will ring and say, "Podge, are you going to bowls?" because I love still going to watch, and they'll take me, but if they don't, I have Mrs Bessemer. It costs me twenty dollars.

41:30 I've got a cab charge now. Thanks to Dr Haskins and Dr Booth-Mason. Because of my eye sight, and there are two meetings in the city related to the army that I like to go to every year, and it used to cost me a hundred dollars. Well, now it costs me fifty. And that's a help. Not, so there a lot of anomalies, going from suburb to suburb. But if Libby wants to come to our annual reunion . . .

Tape 6

00:30 **Helen, I'd like to ask you about the pay you received as a lieutenant. How much were you being paid?**

I can't help you at all. I wouldn't have a clue. Wouldn't have a clue. They paid it into my, I don't know anybody who knows. I haven't got a clue,

01:00 I don't know what I was paid as a private. Haven't got a clue. We didn't handle the money. I suppose some did. I didn't. Oh, it never dawned on me. I suppose I possibly could find out.

When you say it wasn't your job to handle the money, how were you being paid?

Well,

01:30 you could have it paid into your bank account, so you didn't handle the money.

Was the pay, do you know, similar to that of the men?

Less. Less. I'm sorry about that. I haven't got a clue. Oh, I could ask Peg Wright she might know.

What were your thoughts, being paid less than the men?

02:00 We accepted it. It's only very recently that you've got equal pay. As far as after the war, at Farmers the ladies that worked in men's wear departments, or dress materials, they were on equal pay, and then eventually they got equal pay for everybody.

02:30 But it wasn't easy.

How did your pay in the army compare with your pay, teaching, before the war?

Couldn't compare it. We weren't paid much teaching before the war either. Mind you, you've got to remember it was in sterling, rather than dollars. I haven't got a clue. I might say something quite wrong.

03:00 But when I worked for a short time at David Jones, waiting for my compassionate leave to come through, and then I got this job when I was at home, and Mother said I could keep my weekends free, and I worked as the Assistant to the Executive Director of the YWCA, it was twice as much

03:30 as I was getting as a saleswoman at David Jones. But it was all in sterling. Very hard to compare sterling to dollars.

You've said a couple of times today, that the work you were doing in the army, you classed as men's work.

Not men's work. No.

04:00 Well, I mean, we enlisted to replace a man. And we did just that. We did all kinds of things, that would be men's work. But it wasn't impossible and when I went into the army, I did do men's work.

04:30 Certainly, I might have had the authority, but beyond helping them out driving two ton trucks, but I didn't do men's work. I just did a normal adjutant quartermaster's job. I didn't have to handle anything heavy.

05:00 **You've also made reference to the fact that you were taking a man's place, so he could be released for army duties.**

We all were. That's the only reason we were recruited. To replace a man, and not to serve overseas. That was the crowning glory. We did this wonderful job to release

05:30 able bodied young men and did a magnificent job, but that's not being boasting, but we did. And we have never been given an opportunity to have a gold card. Because we did not enlist to serve overseas, and if you speak to anybody they'll tell you that the recruitment of women to replace a man

06:00 to serve overseas, was practically the saviour of Australia until America came into the war. Because we didn't have enough troops, and Darwin had been bombed, and the Japs were coming down heavily on us, and we just needed some more soldiers. We were recruited to replace a man.

06:30 And Cybil Irving thought that we might grow masculine, so she did her level best to remind us to be

pleased to be women. And also she planned our uniform that was feminine and not caps and trousers. Best thing she ever did.

Helen, I'm wondering how much was it seen that you were standing in temporarily for men?

07:00 Oh. Highly regarded. You want to talk to General Cosgrove. Highly regarded. Some of the girls did, I wish I had an opportunity to share with you what the women did in coast artillery.

07:30 All around the coast of Australia and New Zealand and everywhere. They manned guns and did everything. The men hold us in high regard for what we did, and remained feminine. And I think that's wonderful. We had the Diamond Jubilee of our enlistment in 2001.

08:00 We started off with a lovely lunch at Cockle Bay, we had a lovely church service at the Garrison Church, and we finished up with a lovely reunion at Victoria Barracks. Because we thought that's where we started, and where we'll finish. And General Cosgrove was our guest of honour and unveiled the plaque thing for us, and his speech was most moving.

08:30 Especially the genuine way he spoke of the job that the women did in the early part of 1941–42.

Helen, what feeling was there that even though the women's service was seen as a war time effort,

09:00 **that it might have been more permanent, women coming in and standing in place of men?**

Well, when in 1945, I'm not too sure when they closed the AWAS and started the WRAC, the whole atmosphere and the whole regard was quite different.

09:30 They really joined, I think I said to you, mostly, because they could get a career for nothing, and need to stay four years, and as you know, some of them, they're all trained to shoot a gun, handle a gun, and as you know some of them have been overseas. And then, of course, the navy have them.

10:00 And I'm not sure about the air force. But I think we were built to do a damn good job, if I might say so, behind the scenes and not go out and try and shoot guns. Don't know whether you agree with me or not. But I don't admire them. But the whole atmosphere is quite different.

10:30 We enlisted to help our country, we didn't enlist to help us get a degree, or something like that. Also I'm so glad we're not in the army now. Their uniform's appalling, it's most unladylike. Anyway good luck to the girls who can benefit by being in the army

11:00 and getting the army to pay for their professions.

Well, in terms of your career, both with the army and afterwards, since you've referred to some of the work or duties you were doing as previously men's jobs, how did you see any part of your working career as women's work?

My working career was sheer joy.

11:30 I was, I started in a firm where I had to make my way, and I think I told you, we had a Managing Director who was right behind my career, and I think everybody who worked at Farmers in that time, was proud to work there.

12:00 The corporate pride and the loyalty was strong on both sides. And I think there's plenty of evidence, as far as I'm concerned, that the boys and the girls, the men and the women, that came through training with me, we're still very united. Very united. Now, there's no such thing as a departmental store now. You can go and stand at a counter

12:30 and somebody might look up and say, "Do you want something?" Well what are you there for if you didn't want something. Oh. We think it's so sad, but however, it's all because they employ a tremendous lot of casuals, trying to do away with the tremendous cost of superannuation. But there's no loyalty like there used to be. If the bell goes, they just down tools and go home.

13:00 We wouldn't have thought of doing that. We would have finished off what we were doing. No, I had a wonderful army, wonderful work life. Well, I've been lucky all round.

How did you see the AWAS as contributing to the war effort?

Oh, wonderful. I didn't have a chance to work in any forward area,

13:30 but the girls that worked in Townsville and those places. I'm not too sure what they did, but they were spotters, or they were snipering people, sigs [signals] people, they all had special qualifications. I met a lass about twelve months ago who joined our bowling club. And she walked in and she said, "Hello, Podge, how are you?"

14:00 She said, "We did rookies together." I said, "Where have you been all this time?" And she served her whole life, army career, in Townsville, and it was a unit that had army, navy, air force personnel. So, while she had a very happy army career, it was a lonely one.

14:30 And she has no links like we've got. And her name's Frost now, she's a lovely person, so I take her along and I've got her into Khaki and she's loving every minute of it. But you see, she didn't serve in a unit. So, though she said it was most interesting.

Well, I wonder then, Helen, did you ever consider staying in the army as a career after . . .

15:00 No. I got out on compassionate leave, it was all. I went into the army because Mother knew I wanted to go into the army, and she didn't want to stand in my way. And I had no ever chance of serving outside of Australia

15:30 because of my situation. An only child of a widowed working mother. Some of the girls, as I was telling you, two hundred got a chance to serve in New Guinea at the latter end of the war, to help clean up, but they had to be certain categories, like clerks or something like that. And two officers went with them, I've forgotten one's name, but one was our great favourite

16:00 Captain Hornsby. And we lost Captain Hornsby to New Guinea. She was sorry she ever made the decision. She has since died of diabetes.

What of the occupation forces to Japan after the war? Was that a consideration?

No. Never. Never. But I've got a friend, Gwen Stevenson living in Melbourne, she was in New Guinea, and a senior officer who was with those forces, walked into the Orderly room one day and said, "Anybody here take shorthand?" and her officer said, "Yes, Private Stevenson does." "Well, you'll be working for me from now on, because I haven't got anyone to take."

17:00 And she met her husband. And he was serving with the forces, and Gwen had a wonderful time, all because she could take down dictation. It was a bit of luck. So she was overseas quite a lot after our people came back, because she was seconded to their forces out of ours. Lot of luck.

17:30 **Was it the case that you were just unlucky?**

Oh, no, I couldn't do it because of my background. I was lucky to get as far as I did. They had an urgent call at one stage for me to go to Western Australia, and Major Swinney,

18:00 Stella Swinney, who has since died, rang me up and she said, "Podge, they want you in Western Australia, I've told them you can't go." Because I know if they insist on it we'll lose you because you won't be able to go so far away." So there's an example. I couldn't have gone to Western Australia. I couldn't have been that far away from my mother. So Stella Swinney did that.

18:30 Oh, no. They were most understanding.

I'd just like to ask you about some aspects of the AWAS service that you've touched on earlier, and one is, operating or

19:00 **residing in barracks accommodation with so many other girls. How much privacy were . . .**

None. A bed, soldiers box, a bed; soldiers box, a bed; soldiers box. The soldiers box was for your, oh, your clothing. No privacy at all. When you went over to the shower, there was no door on the shower. If someone thought you were taking too long,

19:30 they'd pull you out. But there were doors on the latrines. And when you were sergeant, you were in a room with four, when you were an officer you were part of a room with two, or if you were fortunate, you had a room to yourself. When you were on the staff, you were still in the hut with twenty two, all together.

20:00 It was very hard for some of the girls. I'd been to boarding school, but even so, it wasn't as tough as that. Some of the girls that came from the country, it was terribly hard for them to mix. I tell you. When you stood at the door of the hut and looked at all these beds and soldiers boxes, you knew you'd better get a bed.

20:30 Oh, they all buckled to. It was absolutely the making of us, to make us all do a recruits course.

I'm sure that was the case, although I'm wondering given Colonel Irving's to try to remain feminine in some way. .

To?

To retain your femininity. How possible was that given such crowded accommodation?

21:00 Not always easy. No. Not always easy. But the fact that our outfits were feminine, I think, helped us a lot. Some girls more than others. I think some had to grow into lack of privacy, but never found it easy.

21:30 And it wasn't easy I can tell you. But they just got along with it because you had to.

Well, that sounds a very enforced situation, and another aspect of military life that is enforced is the drill and regimen.

22:00 You have to learn a certain amount of drill because you have to come on parade, and sometimes you used to march through the city. But you grew to respect the fact that if you were on parade, you were on parade, so you kept, you marched correctly and one thing and another.

22:30 You just fell into the atmosphere. Which was quite different from a social walk or something like that. I think you can tell by our troops marching on Anzac Day. That they accept the discipline of marching. I marched for years until I couldn't march. Mary Cadman and I were offered a ride in a jeep in 2001, I thing it was,

23:00 and they offered me a ride in a jeep again this year, and I felt, well, I'd had my excitement of riding in a jeep, because they get you to stand up and wave. And Mary and I found we'd never been on television so much in our lives. And yet we'd marched for years and never been. It was very exciting. But I turned it down this year. I just felt I had my turn and they could give it to somebody else. Because there are quite a number of our girls,

23:30 now, that can't march. That's quite understandable because they're all well over seventy. Apparently, I didn't see this year's march. Apparently we had a good roll up. And Amy Taylor's a good leader. Oh, we're still very proud of being army, and we're very proud of the fact that we did a recruits course.

24:00 **Well, again, during that recruits course in the army, as a teacher before the war, I presume you were used to maintaining discipline in your classes.**

Oh, definitely.

Yet in the army you're living under the army's discipline and system of punishments, how did you take to that?

You just took it. The army discipline was very fair, and I mean, you've got to bring the personality into it.

24:30 I'm a naturally disciplined person. Some of them bucked it. But they never prospered and they normally came to grips with the fact that it was better for them to accept the fair discipline than not to. What's the good of not doing it. They only got fatigues and things like that.

25:00 **What kind of reprimands and punishments were meted out?**

Oh, you'd be given a fatigue. But I don't know of anybody who was given an individual fatigue. We were mainly given them in groups, because we did something that was wrong in a group. I think if someone had been rebellious, they would have gone AWL.

25:30 And then they would have been brought back and put in the holding company, and disciplined from there. They would have been given all kinds of jobs to do that they didn't enjoy. But, as far as I know in the battalion, the only real AWLs that we came across, and came to our notice, something had gone wrong at home,

26:00 and instead of asking for time off, they thought perhaps they wouldn't get it, so they took it themselves. And in most cases, went and gave themselves up. But we had a holding company for AWLs. But sometimes somebody went AWL for just a matter of hours, because they missed a train or something like that,

26:30 or went to sleep on the train or something. We didn't call that AWL. Just accepted that what they said was truthful and that was the finish. I never came across any stealing in the army, and that was a thrill. Because in some places apparently, they had quite a bit of stealing. Well, I never had that much money on me, anyway,

27:00 but some of the girls used to get paid. I think a lot of them had it paid into a bank account or something like that. We didn't get very much, I can't tell you what we got, but I know it wasn't very much to start off with. I can't even remember how it rose. I'm not money conscious in that way.

27:30 When I'd been at Farmers for some little while, Mr Byrne who was 2IC to the Managing Director, asked me one day what salary I was getting, and he said, "Good grief. That's not enough." And flew off. And he went down to our Managing Director and told him, and Mr Wilson said, "If she wants more, she asks for it."

28:00 So he called me down and he said, "I believe you're not happy with your pay?" and I said, "Sorry, that's not true. Mr Byrne's not happy with my pay." 'Well, if you want more, why aren't you asking for it?" I said, "Because I believe that if you think I'm worthy of more, you will give me more." He said, "Oh."

28:30 So I might tell you my pay went up quite considerably. But he was waiting for me to ask for more pay. I don't think you earn more pay that way, I think you earn it when someone thinks you're worthy of it. But I don't know what our pays were, really, for an officer.

Helen, touching on the army discipline again,

29:00 **you mentioned that a punishment might take the form of a fatigue. Can you explain to me what that is?**

A fatigue? Yes. You might have to clean the officers huts. You might have to sweep and clean the officers huts. You might have to do an extra fatigue in the kitchen.

29:30 They were not difficult. But in the hut, we were all given a fatigue in the hut. We had to scrub out the mess hut. Or we had to weed around the latrines. But that was a group discipline. We earned it. We knew we'd get it. But most fatigues were given if people were late, or something like that.

30:00 And they'd be given a small fatigue, like sweeping officer's huts or something like that. Quite minor.

How fair did you see the discipline?

I thought the discipline was excellent. In the training battalion the discipline was tight, but it was fair, and we were all happy.

30:30 I can't remember anybody being disciplined for some rudeness or something like that. No, haven't got a clue.

How much did loneliness affect the AWAS?

Beg your pardon?

Loneliness. How much did that affect yourself?

It didn't really affect me because I like people surrounding me.

31:00 But some of the children, children I call them, the eighteen and twenty year olds, that came from the country, desperate, desperate. They couldn't kind of, until we got things going, they couldn't kind of get into the swing of things. You see, it's hard to understand, but people in the country those days,

31:30 were really from the country. I mean, now they can fly down or whatever, you know, they're much closer to the city. But some of the young women from the country were terribly lonely. So we used to get up all types of things. We might just have a musical evening without a piano. We'd get there. And they were very grateful.

32:00 **You've mentioned earlier today that dances were something that you indulged in?**

Dances, yes, in the Salvation Army hut. Lovely big hut, and Major Whitworth encouraged our troops to go over to those dances, because she felt it was healthy for them to mix with men.

32:30 And the lads from the other units round, and they'd have their boyfriends, I think I was telling… but when the Americans came in, and they were staging, their private troops were staging at Camp Warwick, that was like Warwick Farm, and they were invited to the dances,

33:00 and of course, they'd never seen so much money, or so much food in their lives. And they'd come to our dances, and our girls were inclined to leave their poor old Australian quieter Aussie, and go out with the Americans, so we had some fun at first. But it soon settled down, but those Americans were extroverts and they'd come up to the Orderly Room on the Monday

33:30 with a bunch of flowers for private so and so. I think I was telling your friend. But I had the pleasure many years later of meeting the Vice Chancellor of Southern California University who was one of those he described as Mexican trash. They were automatically put in the army and they were just poor American trash. Poor Mexican trash.

34:00 And he said they'd never seen so much money or so much food in their lives. And they were overfed. Some of them were sensible and made allotments to their family, and others didn't, they just up the money busted up the money. But I had a couple of trips to America before that, the one that I met him, and when I ordered a taxi the driver would say,

34:30 "Oh, you're an Aussie." And I'd say, "Yes." 'I'm not taking a fare from you. You were too good to us in Australia." Jill Kerr, I don't know whether you've heard about her but she wrote The Road from Coorang, a dear little girl, who got her opportunity through Abbotsleigh, and then she went abroad. She arrived in New York

35:00 one night when there was a terrible storm. First of all she had to wait until the storm abated, then she got a taxi to where she was living, and he said, "I'm not taking your fare." And he said, "Miss, what are you doing tomorrow." She said, "Well, I haven't any plans," and he said, "All right, it's on me. I'll drive you around New York and I'll give you time to go to Manhattan Island."

35:30 Their attitude towards the graciousness of the Australians was unbelievable. That's why I'm behind Mr Howard agreeing to go for the Americans in this war. Everybody tells me they were forced into the war. They might have been, but Roosevelt would have had them in the war two years before, with Churchill, but the industrialists in America were so strong,

36:00 they were making money from the Americans. Well, I'm not worried about whether they were forced into the war or not. All I know is that we three wouldn't be here now if they hadn't come into the war. We'd have been Japanese.

You mentioned earlier that when the Americans were staging at Warwick Farm, and the AWAS would mix with them . . .

Well, they'd mix with us at our dances.

36:30 **That there was fun. I'm wondering what shape that fun took.**

Oh, well, first of all they went to the dance and then they'd take the troop out on a weekend leave or something like that. Oh, they spent money like water. They had no idea of the value of money, and then when they went to New Guinea,

37:00 just as an ordinary private, they were forced to carry a camera, and other equipment, and they told us that, this very nice gentlemen told me, that our blokes came behind and as they were marching along, and all the equipment got too heavy,

37:30 our characters would pick it up. But fancy issuing a private with a camera and goodness knows what. So they learnt a lot from the Australians.

I'm also wondering, whether it be with Americans or the Australian soldiers, how much the AWAS women were encouraged to mix with the soldiers?

Oh, they were encouraged. We encouraged our troops to mix with any of the soldiers,

38:00 around us, because Major Whitworth thought it was healthy and so did I. We didn't have to encourage them to mix with the Americans, because the Americans are extroverts and they'd come to our dances and they'd mix with us. There's a difference. The average soldier was rather on the shy side, and didn't get much money anyway.

38:30 Those were their, the difference was that these, what they called Mexican Trash, they weren't volunteers. They were literally called up. All our characters were volunteers. Except for the Vietnam War. That was a terrible time. You know, they took some up and not others.

39:00 Oh, we had difficulty there. I mean, when the fellows had to do compulsory training, all the firms just accepted it in their stride and they went off and did their compulsory training and came back, and I never met one who didn't say he was a better fellow for having done the compulsory training.

39:30 But when the Vietnam War they pulled up some and not others. And that was difficult. But anyway that's what they did.

You mentioned the incidence of AWL earlier, I'm wondering if that would happen after mixing with American soldiers. That some of the AWAS remained AWL.

No, because it was only dancing.

40:00 They'd only go to dances. No, that was interesting. We didn't have any problems, but Terry White and I were on our nightly rounds one night, and we went into one of the mess huts and we saw this American lad with his greatcoat tied up properly. Dead to the world. Dead to the world on one of our long tables.

40:30 His shoes were down there. Sound asleep. And Terry and I thought, well, if we wake him up he might be frightened. We might scare him or something. So we let him go till about, I suppose it was about four o'clock in the morning, and we crept in and made a noise. He woke up startled, and he saw us, and he said, "Where am I," and we said,

41:00 "You're in one of the women's army's mess huts." He said, "Oh, I am sorry. I thought I was in one of my own huts." There he was, militaristically in bed in the right way. So we just showed him the way out. But we thought if we'd done that perhaps earlier in the night, he might have

41:30 taken fright or something like that, and we wouldn't have know what to do with him. But at four o'clock in the morning we did.

Well, our tape's coming to a close, so we'll pause and change it there.

Oh, lovely. Well, I don't know how you're going to make something out of all I've told you.

Tape 7

00:30 **Helen, at a time you were acting as adjutant quartermaster. Could you tell me about your duties doing that role?**

Yes. I was responsible for all the feeding, housing of the battalion, and then the unit. So, I was responsible for everybody, where they lived, how they lived,

01:00 the feeding. There were four, there was the sergeant's mess and besides that there were three training

messes, of approximately one hundred and fifty in each, a sergeant's mess of about fifty, and a holding company mess

01:30 varied from day to day, could be thirty, could be fifty, could be, and when I, and I was also responsible, which I thought was a bit much, of the officers' mess. So I had to worry about their feeding too. As far as clothing was concerned, we had a clothing, proper clothing outfit. Where you could go and get what you wanted. But our ration person,

02:00 Corporal Mahoney, she looked after the general immediate things that the troops might want for their clothing, might be a new pair of stockings or something like that, you know. My day would start, oh, never after half past six, if I was going to do it properly. Because I wanted to go around to all the messes to see that the food was in, and that it was being cooked properly and one thing and another.

02:30 And then I would go to, round, once a month much more particularly, where Captain Hornsby came with me once and found there was no toilet paper in the latrines, men's latrines. And she ordered some. Corporal Ward, who was looking after them, aaagh, you know, was furious.

03:00 Next time she came round with me she gave me some notice, so I went to Ward and I said, "What's the toilet paper like in the men's latrines?" and he said, "Oh, they've got enough to hang themselves." But funnily enough the men's units didn't get the issue of toilet paper we did, and we were often lending, or giving, toilet paper to some of the men's units.

03:30 But you have to keep your rations up. Corporal Mahoney was excellent, and I also had a good butcher, so I wasn't in the office very much, because I was, and then of course, checking the drivers out who were going to do jobs for us. We had to go, take our massive laundry

04:00 to Concord to their big laundry there. You know, all our sheets and everything like that. We couldn't do them. And then the drivers had other jobs for us to do and they had to make out a G2 for me to sign, for how much petrol they were going to absorb, and one thing and another. And one of our drivers we had to get rid of because she was dishonest.

04:30 Well, she wouldn't accept a mission from one of our officers, who didn't belong to us, fortunately, who wanted her to carry liquor. And if she was found carrying liquor, she would be instantly dismissed. So we didn't want that, so we transferred her to another unit, so that she was away from this ridiculous officer, who gave us an awful lot of trouble, by putting people in these terrible positions.

05:00 But I was always in at the weekends, practically without fail, because those were the times I could get round and do more inspections. When the troops were out. I wasn't expected to be at breakfast before the CO came in, because she would know that I would either be at breakfast before,

05:30 or I'd be at breakfast when I had time. It's a full time job, but it's a good one. Better than sitting in a seat all day.

Well, how did you go about ordering your supplies and maintaining your rations?

Each kitchen ordered their own supplies and they were put together, and as far as the meat went the supplies went to the butcher and he ordered them.

06:00 And all I did was just check what they wanted was allowable and delivered to the right kitchen. Oh, that was very interesting. And all the cooks, they had to keep to the same thing on the same day, but I never let them say,

06:30 which they were grateful, "Monday's sausages, Tuesday's eggs," something like that. Each week I'd change the day, so the troops would look forward to coming in to their meal, they wouldn't come in and say 'Oh, it's sausages this morning," something like that, you know. Oh, no. If you've got a well fed, and we had our parties, every now and again in the battalion.

07:00 You always had someone who could play the piano and something like that, and you'd have some fun nights amongst yourselves. They were very grateful for it. Bill Hornsby said they played hard, they worked hard, they deserved something, so they got it.

What sort of a budget were you working under?

Oh, I wouldn't know. No, I could have told you then,

07:30 but I couldn't tell you twenty, sixty years later. You had a budget and it came into the adjutant, and sometimes she'd say, "Oh, Podge, you were a bit over budget this month," and I'd say, "Well, It will be a bit down next month." And they never came down heavily on you. If they thought you were being sensible. Oh, no. If you kept within what you were allowed,

08:00 you were okay. We were allowed certain extension of budget for our officer parties, the male officer parties, mostly the males brought their own liquor. Always far too much. Someone would get too much and would start wandering amongst our lines, and we'd have to go looking for them.

08:30 **I'm also interested in something you said earlier about the Officers Training School, in that you considered it something of a waste of money?**

Oh, no, that was what they called the Big Girls' School, that was right at the end of the war years, and it was carried out at Grong Grong, a big lovely old home at Toorak, and there were matrons from overseas, physiotherapists from overseas,

09:00 captains and goodness knows what. There were only two there that were lieutenants. I never found out why I was sent, but however. The matrons wouldn't, some of them were very good, but some of them wouldn't be disciplined if you tried, they'd want to smoke in bed, and they wouldn't get up for breakfast, and they wouldn't do this

09:30 and they wouldn't do that. But they used to open the bar at dinner at night, and some of them would drink too heavily so they tried to conduct some little kind of reports and things at night. Waste of time, they weren't listening anyway, and after a certain time at night, if we wanted to, we could walk down to Toorak and have a cup of coffee.

10:00 So some of us used to do that. But I just thought that that Big Girls' School was the only time I would say that I thought it was a waste of the army's money. They weren't coming back from overseas. Some of them did but some of them didn't.

How much of that behaviour would you . . .

It was the only one I saw. Every other school I went to, had to go to several schools,

10:30 they were very well run and very well behaved.

What I was wondering was, whether you could put that behaviour down to the war approaching its end?

Well, I would put it down to the fact that they'd served overseas, and they weren't going to be sent to a school when they came back. They'd all had overseas experience in the Middle East. I thought it was a bit tough to ask them to go,

11:00 some of the physiotherapists were really defiant, and I didn't admire that, because they were just physiotherapists, they weren't officers or anything like that, and they made some of the male officers feel very small. But Gwen Begg and I became very fast friends after we met down at that school.

11:30 She was matron of the 3rd Women's Hospital after she came back from overseas. She said she was positively embarrassed by the behaviour of some of them, and I said, so was I. But I think that was just reaction on their part. You know, they'd had the war by that time.

How many of the personnel there were AWAS?

12:00 How many AWAS? Oh, I've got that written down there, too. Fourteen or sixteen thousand. But don't quote me on that, I'd have to look it up. They increased the number. I've got that written down somewhere.

Given the behaviour you were just talking of,

12:30 **what did you, how was the AWAS reputation by the end of the war?**

Excellent. And I mean that in the truest of words. I have never once heard anyone say, "Oh, those AWAS." I think we're held in high regard, and I think too, as I've said twice today, if not more,

13:00 it was because we were all required, irrespective of who we were, or what we were, to do a recruits course. We were disciplined from the beginning and we all mixed well when we got out of the recruits course, and we still mix well.

I understand that it was after this time that you were posted to the 64 Barrack?

Army Barrack. Yes, I finished there. That was a tough assignment.

13:30 **Can you tell me when Amy Taylor visited you there?**

She didn't visit me in 64 Armour Barracks. She was in New Guinea. She was corporal in New Guinea.

When had you had contact with her?

Oh, I couldn't get to the last Anzac March, but she rang me up the other day. I admire her immensely for what she's made of herself.

14:00 **What meetings had you had with her during the war time?**

Oh, none. None. I wouldn't, I didn't know her at all, until she ousted Joyce Whitworth from the President of the Ex-army Association. And by that time she had been to June Dally-Watkins and learnt correct deportment,

14:30 she had been to learn to speak correctly, and she's a wonderful example of what you can do if you try. The girls that worked with her in New Guinea said she was a brash, noisy corporal. I'm quite proud of

her except that, having ousted Joyce, she took on the job for four years, and I think she's been in it now about ten or twelve.

15:00 But on the other hand, if she didn't do it now I don't know who'd do it. Everybody's getting too old to do it. I'm not sure how old Amy is but she's got to be well over seventy. If not eighty. But she loves every minute of it and she enjoys the… God bless her.

What visits from senior AWAS staff, or dignitaries, did you have?

Where?

15:30 **At any time during your service?**

Oh, in the army? While we were in the army? Oh, well, we used to have, we used to have Colonel Irving, we had Major Deasey, Oh, we had quite a lot of visitors. Male visitors and visitors from other, I think we had one WRAN [Women's Royal Australian Navy], I'm not sure about that. But oh, yes,

16:00 we were open for business, wanting to enjoy officer's mess.

What kind of social life did you maintain?

Not much. Didn't have time. Except go home to my family.

How would you relax on occasions like that?

How was I?

Relax. Take time off.

16:30 Oh, I'd go home. All I wanted to do was to get home and see how they were getting on. Go home on the train, come back on the train. And I drove a car. I didn't, I had a nice social life after the army, and I went to dances and things, but, oh, all I ever thought about when I got some leave was to go home.

17:00 I think you'd find a lot of us did that.

Well, I'm wondering what you did to relax yourself, or to . . . .

When I went home, I went home and worked. Helped Mother. Sometimes I played tennis, or something like that. You must remember, I'm the only child of a widowed working mother. So my joy was to go home

17:30 and see Mother and her sister and pull my weight as much as I could. After all, Mother made a big decision to let me go into the army. So all I was doing was getting it back. Until she retired, waited until when she sold Westella, I was quite happy to work five days a week, and two days a week at Westella.

18:00 Now people say, that was just a labour of love, until Mother retired, or sold Westella.

At what times did you feel the strains or the pressures of army service?

I never had any real pressures in the army except my first couple of weeks at 64 Armour Barracks, and I wondered where we were going next,

18:30 with the way they all behaved. And I just went about it, in my belief of moving slowly.

I'm also interested, seeing as how you entered the army older than many of your fellow girls, and you did refer to them as 'the children' a little earlier,

19:00 **how much you tended to look after them?**

I taught in schools before the army, and all the schools went from, well, they call it Year 7 now, to Year 12, not quite like that but nearly. And I was in charge of physical education and all sport. Couldn't have a nicer job.

19:30 **I'm wondering if you were a mother figure for some of the AWAS?**

No, I might have been, I wouldn't call it a mother figure, but I might have been, this sounds boasting perhaps, a bit of an inspiration. Told them to pull their socks up and do it tactfully. I don't think, in the army,

20:00 all I can say you do is set an example yourself. Some of them needed, we'll say a mother figure, well, I would suggest that they go and have a word with Sister, because she was in a different situation to we were, and they'd mostly come back and say, "I had a word with Sister," and I'd say, "Okay."

20:30 Some of them when they first went into the army were terribly lonely, like the little girl I was telling you about, well, you helped them overcome that, but you wouldn't do it as a mother figure because you wanted them to be a good soldier in the army. You'd just help them along. Saw they got to mess properly. Saw they were at the right place at the right time.

21:00 Those were the things they mainly needed help in. Our flow of letters was never good, because they all

had to be left open, and so you didn't get a good supply of mail, which we weren't happy about. Nothing much we could do about it because it all had to be looked at.

You're talking of censorship?

21:30 Well, it was censorship in a way, but I don't think half the time the officers that were required to read them read them. They didn't have time. But if I wrote to Mother, it might be a month before she got that letter. And in the meantime she'd written two or three times back to me, that was because they all got held up while they were waiting for someone to censor them. And you couldn't have phone calls.

22:00 **Why not?**

Well, you just weren't allowed to have phone calls. And my mother used to ring in some times and they'd give me the message. But you'd had to go to a public phone to have it, and that was all right, but you couldn't have it from the battalion.

22:30 Not unless it was urgent, or okay. No such thing as a mobile phone, and goodness knows what we've got now. See, you've got to remember it's sixty odd years ago and there's a group called Inner Wheel, they're all women who somehow or other, have been attached to Rotary.

23:00 They asked me to speak to them one night, and I think two were alive when the war started. The rest weren't. They were a lovely group of women and I addressed them on the Heroines of World War II. It was most interesting how little they knew. I mean, people know if their mothers, or fathers, or grandfathers were in the army,

23:30 or something like that, and they've passed some information on. But they haven't a clue. And they were so thrilled to hear about what all these women had done. One Anzac Day at Warrawee, two new young players asked if they could have their photograph taken with me, and I wondered what it was all about. They weren't born when the war started and they thought it'd be nice to have their photo taken with someone who had some medals on.

24:00 Lovely girls they are. Lovely women. They're both grandmothers. But that brightens you, when you think of it that way. Let's hope we don't have another one.

Well, I'm wondering at the time of your service what you, I mean, living on the barracks, what you . . .

I lived always in barracks.

What you knew about the war that was going on.

24:30 Oh, they kept us really up to date, and when those submarines got into the harbour, we had to get everybody out of their hut, and see that they had a groundsheet or something, and under the trees. And when the all clear came, one of the youngsters in one of my huts, we couldn't find her. She was just sound asleep under a tree.

25:00 It affected the whole state. Oh, we were lucky to get out of that.

Even being inside the barracks, how much of a threat from the enemy did you feel there?

None. Very little. Very little.

25:30 We'd be well posted. I think perhaps, I think the biggest contact I had was when I was at 64 Armour Barrack, we had soldiers from Singapore, very, very sick soldiers, and they'd be recuperating, and I contacted them at Concord,

26:00 and they said they'd love a cake or something like that, so I used to get Marian Noble to make some nice cakes and things, I'd take them round, they were the nicest fellows, and they'd practically eat one cake in one go. And they enjoyed it, so I used to arrange for some of the girls to go round and chat to them. Send them round the truck,

26:30 because they hadn't had the experience to know what it was like to see women in uniform. So we did that much, but some of them took a long time to rehabilitate.

What was your impression, during war time, of being in Sydney, in uniform.

27:00 Well, I wasn't in Sydney. This was out. My mother had to have a holiday once a year, and she had a suite at Hampton Court. And she was told, you had to know my mother, she was a hard case. Though she was very quiet, she had a lovely sense of quiet humour. She had to sleep every night with her shoes and everything below her bed,

27:30 in case she had to get dressed quickly. And I was getting out her things one night and she said, "Oh, darling, that's my best dress. If I'm going to be blown up, I'm not going to be blown up in my best dress." But when the night the war was over, and I knew Mother and her youngest sister were safe, I volunteered to stay in the battalion.

28:00 And in my rounds, I found one dear little girl who came from the country, and she and I were the only two in the battalion. We didn't have a phone, we didn't have anything. So I thought up something for us to both do, and I cooked her a nice dinner, and they all had to come back after leave. That was the way I spent my night.

How did the end of the war,

28:30 **what were your feelings when the war finally finished?**

Oh, relieved. And very relieved, not quite happy, not really happy, about the way some of our soldiers from Singapore were treated. Most unhappy. But still, there was nothing we could do about it

29:00 but try and fight it, like everybody else. Oh, no, some of them weren't treated very well, but it's very difficult to relate this last shemozzle, if I might call it that, with the real war. Because these lads have been given everything, and they've only been away about four months. Some of them haven't even had active service, and they're all professional soldiers.

29:30 Quite different to the enlisted boy.

You mentioned just before that you did volunteer to remain with the battalion, why was it important for you to stay involved?

Why was it Important for me to?

To stay involved with the women's service?

Well, I would like to have seen it out,

30:00 but I had to get out on compassionate leave. I was out about six months before. Our last soldier went out in '45. They drafted you out according to your length of service. But Colonel Irving acted according to Dr MacIntosh's letter. So I was about six months, going out on compassionate leave.

30:30 Some of the girls elected to stay on in the WRAC, and found it quite different, but they were young enough and they had no commitments. They found it quite different. Whole different ball game.

31:00 I think if you speak to any of our people, they will all tell you that they were very glad they enlisted, that we feel better people for having enlisted, we accept everybody now, and our friendships are so strong. So we don't think that it did any of us any harm. We really believe it did us a lot of good.

31:30 I'm sure it did. Sent some of them on a career, that they wouldn't have had otherwise. Because by this time they've all retired, as you can imagine. Some of them were war widows. It's a long time ago, dear. You probably weren't alive.

32:00 **Well, moving on to the time after the war, you did resume a working career. How difficult was it for you to settle back into civilian life?**

Oh, not so hard, not hard at all. Not hard at all. But I think that's because my life is given to working with people. I didn't find it hard at all.

32:30 I still went home and worked every weekend.

What did you miss about being in the service?

Oh, the companionship. But I still got the companionship from the jobs I did, because you see, I worked in a big organisation. I was always surrounded by people.

33:00 But you were always meeting people you'd served with, and doing things with them, and going to reunions with them.

How different was it after the war, working again, compared to your time in the service?

33:30 After the war, I was only dealing with adults. Before I was dealing with children up to seventeen years of age. I had to take, I had a different approach because you weren't scolding people. You were just inspiring them.

34:00 They were a whole lot of lovely boys and girls, from nineteen to say, twenty two, twenty three. And I'm so proud of them because if they haven't married, they've all done well. We were to have a meeting a little, few Sundays ago, and somebody couldn't come so we all said, "Oh, we'll change it till we can all come." We didn't want to go without the one.

34:30 Oh, and I, the type of retailing we lived in you don't have now. It's all gone. David Jones are trying to keep it up, but they're battling. It's so costly.

35:00 **You spoke just before of changes after the war, I'm wondering how you felt your time in the service had changed you.**

I think, can't think it changed me very much, except that, you see, I'm a person who believes in rank

and faces obligations. And I think that,

35:30 if you're going to be the leader, you're the leader. I probably was a little bit more tolerant, but I've never been told I was intolerant. But I was certainly very tolerant in the army with some of those youngsters who came down from the country and didn't have any family or friends in the city, or one thing like that. I wouldn't do the mother figure, but I'd try and get them to accept it

36:00 and do things. And I think we all look at in a different respect, according to our backgrounds. You see, I've worked all my life, and I'm single, and I'm an only child. And I'm suffering now because I haven't got any near relatives. And I didn't marry, but some of them are married,

36:30 they're grandmothers and they can't, they ring up and they say, "Oh, Podge, how are you. I meant to ring you a fortnight ago and something happened." I'm very happy for the fact that they remembered me at last. And I think by playing bowls and bridge, I belong to Probus, that gives me the contact I need.

37:00 I would have wanted to be out every day of the week once, but now I find I've got a lot of letters I have to keep up with. That takes me a long time. I hope they can read them when they get it. My godson does most of my typing.

You've spoken earlier today about how busy you were while in the women's services, how much did the war

37:30 **and your service, perhaps, get in the way, or stop you from pursuing a family . . .**

No. No, I'm one person that didn't, because my working in the army with people, was what I enjoy. I couldn't sit down at a desk all day if I tried. And I think if you're a teacher,

38:00 you have the realisation of getting the reward of seeing the people you are teaching developing. I've had women stand in front of me and say, "Well, don't worry about me. I could never do it." To find out that they turned out to be particularly efficient. A lot of people do that. Those are adults.

38:30 **A lot of the duties that the ORs [Other Ranks] performed during the war, were things that had never been done, or seldom done by women before . . .**

Oh, yes. Definitely.

How did you see that that perhaps changed, not society, but the way people looked . . .

It has changed quite a lot. I'm not one of them but it has changed quite a lot.

39:00 Accepting the ability to do things, and taking responsibility. Men have proved that women are equally as good, if not better, in some cases, of taking responsibility. And not only that, developing people. The women are not making the headway they should, but at least the ones who are getting there are getting there. It's unbelievable.

39:30 **How responsible do you see the women's services in the war, for those changes?**

I don't see the women's services, unfortunately, in a good light, and I don't want to make a comment because I don't know enough about them, but what I don't like about it is people using the women's services to get their vocation.

40:00 Because the army pays for it. And they go in for four years or whatever it might be. It's a help in some ways. A help in a lot of ways, but probably they couldn't do it otherwise, so I won't knock that. But they use the army, they can use it for four years.

40:30 You sign on, I understand, for a length of time, but I mustn't comment because I don't know enough about it.

Well then, speaking personally, what was the most important thing you took from your service?

Important?

What was the most important effect for you of you war time service?

Oh, I think I told you. Development and being more tolerant. I was never intolerant,

41:00 but I was much more willing in adult education, to give people who kept saying to me, "I couldn't do that, I couldn't do that." Give them a chance and tell them they could do it, and they did do it. Oh, I could write a book on my civilian career. It's been wonderful for me,

41:30 because as I'm single, I've always been with people. I grew up with people, Mother and aunties. And that's why I'm so proud of them, because they made a success of life without any help from anyone. And that's what I think is so wrong today. People have been brought up to expect help.

Tape 8

00:30 **Helen, you've told us many great stories today, about your time in the AWAS. I was wondering, because you had occupied a position of some office and rank, when were you,**

Office?

Well, you occupied a position of rank,

Oh, yes.

So when did you perhaps have to make a really difficult decision?

01:00 Well, I didn't have to make any really difficult decisions since they sent me to clear up 64 Armour Barrack. With the downright, shocking behaviour of the troops, and I still let hasten slowly prevail. Because they'd been told that a strict officer was coming,

01:30 and they were going to give that strict officer curry. They were all a little disappointed because they didn't get curry. They were kept waiting for something to happen. And not only that, this wonderful officer that was in charge, she accepted that it was way above her, to do it with no help. And she just gave me a free rope,

02:00 and I just brought her into everything I was doing. That was a tough one. That was tough for many days. Other than that, you might just have to reprimand someone or something like that, which would be an individual thing, and just be in a day's work.

I'm wondering if there was ever an occasion where you

02:30 **regretted a decision that you made?**

No. Loud enough wasn't it? No, I thought it was the making of us all. The fact that we had to do a recruits course, and it didn't matter what you were, or who you were, or what religion you were, or what politics you followed, you had to blend in with everybody else. Absolutely magnificent. Even if the army made some rotten decisions, that was a good one.

03:00 It made us, dear.

Well, please don't be offended by this question. But, I'm wondering if, when you were growing up, how interested you were in boys and a social life?

None. Unfortunately. Or fortunately. I had one boyfriend for umpteen years, and

03:30 we grew up by playing tennis together, and dancing together, because I'm reputed to be a good ballroom dancer, and he taught me to drive, and I just, I think I got into the habit, he was like my brother. Anyway he married somebody else. And it didn't alter our friendship at all.

04:00 When I was, well, I thought I was in love with a lad whose sister was at school with me, and they were on the land, and her mother and father were so proud of the fact that they'd gone on the land with nothing, and when I met them he was the President of the Graziers Association, and Mrs Walker used to love to tell us how she and Dad,

04:30 and Helen, and Nancy, her sister, oh, used to get very cross with her. So it was a little bit too, and Jim and I fell apart because of that. And I went with another lad for a long time too, but I have found that I've got many men friends, without being wrong,

05:00 I was held in high regard by the men where I worked, because they used to say, "Why don't you go and have a chat with Miss MacDougall." Three of the directors now still keep in touch with me. Well, they're the only three really alive. So I would say I wasn't meant to marry. I had wonderful companionships from men, played tennis with them, done all kinds of wonderful things. Danced with them.

05:30 So there's the answer. And I've seen some of my friends make terrible marriages. I've got one friend and somebody said to her the other day, "You know, Betty, you've had such a happy marriage. What do you make by, how?" She said, "Well, it was all give and take. When he gave I took, and when I was supposed to give, I took too."

06:00 She was a hard case. They've been married sixty years. But she maintains that, as far as she's concerned, it was the fact that they had to strive to keep going. They've been very successful, but he's retired. But sometimes I think, these days, they can't take,

06:30 the girl is earning more money than the man to start off with. And she wants to pursue her life in her career, and I think that's where it perhaps falls down. Too many divorces, and too young. No comment otherwise, because I can't comment on that.

07:00 **Well, I'm wondering post war service, perhaps now looking back, how would you like the AWAS to be remembered?**

Absolutely the highest.

07:30 They were all volunteers when Australia was its lowest ebb. I couldn't think otherwise, and I think you've got plenty of evidence of it when you go to our yearly reunions. And especially in that Diamond Jubilee year. That was fantastic. And I think I said earlier, I think Major Cosgrove

08:00 would readily agree with us. No, I don't think I've ever heard of any insult to the AWAS. If I had, I think I'd challenge them.

08:30 **And just on a lighter reflective moment, I'm wondering if there's a time when there was something particularly strange. Or what was the strangest thing you ever saw or did in your war service?**

09:00 I don't think I saw anything strange. Having to face that terrible butcher at 64 Armour Barracks. Oh, on my rounds of 64 Armour Barracks one weekend, I came across a lass having a miscarriage,

09:30 and they, this was before I had them moulded, and they said, "Don't come in here. Don't come in here. We can fix it." I just listened, and went and got the army ambulance, and after all that, they thanked me. She would have died dear. I don't know anything about anything like that,

10:00 but I certainly don't think you can leave somebody that's had a miscarriage, and I wouldn't mind betting that butcher was in that. Horrible creature. He was always trying to handle some of the women. Oh, they had to get rid of him. I don't think we had anything else distressing in the army. I think the girls that worked in mixed units probably had more problems than we had,

10:30 you know, that were in some kind of duty, working in a mixed unit, but Joyce was more worried about lesbianism, so that's why she used to want the girls to go to dances on Saturday night. She didn't think it was healthy for fourteen hundred girls to be tied up. She's probably wrong. I never saw any,

11:00 but it was a good thought, you know. Oh, she used to love the youngsters to go and have some fun. And they enjoyed it, too. By the time I go to bed tonight, I'll wonder what I've said and what I haven't said.

11:30 **Well, you've mentioned many people today who have been really important. I was wondering if there was perhaps one person who was your best mate throughout your war time?**

Oh, not a best mate, but there's one person that I hold in very high regard,

12:00 perhaps more than anybody else, anybody else. And that's Thirls Thomas, but she has since died. She started at Abbotsleigh as a daygirl, in '21 and went to '26, and I started in '22 and went to '27. Now, Thirls's parents lived in Inverell, and her father was a chemist, and he realised that he had two clever children.

12:30 Thirls and her brother, whose name was Ormond, but never called anything else but Boy. So he sold his practice and came to Sydney to give them an opportunity to go to a good school. And Thirls was always so sad, that she didn't come to, couldn't be a house girl, because she felt that we had more to do with the school. Anyway, she was brilliant and she got an…

13:00 University wasn't easy in those days, and Thirls got an exhibition, and when she was sixteen, and she wasn't allowed to take it because she was only sixteen, so she stayed on until she was seventeen. So she left school in '26 and I left in '27. Now she graduated Arts Law with Honours. By that time both her parents weren't very well, so she returned to Abbotsleigh, with Miss Evread,

13:30 and Miss Evread put her in charge of the library. So she started the library, she started the archives, and when we got the lovely new library that we've got now, they went and called it the Archdale Library instead of the Thomas Library. Anyway, Thirls went into the army, had a very interesting career in the army, and after the army

14:00 she took a librarians course, and she won the highest award for librarianship in Australia, and if you ask Thirls what she did, you never found out. She was ultra modest. Now, she did, I can't tell you what she didn't do for Abbotsleigh, and such an inspiration. Everybody loved Thirls.

14:30 And this month's Around Abbotsleigh we were desperate when they didn't call the library the Thomas Library, not called it the Archdale Library. Because then they were all mad about Betty Archdale. And I read in 'Around Abbotsleigh' now, they're naming some special thing, which is the highest thing they could give,

15:00 to Thirls, and I'm so thrilled. Well, she was a wonderful friend. Now, I look after my own affairs, as you know, and something would come up and I'd say, "Oh, dear oh dear, must ask Thirls," and she met Peg Wright in the army, I think I was telling you that Peg, well, she'd never really made her own bed until she came into the army, and there was Thirls, a high ranking guide,

15:30 trying to teach Peg some practical things. It's a wonderful friendship. But she encouraged Peg to go back and do her Leaving Certificate and then do social work, and she ended up one of our leading almoners. But during our Centenary Year at Abbotsleigh, which I think is about eighteen or nineteen

years ago, I wanted Thirls to come with me,

16:00 and we'd endow a scholarship, no, we'd endow a prize, and she said, "Podge, I don't think I can. I think we've got that." So we endowed a prize for the dux of the school and we called it the Centenary Prize. And you're supposed to write and thank the donors and in Thirls's lifetime, we got about two letters.

16:30 And now, the last three that have won the dux of the school have written to me, and come and had lunch with me, and I think it's so sad. Thirls was an inspiration. She was never any different, and when we put the obituary in the paper I had people ringing me up all over the place. "Podge, you didn't tell me Thirls did this?"

17:00 And I said to Peg, "They don't know how hard it is for you and I to know what Thirls did." But I've got a wonderful friend in South Australia, who's now on the verge of Alzheimer's, so I really, I've got lots of close friends, and all in different fields. But I met Dorky, who was Louise Dawkins when she was training,

17:30 and then in the army, and then her husband died as a result of the war. And she brought up four boys, David was then fourteen, and Bill was about three. She went back on the land and reared Poll Dorset sheep. And she was the price. It didn't matter who you met. They'd want to meet Mrs Close.

18:00 One year I was in England, and she was invited over to judge some sheep, and she said, "Podge, should I go?" and I said, "Certainly." She was a terribly strict judge. Some owners will stand their sheep, and they'll judge them from there. But Dork used to make them walk, because some would turn their foot in. Oh, she was highly regarded. Anyway, there was one of the breeders didn't turn up to the last show,

18:30 and she said, "Where are your sheep." And he said, "Oh, I couldn't bring them. it's too far." Forty five miles. So she didn't say anything. But after that he came to Australia, and I was privileged to meet him. And he said to me, "I often think about telling Mrs Close, as she was then,

19:00 about the forty five miles, they fly sheep all round the world," you know. And she's just starting on the verge of Alzheimer's. And I think it's so sad. Well, I ring her up, perhaps once a month, and her eldest son's a doctor, and he says it's wonderful. She tells David who's right, and she chats away and he can't even get a blemish.

19:30 So, old times haven't affected her yet. Isn't that thrilling. Oh, I've got a lot of friends, but Thirls Thomas I admire. We've always been close. I think if you had to be a friend, you've got to be a friend, dear. If you want to have friends, you've got to be a friend.

20:00 **Well, on that note, not sure, we might have asked you already, but can you tell us how you got your nickname?**

Yes. My first day at school. I'm glad you asked me this, because is really treasure. This youngster, who'd started in '21, Kath Lidwell, her father was a doctor, and she was told to look after me.

20:30 Now, you've got to picture it. A funny, fat little girl with glasses and boots on. And somebody said to her, "Who are you looking after?" she said, "Oh, Podge. That podgy one over there." There you are. And I was never called anything else but Podge. And strangely enough, even while I was stout, I am very fleet of foot, and I was on all the running teams. I wasn't flabby fat.

21:00 So, my name went all over school with me, went into training with me. I've got people in the army that say to me, "What's your real name." And now it's become a term of endearment, and I think I told you about the lass that rang up the other day, and she said, "Are you still Podge?" And she said, "It's Joan Atkins here. I haven't seen you for sixty seven years." And I said, "What have I done to deserve this lovely phone call?"

21:30 and she said, "Well, I read abut what you did." I was told to write this essay about all the funny things that happened in the army. And she said, "I said to my friend, "oh, I must ring Podge up."' Isn't that a scream.

Well . . .

I don't want to be called Helen, let alone Agnes.

22:00 Oh, I couldn't bear Agnes.

Yes, we've met a number of people who are not called by their first names.

Yes. Well, Agnes Swan was a real joy in our class. We always used to call from one end of the class to the other, "Hey there, Ag."

Well, the war was a long time ago.

Sixty seven, 19, 2001, was our Diamond Jubilee, that's two years ago.

And you have maintained a close contact with the AWAS Association.

Oh, very much so. And we, I think we all contribute to Khaki, and that keeps us in touch. And we all

belong to the AWAS association, I've forgotten what the subscription is,

23:00 but very small. Oh, dear, we wouldn't miss it.

Well, I was going to ask you why that has been so important?

Well, I think, I think I've said it several times today. We all go back to having to do a recruits course. It didn't matter who you were, or what you were,

23:30 or what religion you were, or what political life you led, you had to do a recruits course, and I think I told you I couldn't have been in a more mixed group of women if I tried, and yet we were all united, to do these two fatigues, silly things all together, not fatigues. I don't think it matters who you talk to, they will tell you that our closeness

24:00 is because we all had to do a recruits course. I think that's true, don't you. I mean, together with the fact that we all had to get into uniform, but, oh no, one good decision the army made. I don't know what Amy Taylor would think,

24:30 but I think it just depends. I have my hand out because of what she's done to better herself, and she's very good at her job. She's criticised because she's held it for too long, but I'm not coming into that, because I don't know who else would do it if she didn't do it now. We find the same thing in our Probus.

25:00 We've all been secretaries and goodness knows what. I wouldn't take it on now, one, because of my problem, but not only that, I think you need a car. Well, she probably goes all over the place. When you sell your car you certainly lose your independence. I've got two friends that drive, over ninety. I gave mine up at eight seven,

25:30 and I immediately thought it was foolish.

I'm wondering how you felt AWAS and you own personal service contributed to Australia winning the war?

Well, all I can say is, the women who were not enlisted

26:00 until after Darwin had been bombed, amazed everybody. Because they were willing to be regimented, to replace a man, and still remain proud to be women.

26:30 When I look back on it, I'm just amazed with what the AWAS did contribute. Now, I won't know the AMWAS [Australian Medical Women's Army Service], but they were medical people. And I won't knock the other services either. But we were the enlisted ones. And then the air force and the WRANS followed, and I don't' know anything about how they got into the army, oh, into . . .

27:00 But I'm confident that a group of women, never seen each other before, all walks of life, and all got on well together and still do. It's quite unreal, isn't it? And nobody worries about what they did before the war anyway. They've all retired now.

27:30 Of course, some of them are war widows.

Well, you've told us a number of reasons why you look back with pride, why were you, why are you so proud?

Proud of what?

Of your war service?

Well, I'm proud that we did something for the country, that's the main thing. And very proud of that, because the people that know,

28:00 know that they hate to think were Australia would have been without the contribution of the women. I wish I could put my hand on Major General Cosgrove's summing up, especially the ones that were in the unit that worked in coast guard artillery,

28:30 helped man the guns and all those kind of things. All around Australia and New Zealand. Oh, that was a real thrill for us to have him at our final get together. We felt that we started at Victoria Barracks, and we should finish at Victoria Barracks. Fortunately, it was a lovely day, and after the service and everything,

29:00 and we had that wonderful woman, oh, I can't think of her name, but she's retired now, and she entertained us with some songs and things. And then we had afternoon tea. My godson took three of us, because I couldn't have got to Victoria Barracks without a lift. And he was very happy to do it. Oh, that was a wonderful year. Because people came from everywhere. Some of them had probably never been before, to a reunion.

29:30 But they kept in touch with everybody with Khaki. Cockle Bay we had the first luncheon. There were five hundred and thirty of us there. It was a scream. It was beautifully done. The service was good, the food was good. We had to be driven there, too. So my godson drove three of us there too.

30:00 If you're every going to Cockle Bay don't make the wrong turn because you'll find that you're back to where you started. Two of our guests, Mary Cadman and Mandy Hosgood, they were told that the bus went so far, and the bus said, "All out. All out." And they weren't anywhere near Cockle Bay. So they were wondering what they could do.

30:30 And a lad went past in a ute with some gear in it and Mary Cadman hailed him. And she said, "Could you tell me how far we are from the restaurant at Cockle Bay?" He said, "I'm not going to tell you how far. I'm going to drive you there. Hop in." And he moved some of the furniture and everything, and they sat in the back. Typical army.

Well, we are coming to the end of our session today,

31:00 **I'm wondering if there is anything you would like to say in closing?**

I'd like to thank you very much for coming and listening to me, and giving me the opportunity of telling you some of the things that really happened. I think we all had spasms of getting lonely in the army, but I think that's only natural. I can get lonely now.

31:30 But I was always proud that the officers I worked with and the troops I worked with, they were worth it. I never found anyone that was disruptive or anything like that. The discipline was strict in the battalion, but so it should be, because we had to set the standard. But it was fair, and

32:00 the various recruits that came and they went out, they all said they enjoyed them. Well, that's a compliment, isn't it. Once we got the feeding we were right. The cooks were beautiful cooks. But if they didn't have the food to cook, they couldn't cook it. Oh, no. I've no regrets. I don't think anybody has.

32:30 I mean, some of them were engaged and their fiancés didn't come back. And Bully and Nonie have never married. That's, but that would have happened anyway. Some of the girls smoked too much and died of emphysema, but that was their problem. Cigarettes were so liberal. I used to have friends that used to ask me to bring them home cigarettes, because I didn't smoke.

33:00 But I used to forget. Oh, I think you two are doing a marvellous job. How you do it every day of the week, I wouldn't know. You'll get a totally different personality tomorrow. Do you only do army? Navy? Ah, what a different life. Oh, I'd love to hear what somebody says. I'm not altogether in agreement with women in the navy.

33:30 I think the close proximity is too much, and they get into trouble. I don't mind them having land jobs, you know, as they've got to have, but I'm not altogether agreeing with them going overseas. But the air force people don't seem to have the togetherness that we have,

34:00 and I think a lot of that is because they didn't have a recruits course. They're all good friends and all that kind of thing, but they haven't got the togetherness. We've got two air force folk here, and they enjoyed it but they didn't have the close, kind of, proximity. They don't' have the get-togethers that we have,

34:30 and that keeps us all together. But it was a real war. We were fighting for something. We weren't fighting to stop a man killing people. And that Saddam Hussein. Even his sons, errgh. I wish they could find him.

35:00 **Well, I'd like to thank you very much for speaking with us today. It's been very . . .**

Oh, good. Thank you. Are you going to take my picture after all that?

Yes, we will.

I hope I'm worthy of a picture.

INTERVIEW ENDS