

Australians at War Film Archive

Iris Roser (Ba Rose) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 21st August 2003

<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/597>

Tape 1

00:38 **Okay, Iris. Can we have an overview of your life story please?**

How much time do you have?

All day.

You'll need it. Do you want me to start?

Yes.

Okay, my life story....I was born in Tenterfield,

01:00 seventy seven years ago. And I have been very fortunate to do many things, meet many people, learn many things and, I guess, enjoy a very full lifetime. Seeing as we only get one. I suppose my first adventure away from home was joining

01:30 the Australian Women's Land Army, during World War II of course. My first train trip. I hadn't been any more than eight miles away from my town. So it was quite an adventure to go to Sydney, and all of a sudden I'm amongst a whole lot of city girls. But it was a very, very rewarding experience. For example, it was very positive. I started off on a

02:01 tomato farm. And from early morning to late afternoon, we picked tomatoes. When you start off, of course, you're so good you're bending over, but by the end of the afternoon you're sliding along your backside, your back is so sore. From then, with the Land Army, we were moved on to

02:30 picking beans. By that time, of course, my back was used to bending over, so that didn't hurt as much. But when it came to pulling turnips, and they were in ground that was like cement, that was hard. We lived in tin sheds, and there were, I think, about sixty of us. Can you imagine sixty girls in tin sheds? Very noisy at times. I had

03:00 carried my mandolin with me. I played mandolin, so about all we had for entertainment was to play the mandolin and sing songs, and wish we were home. The food was rather good, being in big coppers of course. Then the government saw fit to move the group that I was with to Sydney. And

03:30 in Australia they were taking the first population census. So whereas there were people out gathering this information, it came to us as a written piece, and we had to collate it onto cards, which went through, of course, the beginning of computers. That was very interesting, too. We lived in an ex-girls school in Lane Cove,

04:00 and travelled over by train to where we worked of a morning. And we were so poor. The Land Army, we used to get about thirty shillings a week, and about fifteen of that we had to pay for board, so everything else, our toothpaste and all that sort of thing, we had to purchase from what was left. And there were times that you didn't even have the tuppence that was needed to buy a

04:30 newspaper. I'm just saying, it was a fun time as well because I was generally the one who was allocated to snatch a newspaper that somebody had left on a seat. And, of course, being a bunch of girls, we got up to a few hijinks. One night I was sent out to bring back...We were having a party, and we didn't have any boys, and they decided they would ring up

05:00 the British Naval community. So I was sent across to the other side of the bridge, and came home with something like twenty sailors. That was very well received, except by the people that saw me with all these... Aussies didn't like to see me with all these....Anyway, that went over very well. One of

05:30 those sailors, wrote to me, consistently, once a week, on the happenings of how he put in his work day. And where they went, and all that sort of thing. And strangely enough, many years later I met up with a man who had been a sailor on the same ship. And I trotted out all these

06:01 letters, which I'd kept. And he read them through and he said, "Oh, bunkum, bunkum, he must have made all these up." So anyhow, that's that story. And of course, that happened in 1945, so that was around... Well, it was, August, wasn't it? When the war in the Pacific ended, and we were fortunate enough to be in Sydney, and we very proudly marched

06:31 on that day, through the streets of Sydney. We'd never really been into marching, but we had something like half an afternoon's practise. But we didn't care. And then, of course, when we had finished this coding work for the statistics, we were allowed to go home. So we were home for Christmas, 1945. But we still keep in touch.

07:02 Recently we had our 60th year reunion, and we'd keep in touch by writing to one another. But it was wonderful on sixty years to go back and see who had gotten older looking than you had. We always have a fine time together remembering old things, of course. Now, what did I do next?

07:30 In those days. I came back, and much to my surprise, in Tenterfield, one of the business people offered me a job managing a shop. Which I had never done before. And I started for him a toy and a book shop. And that went very well. And, later on I was offered by the government an apprenticeship,

08:00 a choice of an apprenticeship to do for a career, and I chose to do tailoring. So I went off to Brisbane with one of my old school friends. She did.... I forget what she did. But anyhow, I did the tailoring course in Brisbane. Looking back, an interesting part on that was we had

08:30 very little money, of course, but we were in a boarding house and we slept in the same double bed. Now if this was today, they would call us lesbians, but we wouldn't have even known what the word meant, in those days. However, in between times, she had met the soldier who became her husband. And, likewise, I had met my husband.

09:00 So, the next thing I did was I got married. And in those days.... I think I became pregnant about the first month. I was so young, we were so naïve. In those days you were a scarlet woman if you had a drink in a hotel. And I lived in this town where I didn't know anybody. My mother-in-law,

09:30 really didn't like me, because I wasn't a Catholic. And that was important in those days. And so I was very, very lonely. And then my first child was born, so I had someone, didn't I? To love and cuddle. And oh, there was a series of working with my husband and doing other sorts of jobs. And

10:00 then later on, as the boys grew bigger, I joined with community work, such as the Endeavour Foundation. One of the things I'm very proud of, I started the first Unemployed Girl's Club. Gee, I'm going back a long a time. This would have easily been fifty years ago. Something like that. And I got all the unemployed

10:30 girls together. And I got people to teach them deportment, make-up, how to apply for a job. All of those practical things. We had cooking lessons. We had dancing lessons. But, of course, the club finished, didn't it? They all got jobs. So that was something that could be really done again, these days. What did I do next? I know, I worked on a....

11:01 once again, it came around again to working on a statistical sort of thing. And in Queensland they did the first traffic survey. And I was in charge of all these people going out and stopping people and asking where they were going, and how many miles they were travelling, and all that sort of thing. That was very interesting. So, once again, it was a matter

11:30 of collating all that information, and it was the first real computerisation. As far as the Queensland Government was concerned. And all this information had to go onto cards that was fed through a computer at the Brisbane University. And every mistake, of course, that damned computer used to throw out the cards.

12:00 So it took a long time to get that through, by the time we got all that straightened out. But it was very interesting. And then my next job was, I was offered the project of travelling Queensland to promote a fundraising project for the RSL [Returned and Services League]. I had always been interested in the RSL and the background of our soldiers.

12:32 As a matter of fact I have a letter there, dated 1942, thanking me for raising funds for the men at the front from the Tenterfield RSL. Anyhow, to get back to what I was doing then. I travelled the whole of Queensland, going to every RSL branch, in a little white Ford

13:00 Cortina. On my own. I drove all over the countryside. I couldn't do it now. And they were not all that receptive, because at that time they were raising funds to build their own branches, but that was the beginning of the Girl In A Million Quest. Which, since then, has raised millions of dollars to support the RSL. So I'm very proud

13:30 of that also. Gee, what did I do next? Well, this was in between, of course, raising my two sons. It's hard thinking all that way back. However, going into that, my marriage wasn't working all that well. I don't know why my husband ever married me, actually. He didn't seem to have

14:02 much time for me. Nor did I spend that much time with him, actually. But we had different interests. He

was very much occupied with sporting things, and I had never been sports minded. So it was obvious the marriage was breaking down, and at that particular time, the Vietnam War was happening,

14:30 and a local paper came up with the....A local doctor had been working in Vietnam up in the mountains, with the mountain people, and he had been....there was a doctor, and he wrote in the paper how they badly needed a secretary.

15:01 So I thought this would be a good thing to do. And I wrote to him, and he wrote to America. It was an American sponsored program called Project Concern. And within a very, very short time, I got a letter back from America that said "Yes please. When can you leave?" Now it wasn't easy, to just to take yourself off to Vietnam where a war was raging. But I had the

15:31 assistance of the local member of parliament. Mr Reg Schwartz. And Paul Hasluck, who was the Minister for Immigration, or something. So between them they managed to get me a permit to enter Vietnam. And then, I suppose, really starts the story of the great deal of the rest of my life. And, of course,

16:00 it made me feel quiet different about many, many things. Can I stop for a while?

You were talking about the start of Project Concern. And was it Reg Schwartz and some other bloke, who were able to get a permit for you to go to Vietnam?

Paul Hasluck.

And what did

16:30 **your sons think?**

You know, I've never really had the courage to ask them? It sounds ridiculous, but I have never really had the courage to ask my sons. They wrote to me every now and again, but very little. And, of course, while I was there, one of them got married. He wrote and told me he was getting engaged, and he was nineteen. I wrote back to him and said, "Son, don't you think you're a little bit

17:00 young?" And he wrote back to me and he said, "You left me and I got lonely." So what could I say?

"Good luck."

I actually went home for the wedding.

So can you tell us, what happened after you got your permit?

I decided to go to...I had to report in at Hong Kong where they had a base. And I decided to

17:32 go by boat, because I had never been on a boat. So I got myself on an ocean liner. That was interesting, because I met so many people. One very rich lady from Canada, got so fond of me, she offered me a huge amount of money if I would just not go to Vietnam, but come and live with her in Canada as her companion.

18:03 And that was one of the adventures that I got to. But when I arrived in Hong Kong, the organisers of Project Concern in Hong Kong took me to spend a few nights on a clinic houseboat, in Kowloon Harbour. And that was interesting because you were surrounded by people

18:30 living on houseboats. And, of course, they all brought their children and themselves to the clinic. One of the not so good parts about that was the stench. Everything went into the water around your houseboat. That night the doctor said to me, "I've cooked you a perfectly nice dinner." I said, "Forget it." "Oh," he said "You'll get used to it."

19:00 I only stayed there about a week and a half, no, a couple of weeks, and I got used to it. So you get used to living with the humanity of that odour. But it was very, very interesting to...I used to mind the kids and do what I could for the doctor. And in between, go and have a look at Hong Kong. So that was great.

19:31 But I met a beautiful lady there. Her name was Dorothy Plant, and she was the organiser, so I learnt a lot from her. She was a volunteer as well.....Do you want me to go on?

Yes, of course. So from Hong Kong...

Then, of course, all hell broke loose in Saigon, because of the Tet Offensive. That was in February, 1968.

20:03 And whereas it had been planned that I was to go in by plane, that held things up for perhaps two or three weeks, before I could get a permit to travel. Going in on the plane, the plane was full of American soldiers, who had just been on R & R [Rest and Recreation] in Hong Kong. And talking to them, and them asking me why I was going in, they thought I was crazy.

20:30 Because, why would anybody want to go in there? Anyhow, I got to the Tan Son Nhut, the Saigon airport. Meanwhile, a friend in Hong Kong had explained to me that he had been there. He was also a volunteer with Project Concern, and he says, "Now, watch out for taxi cabs. They'll want to charge you twice as much as

- 21:00 they really need, because you're new." But when I got there, I could hear bombs going off; the place was full of guns and tanks, and all sorts of things. Yes, I had my luggage, and yes, I did eventually find a taxi driver, and I would have given him everything that I had, just to get out of the place. However, when I got there, the Project
- 21:30 Concern house in Saigon, they were equally surprised to see me. Anyhow, I stayed there for a while, which was very good, because I became more acquainted with Vietnamese people, and learned more about the hospital I was going to. And then it was matter of getting out, and of course,
- 22:00 nobody was all that enthused about trying to find a way for me to get there. But I nagged so consistently that eventually they got me a ride out. I think it was on a DC3. An Australian plane that flew into Da Lat, which is about forty kilometres from the hospital, and that was....This DC3 was gutted out, a large
- 22:30 gutted out aeroplane. And in the centre of it was all sorts of supplies and guns and boxes. And they strapped me in. On the outside shell of the plane you could feel it shattering. It got me, perhaps,
- 23:00 three quarters of the way, and then it put me down at an American outpost.

Sorry Iris, for the interruption, but you were on the DC3.

I was put off that plane, at an American base. And the man in charge of the plane, he says, "Look, just walk over there." And he said, "You'll find an office.

- 23:31 Just ask them if they can get to Da Lat." I walked over to that office, and there was a black American in charge. He looked at me, sort of did a double-flip, and I said, "Can you tell me how I can get to Da Lat?"
- 24:01 He gave me a very nasty look, and said, "Go sit over there and I'll see what I can do." So I went over and sat on a bench, and I sat there and I sat there, and of course, here I was, a white not-so-young woman sitting on my own, surrounded by a couple of suitcases,
- 24:30 and everybody who came past me seemed to look at me as if I was a unique exhibition, which of course I was. And I sat and I sat and I sat, and eventually I had to ask somebody where to go to a toilet, and they didn't seem to know what to do about it either, seeing as it was a men's base. Anyhow, I did that. And then eventually I was called back to this little office thing,
- 25:00 and he said, "If you go over there...." and so forth, "You can get on a plane to Da Lat." So I went over, and once again, I wasn't given a very great welcome. But I got on, if I remember correctly, it was about a six seater plane, and they helped me on,
- 25:30 and as we flew into Da Lat, the pilot, there was another fellow on the plane I think, the pilot said to him, he said, "Look what they did on that last bombing raid." So we looked down. And he said to me, "If you look down at that pile of ashes," he says, "That's where the Project Concern townhouse was last week." So that wasn't every
- 26:00 encouraging, either. He then put me off at this next American base....I'll never forget the looks of surprise, and possibly disgust, I got along the way, and he said, "Look, I don't know what I'll do, but sit there," and I sat again. And then they came and told me there was a
- 26:30 helicopter, a gun ship, taking off to strafe a village. They said if you like they can continue on a bit further and put you down at the hospital. I said that was fine, that was great, I was getting there. And on a gun ship, there were guns on either side of this big helicopter; they sat me in the middle, and of
- 27:00 course, they didn't give me anything for my ears. So it wasn't particularly pleasant with these two guns spraying out hundreds of bullets, on either side. And along with that the feeling of, okay, down there they're killing people. That wasn't very pleasant at all. Also, it was scary. Then they flew me into the hospital,
- 27:30 and of course, the hospital had a pad, because often they put patients down there. When I got out of the helicopter, I could barely stand up. My legs had decided they were too scared to want to stand up. But anyhow, people came running out of the hospital and they welcomed me. So that, sort of, was fine.
- 28:00 I had arrived, I had arrived. I had actually arrived. But later on, I considered what had happened to me, and I came to the conclusion, I had gotten the rides that I had purely because people didn't know what to do with me, and wanted to get rid of me, so they shafted me onto the next person. However, the hospital
- 28:30 was another story again. One of the ladies, her name was Tuet she came and she said, "Come on, I'll show you around." We went down to the hospital, and from a person coming where hospitals were hygienically clean, and smelled nicely, looked nice and white, it was
- 29:00 a physical and very much a mental shock. The floor was cement, of course. The beds were iron beds, with the wire mattresses and a mat over them, a cane mat. The beds were full of people. In Vietnam, when somebody went to hospital, somebody went along with them,

- 29:30 generally, to take care. And of course if they had children, they couldn't leave those at home, so they take the children along, too. So all the beds were covered with bodies. The clothing they were in, was possibly the only clothing they ever had, so there was no things such as pretty pink pyjamas. The colour of most of
- 30:00 our premises, in the hospital, the Project hospital, was brown. Not brown paint, but brown of the earth over a lot of time. I'm not saying it was dirty. I later learnt that it was relatively clean, by comparison. But the people were all happy, they were asleep, they were being taken care of. We had two
- 30:30 doctors. These two doctors, Jimmy, and I forget the other man's name at the moment, they were Chinese. And with the uprising there in China, they had swum the river, so they were actually refugees from China. They were wonderful men. They were really, really wonderful doctors. And also part of the hospital program was training medics. So the doctors trained medics.
- 31:13 The people that I met in the hospital, a lot of us have kept in contact, and Jimmy and Hui, his name was, got very good jobs when they went to America. They finally, after
- 31:30 the war, or before the end of the war, got themselves to America. And both have jobs over there in hospitals in Los Angeles. So that's a nice part of that. They were, of course, away from their families. Very, very generous of them to be there. As I said, they were training medics, which is part of the Project Concern program.
- 32:01 And the medics then went back to their villages, and the hospital kept them supplied with what medicines and drugs we could give them, so they could actually take medicine into their own small villages. The people were Montagnards. Montagnards means 'hill people.' They were very different to Vietnamese people. They rarely mixed and they didn't inter-marry.
- 32:31 They were the farmers. They grew their own rice, and they lived on what they grew themselves, and fish from the river. Very interesting thing, from that particular time, they were saying the Montagnards were not loyal to the country, and they were not respecting the government and all that sort of thing. But it was so unfair.
- 33:01 Most of these Montagnard people hadn't travelled anymore than a day's walk from their village. They knew nothing about the outside of their villages. They knew nothing about being proud, or flying a flag or anything like that. But they were very much well-controlled. Within the village they had the village chief. We never heard them
- 33:30 arguing the politics of the government like we here. Everything seemed to go through very smoothly. It was an interesting fact that it was a matriarch society. The women controlled the land. They controlled the money, if anything. But then again, they also did the work. It would come to rice growing time, and they grew what we called the dry rice.
- 34:00 The women would do all the hoeing. Whereas, the men would poke the holes to put the seeds in, the women bent over to put in the seeds. But the husband would always carry the hoes home. Wasn't that good of him? You would see the women walking home, and the husband carrying the hoe. But they were happy people. They loved their children.
- 34:30 An interesting factor was if a child was killed or anything ever happened to a child....A child was never an orphan. That child was taken in by the family who had the least children. So they really had some interwoven good qualities. We loved them. One story I must tell you is about a volunteer we had, who
- 35:00 was a dentist. Now, he was dentist from Massachusetts. And he came across to pull teeth, to do dentistry. He got very impatient, because when he arrived there was what we called a Red Alert on....What I missed saying was, halfway between Da Lat and the hospital,
- 35:30 there was an American outpost. And they had taken responsibility, not willingly, of being our keepers. Our security. They didn't like it at all. Also, across from us we had
- 36:00 a base of the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam], the South Vietnamese Army. This was an interesting place because the first commander who went in, he started digging, to go underground, for security. And as he dug he put a shovel full on top of a shovel full and it ended up a small mountain, with a honeycomb of
- 36:32 living quarters and that underneath. But fortunately, we never, ever needed their help because I think it would have been very minor. Anyhow, with this dentist, we sent out word that we would be coming into the villages to pull teeth. And we got in there, and
- 37:00 I went with him. And they used to have long wooden seats. So we would line up the people that wanted their teeth looked at. And he had the means of numbing the gum and for pulling teeth, but it used to distress him very much he couldn't do anything about fillings
- 37:30 or things like that. And he would put in these syringes, then that person would go to the end of the line and one would move up. But by the time we got to the end of the line, it was time for them to go up and....But as he pulled the teeth, and we'd do what looked like hundreds in a day, he'd just go one, two,

over his left hand shoulder. And by the time

- 38:00 we left that village of an afternoon, there were would be a whole mass, on the ground of teeth. But it wasn't much fun. If you look into the mouth, repeatedly, of someone who's never seen a toothbrush, it took a very sort of dedicated person to do that. But we went to village after village, and the people sort of knew we were coming,
- 38:30 and this ended one day when we were pulling teeth, and all of a sudden a little boy came around the corner and he said, "Viet Cong come get you!" So, we used to use an old Jeep, and we just threw everything in that old Jeep and took off across country. And we didn't go back again; we thought that was enough, because we had almost covered the whole area anyhow.
- 39:00 But, he went home to America and ended up the mayor of a city, or something like that. But he came to pull teeth and that's what he did. He pulled teeth. We had many volunteers. Some came to help the villagers build wells, and some came just to look around. But we had a very helpful American nurse there, and she was very dedicated.
- 39:32 I'm giggling because I'm wondering if I should tell you about our toilet facilities. Well, first of all we had hot water. That's provided somebody lit the fire under a forty four gallon drum every afternoon, and that provided the hot water. If you got in relatively early, you got hot water. But the loos themselves were
- 40:00 made out of a cement pipe. A round cement pipe, and on top of that pipe, at varying heights, someone had cut a round board, with a hole in it. That was it. And the actual building itself was built up to a certain height, with wood. And the rest of it was just sort of
- 40:30 screen wire, so you always knew when there was a seat empty, because you could look see, all the way through. However, it worked. So that was it. The kitchen, I'd rather not talk about. You didn't want to see it. I graduated to driving to Da Lat, at least once a week, to get supplies of
- 41:00 food. And, I would fill up the vehicle. This was an old, I think it was, an old 1947 ambulance that some Australians had sent over there....

We'll just stop there, Iris....

Tape 2

- 00:41 The quarters were certainly not something you would write home about. We had a generator. I think the generator went there about the same time as the 1947 ambulance. And we had a wonderful
- 01:00 maintenance man, his name was Omkar[?]. Omkar could fix anything. And the generator was his particular baby. He kept it going, nobody knew how. What distressed me was the fact that when he was testing it, with the points, he would stick his finger in, to find out if it was working. I would repeatedly think
- 01:30 I would find him flat on his back, and he wasn't the sort of person you would want to give mouth to mouth to. Anyhow, Omkar, I think he had about two or three wives, and he was always running from one of them, but we couldn't have done without him. In the kitchen, we had two Vietnamese cooks. Now all the cooking was done in either a big pot or a big wok.
- 02:02 I graduated to going marketing, and I used to bring home what meat we could afford. We were always on a shoestring budget. And vegetables, I used to hate giving them to the kitchen, because I knew how they would come back. But you couldn't insult them by asking to cook yourself. Regardless of what I gave them, it all ended up tasting the same. Regardless, of
- 02:30 what you gave them, they all managed to...But that was the way they liked it. They also cooked for the people in the kitchen, so they did a very good job of cooking, and of course, it had to be in huge quantities. The dining room was the same brown as the rest of the establishment. It was earthy brown.
- 03:00 And the crockery was predominantly once again, chopsticks, which although many people had managed to...I managed to get myself a spoon, and a knife and a fork. But you never worried about it much. Because you had more things to think about. You only needed food to eat to make you healthy, that's all. I had one experience one morning.
- 03:31 A man used to come on a bicycle, and he had a huge basket on the back of the bike, and used to carry these beautiful loaves of long, crusty French bread. That was the nicest thing we had to eat. He came every morning, and I used to get up early, and I'd go to see that he had porridge, and a cup of coffee, or see that he was fed and looked after.
- 04:00 And one morning, I decided, while he was having his porridge, I decided I'd take some of the bread in for him. I looked at the bread thought to myself, 'Why take in one or two loaves when I can carry the whole lot?' I went to pick up the basket and I couldn't budge it. And I realised that he was carrying

ammunition. He was an ammunition carrier for the Viet Cong. And I thought,

- 04:30 'Oh my God! What do I do?' So I decided to do nothing. In-between time he saw me lift it and he came out and panicked, sort of thing. But I made out I hadn't seen anything. I went in and sat down with him, and had some porridge with him. Because I was afraid he wouldn't come. And that French bread was the only thing we had worthwhile eating. And not so long after that, I
- 05:00 heard a banging on the door of my room one morning, and went out and there he was, and he was sort of throwing his arms around and trying to say something, which I couldn't understand. So I got an interpreter up, and the interpreter says, "This man says you no go to town today. You no go to town today." Because it was my go to town, for market day. And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Viet Cong." They had bombed some bridge.
- 05:31 So they had actually put bombs on the bridge to take me out that morning. So it saved my life. By not reporting this little man, for his gun carrying. So that was a good thing, wasn't it? I wouldn't be here. The men from the outpost went down, when I told them, they went down to look who was there. However, that's how we continued to get our bread.
- 06:01 There was a table tennis table down one end of the room, where people, if they wanted to, to enjoy. Mine was just generally hit and giggle, as the table tennis type of the player I am. And we had some interesting....You see, that was the only sort of community hall that we had as well. One night, we were starting to have our dinner,
- 06:30 and all of a sudden we heard the sound of bombs being dropped, on a village near us. And a lot of our medics had, of course....their relatives [relatives] were living in those villages. So we all sat together....we used to sing a lot. I found that these people, when we went into villages, the medics we had that went with us,
- 07:00 I found that we sang when we were nervous. And the higher they sang, the more nervous they were. I used that as a guide to turn around and go home, if it was too bad. But that night we sat singing. And they knew all the songs, the Christian hymns, that I had learned, of course,
- 07:30 in Sunday School. So we sat and sang things like Jesus Loves Me, and all that sort of thing, as loud as we could so they couldn't hear the bombs. We had some very memorable moments, sad moments, like that. Next day we heard, of course, that some of the relatives had been killed.
- 08:10 The village people, they were so good to us. But one of the things that distressed me most was when we went into the villages, we never....I just can't think of the name of it. The children
- 08:30 get a fungus growing around their eyes, sore eyes. We could never get enough ointment, regardless how often we went. We could never get enough medicine. And can you imagine what it was like? Not even having an aspirin, when you have toothache? They had their own remedies, of course, and along with this they also had their own medicine men. And every time we went into a village
- 09:00 to take medicine, we would first of all speak with this man, and get his permission, so we wouldn't upset the community rules. And they appreciated this. And another time, they invited me to a....They asked me
- 09:30 to be....to attend a function. This village of Du Rak had celebrated. It was two or three years, or something, or months, I forget which, since they had been attacked by any Viet Cong, so they were celebrating the fact. So they invited me to a function. The first thing they did when I got there was the killing of the buffalo.
- 10:00 To be eaten. Buffaloes were like their....commodities. You were very rich if you had a buffalo, or one or two buffaloes. So I was surprised they were actually killing a buffalo. That was horrendous. It starts off with all the young men throwing a spear into the poor old thing, and then, of course, they went through the whole ritual of, sort of, cutting its throat
- 10:31 and cutting it up to eat. And the party was in this....you can't call it a room. But there was a table and seats around, or logs around, to sit on. I'll never forget this. And then came the eating part. Now what I didn't know was
- 11:00 it was traditional to cook the entrails, the innards, of the buffalo first. And I was getting rather hungry by this time, but along with that we had the rice wine. And, of course, rice wine seems to help those villagers go around. It's very much party fodder. This particular
- 11:30 place they gave me a bowl to drink out of, and kept it filled with wine. But on either side of me, one of the men sat, and they had to hold the bowl, so I was pretty much covered in rice wine. Then came along this cooked meal, which looked rather like a stew. When I took my chopsticks up,
- 12:00 and bit in, I got grit in my teeth. They hadn't cleaned the innards out, and I had to eat it, so as I didn't spoil their function. But I only ate half and pretended I was full, and passed it on. But to get back to the rice wine. They took away the bowls, because they wanted them to put food in. But they gave us each a bottle. Somehow they had managed to get empty bottles

- 12:30 so I had this bottle of rice wine, and I thought, 'Oh goody, I'll just have my own bottle.' But once again, a man on the other side had hold of the bottle. And I had taken with me that day, a soldier from the outpost, an American soldier. He was a tall fellow. But you never saw him without his gun. He carried his gun by his side regardless of where he was. So he was up there and he was getting rice wine as well. But
- 13:03 the village chief started to sit a bit too close to me. And he pointed out the fact that I had bracelets on and he had bracelets on, and I got the message that he wanted to swap bracelets. So he got a nice silver bracelet of mine, and I got one of his, which I still have in there. Which is beaten....I don't know what material it is, but they make their bracelets out of what looks like beaten aluminium.
- 13:30 And I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but I felt sure it was time to leave. So I stood up to go, and they helped the American soldier stand up, because he was having a bit of trouble by then. But the main problem was to enter the village you had to go over a swaying bridge, look down to a deep water. But I managed to reach it, and he had to be helped across. That was scary.
- 14:00 Then we got in the Jeep, and I was able to drive it home. But their functions are very memorable. Another one I had to go to, they had these huge rice wine pots, and whereas you thought you might get a glassful, or something, They had an empty reed, a supple weed, and you had to draw up the rice wine through this
- 14:30 reed, and it went from mouth to mouth to mouth. That took a lot of willpower. And you couldn't even wipe off the top of it. So I had to sit there and....On the third time round I had to say, "I'm sorry, I have to get back to the hospital." but it's a pretty sort of potent stuff, this rice wine. And likewise, when a village was being bombed or moving
- 15:00 or something like that, forget about other goods and chattel, just as long as the rice wine jars went first. That was the first priority to get out of the village, to keep them strong. I was there.....One of the very memorable things, also, was when one village was being bombed. After it was over, a girl was brought in screaming, she was a
- 15:30 beautiful girl. And we couldn't stop her screaming. The Viet Cong had tied...because she had been going out with an ARVN soldier, the Viet Cong had tied her to a chair and made her sit and watch while they cut the throats of her parents. So you can imagine that was something that stayed with us. We couldn't stop her screaming. And they
- 16:00 brought her to the hospital, and we tried to quieten her down. But even with what we had, we couldn't stop her crying. And eventually she went home. But she took her own life. And that's understandable, too, isn't it? But we saw quiet a few drastic things like that. The Viet Cong would come into the villages, and harass the villagers. For example, one day,
- 16:31 the medic I was travelling with, in the vehicle, he saved my life, because we were going through a village, and as we got into the middle of the street, there was this man laying, a body of a man laying, his body here and his head unattached and cut off. My immediate reaction was to cover this so the children of the village wouldn't see. And I was
- 17:00 halfway out the door of the Jeep when the medic dragged me back. He said, "No, no, no," he said, "That is the way the Viet Cong control the village. You will do what we ask you to do or we will cut your head off, too." And he said if I covered that head, the Viet Cong would have gone after me. So that's the sort of thing that was happening you had to learn to live with.
- 17:30 And of course, it worked. Then they would go into a village and they would harass the village and eat all the rice. And meanwhile, they were burrowing under the village. And they would take out enough, and they would build a cavity under the village for themselves to live. And they would come out at night, and harass the people in the surrounding areas. In one village close to us, the
- 18:00 village chief used to ask us to buy them rice, and we would bring it home, and they would come to the hospital and fill their pockets, and things like that, and take it back. Just to feed themselves. And in one place, the Viet Cong came out and they did a most unforgivable thing. They wrecked the only sewing machine in the village.
- 18:30 That was too much. They reported them as being there. And what happened next, and this happened right throughout the Vietnam....it's not very well known. But the Americans before they bombed a village would notify the village that it was going to happen, so the village people would move out.
- 19:02 And they'd move out with everything that they'd have. But when they moved out, they would then bomb the village. And at one time they had about a thousand people in some sheds we had next to the hospital. And they had moved out. And they had moved out most of their things out on a poor old elephant. They had one elephant.
- 19:38 I had no food for them. I used to go in De Laton, beg, borrow and get enough food for them. And I had them come to collect this food, and they were so fair. If there were four children, they would get four little slices, depending on the size of their family. But they never fought. They went into these
- 20:01 sheds, they had nothing. They didn't argue about whose space was what. They just sort of did the best

that they could. And the memorable one about this was that the village chief, somewhere along the line, had gotten him a Davy Crockett hat and a red cape. And whereas I got up early of the morning, to look over things, he used to

- 20:30 also get up early in the morning to look over his files. And he had a little hillock, and he'd stand on there every morning, to survey what was happening, in his Davy Crockett hat. We used to get all these donations from America, they used to come in with all sorts of things, and you'd get boxes
- 21:00 and the headquarters would send me out with X boxes, of distributions for people, in this sort of circumstances. But I never knew what I was going to get when I opened a box. At one time, we had a group of people in from a country, a very mountainous area. The women were
- 21:30 topless, the men wore just a little thing. But they were topless, with a sarong around, from the waist down. And one day I was doing one of these distributions, and I opened up a box and this box was crammed with red brassieres. Now this really created a stir. The women loved them, and from then on you could pick out that particular tribe, because the women were wearing
- 22:00 red bras. You could pick them from a mile away. All these women, that was the so and so tribe. Another distribution was, people had knitted woollen bed socks. Now, these people had never had anything by the way of footwear in their lives. So, why people would even not...sort of say, "Well, what do
- 22:30 they need?" Didn't matter. But anyhow I had these bed socks. I thought to myself, 'What do I do? What do I do?' So I put one on my head. And they loved caps, because they believed the heat of your body goes out through your head. So once again, I had a whole tribe running around with bed socks on their head, right? But the worst one was the day I opened a box, put my hand in and came out with a handful of condoms. 'Oh my God! What do I do with these?'
- 23:00 So I put one on my finger and as they filed forward I gave them one. I don't know how long they stayed on, but we had all these people running around with condoms on their fingers. They were quite happy. I don't know what the original outcome of those. But back in the States, I would have liked to have said to people, "Look, let's think about 'What do
- 23:30 they need?'" And so forth, but I never, ever got the opportunity to do that, of course. But they were grateful, for whatever they got, regardless of what it was, they were grateful. What affected me most was their serenity, their acceptance of their situations. While we would be dancing up and down screaming
- 24:00 "We haven't got this. We haven't got that." They accepted everything that happened, calmly, and got on with what they could do. One thing I did have was I eventually graduated to have my own room, when one of the nurses left, and I would have bangs on my door at night, and I would go out. And there would be young teenage men from the villages, banging on the door,
- 24:30 "Hide me! Hide me!" Because the Viet Cong would come into the villages, they would tie together with barbed wire or something, all the youth, and take them off, to work for them carrying guns or something. I was...quite often hiding out these young men. We also had a cook who had to
- 25:00 hide out from his wife, so I had more or less had a permanent space for him, because he was never going to go home. But he was a very good cook, or one of our best cooks. So it had its other little distractions, apart from running the hospital. I had been there almost a year, and somehow or other,
- 25:30 things changed. In between time we did have a manager, whereas I was supposed to be this secretary, and I ended up doing most everything. There was also a manager, and I shouldn't say this, but he didn't like Vietnamese. He just didn't like the Vietnamese people, so he didn't spend all that much time working with them. We also had a
- 26:00 director from Saigon, who came up every now and again, and he sort of upset people, and I had to quieten them all down. And it sounds as if I am an "I am." But I'm not an "I am", it was all just these things that had to be fitted in. But I decided myself it was time somebody else....actually, I was pretty worn out.
- 26:30 And in a place like that you live on your nerves all the time. A couple of times I had to evacuate the hospital, because of...almost every week we'd have a letter from the Viet Cong saying "We're coming to get you next Friday." Or something like that. And all of these things, even if you don't want to let them, they get on your nerves. So I decided it was time to, at least, have a holiday.
- 27:02 And they came in, and they had extra people to come in from the States, so I decided to come home actually, or go home. And by that time I had been working a lot with the American Army. They knew me very well. One night we were evacuated there
- 27:30 under incoming bombs, or rockets. That was the night I got diarrhoea. The men's toilets, of course, were all that were there. And they didn't have any divisions or anything, so I sort of spent time in there and the soldiers would come in saying, "Get out of here. Get back in the dugouts." And I'd say, "I can't. I want to die here."
- 28:00 But they knew me very well, because when I got stuck there I used to make them apple pies. But in

between times I had become quite friendly with them. They knew the work I was doing, so they suggested if I was leaving the hospital, I could think about going and working for the American Aid. So I thought

28:30 I would leave, I would go home and I would think about this. And that actually was towards the end of 1968, so that's a little bit about one year. That was my introduction to Vietnam. But I'm very glad about it because,

29:01 as I said I was working with the Hill People, the Montagnard people. And working with the Vietnamese people was quiet different. They're a different race of people. As I said before, they don't intermarry, they don't mix. But they were wonderful, friendly people. Wonderful, wonderful, friendly,

29:30 people.

You've given us such a wonderful introduction, I would like to actually go back...

What I didn't say there was, remember I told you about the bombed out villages. What I didn't tell you, and what many people don't recognise is that if Americans bombed a village, they went back and they rebuilt it. And a few years later, I went back because

30:01 in my next job, I was trying to get my interpreter back to America. And I went back and I nagged and nagged and nagged, and I actually got myself back to the hospital, which was not flying safe at that time. But I went out to the village that I'm talking about, that was bombed, and it was rebuilt. They had a good school; they had a good well system. The Americans had rebuilt their village, it was a

30:30 comfortable, happy, functioning village. But the people remembered me, so I went back, and they all came and we all stood there, crying. And I was so thrilled to see what had happened. They had a beautiful village.

That's a wonderful story.

So, a good story.

Iris, can you tell us about returning to Australia, and your decision to go back and just lead us through I guess what happened for you next, in brief terms,

31:01 **just as an introduction, so we....**

I think like everything else, I've always been a voluntary worker. Like even before I went over there, I was working with the Endeavour situation, which was children with problems, and girls with problems, and things like that. So along with that, I had been away

31:30 from home a year. And a year of a different, entirely different functioning, thinking factor, and I was a realising already I wasn't fitting in very well at where I'd left. And I realised there was a lot to be done with the Vietnamese people, so it didn't really take much thought.

32:03 After a couple of months I was on the plane again and went back, and that was another different experience altogether. Well, my sons didn't seem to be missing me all that much.

32:30 No mother to nag at them. 'Don't do this, don't do that.' I was concerned, I did feel there were things I could do, that were more humane, necessary than at home. I had been given papers by the

33:00 American Embassy, to fill in, to send back. So I sent those back, and of course they came back once again with sort of, "When are you coming?" So I did what I had to do at home, like there's all these things to arrange and bills to pay and things like that. And got myself back there. But of course when I arrived this time, it certainly wasn't such a horrendous

33:31 happening, was it. And I was prepared for whatever else it was going to bring me. But along the way, of course, I also hoped to get lots of news of the hospital I left. Because you become very close, you know, I became very close to all the medics,

34:00 and the Hill People. We had all been one tremendous family, of supporting one another. And that was one of the reasons I wanted to get back to Vietnam, to be able to be in contact with them as well. So there I was again, but hopefully this time a much smoother entry. Can that be the eight minutes?

Tape 3

00:32 **Iris, we were just discussing your grandfather. Can we talk about him just for a few minutes?**

Yes.

He was in the First World War, in the Light Horse...

He was in the Light Horse, actually, yes. That picture you see of him there, he was presented that cup,

it's a beautiful

01:00 thing, silver thing. He was presented that cup by the Duke of Gloucester, the King that abdicated, many years ago. He was actually a very strict man. He kept his wife Gladys, polishing his buttons, and nice white gaiters and that sort of thing. He didn't communicate

01:31 much. One thing there was about him that wasn't very nice. His son joined the...married a...his actual, I'm getting out of the war; his son later on went to marry an English bride. And he thought his son should have married an Australian lady,

02:00 and incidentally, he is second generation Australian. His father came to Australia in 1848. And when this war bride came home, came back to Australia, within hours of her arriving, he had her in the cow yard, teaching her to milk. Now she was born to the sound of Bow-bells in London,

02:31 and she was scared stiff, and she really hated him. But that was his...you know, for even coming he was angry with her. And she used to run away. And there was another English war bride some miles across country, she used to run away and hide out with this other war bride. And my uncle, in those days could do any sort of work

03:00 that had to be done. And he was building fences on other properties, so he was away from home. So she had a terrible life. But later on, she managed to get away from grandfather, living with grandfather. She loved my uncle. I was only a kid, but when Uncle Arthur, like all soldiers he liked to have his drop of drink,

03:30 and he used to get happy very quickly. When he was happy he liked to dance on top of the kitchen table. So I was very fond of Uncle Arthur. He and his wife managed to get away on their own, Heather [interviewer]. They really enjoyed, loved one another very much. But my grandfather, you didn't do anything wrong in his presence, did you? No.

04:00 And I can't say I loved him. I don't know of anybody that did. Perhaps my grandmother did.

Do you think those ex-servicemen had an effect on your understanding of the life of a soldier?

I don't know. My brother went into the army very early. I don't know. What I seem to have, I have a, I think I might have said it before, a letter saying for helping raising funds for soldiers in 1942.

04:30 **Can you tell us about that? What did you do to raise funds, and what was it for?**

Well, this was the RSL in Tenterfield. In those days, you did things properly. I was sixteen at the time. I used to run dances or halls, and in those days, if you really did it properly, you had a sit down evening

05:00 meal, you had a band, the ladies all had a dance program, where the men wrote their little....'I'll have the next dance with you.' But the sit down supper was really a lot of work, but somehow or other I did that. I used to run these functions to raise funds for what they called them, Soldiers'

05:30 Comforts, back in 1942. So I must have been involved with war efforts. Not that I like war, I abhor war. I see no sense in it. But no, it's always been there. Along with that, I like people. I help people very easily. I'm still doing it. I had a two hour session on the phone last with

06:00 a gentlemen whose been put out of his flat. I don't know what he expects me to do about it, but that's happened. A war veteran.

So you had one brother, any sisters?

I had one sister. But my brother was in Korea.

Can you tell me a bit about the dance cards. What if you had nobody put their name down on your card?

You'd be a wallflower.

06:32 That really was a lovely....it was nice. You'd get there, and sort of sit there, and hope to get your card filled. And then a gentlemen would come up and say, "I believe we have the next dance." And everything was very much so so.

I wonder if people were married from having their dance cards full and dancing with their prospective husbands.

I don't know,

07:00 I don't know. But in that time, in that particular time, in the town where I lived, there were a whole lot of soldiers from the Middle East, home, and there was a recreation camp there for them. So you would have had to look very much dragon-like not to have your card filled very early in the evening.

Can you tell us about some of the mischief you got up to in the Land Army?

07:33 I don't know how we did this, but the first camp, we had about four beds to a room, and three rooms, so

that doesn't make all that many of us. But somehow or other, we had the lady that was in charge of us, she used to go to bed very early,

08:00 and sleep we hoped, very strongly. But somehow or other, the girls had to go AWL [Absent Without Leave], some of them had boyfriends that would come and see them, some of them just wanted to get on a bike and ride into town and go to a dance. But somehow or other, she used to come in at nine o' clock every night and see that everybody was in their bed. Somehow or other we had a system where it was somebody's duty on that particular

08:30 night, to somehow or other, if there were empty beds, go ahead of where she was coming. But how we worked it? But I always seemed to be the one who had to slip from bed to bed and be there when she got there. That was one little thing that we did. Another thing was we used to.....I guess, we used to go on unauthorised leave.

09:01 We'd do stupid things. I was in Sydney a few months back, to a reunion, and we sat and giggled, my friends and I, we sat and giggled like sixteen year olds, about the things that we did. Like, we were always having parties. It might be for the dog across the road, but we'd think up a reason to have a party. And they must have been very mild parties. Because you didn't drink in

09:30 those days. You were a scarlet lady, if you went into a hotel under the age of 21. You didn't swear, you didn't tell dirty jokes, so they must have been relative to today, very mild parties, but we laughed a lot.

Did you swear a lot and drink and smoke on the side where nobody saw you?

10:00 No, never went into a hotel before I was 21. Swearing just wasn't in. We did have some of those atrocious city girls with us. The majority of us were country. We did have those who had different sort of happenings to us.

10:30 We just used to sort of have a party if somebody got a fruit cake or something like that. But I don't remember any of them drinking, they possibly did. But I don't remember any of them.

And smoking?

I can't remember them smoking. But along with that, let's not forget, we got thirty shillings a week. And we paid fifteen

11:00 shillings of that on board. So we didn't have that much money to throw about.

What about boys? Did you talk about boys, and compare how the boys were?

See, some of them had boyfriends away in the army. We certainly didn't meet up with any.....Now and again, we'd sneak out to dances. That's about the only thing we'd do. But even if you met a boy there, he wasn't allowed in camp. I, at one time, I went to a dance,

11:30 and met this fellow. And he used to swim across the river just to say hello. Isn't that nice? He was in the army, or air force, or something, across the other side of the river. The Camden River. That was so romantic, wasn't it?

Did he bring a change of clothes to get changed into?

No, he used to swim across and he used to carry his clothes above his head.

12:01 **That's very romantic.**

Isn't that romantic?

Do you remember his name?

No, I don't remember his name.

Were there many....I suppose 1942, 1943, were there Americans around as well?

What I'm talking about is 1944. I never met up with any Americans. They were predominantly in Brisbane,

12:30 I was in New South Wales, for this happening. And of course, we worked out in the country. The first place we went to was Camden, but we of course were on vegetable fields, and they were never close to a town, they were out in the country. The next place we went on was a place called Gulgong. Way out in the boonies we were. We just lived in the middle of these acres of carrots or whatever was growing.

13:00 And we had no means of transport to go anywhere. So...along with that we were very tired. You couldn't work in the fields all day and not be tired at night.

Did some of the girls used to go out with any Americans?

I don't know. It was

13:30 a very different world to nowadays. Let's take the word "Sex." Nobody would even think of saying that

word. Nobody would even think of the things that go on today, definitely not. I'm not saying we were all pure. I don't know

14:00 who was pure or otherwise, but I think the majority of us was as naïve as I was. I've learned a lot since. Too much, perhaps.

So, we were talking about....Well, first of all, did you do many of those raising funds? It seems like you were very busy?

I did perhaps, well, three of them, before I went into

14:30 the army myself. And from then on I didn't have time, of course. No, it was a very pleasant time to look back on. As far as the camaraderie and the girls were concerned. Very pleasant time. And as I say, we've had two reunions, a fifty and a sixty year reunion, since then.

15:01 And enjoyed them very much. And I said, see who's gotten older looking than yourself, or otherwise.

I was just going to ask you about that time, that first time you came back from Vietnam. You were telling Chris that you'd go to the supermarket

15:30 **and you'd see all this food....**

Everything. Everything. You tried not to think about it, because it was so different. In Vietnam, the marketplaces were.....In Vietnam. Here, I don't think you don't realise until you live without it,

16:00 what running water is. How wonderful water is. For example, at one time in Vietnam somebody said to me the Vietnamese people were dirty. They were far from dirty; they were the cleanest people I'd ever met. And I used to reply by asking, "I wonder how clean you and your house would be, if every morning you had to drop a bucket into a deep well and bring it out."

16:31 And they didn't like that. But we should be so grateful for what we have. Just simple running water. And that was....there was no water to wash anything in a marketplace. Of course, it just didn't come back to washing the vegetables. The walls were as I say, the most predominant colour was

17:00 a nice earthy brown, because that was what you lived with. Earthy brown. And the actual quantity and variety of things, they're just not there. Not in the highlands anyhow. But when you get to Saigon, of course, with money in Saigon, as they say, you can buy anything. And the marketplaces

17:30 and that were fantastic. Not in the highlands, but in Saigon.

Can you tell us Iris about your trip back to Vietnam, the second time you went back?

By comparison....

Well, the first time was a bit of a debacle...

The second time was a dream, by comparison to the first time. I just flew in.

18:03 They'd sent a soldier to meet me, and of course, the first time was in the middle of a military offensive. The second time everything was relatively clear. Although it has been recognised it was the busiest airport in the world. But you went in. There were planes, and there were lots and lots of cars, but without the tanks

18:30 and the bomb evident, sort of thing. So they had arranged to let me to stay for a little time, back with the Project Concern, and the housing. That's one thing that happened to me, with the time that I spent in South Vietnam, the region around Saigon, was housing. For some reason, I don't know

19:00 the Americans had set up a status of....Well, Americans were the number one persons, the Vietnamese number three, and I was what was called a Third Country National. Anybody other than Americans or Vietnamese were called Third Country Nationals. A bit degrading, but nevertheless

19:30 I was a Third Country National. As a Third Country National, I was not entitled to American housing. I was not entitled to shop at what they called PX [American canteen unit], which is their American goods place. I was not allowed to use their post office. So my first accommodation

20:00 was above...In Vietnam, the food, for want of another word, they used most was called Nuoc Nam Nuoc Nam was a fish sauce. They got all these little fish, bones and all, and they had huge jars, and they fill it with fish,

20:31 a layer of salt, a layer of fish. They'd leave that. They'd put that away to mature. And of course it becomes a liquid, very fishy liquid. Then they drain it off, and that becomes Nuoc Nam sauce. Now, it's very smelly

21:00 as you could imagine. My first accommodation was in an ugly little room, on top of a Nuoc Nam shop. I lived with the smell of Nuoc Nam. I had the feeling it was all through my clothes and everything. For a wash I had a bucket,

21:30 and another bucket. You took water from one bucket and you poured it over yourself and stood in another bucket. I was there for about three or four months I suppose, and somebody came in and rescued me, and moved me to a bit better apartment. And I

22:00 lived in various places, until eventually, a couple of years later, they put me into American accommodation, and that was wonderful. I really appreciated that. I had my own flat, and I had a shower.

And have you been able to eat Nuoc Nam sauce since then?

I love it. It's like vegemite. You get used to having it.

22:30 I can eat and enjoy it without thinking what's in it. But it is a traditional happening.

It's seems ironic that you weren't allowed to use the American post office and everything else when you were working for Project Concern, which I believe was an American charity, wasn't it?

This is not...I'm not with the Project Concern now...

The second time around you're not with Project Concern?

No, I'm with the American

23:00 Aid. The US AID.

My misunderstanding.

Where I wasn't allowed to use, somebody used to use it for me. Like I would give my letter to somebody and they would post it at their post office. But I couldn't go to the post office. Likewise with the PX, somebody would be going to a PX and they would say, "Is there anything that you want?" And I might say, "I'd like some milk, processed milk," or something like that.

23:30 But predominantly in Vietnam I ate straight from the markets. Huge markets. Like you went to buy fish, they'd be alive and jumping around in a bucket. And you carried it home in some sort of bag that you'd take with you, it was jumping around, and then you had to kill it yourself, or find somebody to kill it. The meat you would

24:00 never buy because it was hanging in strips, and you had to sort of swat off the flies to see what was underneath it. But along with that, I could get veggies and you'd take them home and you had a special thing to wash them in, when you had a place to wash your veggies. But you got used to it. You got used to it. You had to, didn't you? And

24:30 of course they had lovely fruit. The mangoes were absolutely fantastic. Beautiful, beautiful mangoes. And other fruit and veggies that we had.

So Iris, where did you go from the fish sauce apartment?

Actually they moved me, one of the times,

25:00 there was this American secretary lady, had a three bedroom house. So they decided I could use one of her bedrooms, so they moved me in with her. But she didn't like me being there, she had a boyfriend that used to come. She said I got in the way of....I messed up with her entertaining factors, so I had to move out of there. And from there I moved

25:30 to a place, a building, the second storey, but it was all open to the afternoon sun. It was so hot. There was just this tiny little window up the top. So I really lived in some not so nice places, but it didn't matter. It was not worthwhile kicking up a fuss about.

Were you transferred back to Da Lat?

No.

26:04 Vietnam was divided into what they called 'corps. And I was in 3 corps. My title was, I was a Welfare Advisor for Region 3. Region 3 was around Saigon, 2 a little bit lower. And then 1 was down on the Delta River, itself.

26:37 It was not like you could move all that freely. You had to know where you were going. I was very fortunate because I ended up working a great deal with children. Taking children to hospitals. And predominantly, of course, I was in charge of

27:00 all the orphanages. I had about thirty orphanages, I forget how many children, I was supposed to survey; see that they had food, that they were being looked after and that sort of thing. And that was very, very time consistent. I never really had time to think about being afraid, thinking what I did have and what I didn't have.

27:30 I never really had time, I was just so involved in what I was doing. For example....and they used me. I hadn't been there anymore than a week in the Saigon office of American Aid, when the man in charge,

he said the head of an

- 28:00 orphanage has just died in Saigon and we want to send a wreath as representation of the American presence. He handed me some money, he said, "Now take your interpreter, buy a wreath, and take this to the cathedral." You may have heard of Saigon traffic, but I don't think there could be anything worse in all the world. There were Jeeps, there were
- 28:30 tanks, there were cyclos, there were motor scooters predominantly, and push bikes. And it was a matter of just finding a space to get through. And here was I, just more or less, just arrived, and he said, "Take a car and drive to the cathedral in the middle of the city." He said, "You've got a license?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, what are you waiting for?"
- 29:00 So I got my interpreter and gee, she was very good, and she knew where I had to go. But anyhow, I made it. But what I'm getting at is, right from the beginning, when they didn't want to do anything particular themselves, I became an American representative. Which I did many times.
- 29:30 And another time, on this same subject, another time in Ta Gam, which was up on the Cambodian border. A very high personnel of the Catholic Church had passed away, and I was asked once again to take a wreath to represent them. I'll never forget this because....incidentally, I had access to choppers and planes, whenever I want to, I would just say I would like a
- 30:00 chopper. It sounds ridiculous today, to say I could order my own plane and my own chopper. So we choppered into Ta Gam, and Ta Gam a religion called Cao Dai, and the temple was in the middle of the city. And we choppered in. And the mourning colour is white, dressed in white. And it was fascinating because every road
- 30:30 that led to the temple, on every road there was a white movement. And once again I had to walk up in front of everybody else, with the respects of the American Government. Another time there in that same place, the Americans had earlier in the
- 31:00 time had come up with the plan of educating the teenagers to jobs that they hoped...Like, for example, the Americans hoped to put a bank in all the predominant villages. So they would need bank clerks, and people educated to these type of position. And they would be building, so they would need carpenters and plumbers. So they put teachers
- 31:30 of all these crafts into the school. Now, in between time came the Tet Offensive, and many of the things and the money that they were going to spend, made it impossible to do these things. But nevertheless the classes went on, didn't they? So it came for the time for all these young
- 32:00 people to graduate. And they got in touch and asked would a representative come up and hand out the graduation forms. So once again I represented the American Government, I don't think anybody wanted to go. So there I was handing out all these....to these wonderful kids. But then came the graduation ceremony. When the principal of the college stood up and said,
- 32:30 "We would like you now to tell us where do we go next? Where will these children be employed?" So that was a hopeless situation. All I could say was, "We regret these facilities are not here, but if they are able to get to Saigon, we feel sure that they will find positions there,
- 33:00 to use their talents." But I'm just saying that this organisation that I worked for, I don't know if it's because they had made the decision that I was equal to these jobs, or not, but they certainly gave them to me. The orphanages were....Firstly many of the children in the orphanages were not orphans. I
- 33:30 one time went to President Thieu and I said, "Would you please designate for me, give me some sort of direction on what comprises an orphan?" He says, "In Vietnam, all children are orphans." And the mothers, a lot of them, their husbands were away in the army. They were working. The women did
- 34:00 everything over there. They built the roads, they did all the jobs. There were no men around to do them. So they put their children in orphanages. And of course, in orphanages they got a good education, and a lot of the orphanages were well run. The kids got a good education, they got meals, looked after.
- 34:30 Unfortunately, as happens with so many things, so many of the orphanages for the people that ran them were a way of making money. They had all these thousands of American troops there, who were very generous. One of the orphanages for example, on the way to one of the military bases, used to make it possible for the men going
- 35:00 past in the trucks to see their little children. Some would have singlets on and no pants; some would have pants on and no singlets. And of course, the boys would see this and they'd pull up and they'd say, "This can't happen." And they would write home to get their parents to send them singlets or whatever. And that was because the nun said they couldn't afford to have them
- 35:30 all fully clothed. This was a typical way they had of making money, because what came back would go on the black market, and the children would continue to be run around like that. But what came back was sold. So when the soldiers would take the singlets in, they'd probably take a whole lot of other goodies as well, and continue to do that.

36:05 That was done in many forms. Another orphanage, close by that one, she had holes, obvious holes in the roof. And underneath the roof was....it was quite a

36:30 substantial roof, but it really looked the way she had it set up, was holes in the roof. So of course the boys all called in, didn't they, to contribute to the cost or re-roofing the orphanage. So that was another way of making money. But most of them wore religious gowns, but there was nothing to say that any of them

37:00 were ordained priests or nuns. A lot of that...The Vietnamese men and others, some worked as spies, and some worked off in the army, they wore the nuns' habits, so you never really knew who you were talking to. I

37:30 discovered that at other places, the nuns were getting medical attention. Each unit of men, air force and army, that were based there, they had a medical team, that used to take the medicines to the villages and to the people, and they used to go the orphanages and whoever was in charge, would trot out all

38:00 these little children, with their ailments, and the medical team would give them medicine and care, and I took my interpreter one time, I had a beautiful interpreter, along to watch one of these medical visits. And she came to me and she said, "All these little children,

38:30 are all saying the same ailments." And she said, "And I met a nun and she was telling them all what to say." So in other words, these children were getting medicines that they didn't really need. And we found at this particular place, we had three medical teams going there in the same week, so if the children were actually getting injections or whatever, they could be getting three injections

39:00 a week, which was detrimental. So I went up to General Westmoreland [Commander, US forces] this once, and he gave me permission to contact all the medical teams and find out just where they were going, and keep it down to one per week to that particular place. And that's another one of the tricks. And another one was when a man had a big sign saying, 'Come

39:30 and support this orphanage.' And it was down a small lane, and to get there you had to go down this small lane. And somebody said there was something funny about it, so I went to have a look myself. And I found that when I got in the beginning of the lane, a loud whistle blew. And then a lady came out and kept you there talking for a while. What was happening was, the man in charge of this so called orphanage used to

40:00 blow this whistle, and all the little kids of the community would run around and pretend to be orphans. So we called him 'The Whistleblower', but that's how he got his children. You never failed to be amazed at the things they would think up to get money from the troops. So you had to try and be one step ahead of these people all the

40:30 time. We had lots of problems with the graft and corruption. America sent in a tremendous lot of food, food aid, and each welfare office was supposed to get a certain amount. I found that they were

41:04 bringing in, say, twenty ton of rice, and signing it off as eighteen and they would keep the rest for themselves. So, I threatened to go to the source, to expose what they were doing. We had the welfare chief, and she said,

41:31 "If you do this, you won't get back to Saigon alive." So I decided not to do it. But later on, they did have a go at me...

Sorry the tape ran out...

Tape 4

00:32 **Iris, I was wondering if you could actually take us back to some of the first surveys you did of the orphanages, and a bit about what you saw?**

It was quite frightening. I found there were more orphanages than they thought. The whole thing was to try and sort out just how honest these

01:00 managers were. Just to skip a little bit forward, I once had a lady come out from America. She was the late General Eisenhower's secretary. She was quite high up the tree. And she came out representing an organisation that had a lot of money to spend, but she insisted that the committee said it

01:30 must be spent where the money would be used honestly. Where everything that was brought must go to the children. And the people who were administering it must guarantee that it would be an ongoing program. I looked at this, and I burst out laughing. And she said, "What's so funny?" I said,

02:00 "Look, you may as well go home now. There isn't anybody who would sign that." But anyhow, she

insisted. So, we were given the use of a driver, around Saigon, and for going further afield we were given the use of a small plane, and a pilot of course. And I took her visiting, so many places. Now, I said,

02:30 "Use your eyes and your ears, and if you think you've found an honest person, you use that one." But we didn't. We couldn't find, number one, where I could ask the person would they agree to sign this. No one would. And the....Ronnie, her name was, Ronnie could not verify herself that it could be honestly

03:00 spent as these people had stipulated. So quite frankly, she went back to the States, still with that money. Because it would just not have been possible to find that sort of place. It may have been there, but I didn't know of it, sort of thing. I had one place that even used to make the children look flushed, to look as

03:30 if they had an illness, to get medicine. We believed that this medicine, and the extras that they got, went to the North Vietnamese Army. You were never sure of anything. As I said before, working with this corruption...I went

04:00 back to the office one day and my counterpart, the welfare officer, was in a great state of affairs, because a priest had been in to tell her that he had overheard they were putting a bomb in the old car I used. And he was frantic that I would get in the car, before he could tell me. Fortunately, or I wouldn't be here, he caught my interpreter and

04:30 told her not to use the car. So we called over one of these bomb experts, and yes, the bomb was there. Later on, they took the car out anyhow, but I wasn't in it. In a war zone you've got to expect these things to happen. You walked around, you knew it was always there. People ask, was I afraid?

05:00 I guess, the adrenaline was working all the time. But actual fear, I suppose like everything else, you get used to it, in the back of your head. You just wouldn't carry on if you went around crazy and afraid all the time. But there were some orphanages of course that were excellent. And the things you learnt. For example, the Catholic Relief Group

05:30 had an orphanage there was very well run, but you sort of had to learn that when you walked into an orphanage, the little children and babies would be lying in their cots. And whereas we sort of wrap babies up in swaddling clothes, these little babies would be lying there, and admittedly, it was quite warm. But they wouldn't have any clothes on at all. But the bottom of the cot had slats, so if their

06:00 bowels or anything moved, it went straight through, didn't it? Onto the floor, which was simple. Because it was just as easy to clean up the floor as to wash nappies, and they couldn't afford nappies anyhow, right? But you had to learn all these things and look at them in a factual sort of a way. To me that was a much easier way than washing a hundred nappies.

06:31 And the floors were hosed out. So they were kept nice and clean. And there were just so many things.....And, of course, with the troops, as I've said before, all these units had special

07:00 civilian involvement detachments. So there was a lot of them that would take toys to the children, and they would take lollies, other sorts of food. I had a lot of trouble with milk. In Vietnam the children don't have cow's milk, no cows. But they have a rice milk.

07:32 It's milk made by boiling and boiling rice. But of course the American troops would bring in all these gallons of milk. And the next thing I would have a whole orphanage, with all the kids with diarrhoea. And that was very difficult to explain to the troops. No, they don't have milk. They would also

08:01 bring in a whole lot of toys....I had an experience, a very learning experience myself, on this one. In one area, Thanh Lai, there was this orphanage and TB [tuberculosis] centre and aged care centre, or aged peoples' centre. It

08:30 was three stories. The little children were down below, then we had the people with TB. But it was a place, this huge place, I forget how many beds, but these aged people and the sick people, they were on beds about possibly two foot wide. This whole dormitory of these

09:00 people lying, just lying on these beds. And I looked at it, and thought, "Oh my God, imagine having nothing to do except lay there, waiting to die." And in my western imagination, I decided I've got to do something about this. So I went and I rounded up a whole bunch of television sets,

09:32 card games, radios. I was so proud of myself. I would give them something to look at, something to do, all this sort of thing. I was so proud of myself, and I had all these things. And I went to the lady manager of this, and I said "I have this for you; I have TV sets for all your people to watch." And this and that and that.

10:01 And "Ba Rose," she said. "I know you like us very much, and we appreciate all the things that you do for us. But thank you, no." "What?" She said "If I have a TV set on, for some it is too loud, some can't see, some will want a different program. If I have

10:30 a radio it is just the same. Some people will turn it down, some people will want it turned up. If I give them card games, they are great gamblers. Whereas now they get a little money every week. Somebody

would end up with all of that money." She said, "We have, I'm just here working it out on my electricity bill. Even those small things would add to this bill which I find very difficult to pay." So there I

- 11:00 learned to stop thinking with my great western mind. And from then I sent the things to other places, but we gathered together pretty picture books, and some pretty bed coverings, and we worked on an entirely different happening for that place. But in all of the civic action fellows who
- 11:30 came to give donations to this place, I could never get them to go back to those dormitories, because to look at all these people lying, with nothing to do. There was a church, if they wanted to they could get up and go to church of a morning. I can still see those people lying there and there but for the Grace of God go I, sort of thing.
- 12:02 But I could get people there to help the children down below. At this too, also the boys themselves, the civic action guys, they decided instead of seeing all these women washing by hand, they would buy them washing machines.
- 12:30 But there, there wasn't enough water. You know how it puts the water through and it runs away. There wasn't enough water. And a sister said there wasn't enough electricity. So last thing seen by me, those washing machines were still sitting there, serving as a cupboard. So, as I said, that was one of my great lessons. To never think with my mind, to ask the
- 13:00 people first if they wanted to. But the soldiers, they still continued to take parties there, for the children. Because the children would have school during the day, but after school they would sit and peel all the vegetables for the people the next day. It was really a wonderful place to go, to see the dedication of the sisters that ran that place.

Which particular

13:30 orphanage was that one?

It was called Lang Ka Ne. Then I had another favourite orphanage. It was a little one in the country. Father Tean came to me and he said they'd received a rocket through the roof, and six children had been killed, and please could we get someone to repair the roof. Which I was able to do, because the air force

- 14:01 the American Air Force, the civic action, came and did it for them. And then, while the Americans were there, they also decided they could take out movies. So the Americans took movies out to the children. It was very popular of course. And they also took them food and things every now and again. It came Christmas time,
- 14:30 and Father Tean came and brought me an invitation out to have a Christmas meal with them. I went out of course, and the children all sang little Christmas songs for me. And Father said, "We're going to eat now." And we went in, and on my plate were two church sparrows.
- 15:02 You think of a little sparrow, and the feathers have been plucked off him, and he's been cooked, he's very small. There were actually four of them on the plate. Father said, "You know we're very poor. But we feel this is something special for you." I thanked him. I'll never forget this
- 15:30 thing. I sat down, and I said, "Oh my goodness. We've got one each." So there we were, all nibbling on these tiny little sparrow bones. And after the meal, Father said, "We also have a present for you." And I said, "Yes, what is that?" And he said, "Come with me." And I walked out. And
- 16:00 in the courtyard of this orphanage, they had this real old monkey. And every time when I'd been there I'd went out and said a few words to the monkey and gave him a little pat. Father Tean said, "We know that each time you've come here, you go and you look and you like our monkey. So we have decided to give you our monkey for yourself."
- 16:31 Fourteen years ago, the Father and his nuns had walked, all the way from Hanoi, to build that orphanage, and they had brought the monkey with them. I had to do a quick flip, and I said, "I have no place. But I love my monkey, would you keep him here for me?" And everybody smiled again. To slip forward a little, before I left Vietnam, which was some years later,
- 17:01 Father came to my office. He refused to speak to the manager of the office; he just wanted to see me personally. And eventually he caught me. He said, "I have just come to ask you what I have to do." I said, "What do you mean, father?" He said, "Your monkey." I said, "Is my monkey well?" He said, "Yes, he's just become a father." And we would like to
- 17:30 ask you, what would you like to do with the monkey's son?" I must say I was very excited, to have the second monkey, but once again please keep him for me. So that was Father Tean and his children. I have some pictures of him there if you would like to see them.
- 18:00 So along with all the not so nice things I had to do with orphanages, there are always incidents like this. I think one of the best institutions there was from Germany. The German government had built quite a complex, actually, and their idea of support was to send in trainers,

- 18:31 or young men. They were planning on teaching them trades to take up, and be part of Vietnam, as necessary, when the war ended. But to get into that institute, they only took into that institution boys that had been in jail.
- 19:01 So much so, it was not an uncommon thing for a woman to get her son into jail, to get him into this institution to learn things. But they had wonderful classrooms built by mechanics, refrigeration experts, machinists, tailors. They were teaching all these necessary crafts. The boys all lived
- 19:30 in separate cottages, there were so many to a cottage, and it was competitive as to how clean that cottage as kept. They did their own cooking. They used to have competitions there all the time. It might have been drawing, it might have been singing, or any kind of competition. And I was fortunate that I was asked to go there, once again to present prizes, for the month. It might have been the
- 20:00 best footballer or something like that. They had competitions going all the time. And along with this, I had met up with ladies who had chosen to do in Saigon, what I thought was one of the most not-so-nice things. They were working in the Saigon prisons. Now,
- 20:30 if you want to think of place not to be, it's not any prison, but Saigon prison. Now they were working on people, the criminals, or whatever. Once again they were trying to teach them crafts, and perhaps a better way of living. But they were working with keeping them clothed and keeping them fed. I was able to get them food and all that sort
- 21:00 of thing. But I took the Salvation Army ladies out to this German institute, to see what was happening to the boys that were coming from prison. And I got an agreement between them and the manager, that he would give special attention to the prisoners released through the Salvation Army.
- 21:32 And both sides were very happy about this. But just after that there came a public holiday, a public Vietnamese celebration or holiday, or something like that. And over there, on celebration days, they let everybody out of prison. The Salvation Army had gotten all these people ready to go to the German institute. They didn't have any prisoners anymore.
- 22:00 However, it didn't take them long to get some more.
- So they would just let them all leave permanently? They let them go on a permanent basis?**
- Anyhow, they did very well there. Along with that we got a school going in Saigon. I'm a great scrounger, as you can see.
- 22:32 But there were always people, American people and other nationalities, looking to see what we can that's positive. So once again, I got a building in Saigon, and we started getting the teenage sort of recruits. And somehow or other, some refrigerators fell off the back of a truck.
- 23:00 And cars broke down here and there. And we had, once again, we got training teachers in for those. So there were some good positive things going along. I had these air force civilian support groups and the army civilian support groups, so whatever I could find for them to do, they happily did it. I had one big army; I think it was a cavalry,
- 23:30 they had a group of men who in rotation used to take the kids to the zoos. So I would then send them off to the orphanage and they would collect all the children, and take them to the zoo. And that was very, very popular of course. Not just for the kids, but for the men as well. I think there's very little known of...you hear of a war over there and you hear of people killing and
- 24:00 what happens in a war, but I don't think you hear about all these nice things. All these what-can-we-do-for-civilians sort of thing. I just had to have a school that needed something, and I could find guys that would come and do what they wanted to do. Most amusing one was the bakery. There was a very wonderful orphanage
- 24:30 school run by a bunch of Buddhist nuns. And they took a lot of children who were mentally retarded and so forth. And their dream was to have a bakery, so that the children could learn that sort of trade, and needn't need to be all that bright, to bake the bread or whatever.
- 25:00 And they had space at their orphanage to build a building. Could I find somebody to build them a bakery? Well, at that particular time I had a group of naval men saying, "What can I do? What can I do?" So they happily agreed to build the bakery. Now all I had to do was tell them when to start. So I went to the
- 25:30 sister and I said, "Will you give me a date to start?" And they said, "Yes, we will give you a date." And I said, "Next week?" And they said, "Oh no, no, no." And each time, the men rang up and said, "When do we start?" I'd say "I haven't heard yet." So I kept asking this sister when can we start. Then all of a sudden one day, it would have been two or three weeks later, I go this frantic phone call.
- 26:01 "Please tell the captain he can start tomorrow." I said, "Tomorrow?" They said, "It must be tomorrow." So I got onto the naval depot, and said can you tell captain so and so, tomorrow is the day to start. He said, "Oh gee, I've got to get a few things together. It can't be tomorrow." I said, "I'm sorry, it has to be tomorrow." He said, "I can't do it." I said, "Please." I said, "Could you just come and

- 26:32 dig a hole for the first brick, or something like that. So he agreed to that, so he came along with a number of his men, all beautifully dressed in their naval uniforms, and he wasn't very happy when I told him why it had to be tomorrow. Because they had consulted their horoscopes and that was the day, the special lucky day, to start a bakery.
- 27:00 To build the bakery. He wasn't at all impressed. However, they came along and we turned the first sod. Before I left the bakery was functioning. It was providing an income, it was providing work, and it was happily going along its way. The other time I had that was a fun thing.
- 27:30 Another orphanage wanted to build a fish pond, because that would produce their food, and one again could be an income depending on what happened there. And they had a block of swampland, so I got onto one of the companies that had all this digging equipment. These huge machines.
- 28:00 The first one came in, because it was a swamp, and it immediately got stuck in the mud. So they sent in another big, what do you call them? Digger things. But it was a very big piece of machinery and coming through the brick
- 28:31 gate posts, it knocked out a gate post. So I had one machine that was absolutely down in the swamp, another one that took off a gate post, so that wasn't a very good start to this. But anyhow the other one got through and pulled the other one out and they eventually cleared the space to put in a fish pond. And got that all functioning.
- 29:00 So there were two bits of things that we got going there. But there was always a challenge, as to know what to do. I talked about the civilian help bringing in toys. The one time I had a problem with an orphanage, these
- 29:30 men went there quite a lot, they were very generous to it. And it came time to bring in toys; they said to me, "Iris, what can we bring by way of toys?" And I said, "Well, marbles." So forth and so on. But I mentioned a whole bunch of little things. And they said, "Why are you saying this?" And I said, "Well, marbles, they can put them in their pockets, their very own, they've got something to keep. And little bracelets they can keep on their arms, it's theirs." They said, "Oh, no,
- 30:00 we've got plenty of money. Actually this request is going through Hollywood." They said, "We'll bring in some dolls." So I said, "That's all right, providing they're little dolls." I said, "If you bring any big dolls in they won't get them." I said, "They'll end up on the black market." But of course they brought in dolls. Absolutely beautiful boxed dolls.
- 30:32 The men went, of course, gave them all to the children. And the men kept going back to that orphanage, and they were saying, they'd get back to me and say, "Iris? Why aren't the kids playing with their dolls?" I said, "They probably haven't got them now." I said, "Well, you go and ask the sister can you see them playing with dolls." And the sister says no, they're not allowed to bring them out in the daytime. They're just allowed to bring them out at night time. And
- 31:01 another group of soldiers went back to see the children playing with the dolls. "Oh no, they can't play with them today, because they've all been naughty." The nuns would think up all sorts of logical reasons why the men couldn't see the children playing with dolls. And the last one was, the colonel went in, and he was very emphatic, he was going to see these children playing with dolls. She said "We have such a sad story to tell you."
- 31:30 One of the people that come in and do cleaning for us, offered the little children ten piastres to buy their doll. And the children thought that that was a pretty good price, and they could make money for us. So all the little children all sold their dolls." I said, "I told you so."
- 32:01 I suppose they're sad stories. But they're factual little stories that make up an overall happening, and I suppose children, and the way children were used, for war as well....

What were some of the more positive stories in terms of how the work you did benefited the

32:30 children?

Yeah. Yes. The children were beautiful, of course. There wasn't any of them that you wouldn't have liked to have brought home with you. I had one that I would have liked to have brought home, but a chap came to claim her. In the orphanages, particularly the ones in the country, they had no medical help, really.

33:02 So I found that quite a number of them had what they called a "dying room." And when the child got very ill.....also, if you took a child to hospital in Vietnam, you had to go with it, or someone had to go with it, because there was insufficient nurses to take care of them. Or even family, if somebody was ill, somebody had to go along to do the nursing side of it.

33:32 So, they used to have what they called a "dying room." And they just put the child in there to die. And I found this room in this orphanage and this little child was very close to death, and the lady didn't want me to take her. The manager didn't want me to take her, but I insisted on taking her. I took her home, found a lady to care for her, got her the medicine,

- 34:00 and she was doing quite well. I called her Small One. I was actually thinking about seeing if I could adopt her. But one day to my desk came a young American soldier, who asked for me. He explained how his buddy, a Vietnamese soldier, used to take him home.
- 34:31 This fellow, this American had come back from America. And he used to play with this man's child. And he promised this Vietnamese soldier that he would take care of this child. Well, the Vietnamese man got killed. And the wife, because she couldn't take care of the child, put her into this orphanage. And this American managed to get himself back to Vietnam, as a civilian, to get this child.
- 35:00 But of course when he arrived there, the child was not there. So the lady in charge, who didn't particularly like me by the way, she sent him to me, and this little child, she would never smile. You could never get her to smile. My interpreter and I used to look after her. And he walked in, and she
- 35:30 got the most beautiful smile. And she recognised him and he took her back to America. So it was just quite a story, isn't it? But this lady, at the orphanage, who was there, really, to make money. And I caught her up to all sorts of tricks, of selling things, and
- 36:02 she just wouldn't co-operate at all. I would bring her in food and it would be gone the next day.

Was there anything you could actually do about those people in the long run? In terms of removing them? Or replacing them?

Not really. All you could do was...I was telling you before about the child

- 36:30 with the pants, singlets. I was reported to Washington on that one. It went right up to the Head of State in Washington. Of the neglect of the Americans, allowing in their area, the children to be so poor. And I was reprimanded from Washington on that one. So I went across to the American
- 37:00 base. We called the Pentagon the main American base. And I insisted on getting a couple of generals, actually, to come with me and I took them across there. And I had the authority to ask the management to open their cupboards. And they were horrified of course, and refused to do it, and I said, "Well, okay. I'll will see that no American ever
- 37:30 comes through here again." But she went and opened the cupboards and, of course, they were stacked with food and clothing. Floor to ceiling. So the generals were horrified, and they wouldn't have believed me otherwise. So that was all that I could do. Try to keep them a bit honest.

Can you tell us how you came to get the name "Ba-Rose."

Oh, 'ba'

- 38:00 means Mrs.. In Vietnam they don't have Mrs and Miss and all that sort of thing. But anybody over a certain age, married or otherwise, becomes 'ba.' Underneath that you can be a 'To', T-O. And of course Roser, they didn't quite know that, but they knew about roses so I became "Ba Rose."

Yes, we'll stop there.

Tape 5

- 00:33 **Iris, I wanted to have a little chat to you about Da Lat. Just coming back to Da Lat....**

In the Vietnamese language the 'A' becomes 'R', so it's Da Lat. Like we recently had Long Tan Day, they call this Long Tarn Day. It's a pity somebody doesn't tell all these announcers.

- 01:01 'A' becomes 'AH'.

What were your day to day duties in Da Lat when you first got there?

I don't know that there was ever anyone duty. You did what was happening. For example.....fortunately,

- 01:30 though weird, one of my activities before I went to Vietnam, I was a stockcar driver. Do you know what I mean by that?

A cart driver?

A stockcar. Do you remember when they used to chase one another in old cars around old forty four gallon drums.

Can you tell us about that?

No.

I don't know.

It's just a racing track, but

- 02:00 you go around in circles. But you drive old bombs. It was very good because I learned to drive. So one of my duties there was to...see, in the hospital, we had limited vehicles. And this predominant one was this old '47 ambulance. Now we had very few medical equipment
- 02:30 necessities, so if a patient came in that we couldn't handle at the hospital, I had to drive them to Da Lat. To the hospital in Da Lat. So that was one of my duties if somebody came in. To get them to the hospital. Perhaps a woman having a baby, and they couldn't handle a caesarean birth, then she would have to be quickly taken into Da Lat. Likewise,
- 03:00 when I got in there, I would come home, I would go buy rice or whatever. We couldn't afford to come home empty. So that was one of my....it was the shopping duties. But predominantly, I went there as secretary. So I had to compile reports and do some bookwork as well. But I did go there as a secretary. There was always a necessity
- 03:30 to be considerate of the medics and the trainees, like we had trainee nurses training with medics, there was always something going on with them. Like perhaps they have somebody who was just killed, in a raid on their village. Or perhaps there had been a little argument amongst themselves. But there was always this ongoing being there, for the personnel.
- 04:01 One of my pleasures was monkeys. I owned two monkeys in Vietnam. But this little monkey used to live up a tree, and hated cats. He'd spit on them. But when the Viet Cong came into the hospital one time, they killed my monkey. So that's one of my sad stories.

Can you tell us about that?

My monkey. I can't think of his name...

- 04:30 but it was dogs he hated. If a dog came past and he was up his tree, he would jump down onto the back of the dog. But he was a dear. Why don't I tell you about....I told you about Unkar and his testing thing. Let me tell you about the housemaid. Mumzack[?]. She always wore,
- 05:00 she had the black pants that they normally wear, but she always wore this filthy looking blouse, so I went to a great deal of trouble in Da Lat, because they didn't have that sort of thing, to buy her another blouse. Which I eventually found a couple and took them home for her. And she was absolutely delighted. But much to my surprise she came in the next day, still with this dirty old blouse on. I said, "Why
- 05:30 do you not wear the pretty one?" She says, "I am, I am." And pulled up her dirty shirt. She was wearing the old one so she wouldn't get the new one dirty. And Mumzack, she was absolutely delightful. And they were all there. And they took great care of me where they could. But she was just there to do a bit of cleaning, and
- 06:00 look after us, sort of thing. But between her and Unkar, the man who did everything around the place, they were our only employees other than the medics. Lots of pleasant memories mixed up with all of these things. But Unkar,
- 06:33 he was the best medic. Unkar, was the fellow who stayed behind. Twice we evacuated the hospital, and twice Unkar stayed behind to look after things, and did it very well. And now he's running a hospital, where the communists took over the hospital, they kept Unkar on to run it.
- 07:00 So, that's very good.

Can you tell us, Iris, about the day the Viet Cong came in and killed your monkey?

Well, we were not there. This was when we had evacuated. Every now and then the Americans would tell us we had to go away for a while. Or one evacuation there was very, very positive. But this first one, a great delight to me was my monkey. He lived out in the back. I guess he was everybody's monkey. But he

- 07:30 lived out on a tree, near the back door of the office. And he was very cheeky. He absolutely disliked dogs. And if a dog came past him he would jump down out of his tree and get on its back, until the dog threw him off, screaming its head off. And he also disliked some of the staff. Don't ask me
- 08:00 why. Perhaps they tormented him, but when they walked past he would spit on them. He was his own monkey. And then one time we evacuated the hospital, we went back, and he'd gone. Some Vietnamese people, take monkeys, take the top off their heads and eat the brains. And so we all hoped that our monkey didn't...I forget his name, that that didn't happen to
- 08:30 him, but it possibly did.

Is that when you came across the missionary house?

No. That was the next evacuation, when we (UNCLEAR)...

Can you tell us about your involvement with the missionaries in Da Lat.

Well, first of all, it was the worst evacuation we had. Like, I

- 09:00 was sitting on the front porch one afternoon, actually I was sitting there and I was watching a B-52 raid in the distance. But a little man came around the corner of the house, and he said, "Viet Cong come get you, five o' clock." And I said, "Yes." But then I saw from the next village, the people
- 09:30 all moving past. People laden up with all their goods and chattels, everything they could carry. Every man, woman and child were carrying something and going slowly down the road. And when they sent for an interpreter, he said they had been warned that the Viet Cong were coming into the hospital at five o' clock, and they would come through this village to get to us.
- 10:00 So they were moving in. Now, it was sort of getting on about three or four o' clock in the afternoon, so I sent around to all the staff to be ready, to do the moving, and the patients, they told the patients, and the patients that could went off to live in the woods somewhere.
- 10:32 And when I looked to our staff, to say, "Well, what are we going to do? Are we going to stay here or move or whatever." We found we didn't have a vehicle. One of our vehicles was in Da Lat with mechanical problems. And it was Unkar, our maintenance man; it was his day off to
- 11:01 get high, really, and he was away. So we didn't have a vehicle, so we had to decide to stay there and see if anything happened, or walk with the people out front. So we got what we could carry, or the least we could carry, or what we needed, and we decided we would wait until something like half past four, to see if Unkar
- 11:30 came home. And we were just about getting ready to walk, and Unkar and the old vehicle came around the corner. We dashed down to the gate, with all we could carry. We all jumped on, I think there were about thirteen of us, got into that old vehicle and turned around and went back along the road.
- 12:00 That was the night....When we got to the American outpost, I said to them "Look, drop me off here. Then I can wait and see what happens, and I can listen to what the soldiers say. And if nothing happens I'll be close to go back. But you go on into Da Lat." And I'd
- 12:30 rang ahead and I asked the Americans in there could they could find a place where the staff could stay. And they looked around, and they got back to me and said yes, there was an empty cottage that had been previously used by some American religious fraternity, that had returned to the States for a holiday. So we could possibly use that for a short time.
- 13:00 So I said that's wonderful, and told Jimmy who was driving where to go. Now, that was a very memorable night. I don't know if it was fear or what it was. But I had dinner with the men, then they'd allocated me one of the rooms they kept for the occasional guest.
- 13:30 But all of a sudden, that was it. Was I sick. I had diarrhoea one way, and vomiting the other way. And there I was. And the latrines on a men's outpost, were not exactly meant for privacy. And what could I do? I'd go in and get out as quick as
- 14:00 I could. Or I'd be in there throwing up or something and a soldier would say, "What the hell are you doing in here?" "I'm thinking of dying in here." Anyhow, I had just got back to bed and the bombs started falling. The incoming rockets started falling on the outpost. And the colonel was running around, "Get yourself in the bunker! What are you doing in here?" "Well sir, I've got a problem here."
- 14:31 "What's your problem?" "I've got diarrhoea, sir." That was one of my most embarrassing nights, let's put it that way. Anyhow, with the incoming rockets and so forth, there was a little but not much damage done. And then next morning I persuaded somebody to take me into Da Lat, and that's where I found the people.
- 15:03 **What do you mean "the people."**
- That was our group. That's where I found our people. I then decided that if I didn't get back to nag at the soldiers they might possibly might never let us in again. So I nagged myself into a ride back to the outpost, right? And I was there I think for
- 15:30 about four days. And eventually, the colonel says, "Look, I know I shouldn't do it, but I'm sick and tired of you nagging me anyhow, so I'm going to give you permission to take the gang back in again. If they will come." I said, "What do you mean if they will come?" He said, "They're not going to be stupid enough to go back in there." I said, "Of course they are." So I got
- 16:00 on the radio which we used, I said to the Jimmy and the boys, "Look, can you get out here by this afternoon, or preferably by about two o' clock? We're going back in again." He hesitated, then he said, "Yes, all right." So, it came two o' clock, no car, no people. Half past two, no car, no people.
- 16:30 And the American soldier was going, "I told you so, I told you so. They're not going to come. They're not that stupid." And I said, "They'll be here. They'll be here." Anyhow this kept going until at least half past three. And they said, "Give up, Iris." And then comes the old car, laden down with all the staff and all the medicines that they could carry. And they came in, and they

- 17:00 quickly stopped, and I quickly got on before somebody said, "You're not going." And back in we went. And Jimmy, Jimmy was the doctor, Jimmy said to me, "Iris, I thought you would have got us a helicopter in from the outpost, to the hospital." And I said, "Geez, Jim, I could have done that but I never even thought about it." He said "If there's a next time, will you think about it." But anyhow, that was fine. We got in again.
- 17:34 The Viet Cong, or NVA [North Vietnamese Army] soldiers, if they hadn't taken all that much equipment, well there hadn't been much there to take. And it was in much better shape than we thought it would be. I then got in the vehicle and I wanted to go into Da Lat, to see...I had told them to leave the place just exactly as you found it.
- 18:00 Just to make sure that everything had been left nice and neat and clean. And I got to this house, and there was obviously somebody in residence. And I knocked on the door, and this, I guess he was a lay preacher or whatever you'd like to call him, came out and I started to say, and he said, "Yes, I know who you are." He said "What did you do
- 18:30 without my permission? You brought those..." I forget the adjective but he meant, he said that Montagnard people were not good enough to be in his house. I forget the adjective that he used. "You brought those people home to my house." I said, "Number one, I don't believe it's your house. It belongs to the American Government. Number two, you must understand we were destitute for a place to stay, number three, I
- 19:00 don't like you implying that these people are lesser than yourself." And he flew into quite a turn. And he said, "Not only that." And he brought out a singlet. He said, "This was left here." And so forth and so on. Anyhow I was very, very absolutely disgusted. Of a missionary of all people, would even think these things, let alone say them.
- 19:32 I'm afraid that stayed with me, and I walked for a long time. When I'm real angry, it's a good idea for me to walk away from people. So I went on walks, and got back in the car and went home again. Another problem I had with the missionaries there....they, of course,
- 20:00 spoke to the people about how the Lord would take care, the Lord would look after you. But when anything happened, they disappeared, and the people said, "We stay, why can't they stay?" And they'd say, "Well, we'd be taken care of." And I don't think they did a service to anybody. Except they taught them the hymns we could sing when we were scared.
- 20:31 **Well, they were good for something then?**
 Yes, they did start a very good training college that once again, when the war got a bit tough, they left.
Who did the hospital most service? Did the hospital have Viet Cong in it as well?
 We never asked, we never asked them questions. That's why we believe we were allowed to stay there without too much harassment. Because we never asked where the person came from. The men
- 21:01 treated what might have been a gunshot wound, or something like that, but no comment was made. Because we went in as a non-political organisation. That I believe to is the reason why we were allowed to use the roads, only until three o' clock in the afternoon. We had a permit to use the roads until three o' clock in the afternoon, then we had to be off by three.
Why is that?
- 21:30 That's what they set up.
What happened after three o' clock?
 Well, we never took the risk of finding out. (UNCLEAR) without any problems until three o' clock. Then one time they got nasty, and they set up roadblocks. Anybody using roads had to pay so much to continue on.
This was the Viet Cong you're talking about?
 Yes. So we had to carry some money.
- 22:00 Buy our way through the roads. But they'd do all sorts of things. Like they'd take planks out of the bridges. The bridges were just made of planks. But they'd take a plank out, and you'd be driving across and go clunk. It was a war of nerves. It really was.
It sounds like they were thankful that the hospital was there?
 Oh, very much so. Very much so. And of course when we went away
- 22:30 the local people got very upset, because they believed that people had more faith while we there. And they knew we wouldn't be....well, eventually they did drive us out. But they knew that while we were there, they felt safer.
I know you were hired as a secretary, which meant a lot of things. Did you ever pick up any

medical procedures?

- 23:00 Oh yes, yes. Whatever was happening. Whatever was happening. I helped deliver babies. It was one night, we were up on the hill, and we had to climb through barbed wire to come down to where the lady was having the baby and having problems. It was just whatever they were doing. It was a matter of... you never had any great big staff. We certainly didn't have any sort of
- 23:30 other than the doctors, medical staff. It was just a matter of what was needed doing. You nursed babies, you fed babies. The only thing they wouldn't let us in was the kitchen, unfortunately. Every now and then it would have been nice just to cook something that you could eat.

You said the Montagnards were different from other Vietnamese people.

24:00 **Can you tell us how?**

- They were physically different. They were larger people. And, of course, the Vietnamese people were relatively city folk by comparison. The Montagnards lived as farmers in the hills. I don't think they fought for with anybody, they were just these
- 24:31 groups of people. And they just lived a life of their own, to themselves. I'll never forget one day I went into a Montagnard house, and they did a lot of weaving. They used to make their own thread, dye their own thread and weave. And each Montagnard group
- 25:00 had their own pattern, in the skirts the ladies wore. And they had this pattern and they had these old fashioned looms, you know that you pull the thread down on. One day I was watching this aged lady, do this weaving. And I said to her, through an interpreter, "Have you taught your daughter to do this so she can continue on?" "Oh," she says, "These young
- 25:30 people today." Another day, Dorothy a friend of mine was there with a camera and we saw this lady, sitting, she had the loom on the floor. And Dorothy said, you know, take her photo, and she knew what we meant. She said just a minute sort of thing. She had one
- 26:00 tooth, one tooth. She was sitting there, topless, with two sorts of flaps of breasts hanging down. She said, "Just a minute." And she went inside and combed her hair. Now, women all over the world, if you want to take their photograph, what do they do? They comb their hair.
- 26:32 And she came and sat down with a big smile, and Dorothy had her photo. There are always these beautiful little snippets of things to keep you smiling.

Was it mostly the Montagnard people that you dealt with?

In that job, yes. The tribes of Montagnard were all the people around. Well, mostly.

- 27:00 There were Vietnamese people as well. But the Vietnamese people were predominantly the sales people, the commercial people, in Da Lat.

I was just wondering Iris if you came across any Aussie servicemen in Da Lat?

Australians? Just one.

Just one?

Hmmm.

In the hospital where you were?

- 27:30 No, back at the American camp. His name was Simpson, he was a very prominent VC [Victoria Cross] winner, World War II [actually Vietnam]. He was the only man ever given authority to swear in front of an American officer. Because it was recognised as a fact that he was unable to put a sentence together without swearing.
- 28:06 **Well, I won't ask you what he said when he saw you.**
- I'll tell you. I went into the...We had to report into the outpost, the American outpost. And they said, "Hey Sim! There's an Australian lady here would like to see you." And he said, "I don't want to see any bloody Australian woman, bloody Australian or otherwise."
- 28:30 He refused to see me, so I walked in anyhow, and sat on the side of his bed and said, "Well, you're bloody well going to." He was something else. He married a Japanese lady, during World War II and had a lot of trouble getting her into Australia. Much, much later...I had read an article in a magazine about him that she was quoted as saying
- 29:01 "He is such a gentle man." But later on in his life, he went to Japan to live, and he died in Japan. But he was a well known, one off in the Australian Army.

I'm just going to take you back to the hospital in Da Lat. How many beds were in there? How many people could you fit in there, in the little hospital up there in the highlands?

I'm glad you asked that question because it wasn't the

29:30 beds, sometimes the beds had three in them. I don't know. But you could have anything between twenty and sixty. Because, as a family, one would come in and the other would come in to take care of that family. Which was the same in all of Vietnam. There were never enough nurses. The ill person would

30:00 need someone to care for them all the time. But of course it made the meals we had to cook, double. Some women couldn't leave their children, so there'd be little children running around all over the place as well. It didn't matter, in all of these stories with these Montagnard people, and a lot of the Vietnamese.

30:30 The fact that they didn't argue. They didn't quarrel, they didn't get nasty with one another. It was a serenity sort of thing.....that is unknown, in our everyday life.

You told us about the two Chinese doctors that were there. Did you have a different nationality of nurses?

American. American nurses.

31:00 **No other countries?**

Well, apparently they did it at different times. Because Project Concern was quite a big organisation. They had the clinics in Hong Kong. And after the war in Vietnam, they opened clinics in Indonesia. So it was a big organisation. Every now and again we would have visitors who wouldn't stay very long.

31:31 One thing that happened was, it was American Independence Day, and the Americans decided to come over from the post they were at, to celebrate Independence Day. So they came across to the hospital, where we had a fairly long table, and sat and we were drinking beer. And at one stage they decided to

32:00 sing the Star Spangled Banner, and they didn't all know it. Another thing that I did over there, I forget what we used to call these kids who lived around the kitchen. We had a special name for them, but I can't remember. All these little kids. I don't know if they were all orphans from the village or what they did. But they used to eat what we didn't eat, from the kitchen.

32:30 And at night-time, for something to do, I had two logs outside my door. I'd sit on those logs and I'd teach them songs. So I taught them to sing Waltzing Matilda. We had a great old chorus on Waltzing Matilda. So when these boys couldn't sing Star Spangled Banner, I just walked in my gang and we sang Waltzing Matilda. So there was always something like that that you could do to

33:00 break up the situation. And then that night, another night we had a bunch of the South Vietnamese officers off that post, come across, they were celebrating something, and they brought some beers, and they had the beers. And then much to my horror, at the end of their celebration,

33:30 they all pulled out of their pocket a little candle and lit it. They walked back to the outpost, on a dark night, carrying a candle, in the middle of a war situation. A lot of funny things happened, some funny things. Anyone could have gone pop pop pop and they'd all be gone.

I remember

34:00 **reading in your book about a Canadian woman. I don't know if she was a nurse, or in administration, that fell in love with a Vietnamese man. Can you tell us about that?**

That was one of our nurses. That was a long story, and they married. You might have read about the wedding.

Yes.

The wedding was in a sort of community hall they had in one of the villages.

34:32 And all the little sparrows from the district lived in the top of the church. And the minister they had, a Vietnamese minister, who did the ceremony in both Vietnamese and English, but all the time, these little sparrows were circling around overhead, and it was really lovely. And afterwards, we had a breakfast which I was invited to,

35:00 and everybody had special food. And because I was a special guest, on my plates, was all the necks of the chickens. Because the neck they thought was the special part. I ate some terrible things. I had to sit there, chewing on the necks of chickens, and pretend I was absolutely overawed with their

35:30 delicious meal.

Was it that she had fallen in love with him, and she had to leave the hospital because the government didn't want....

No, no, no. We had a very sort of pretentious manager come in at that time. And he wasn't at all keen on anybody marrying.....An American nurse marrying a simple....long story that one.

36:00 Because then she left the hospital, she married him, she went to Saigon, she got a job in a Seven Day

Adventist hospital there. She got pregnant; she had a lovely little baby. But for the baby's health, she moved back to America, but of course he couldn't get out of the country. He did all sorts of things to escape getting in the army. Then,

- 36:30 she was able to send him money, to bribe people, to get out of Vietnam, across into Thailand, to buy a ticket to America. But of course, all of these things had to be forged and had to be paid for in cash, to some of the dealers along the way. Anyhow,
- 37:00 he got there, but to get the last ticket out to America, he went with the bribe to the wrong person, who happened to be a policeman, and ended up in a Thai jail. Now was it Thai or Cambodia? I'm not sure. But wherever he ended up, it must be Cambodia. And then, at that time, the Cambodian Embassy decided that
- 37:30 every Vietnamese in Cambodia, had to go home, send them home, But, of course, him being Vietnamese, he was sent back to Saigon. And what happened next? (UNCLEAR) But eventually he got himself across to America, and the last I heard they were divorced
- 38:06 So, it was a long time and they tried everything.

Gee, you've eaten some strange things, over there. You've had chicken necks and sparrows and entrails.

The worst is dog.

- 38:30 What is very little known, and I've said this before, that Americans rebuilt villages, and down in the Rhan Sik[?], that was at the beginning of the Saigon River, or the sea end of the Saigon River. We had people there. There was some ten thousand Vietnamese from the Tet Offensive, living in all sorts of buildings made out of cardboard and all sorts of things, on the Saigon River.
- 39:00 Now, the American Government, they decided to move those people, if they wanted to move, to rebuilding a village for them at the sea end of the river, and even though the place was predominantly mud. First of all they were given money to make a cement floor....I controlled the money by the way, it sounds ridiculous. But then we gave them money to
- 39:30 build the walls. Then, from the Australian Government we got roofing iron. Now through dubious ways, and lies, and so forth, I managed to get this roofing iron down to the village, and by the time that had happened, and this was over a period of a couple of months of course, the people were then moved
- 40:00 down the river to take up habitation in the new village. So all this happened over a great period of time. But where they built, as I say, was mud, and they had footpaths that were sort of up in the mud, they put areas up so that you could walk a little bit higher. But I could never manage to walk on those
- 40:30 mud footpaths without falling over, and the whole village used to turn out to watch me fall in the mud. Which I did frequently. Nevertheless, there came the day when people had a house, they moved into their house. Even though there might be water running underneath their beds or something, they had a house. And they were celebrating now that everybody had a tin roof, so of course, I had to be there. And they put on this special treat....

Tape 6

- 00:33 As you can imagine, this was a special day. There were all of these people who hadn't had a home for a couple of years, all of a sudden had a home. They were fed, they were happy. And it was going to be, and it is now, a very prosperous village, fishing conglomeration. They make their money fishing and apparently it's flourishing. This particular day they just
- 01:00 had one sort of shop in town. And they had a table set out the front, and I was asked to sit down at that table. And I wanted to wash my hands. And I knew there was a drum at the back of what was supposed to be this restaurant, so I thought I'd walk around the back, quickly wash my hands. And I got around there, and I saw a man with
- 01:30 some meat. I said, "Oh, what are we having for lunch." And he held up a dog, a skinned dog, that he had just cut a slice off its hip, and its little black feet...Anyhow, that was it. I made a point of always eating what they gave me. And anyhow, time went
- 02:00 on and we had a couple of rice beers, and everything, and I forget what else they gave me to eat. A sweet potato sort of thing. And they then, lad de dah de dah. And they brought me in to eat the first meal. It was heart, a dog heart. I had to eat the heart of a dog. That adds to my list of snakes, and sorts of
- 02:30 other things that I'd eaten. But I ate it, and I kept it down.

Can you tell us what it tasted like?

Well, actually, it tasted quite nice. If it hadn't been dog, I would have enjoyed it. But it tasted quite nice. And then the men, of course, ate the entrails of the dog. Yes, I've had some fierce meals.

You were telling us between tapes of a

03:00 **particular ox dish that you had....**

No, that was in China. Later on, when I was in China. We had a special meal with the people I was travelling with. And it was most unusual. A bit tough. And I said to the people, "That was very nice. Do you mind telling me what it is?" And they said "It was specially for you today, we are serving penis of the ox."

03:30 There isn't much I haven't eaten, somewhere along the line. They used to get these tiny little shellfish, you know, tiny little ones, and unscrew the end of that. And I had to eat that raw.

Was this back in Vietnam?

Anyhow, I've survived, haven't I?

You've probably developed a very good immune system.

I was very fortunate I have a very good immunity.

04:01 Or I did have a very good immunity. Oh dear. Then we come to the toilets. Now that was a hard part. And the toilets, a lot of them, are over water. And generally, in the water they're growing fish. I was never happy about eating the fish.

04:30 And of course, it was up on stilts, and you walked in, and if you were lucky there was a bit of drape of some sort down the front, and you just do what you have to do. Funnily enough, the whole village would come out to watch. If anybody was standing around it was like you were putting on a show. They'd come and watch the....

05:00 Oh dear.

Would they do that for everybody or was that just because you were a special visitor?

No, see I was possibly, and I often smile about this, I could possibly be the only white person a lot of people in Vietnam had seen. I would go into schools and I'd have to stand there while kids pulled the hairs on my arms. Because they don't grow hairs like.... That's another thing I used to get, cartons of razors for the Vietnam soldiers, but

05:30 of course, they don't have to shave. But I often think that's funny, to think that all these little kids and people think that every white person looks like I do.

So how else would they react to you being the only white woman coming through?

Well, the school kids used to be made to all stand up and sing a greeting. They were wonderful. The schools were wonderful.

06:00 A lot of them were run by sisters and nuns, who never hesitated....they all wore a long cane, hanging off their belt, and they never hesitated to use it. The discipline was very strict. The kids were all eager to learn. Incidentally, there were never enough schools. So the schools worked in shifts. This week you might go to school in the morning, next week you go to school in the afternoon, and so forth. So

06:30 every child could get a certain amount of education. But no, the kids gave such great pleasure because they were always so beautifully behaved. And so forth. I love kids.

It's easy to tell. I just wanted to go back to the hospital for a bit, and ask you, what were the most common illnesses, or injuries that you....

07:01 **that would have come through the hospital when you were there.**

I don't know if I could answer that one. The most common would probably be babies. But they did have a lot of accidents. Like they worked a lot with hoes and axes. So there were a lot of cuts and things like that.

07:30 The.....possibly the worst one with the oldies was sclerosis of the liver from drinking rice wine. Did I tell you that story about carrying the dead one? That's another one of my talents. I used to have to deliver the dead, in the old van. Back into the villages. Because it was very important that the person was buried in their own area. And we didn't have any

08:00 elaborate sort of special covers or anything. We just had the thick paper sheets. So you would roll them up like a cocoon, and tie it at both ends, of this paper sheet. And then we'd put them onto a stretcher in the back of the old ambulance, and I'd drive off to the village. And that was a fantastic experience also. Because remember there was no telephone,

08:31 but they had a very sort of wonderful bush telegraph factor. Because I would perhaps be two miles from that village and I would start to hear keening. Keening is their wailing. And it gets louder and louder

and louder, until I got to the village. But I don't know how they knew I was coming. Anyhow, mostly there was a bed ready,

09:00 and they had some bit of direction on for the....to put this body on. But this day I went into the village with this old fellow. And it was apparently a Viet Cong occupied village. Because you could tell that if the village was okay, there would be people there. If it was a Viet Cong village, they'd be afraid. If it was a Viet Cong village, if the Viet Cong controlled

09:30 the village, they'd be afraid to talk to me, in case they got into trouble. So they would all disappear. They would leave a bed out, and they would all disappear. Now, normally, there would be somebody there to help me off with the body. This day I was left with it on my own. Fortunately he was just a little fellow. I picked him up as best as I can, like that, but the paper burst open, and he burst open.

10:04 I just....covered in fluid, stinking fluid, round all the way....I put him on the bed, jumped in the car, and drove back because I had seen a creek. I stopped the car and I ran down to the creek and I was washing myself off, and a little voice came out of the woods

10:30 and said "There are Viet Cong here, go, go." I didn't care. I didn't care who was there. I just had to get out of it and get washed. So that wasn't very pleasant.

Why did the corpse explode? Was it due to the heat or a particular illness?

11:01 Well, sclerosis of the liver is not a very nice thing. I don't know if there had been bleeding there. I don't know if there was some moisture had gotten through, or what, but believe me it happened. Another day, with a dead body, I had to get it to a village. Because the village chief had died and I had to get it there. And it was way up in the boonies. And I rang through to request a helicopter.

11:32 And the colonel said, "Look, you're asking a lot. We've got a battle going on out there, you know?" I said, "I appreciate that sir, but if you could just detour I'd be most gracious." He said, "Is a matter of life or death?" I said, "Yes." I said, "It has to go back to the village, for you know the reasons." And he said, "I'll have a chopper there in ten minutes,

12:00 it will set down for five minutes, and then it's gone. So whatever you have, get it there." So we had this dead fellow. The boys were halfway through making a coffin, a wooden coffin, out of thick planks. So I said, don't do the nails, because they put in all his chattels. When a Vietnamese man dies, at least when a Montagnard man dies, he has to have all his

12:30 gourd and all that sort of thing, along with him. And let's get it out to the pad. So we put it in the back of the old van, and we took the boys along with us. He had two of his rellies along with us. So we had it all there. By the time that chopper set down, we had it all ready to just slide off into the chopper. Which we did.

13:00 With the boards just sitting on top. And we practically flew his rellies in on top of it. And I said to the chopper pilot, "The colonel said life or death. He's dead." A long time before they'd speak to me, after that one. That really did get me into trouble. But it got him home.

Iris you were talking about the keening before. The

13:30 **wailing that you would hear from the village. Can you actually, I guess, describe that sound, and what you know of the ritual?**

I don't know....can I perhaps use another word. It's a type of a chant. You know the ongoing chant that builds up. It's a type of a chant, and

14:01 I never, ever stayed for any other ritual. I don't know if he was buried or burnt or what happened. But the amazing part about it was, how did they know? How did they know? And then another time when we were ferrying a guy to hospital because he didn't have anybody to claim him. The medics went over and they

14:30 dug a hole for the coffin on the side of the hill, made the coffin, then they carried, about four or five of them carried it across, and we got across there, and the coffin wouldn't fit in the hole. So I thought they would take spades and just make it a little big bigger. But they didn't. They

15:00 set it as neatly as they could on top of the hole, and then there was some sort of signal I didn't get, they all jumped on the top of it. And forced it down.

Did they all go in the hole after it?

Oh, no, it just went down. Then we filled in the top. And I said a few of the words I could remember of the service, and he was gone.

15:31 **You mentioned a couple of times the hymns that you would sing, when you were scared in the hospital, to help calm everybody down. Can you actually recall any of those hymns?**

Oh they were all our Sunday School ones. Jesus Loves Me, Onward Christian Soldiers, that type of

thing.

Is there any one I guess that is particular for you that you could actually sing a bar or two for us?

No.

16:02 But if you go along to any Salvation Army Sunday School, and you'll hear the best stuff.

It was worth a shot.

Well, you probably know them yourself, anyhow. All of these things, I'm using the word 'I'. Which sounds a bit....I don't know what you call it. But I am saying these things, and look; they are a hundred percent true.

16:30 Whereas I always had people with me, you know what I mean? Like taking that man home, I had nobody with me. I considered the situation at that time, was so insecure, I didn't want to take anybody with me because it was pretty dangerous, right? There was nobody else. There was nobody else to do it. I had two doctors, who were wonderful.

17:00 But that was their chore. I had a manager who was frankly either never there or drunk. And there just wasn't anybody else. There just wasn't. I normally had a Montagnard or two with me, but there wasn't anybody else. There really wasn't. So to get things done, you just did them.

I think they were very lucky that you

17:30 **landed in the job.**

I don't know. I think I was lucky, because how else would I have had all those beautiful experiences.

And developed such an exquisite menu.

Yes. Hmm.

Iris, can you tell us about, I guess, working with the Americans on a day to day basis?

That's an interesting one. It's...

18:00 you have to get used to them. That sounds like an illness, doesn't it? You have to get used to them and you have to realise the differences. One thing I will respect and I wish there was more of it in Australians. Americans teach their children pride in America. As we don't sell our children, or tutor

18:30 our children into being proud of your country, do we? We get a little bit on Anzac Day and things like that, but we don't have anything like the pride. With Americans, you can then I think forgive them, if you feel they're slightly arrogant, because they have really been brainwashed to be proud Americans. A little insight into this. I went

19:00 to America. I went to Washington for a reunion. And it's in sections. There's a Vietnamese section, there's a something else section. And I went to the Vietnamese area, and I was talking to a lady who was running a shop. And I said, "Would you be happy to go back to Vietnam, when things are better?" "Oh, no, no, no," she said. I said "Why not?" She said

19:30 "I am a Vietnamese American." And she was proud to be a Vietnamese American. She is not a Vietnamese. She is a Vietnamese American. And lots of other nationalities I met there, they were dual nationalities, and proud of it. Like there was no American blacks anymore, they are African Americans. And we've

20:00 got a lot to learn. But working with the Americans, particularly the ones from the south of America, I had difficulty in understanding their language for a while. And they had difficulty understanding mine, all right? I could never understand, from the minute I....this was working with the Americans now. I couldn't understand their insistence that I write reports.

20:31 Long reports. Because to me it was a waste of time. But the first time I wrote a report and handed it in to the manager, or the director, or whatever he called himself, he said "Next time I ask you to write a report, I'll write the report, however, should I want to send a telegram, I'll get you to do it."

21:03 That was my first lesson in writing reports. And that happened. Like, right through I had to write detailed reports. And later on, when I came home, and I was thinking about a lot of things....each morning, in where I was working in Bien Hoa, it was

21:30 absolutely demanded that you attend, I just can't think of it...Everybody had to attend these meetings. They had to give a report on what the day before...A debriefing, they called it a debriefing. And I had been home in Australia quite some before I realised that was all intelligence. I went into a place one day and I found out there sort of two hundred and fifty refugees.

22:02 That was an easier way for them to find out there were two hundred and fifty refugees. But I didn't know what I was doing. I was actually going in to find out how much food I needed. But what I gave them added up to....actual intelligence. And I didn't realise, until a long time afterwards. I was feeding

them intelligence every day.

What did you think when

22:30 **you realised?**

I can't tell you, it's rude. Another time I travelled with an Australian general. Brigadier [Ted] Serong, he passed away a few months back. And this is a ridiculous thing. I had an obsession that I wanted to do something special in the program for Vietnamese

23:00 widows, war widows. And I was always nagging about this. And the American ambassador I was working with at that time, said, "You do this for me, and I'll see what I can do about it." I said, "What is it?" General Serong was travelling....I forget what they told me he was doing. Anyhow, he was travelling all through Region

23:30 3, in a little white Toyota. Now he must have had a really great price on his head. And apparently they wanted somebody to travel with him, so I was the bunny, wasn't I? So they offered me this prize, of a program for widows, if I would travel with him. In his little white Toyota. And we travelled all of Region 3, like sitting

24:00 ducks, In that little white car. And it was only back in Australia, that I went to a gathering where he was guest speaker. And it was only there that I realised, I was the decoy. This was just a man and a woman travelling in a car. When we got to an outpost, he would be taken

24:30 off, and I was left to talk to the boys. And they'd give me a special room or something. And I would go and talk to the village chief in that area, and rave on about how many widows you have and all that sort of thing. And I was thrilled with what I was doing. But as I said, nothing ever came of it. What he was finding out, I don't know. He was a very.....But he didn't communicate. On the whole of it we might have spoken

25:00 about twenty words to one another. If I go to a meeting in Brisbane, and find out what I've actually done....

It's incredible, isn't it? I just wanted to ask you, about the Americans rebuilding villages and the programs that they had for doing all of that. Given the war,

25:31 **raging across Vietnam, did you get a lot of support from the Americans for what you were doing on a day to day basis?**

Oh, very much so. They were very pleased with what I was doing. I think they thought that nobody else was stupid enough to do it. Of course, I got on very well with people.

26:00 And they were amazed with what I could do with people. Whereas an American would go into a village where they wanted to do something, he would tell them what they were to do. I would go in and ask them what they thought about this, and what they had heard about this, what's your idea? So I got on, and I could get it done. So I was able to get things done, that they were not able

26:30 to do. When I left, of course, they put on a great do, and they gave me the meritorious honour, and apologised because the medal couldn't be of a higher quality, because once again getting back to the fact that I was a third country national. So that was the best that they could do. So I was given a great deal of assistance. I think there was

27:01 some sort of an impression that I was quite crazy. My what-the-hell attitude. They were not quite sure about that.

Can you tell us about your what-the-hell attitude?

Well, I just did what had to be done the best way I could do it. Regardless of there being any danger, or anything. Danger didn't occur to me. It didn't really occur to me at all. I did stupid things.

27:31 Like, it was....Christmas Eve, on the big air force base in Saigon. I got a group of people together and decided we would go around the base and sing carols. What we didn't realise was that nobody wanted to be reminded about home. I thought that people might come out and join us, and sing with us.

28:00 Everybody clamped their windows closed, but I didn't understand. They didn't want to be reminded, that they were away from home. So, as I say, I did things that they didn't expect me to do. And we got on fine. But we had, as I say, we had to learn to recognise one another's language. Our spelling was different. You'd

28:30 be surprised at the different spelling in words. I had a less is best attitude that got me further than their 'I can' attitude. The main American base at Long Binh, was what we called The Pentagon. I was there,

29:00 I had to go to their meetings, in The Pentagon. And we were sitting down. And these meetings were to put to General Westmoreland grievances and comments and all that sort of thing. And the issue came up, that the Vietnamese people

- 29:30 were objecting to the American soldiers whistling at the girls, or calling out to the girls. And this fellow stood up, and greatly reprimanded that the people there must get to their troops, that this was a no-no. And this made me mad. Because I took such a lot from the Vietnamese itself. And I stood up, and without thinking,
- 30:00 I said, "General, if you think that that is a one sided argument, you're out of your cotton picking mind." There was absolute silence. Nobody tells a general there that he is out of his mind. And all of a sudden I realised what I'd said, and started laughing. And everybody started laughing with me, fortunately.
- 30:32 He took it quite well actually. I said, "Look, I take so much from the Vietnamese. I've been spat on, kicked, pushed over, and I feel sure that other foreign women in this country had the same things happen to them, so you're out of your cotton picking mind." One of his generals wrote home to
- 31:00 America, and sent me a bunch of roses. Another time Westmoreland wanted me to...They had certain things the orphanages could request for the upkeep of their orphanage. And this woman with this particular place, she wrote to Westmoreland,
- 31:30 and she said, "I realise that this request could go elsewhere. However, I know it is better to appeal to God, than ask of the angels." So this went down very well with him. So I had set up a thing, like these requests couldn't go through unless I signed them as being authentic.
- 32:00 Two of his staff came out to my office and said, "The general has this request and he would like you to okay it for approval." And I looked at it, it was for a generator. And I said, "I'm sorry about that." And they said, "What do you mean?" I said, "This lady already has a shed full of generators." They said,
- 32:30 "Oh, it doesn't make any difference, just sign it." I said, "I am not going to sign it, but if you come with me I'll take you out and show you her shed full of generators." So then they came with me. I talked to the lady. I asked her, I said, "These fellows are looking to see if your generators are in good condition." So she opened up her shed, and there was a shed full. And I said, "No, I'll make you a deal. And we'll think about it.
- 33:00 We have just opened up a school, down at Vung Tau, for after school training; I think it was for training kids to be electricians or things like that. But I said, "They can't have night meetings, they can't go to classes at night because they don't have a generator.
- 33:30 Now if I can have a generator for that school in Vung Tau, I'll sign this. But along with that you also have to give me a certain amount of petrol to keep them going for six months." So there were always ways around things.

You knew how to wheel and deal?

I had a wheel and deal with General Westmoreland.

34:01 **You did what you had to do?**

I did what I had to do. That was a very good answer as far as I was concerned. Because the kids got their school.

You mentioned before about having been spat on and kicked and shoved by Vietnamese people, at various.....

34:30 **times. I guess, who didn't accept you doing what you were doing. I'm - wondering if you can talk to us a little bit about dealing with the Vietnamese people on a day to day basis? Just getting to know them?**

35:00 I was very, very fortunate. My first interpreter, her name was Vinny, she was beautiful. She had been forced by the Communists to come to the South. And she was a very knowledgeable girl. She was a very compassionate girl. As I say, I was very

35:30 very fortunate to have her. She taught me much of the Vietnamese culture, and she had a great love for the country. And she was also very protective of me. If anybody upset me, and she'd want to bash them up. Along with that, she taught me a little

36:00 bit of Vietnamese. I could understand a lot of Vietnamese, but not speak it, do you know what I mean? And she had a lot of trouble with me, because I would go and talk to a village chief, or somebody of importance, and she was supposed to listen and interpret to me what they had said. But every now and again I would realise

36:30 what they'd said, and go to answer before she'd done the interpreting. So she used to have to watch that I didn't answer the question. Because, while they thought I didn't understand what they were saying, it worked better. It worked better, so I had that intake there. Also, she was absolutely charming, so

37:00 I sort of learned from her ways, and her whole tuition of me, to get on more with Vietnamese people. She took me to meet her family. She took me to meet the wives. Like Vietnamese wives, absolutely amazed me. They had the art of being able to twist their husbands around their little

37:30 finger without him knowing it.

Can you give us an example?

No, I can't do it. But I used to watch them and think 'Wow!' The women were incredible people, are incredible people. For example, they would be working on the roads, or they would working in garbage or anything,

38:00 but they would have...they would wear hats in the sun, they would have long gloves. Their face would be part-covered if they were working outdoors. And they would work in these really dirty jobs. But come home at night, they would be impeccable. They had this....like their hands and everything. If I went out digging in the garden, my hands would....

38:31 They were working on the roads, the dirty roads, and they'd come home and they would look as if they just sort of stepped out of a shop or something. They're able to do this. They are able to do this. And as I say, I used to just watch them. But once again I was very lucky with my interpreters. They were fantastic. The ao dai, you know, is a beautiful garment. It not only

39:00 looks good, but they worked at never getting dirty. They would carry a little handkerchief thing with them. Now, if we sat down on a seat, they would first of all wipe the seat, and then flip the ao dai up the back, it was a double back, before they sat down, so the ao dai never got dirty. And if it was raining they would pull it up over their head.

39:30 But it really is a very versatile garment. We would go out on a day, working, and they would come with me on the planes, on the helicopters, on the gunships, wherever. They would come with me. And they would step out neat and tidy at the end. They never showed any fear. But they came with me, wherever I went, they would come with me. And

40:01 this was incredible, I learnt a lot from them. I was very lucky.

Wonderful, thank you, Iris. We will just pause there.

Tape 7

00:32 **I wonder if you could tell us about the nightlife of Saigon?**

Well, the nightlife of Saigon was relatively hectic. Now, being a woman on my own, there was no way I would have ventured out on my own of course. But just

01:00 to break away from that question, to answer it in another way. I went back to Saigon, back to Vietnam, to help to get my interpreter out, to America, because she would have suffered the consequences of working for me. And I stayed in a little sort of bed and breakfast place. And while I was there, a

01:30 Vietnamese, or an Australian Vietnamese, one of the boat people, came in, and the first thing he said to me was, "How you going mate?" Because he had heard I was an Australian. I looked up very surprised, and he explained to me that he had been in Melbourne for so long, and he had had come back to do something or other. I said, "Now that things are so much better here, are you going to come back to

02:00 Vietnam to live?" He said, "No." He himself, had gotten himself into quite a financial position, working with selling electrical goods. I said, "In that case, are you going to retire here?" He said, "No way." I said "Why is that?" He said, "In Australia, around about five o' clock, people go into their houses, not all that many of them come out again that night." He said,

02:30 "In Saigon, at five o' clock everybody comes out." And he's so right, because it is a night time city. People come out and just promenade on the footpaths. Perhaps go to the markets down the street or something like that, but people go out at night in Saigon. Now, when I went out, when there was somebody there to take me, we

03:00 used to go to the night-clubs. And what I enjoyed most of all was the...what do you call them? Not the bar girls, but the girls that were there to dance with the fellows, and perhaps make a bit of money or something like that. I was quite an identity, I was a white person. And I was happy and pleasant to talk to. So actually, when I

03:30 went into one of those places I think I got as much if not more attention than I'd have if I had been a handsome American soldier. They loved to tell me their troubles. Most of them were working there because that was the best place to make money for their families. And their families, of course, were quite impoverished. They, of course, had told their families they were

04:00 working for the Americans, and they were teachers and typists and all that sort of thing, because their family would have not liked them working in the club. And we both found we enjoyed our conversation. So it would be nothing for me to go out and sit and talk to these girls all night. And I enjoyed doing that.

It wasn't exactly what I went there for. But I

- 04:30 enjoyed doing it. And of course, there were predominantly a lot of Americans, and I guess Australians there, too. And the food was good. A lot of it was French cooking, and that was quite good. The bands were generally quiet good. But as I said it wasn't a place that I really went, but they were really
- 05:00 sort of hopping, hopping smart. I had a friend, his name was Harry, and he was on an outpost down on the....Rahn Sit, he had an outpost down there. And periodically he would have to come up to Saigon for something or the other. And I had met him through working with his community down there. And he spoke
- 05:30 fluent, fluent Vietnamese. And he really liked the Vietnamese people. And the Vietnam, in a way, we needed a MASH [American TV series about the Korean War]. You know the MASH on TV? We needed something like that, stupidity, or fun, whatever you like to call it, just to stay sane. Harry and I got up to quite a few tricks.
- 06:02 One, he used to take me into the bar, and one night we put on an act with....A stand up fight. I started screaming at him for going out with another woman, and he put up his hand, he was going to slap me.
- 06:38 The American soldiers dashed up to protect me, and the Vietnamese women came up to be on my side. And eventually, of course, Harry and I burst out laughing. Everybody burst out laughing with us, but the result of when we did these things,
- 07:00 the lady in charge would ask us to come back and do it again. Another night, the big act we put on I was pretending that I was deaf and dumb. So I went through the hand manipulation, or hand speaking, a little. And Harry went to the bar, as to get me a drink. And when he brought me the drink back,
- 07:30 regardless of what it was, I would put on an act, "No, that wasn't the right one to have." And he would go and get another one, and he would bring that back and I would put on the act again. And the people, of course, watching this, all got in on the act. And the people around all started bringing me different drinks. So I had a whole table full,
- 08:00 half full of drinks. Then I put on the act of sort of tasting them all one by one, and I was either smiling, or putting them aside or something like this. And at the end I would thank everybody, and nod and thank and smile at everybody, and everybody would go away pleased that they actually helped me. And the hardest part of all this of course, was keeping a sober face and not laughing.
- 08:31 And there again, the lady in charge used to ask us to come back and do it again. So little things like that broke up our working life. Whereas everybody seemed to enjoy it anyhow. But we would think up things like that to do. Just to be different.

You should have charged money?

No, it broke up our pattern of heavy thinking.

- 09:05 It was fun.

What happened to Harry?

I don't know. I don't know what happened to him. He could only get up every now and again. And, as I said, we were just mad mates, not bosom friends, so I don't know what happened to him, but I'm sure he'd be right. He could talk his way out anything he got into.

- 09:31 Oh, another night, I should mention this. I was down, working in his area. And he'd lost a few men, and everybody was unhappy. So he said, "What we can we do?" I said, "What these guys need is some good looking girls." So we actually rode across the South China Sea
- 10:00 to Vung Tau, and got ourselves a boatload of girls, and brought them back to spend the night with the boys. Which was very much against the rules.

They would have appreciated it?

Oh, the girls. They were very happy. And next morning they got up and looked as fresh as a daisy. It was good. It just broke up a very bad time

- 10:31 at that particular outpost, at that time. Once again, very much against the rules.

You wonder if there are any rules in war sometimes, don't you?

Oh, there has to be a very strict sort of discipline, or it doesn't work. But a little bit of breaking rules doesn't do anybody any harm. It didn't do anybody any harm, anyhow.

- 11:00 It was an interesting fact. Somebody asked me the other day, you know with all those all soldiers in Vietnam, you must have had a lot of boyfriends or something like that. But what they don't understand was that the Vietnamese girls were beautiful. They were beautiful. Very handsome people. And like the American section where I worked,

11:31 the management section, they would put on bouncers or something like that onto Saturday night. And there may have been about six or eight or ten American ladies and myself. We would sit out. We were wallflowers. They weren't going to dance with us.

You were pretty young though still, weren't you?

I was forty.

That's still young.

It is now.

12:03 They seemed to think that we would be surrounded by men, just because we were white. And it wasn't so. Another thing I was counselled for was the girls living with the Americans. Coming to me and asking me to help them understand the ways of the American men.

12:33 One night, I had the honour or the privilege of my boss's live-in lady, was having a baby, and I promised to take her to hospital. Because the Vietnamese girls having babies to Americans was very much frowned on by Vietnamese people. And also most unpopular in the hospitals, because the babies were likely to be so

13:00 much bigger, than a pure Vietnamese child. And it's every sad because you know with the birth there's a lot of bypass, they used to save up the newspaper for the blood and the...what do you call it that comes away after the birth of the baby?

The placenta?

The placenta. They used to save up newspapers to take with them to hospital. So the night this baby was born,

13:30 Charlie's lady's baby was born, we travelled to hospital. And the first one we went to, they refused to take her. So there we were at two o' clock in the morning, when we had to travel into Saigon, to get her into hospital. And the only reason they would take her there, was because I got really nasty. And she had the baby there. But we had so much trouble.

14:02 Anyhow, the baby was duly born, and named Charlie Brown the Second. Which was his real name. Charlie Brown the Second came home and won everybody's heart. But this was a sad night for me, because they just refused to let her enter the maternity ward. They didn't give much treatment there either.

14:30 But anyhow, after a couple of days we brought her home again.

Would it have been okay if she was married to Charlie?

No. Because she could have said she was married. But they didn't ask the question. They just said, "American." And that was enough for them not to want to admit her to the hospital. And they had a point, because the babies would have been bigger babies.

When you say bigger, meaning more difficult births?

Yes. More difficult births.

15:08 No, it was full of learning it was.

So did a lot of Vietnamese women have to have caesareans?

I don't know. I don't know. But, as I say, on dances on Saturday night and things like that, when everybody presupposes that we being the only white people we would be surrounded by people wanting

15:30 to dance, but that wasn't so. Most of us sat like wallflowers. Because they were all dancing with Vietnamese girlfriends.

You can remember those days with your dance cards?

So very different. The Americans wives were allowed to come in with permission from their husbands. But we always knew who was coming, because his Vietnamese girl

16:00 would move out the day before. And they all trusted me, they all trusted me, like the American men, all trusted me not to say anything. So I would get invited to meet the wife. And it wasn't always easy to say, "Well, what did you and so and so do?" It wasn't easy to always remember to watch what you were saying. Anyhow...

16:32 **I'd heard actually that a lot of the American, even some of the Australian men serving over there, had Vietnamese wives. When they say wives, did they mean married or just living together?**

It could have been either. But I think a number of them did marry their Vietnamese girls. But as I say, they were very beautiful.

17:00 Very well trained to be wives. As I said, they learned how to twist their husband around their little finger, without him knowing, They were very beautiful. It would have been so, but along with that, a lot of the girls who were living with the Americans, the

17:30 husband was able to use the PX, and they had a certain amount of money. And once again, a lot of that went to their families. It was another way of getting support for their families. And I guess, that's what they had to do. The necessity of survival.

I wanted to ask you, Iris, about the children at the orphanages. How could you not get

18:00 **attached to them? How could you remain detached from these little kids?**

I didn't. When I regularly attended orphanages, it was possible to get about a hundred cuddles, all in one day. Because....there's a picture of me up there. I managed to get the movies to go to some of the orphanages, the Americans to take along movies.

18:30 And they'd take turns at sitting on my knee while they watched the movies. No, I had hundreds of children. I did. And they were easy to get attached to, because once again, they were all so beautifully mannered. They were brought up to be beautifully mannered, and nice-looking, pretty kids. It was interesting, though, when people came. You'd see these people canvassing for support

19:01 for children in the under privileged world. These people from the different organisations used to come to me and ask me to take them to the poorest villages, where they could photograph these little underfed children. They didn't have any. And I'd take them to places, and they would deliberately ask for a child that looked underfed,

19:30 and was dirty and not dressed well. I didn't have any of those. Because with those ads, they go looking for the worst dressed, little child....He could be surrounded by well dressed fat children. But they don't want to photograph him at all. And children are loved. The love of those parents for their children, you could cut with a

20:00 knife. It's so evident, of how important the children are. And they have sort of extended families. So that a child may have two lots of families, but that child is as closely held as say a one parent family. The love was fantastic. And of

20:30 course, one thing, they lived in a little house. This room could possibly hold two families. And this is the difference in our world today. I know with my sons, they each had a separate bedroom. They really didn't....they were three years apart. They didn't have all that much time to talk to one another. I think if you go to bed in the same room as a person, like if you had a sister or a brother

21:00 alongside of you, you talk, don't you? Sometimes you talk until midnight. Until somebody shuts you up. But there, they are so close together from being children. They are naturally close as they get older. Whereas we can have sons and daughters, if we separate them, they really never get to know one another, with the closeness of

21:30 these families in small rooms do. And here it's a crime in Australia, if your children don't have their own bedroom. Or they're under privileged.

Now, yes, that would be true.

But they are close. They're physically close, they're mentally close. It's their life. And grandmothers are the most revered people.

22:00 I went to a party at one time, actually it was a wake, that all the family had gathered. And in amongst the family there were these little children from little babies all the way up. And sitting on a cushion in the corner was an old grandmother. And she had her tiny little flappy breasts, and she had a child on each. Now she, herself, would have been possibly fifty to sixty, which is very old.

22:30 But the kids were lined up, because they were next to be with grandmother. And, of course, she was loving it. Mothers and grandmothers.

But couldn't be nursing them still, could she?

They were sucking on her nipple.

But there's no milk.

No, there's nothing there of course. But that was what the kids were doing, and she was loving it.

Isn't that wonderful?

23:00 Yeah. And you sort of take a double take and look at this, and then you realise how happy she was, and all the little kids waiting....

That's beautiful.

Yes it is. And grandmothers were much loved. Quite often they had more say in the house than anybody else. And another thing, quite a lot of their

23:30 folk, if they had a backyard. Chances are in that backyard there would be three generations buried. And the tombstone was in the backyard, so they were still together. So many different....I was invited to a boy scout meeting. Once again to give out the prizes, but the boy scouts did the same knots and were taught the same

24:00 things as our boy scouts here, and I handed out the prize for the ropes and the things that they normally do. And then it came lunchtime, and this was held in a cemetery by the way. One of the most secure places in Vietnam, if you wanted to do anything, was in a cemetery. It came lunchtime, and it was rest time. So, they

24:30 cleared off the top of one gravestone, and said, "This is yours." And they cleared off all the others, and we all laid down on top of headstones to have a little resty-poo. Why not?

They wouldn't have minded.

They wouldn't have minded. It just felt a little strange, that's all. And anyhow,

25:00 what they did invite me there for was, I let it be known I could get onto some musical instruments. And they had their own band and they needed more musical instruments, which I was able to get for them.

What kind of musical instruments?

Oh, drums. I got them a set of drums. And bugles. And they did a lot of work for

25:30 me in the scouting movement. As you can imagine, there was no Lions Club, there was no Apex Club, or any of those clubs, because all the men were in the army. If there was fire in a section, of the refugee section, which there often was, because of the cardboard houses and things, and they're burnt down. Or if I had some cooking pots I wanted to distribute, I would go to the boy scouts. And they would do these jobs for me.

26:02 In the refugee places, we would get sort of pieces of cement that they could put down for paths for the elderly to walk on. But they took the place of service clubs, in our communities. The boy scouts did in Saigon. But happily, they would happily do that for me. There are all these little connections.

26:30 During that time, were you concerned that your sons might be called up?

They both missed the call up. Only one was old enough, and he missed out. And the other one was too young. Roy, the eldest son, missed his name coming out. But I don't think it would have done them any harm. It wouldn't.

27:00 Anyhow, he's the sober one of the family. The other one's off on his yacht, He's a chef by trade, and he planned on retiring when he was fifty, with a yacht. So he worked very hard, he went into cheffing at fifteen; worked all the way through until he was about forty nine. Then he got the framework

27:30 built out of fibreglass for his boat, and he finished it off, and for the last five years he's been drifting around the Pacific. "It's hard, Mum. But somebody has to do it."

He sounds like a chip off the old block.

That's what happens, of course. They will want to do something. I'll say something, but they'll say, "You can't do that, mother."

28:00 There's very little I can say, don't do that.

With all the orphanages, did you get a lot of offers from American servicemen to take them back to the States?

That is an incredible story. Orphanages sold children. Organisations sold children. I had

28:30 one American lady, I think she was a nurse from the main hospital. The main American hospital. She very badly wanted, and she had a particular Vietnamese boy or girl, I forget at the moment, a child that she wanted to adopt. And there was a whole list of things she had to do through the government. Fill in that

29:00 form, fill in that form, character references, a whole biography done, all of that. And we went to the orphanage, and the lady in charge wouldn't let her go, wouldn't let her take the child, and she used to insist that she had some reason why the child couldn't go. Until one day I happened to say to this manageress, I said, "Look, we really need....She will have a wonderful life, this child. What can we do?"

29:30 And this woman straight out said, "You give me X X thousand piastres." So, that was how she got the child. And another place, that I can't name, once again, they were taking the children. To make them well. They took children from an orphanage there to be made

30:00 well. And they refused to give the children back to me. I said, "Why is that?" And they said, "Any child that comes in well, we make them well, then they must go for adoption." I said, "I promised I would take them home to their mothers." They said, "Can't do that." So I said, "Fair enough. I will be back on such

and such a day, I'm bringing a gun. I'm taking those children." And I went back with a gun, and they gave me the children. But otherwise those children were taken from woman who couldn't look after them, didn't have the means to make them well when they were sick, but they would only take the children if their mother signed that child over for adoption. And those children were sold, to people who wanted to adopt them from the States. Pretty story, isn't it?

No, it's horrible. That's like baby farming.

31:00 That's right. But quite a lot of that was done.

When you said before, when you were talking to Chris before, you said something about a Vietnamese man saying "In Vietnam, everybody's an orphan." What did you mean by that? Or he mean by that?

Well, he

31:30 wasn't prepared for, and the people I spoke to about that, nobody was prepared to say, and I agree with this, nobody was prepared to say this and that and that makes every child an orphan. Because there were so many children in orphanages for so many different reasons. Like, it could be that one of the parents were killed. It could be that their mother was not able to support them. It could be that

32:01 the parents were both dead. But, there was, nobody would set up any rules. In one orphanage, oh I forget what it was. I can't think of the organisation. I think it was SOS or something, children's fund. Anyhow, there was not one, I say this to them, that the children all have parents.

32:30 They said, "No the don't. They're orphans." And they did a check up and not one of those children was an orphan. In the true sense of the word as we know it. We think of an orphan without parents. That was not so in Vietnam. There was nothing that said the child couldn't have parents. But what President Thieu meant that he wasn't prepared, as far as he was concerned, all the children were disadvantaged

33:00 because of the war. And in his way of thinking, that made them an orphan. That was fair enough. Anyway, the people, I think it was an SOS village, were very surprised because they were funded because the children were orphans in the western sense of the word. So that caused a bit of a kerfuffle [a fuss].

But could the Vietnamese families

33:30 **leave their children in the orphanages, for say six months, and then come and get them when they were on their feet again?**

Yeah, many of them did. There's nothing to say that they had to continue to stay there. But while they stayed there, I just can't think of the amount of piastres now, but the Americans through the Vietnamese government paid the orphanage so much per child per month.

34:00 So it was not as if they weren't funded, or something like that. But they were funded through the American Vietnamese government, per child. Which in those times was a relatively generous amount.

Can I ask you, Iris, you were saying before that if a Vietnamese woman was pregnant with an American's baby, it was frowned upon. Would it happen that she would often give the baby up and

34:30 **put it in an orphanage?**

Possibly, but the whole thing was, they seemed to love part American or otherwise baby. People had the impression they were sort of cast out and all that sort of thing, that wasn't so. And as one person said to me, I don't know who it was, "We hope that they will have

35:01 the American, as well as the Vietnamese good points, they will have the American strength and size, right? Because one thing over there, with the American and the Vietnamese men, and it was down putting. Here's a Vietnamese man, he's about that tall. And he's got a six foot American. That automatically makes him

35:30 feel inferior, doesn't it? Well, it does. It does. So they thought the Americans had qualities that were worthwhile. I'm not saying that woman who had that baby, particularly. And in one village where there was just one little part-American boy, everybody loved him. Everybody spoiled him rotten. So there was a great kerfuffle, in America, when somebody

36:00 in government, or something, stood up and said, "We must bring all these children home. Because they are being misused," and that sort of thing. And I challenged the whole government. I said, "You show me where they're being misused." And the thing that it was. All the children sired by Americans, had to be taken back to America. I said, "That's interesting." Now in my way of thinking, a child sired by an Australian

36:30 is going to look very much like a child sired by an American. What do you do there? And I made a real mockery of the whole thing. I was supposed to be able to collect up these children. And I said, "I couldn't do that." I said "I just couldn't differentiate." But when the Australians left Nui Dat, pulled

- 37:00 out of Vietnam. There was an orphanage there, and that lady was a real rogue. And I could never get them to believe it and it didn't matter anyhow, but they gave her tremendous help. But when they pulled out, I think she expected them to leave her just about everything that was around. But I got down there, and she said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I've come to see if there are any children, perhaps, left by the
- 37:30 Australians that need help. Because I'm here to help them if there are." Oh, she said, "Uc da loi, Australia, number ten", which means bad person. "Oh, Uc da loi, number ten." And I said "I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about children." She says, "Oh, no." she refused to tell me. So I went around the village, to try to find some of them. There were a few, but their mothers wouldn't let them go.
- 38:01 And that was quite an issue for quite a while. To take all the children home. But I didn't see any of them being mistreated. I certainly didn't see every one of them, but I didn't see any of them being mistreated. Later on, the stories came out about them as they grew bigger, being ostracised in Vietnam, but I didn't follow that through at all. But I just can't imagine it.
- 38:31 **You can understand mothers not giving up their children?**
- Yeah. But I didn't follow through on that one, but I'm sure it worked itself out.
- I wonder if the women that were ostracised were forgiven after the children were born and loved? The Vietnamese women who were frowned upon? If they were accepted back into their village,**
- 39:00 **after having the baby?**
- I never ever saw a real problem. Now some of these people don't seem to have the rigid set of rules. For example, a Vietnamese man can have two wives. If he can keep them. But the other way
- 39:30 around was that if he left them, the wives were ostracised because they had done something wrong. But when he did have two wives, the two families, if there were families, become one. I'm not saying they didn't have strict rules, but perhaps there's more acceptance of people being
- 40:00 people. Of people being human and human frailties. But, believe me, I mixed with all sorts of people in all sorts of work of life, in villages, but I didn't see that. I didn't see that at all.
- We'll just stop there, Iris.**

Tape 8

- 00:34 **We were talking before about, I guess, the grace of Vietnamese women, and the sense of shame and pride, in terms of if they were abandoned, what would they do? Could you talk to me about that again, on camera, in terms of the suicides?**
- 01:01 Well, for example, just another little thing, I always had one or two Vietnamese women working with me. And I would get a message to say something like "Tomorrow will be a windy day, and windy
- 01:30 wind makes me feel ill, so I can't come in." It was because she had her periods coming. Nothing to do with the wind at all. But they had all these beautiful little excuses, rather than say what was happening. They would put it more nicely to you, right? As I said with them, you would see these little shoes lined up on a bridge
- 02:00 and I was horrified when my interpreter says, "She's jumped in the water to drown." And I said, "Oh dear, can we do something?" And she said, "Not to worry." She said, "She won't jump until she sees somebody there to rescue her." I said, "Why does she do it?" She said, "Well, that's what you do." There was no arguing about it. But perhaps she had had an argument and her boyfriend had left her.
- 02:31 So she is supposed to be very sad, and do something drastic. Well, she'd attempted it and done the right thing, hadn't she? Whether she survived, didn't matter. But she had done the right thing, by proclaiming her grief or anger or whatever it was, by doing the accepted thing of suicide. I have never heard of any of them that
- 03:00 didn't get somewhere there to pull them out. But it was an accepted thing. It comes back once again to the little quirks in our culture, doesn't it? But on a whole, I didn't hear all that much of it. They wouldn't tell you anything that was really sad. They would concoct some other little story
- 03:31 that was much nicer listening to for me, than the real story.
- Was there any customs that you yourself picked up along the way?**
- For myself? Not really.

That you adopted?

What really stayed with me is of course was the fact of

- 04:01 acceptance. As I told you before, I had all these hundreds of people in these most uncomfortable surrounds, just to have a roof over their heads. And where they would quietly just settle into whatever was there, without complaining or screaming at somebody, "You've taken my place." And the acceptance was really a lesson that we should all learn. Acceptance is taking things as they are, not as you want them to be.
- 04:30 And not as you would dream to have them happen. But accept things for what they are. It was like, when I went into a village, I would immediately know if it was a Catholic village or a Buddhist village. If it was a Buddhist village, they would be growing things, but it would be more untidy
- 05:03 than the Catholic village, right? Because they would be sort of getting on with things and not caring all that much if it looked untidy. But this lot would be gardening but they would leave a few weeds. There were all these little factors that you had to learn. The different attitudes. Say I had X amount of
- 05:30 rice in my distribution, the Buddhists would say, "We'll get by. We'll get by." The Catholics would say, "Is that all? Is that all you got?"
- 06:00 And these nuns who brought me that outfit I have there, they would never accept anything off me. Because they said, "It will be provided." And they were able to make do on very little. But they were happy. I've seen them do incredible things. I used to go into a Buddhist temple in Saigon. One day I was there,
- 06:30 talking with the head monk and a very ill, aged lady was brought in on a stretcher, by her sons. He had them sit her in a chair, he sort of gave a little bit of massage to her hands and her forehead, and he went into a sort of a chant. I guess you would call it a prayer, with her. He went over
- 07:00 to the altar, and prayed. He came back, put his two hands to her forehead, and she got up and walked away. I've seen them do the most incredible healing. Absolutely incredible. I have lived a very varied interesting life. I'm a very observant person,
- 07:30 and as I say, I think I've seen a whole bunch of miracles. It's a miracle I'm alive.

What's perhaps one of the strongest miracles that stays with you from your time in Vietnam?

One of them would be I drove an old Scout. An old Scout Bedford

- 08:00 vehicle. You know how they had those little half windows down the side?

I don't actually, but describe it for me.

You know how you wind up a window on the side, it's generally one window. Well, some windows have half of it, a small window, then the other one. Well, one day I was driving towards one of the villages, and a bullet came through this side,

- 08:30 about there, and crashed out the window on the other side. Now that was pretty close. I was within about four inches of getting a bullet in my head. And that was one of them. But there were so many times. Like the day my car was blown up. I could have been in it. But no, there were lots of them.

- 09:00 **You have shared with us some of those experiences, which leads me to another question, which was I guess with the work you were doing, were there times you experienced direct conflict of the war that was raging?**

With people?

Yes.

I guess there

- 09:30 was. But it didn't stay with me for very long I think a very good way of finishing an argument is to walk away. And I learned if I was out of my depth to walk away, and that lets them think they've won.

From what you've told us, I wouldn't imagine there was too much you would walked away from.

- 10:02 Well, as I say, what I worked out was seeing their point of view. What I worked out was giving them their say. It was their country. The Vietnamese, it was their country, not mine. With the Americans I would have quite likely have said, "Oh well. You're a bloody idiot." And walked away. But of course if they
- 10:30 hurt me, they would have been in trouble. But no, I don't remember all that much. Except the time they arrested me. This is another queer story. I overheard a story about a program to kill General Westmoreland, at a marketplace.

- 11:01 And I overheard two of the people I was working with talking about how they had heard this, and they were talking about how it was to be done, and all that sort of thing. And I made the mistake of mentioning to one of the Americans the story that I overheard. I was immediately arrested by the American police for not reporting what I had overheard. And so they sent me
- 11:31 police, or whatever you want to call them, to pick me up. Night time in a helicopter, they took me into a lock-up in Saigon. And then they were really rude to me. They were saying what sort of person was I when I didn't report the....I said, "Had I thought it was a serious thing, I would have certainly reported it." (UNCLEAR) And they were going
- 12:00 on, firing things at me, and I said nothing. And one fellow said, "Why don't you answer me?" And I said, "I will when you start speaking to me like a lady. Your mother would be absolutely annoyed with you." Of course that blew the cops' mind. And they threatened to send me back to Australia, I said, "Wouldn't that be terrible."
- 12:30 They threatened me with all sorts of things. But I said, "When you treat me like this, how would you treat my fellow worker? When you pick them up? If I told you who it was?" I said, "You're treating me like this. How would you treat them?" And I said, "Possibly they have families. Possibly you'd throw them in and the family would never see them again." I said, "No, send me home if you want. Go to my boss tomorrow and see if he will release me."
- 13:02 Oh, they threatened me with all sorts of things. But they eventually let me go. For many years I did have that stumbling block.

So did that rumour turn out to be real? That plot to...

I don't know if it turned out to be real, but they took Westmoreland up country that weekend. So they must have been a little bit scared. But these were just two ordinary men,

- 13:30 working in my office, that were discussing it. And whether it was otherwise, yes, I should have reported it. Had they treated me properly...I said, "Look, I should have reported it. I've just been so busy," and so forth and so on. And I could have coped with it that way. But I didn't like their language. So yes, I did have a few setbacks.

Iris, you were telling me in the break, about the tours that you organised.

- 14:00 **Can you tell us again about that?**

I felt that...On Long Binh there, there were up to forty thousand soldiers. That was the main camp, American base. Twenty, forty thousand American soldiers, and in between being sent other places I guess. How terribly bored they must be. And I used to feel sorry that both the Australian and American troops, and the Koreans and so forth, knew so little

- 14:30 about Vietnam. They knew very little about the people that they were fighting for, and how they lived and what they did. So I got the idea and got permission to start country bus tours. Now looking back on it, it was totally illogical, wasn't it? The first bus tour, I think it might have been about half full, courageous enough to come with. Anyhow,
- 15:00 I took them on a country trip. And I said, "Now, look, you can see, this is what they eat." Because of the water spinach growing. This is the sort of houses that they built. Now some of the houses, the bricks came from X across there, and how the bricks were made, and how the bricks were baked in the sun and so forth, and so on. And how the Vietnamese wish in life was just to
- 15:30 have a small cottage and enough land to grow rice. And about the schools, and all that sort of thing. Their way of life. My aim was to take them out to a ceramic factory, where they made the most beautiful ceramics. And it was interesting because they baked them, or cooked them, in the side of a hill. In a dugout, and they were still using wood fire to fire them up to the heat necessary, for the glaze.
- 16:00 We got out to the village, and to the ceramic works, and they enjoyed that trip. But they wouldn't get out of the bus. Now I'm not blaming them. I really wanted to show them the country marketplace, all that sort of thing, but they wouldn't get out of the bus. And that's fair enough, because they thought they might have been shot or something like that, and that was fair enough. Anyway, I got them back and they enjoyed it to a degree. But the next busload I organised to take to
- 16:30 Vung Tau, which was a seaside place, and that filled up very easily. Because the highway we went down was relatively safe. So I took them down there, and they were out of the bus and they enjoyed it. And then I didn't have to do that, because they then organised and did it themselves. But I can't say it was a real success, but it did get it going, between there and the beach.
- 17:00 So, that helped them in a little bit of a way.

Did you observe any, I guess, any of the effects of a deeper understanding of the Vietnamese people on the Americans that you were taking on tours? Did they actually appreciate what you were doing?

The Americans? I had a reputation of being somewhat crazy, and I think

17:30 they fitted in with that. But yes, they did thank me. Particularly for the Vung Tau ones. It was very embarrassing, though. There was a little boy, I had somehow or other along the way I'd met down there, and I'd always had a relatively big bosom. And this little boy is about ten,

18:00 every time he saw me he used to dash up to me, threw his arms around me and said, "Oh, I like to put my head on your cushions." He called me Mrs Cushion. So, of course, who had to be there when the bus pulled in at Vung Tau, my young friend. Oh dear,

18:31 such is life.

Iris, can you tell us what you observed of the Americans and the use of drugs amongst the soldiers?

I think like most things, many things, one of the worst factors, was the drugs. The story was, of course, that the communists

19:00 flooded Vietnam with....made drugs so accessible, because they would destroy (UNCLEAR), they said many years ago they would destroy Australia with the same thing. With drugs. You could buy drugs on any street corner, or any place. Even with the outposts, drugs got into the outposts. I had a friend who was a Green Beret [US Special Forces] and he was commander of the Green Beret.

19:31 And he used to come to me to get me to write the letters to the parents, when the boys were killed. Because he, himself, was very upset because he couldn't keep the drugs out of the outposts. And he said, "Just half a dozen guys who were off the twist with drugs, could do so much damage to the rest."

20:02 But we all agreed that there is just nothing you can do about the drug factor, but everywhere, as it is today in any country, it was a very destructive element. Even on Long Binh, the main base. There was a big problem. As I said, there were men there, relatively bored, drugs

20:30 was a big problem. I used to go in and talk to the Jewish rabbi there, who was my main contact there, because he used to work with the boys, and one of his big problems was drugs. So they were trying to do something about it, or possibly send them home if they were too bad. But they were

21:00 testing drugs all the time. It's overpowering the world, isn't it? To a degree. As I said it was said that that was the plan behind the whole issue, of destroying the American Army. So it is said.

21:31 **Well, to a degree it worked quite effectively.**

Yes.

Just before I go on, did you see anything of the Australian soldiers in Vietnam, and what they would get up to?

In my job, I sort of worked,

22:00 as I said with the welfare program. And we had Civic Action with the Australian Army. And they once again used to do projects with schools and things like that, in their area. I didn't interfere. Every month I used to go down to the welfare officer, in their area, the Nui Dat area. And he would have written down the projects that

22:30 the Australians had proposed to him. And I would sign off on them. Because that was the agreement with the Americans, that I would sign off on all projects. I knew they would do the right thing, so I didn't bother them much. And now and again, a couple of times, I went to their mess, and had a meal. But they used to give me,

23:00 you know, put it on, give me a real meal, but they used to have American steaks, that thick. I was just longing for a lamb chop. A mutton chop, have a bit of mutton. So I never said anything, but gee, I would have loved a chop. Then the Americans had

23:30 a base down there where I had to do the same thing. Wow, did they live high. You could have ice cream and fruit salad, and fresh salads, and things like that. That was really good. But I worked with a padre, an Australian padre. And he used to come to me to talk about....the Australians were in the process of a building an

24:00 orphanage for children. And they had the plans, but they couldn't understand why the plans and what they were doing was being continually knocked back. I knew why. Because the Vietnamese, the Catholic priests actually, didn't want an orphanage. They wanted a Catholic priest

24:30 retreat. That was the plan, and they wanted the plan to fit in with their retreat plans. Not the plans that the Australians had for little children. And I tried to tell this Australian padre this, but he didn't want to listen. But the orphanage down there, she was one of

25:00 the greatest black market suppliers in the issue, but they didn't want to know. So I gave up trying to tell them, and it really didn't matter all that much anyhow, I suppose. But this orphanage they were quite upset because everything....For one thing, they said it couldn't be built there. Because there was some

graves above it. And when it rained, that water would go through those graves and

25:30 wash down onto the building. And that would be...unsaintly. That was one of the things; I forget what the rest of them were. But unfortunately, the Australian padre that I talked with, he is now deceased. But they didn't want to listen, so I didn't have all that much to do with them.

In your experience with

26:01 **the work of the Civic Action group. Were they effective in what they were doing?**

Very much so. There was only one thing that I tried to talk to them about, and it's showing itself very much now. You don't make beggars of people by completely giving them things all the time.

Can you explain?

26:30 If you give people things all the time, they expect things all the time. They expect them for nothing. Well, there's a way of doing that, too. You go into a village and you've got lollies for kids. "Hey," you say to the kids. "Gee, wouldn't it be nice if we got a rake, and we raked all that up. Then you can have some lollies?" There are ways of doing things. But they were giving out handfuls of lollies all over the place, with

27:00 the result that if anybody else went into the village they immediately put their hands out. I try and tell people that but they don't want to listen to that either. But now I believe that Saigon is full of people....and it's just my opinion. The Australians are doing some wonderful

27:30 work now. We have Vietnam veterans that are here. And they're doing some wonderful work. They've gone back and they've rebuilt the schools, they've rebuilt hospitals and all sorts of things.

Even today?

Yes. They're raising funds all the time, and they take medical supplies into the kids. They're doing a great job.

Wonderful. Iris, you've talked about the local villages that you spent obviously quite a bit of time in.

28:02 **I'm just wondering if you could describe for us the layout of a typical village, or a particular village, that you entered into, just to give us sense of how many people, how it was laid out? What your perceptions were?**

I don't think there was any such thing as a typical village. Because a village was built

28:30 as to what the location provided. A typical village would have a school, the normal little plank desks, a typical thatched roof or whatever they could get, on it. It would have had as much land as they could get, that was growing rice. And remember, in these typical

29:00 villages now, there are very few typical, because there were no men. For example, if you went into a village and there were no men, but a couple of dozen pregnant women, you would know that there was a high possibility that that was...it could be an NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. That is a North Vietnamese

29:30 village. And the men were hiding. Or it could be that they were Viet Cong, and they came home often. Like they had to come home sometime, didn't they? To get the women pregnant. There was no such thing as a typical village. The people all very much cared for, and looked after one another.

30:03 They were not bright places. You know what I mean? You go into a little community here, somebody grows flowers and somebody grows...at one time, often, the village chief used to ask me for more of the food. The American food. And I'd say things like, "No, this is all I have. This is a ration that I have at this particular time."

30:30 Because it was so much per person per village. "But how would you like me to bring you out some vegetable seeds. You have the land, you have a river there, you have so much water. And you can grow this. I've got seeds for whatever you wanted. So all you've got to do is ask me for seeds, and I will see that you get seeds, that you can plant and grow your own food." Not one village asked me. Not one village asked me. Not one village really wanted the seeds,

31:00 to plant their own crops. That's pretty world wide, isn't it? There would be possibly villages made up of old folk, and women and children. Old men, women and children. I couldn't say how many people, because it would vary from perhaps a forty to

31:30 a hundred, or something like that. But you could tell by the population, what the surrounds were doing.

What would you do, or be expected to do, if you came across a village that you suspected was NVA, or Viet Cong?

The practical thing was to do nothing. The sensible thing was to do nothing. There was one village, that

- 32:01 my interpreter had a rellie in this village. She was always very upset when I went in there. Once again, this was an all women village, and they grew tea and they produced quite a lot in that village. This is a story where we used to go in because her grandmother used
- 32:30 to give me tea, she used to grow tea. And I said, "How do you dry it?" And she showed me how she put it out the front on a flat mat until the sun dried it. I said, "But how did you get it crushed up into little pieces?" She said, "Very simple. I put the mat out when the children are coming home from school. And as they walk past, they all go crunch, crunch, crunch, with their feet. And that makes the tea all chomped up." I
- 33:00 lost the feeling for her tea that she gave me and passed it on to somebody else. But that was a very happy village. But my interpreter would only allow me to go in certain times of the day, because she said it was a Viet Cong village. And there were warnings like that that you know. For example, when I was driving from Da Lat back to the hospital, you could tell if there were Viet Cong around. Because
- 33:31 the very prized water buffalo. If there were any water buffalo, they had children minding them. So if you can across children driving the water buffalo home, you'd know, be careful. If the little boy was asleep on top of a buffalo's back, you'd know there was nothing to be afraid of. But there were all these little things that you had to learn, that
- 34:00 meant something. In these villages, like if you had to observe a curfew of being in and out at certain times of the day. That was interesting. And I had another big orphanage, had the most children in Vietnam. He would never fill in the forms which was necessary for me to give him food. So it was always a courtesy call. The orphans were
- 34:30 actually children of well off Vietnamese who wanted their children out of Saigon, so they wouldn't learn the nasty ways of Americans. So they were predominantly the children. And of course I should imagine they paid this chap who ran it pretty well. It was also well known that it was a refuge for North Vietnamese troops,
- 35:00 and one day I was talking to him. He's a very smooth man. He had quite a perky sort of sense of humour. Anyhow, I was sitting there, talking to him, looking out the window, and I see all these truckloads of rice, going up into the bush. I said, "Look at all those truckloads of rice going up in the bush. Where on earth could they be going?"
- 35:30 And he did a quick flip and he says, "The boys are in camp out there. Some of the boys are going out for a bush camp for the weekend." He only had about a hundred there. I said, "Gee, they must get awfully hungry." He said, "Yes, they must. Mustn't they?" He was feeding half the Viet Cong, or the Vietnamese, in the territory.
- 36:00 Then he wanted a loan of a Rome plough to knock down some trees on the property. And because he wouldn't fill in these forms for the government, I couldn't allow him to have a Rome plough. So he complained, directly to Washington, and I was reprimanded and my name was all written up in the Washington Post, as this welfare advisor who refused the loan of a Rome plough to
- 36:30 this poor orphanage management. He wanted a plough to....You'd go in and he'd be having a meal and he'd had have butter. One day, I accidentally saw into one of the side rooms that I always wanted to take a look into, a stack, a whole stack of American canned food. He had it
- 37:00 stacked high with American canned food. No, he was quite a character, that one. But his orphanage was run a hundred percent fine. Every afternoon, the children were given a towel and a cake of soap. They had two showers, outdoors, and all these children would line up, with their towels,
- 37:30 to the shower, and go in one after the other, take their clothes off, have a shower, dry themselves, come round, pick up their clothes and walk away. It was like clockwork, they did this. But one of his things that was unusual. The children were fed well, but they were not allowed to speak at meals. So during the mealtime it was all a hundred percent silence. Actually, at these showers, even, they were not allowed
- 38:00 to make a noise. But they were all cared for. Out here on the wall, I forget what you call it. But he gave me that. See the....what do you call it? Get up and have a look at it. It's one of those things where they put on many, many things of varnish.
- 38:36 That was presented to me by him. And he had the children all making those, and selling them. So he had a real good business going as well. Because he taught the children all these crafts, and they all sold in Saigon. He was really a fun guy.

Tape 9

00:31 Have you got some questions?

I do. I was going to ask you when you did you realise it was time to get out of Vietnam and

come home to Australia?

That was very, very brought home to me, in a positive manner. One of the places, towns

- 01:00 where I worked was Ta Ninh, on the Cambodian border. And I went up there....along with being welfare officer they also put me in charge of the PL480 program. And that was the food program. So, that program was very hard work, and I got the job because nobody else would do it. Not because I was good at doing it. But the people were
- 01:30 repeatedly, no matter what you gave them, they asked for more and in this particular incident, I sent up....One of the most liked things on the PL480 program was cooking oil. Because it was expensive and it was hard to buy. But there was quite a generous amount came through from America. So I had been up there previously, recently, to
- 02:00 make the distribution. And somehow or other, there were cases of cooking oil got lost, not taken, lost, they said. So would I please bring back some more cooking oil. Now I went up there just to debate this with the American officers in charge of that section. I said, "Come on, it didn't get lost. Somebody's got it somewhere." And
- 02:30 we'll have to find it because I don't have any more cooking oil for this area. We talked on about that, and other issues, with this food program up there. And by this time, it was getting around to the time when they were talking about the Americans leaving Vietnam. That's an interesting thing
- 03:00 I'd like to talk to you about. I was walking out of the office, and walking back to the chopper pad, to get back to Bien Hoa, and I walked past six dead
- 03:30 Vietnamese war-wounded men, lying on a palate, ready to be picked up I guess, and taken back. And it didn't mean a thing. I walked past them as if I'd been walking past a stack of wood. I said to myself "It's time you went home." You know, I had so completely lost compassion, I looked at those and it didn't mean anything.
- 04:00 So that's when I made the very positive decision 'It's time you left here.' Yes.

Did you find out what happened to the cooking oil?

No. I never went back. The Vietnamese, see, in each section there was a welfare officer, Vietnamese type.

- 04:31 That was supposed to be my counterpart. And I was supposed to work with them, but a lot of them, must have got very rich. Because their idea of being honest and fair....Then again, we had in Vietnam, if you were a man and you had a family, regardless of what else culture said, your family came first.
- 05:00 Your family came first. So in other words, if you get your hands on something, your family came first. And I had to always have that in mind, too. I would do that, for my family. I would steal for my family. If I was Vietnamese, I'd probably kill for my family.
- 05:32 And I had all of these things that had to go through my head, with what I was doing. As I said, I was so amazed, angry, whatever you like, with myself to think that I could witness something like that as if it were....just a load of logs, or something like that.

Gee, you had four years of

- 06:00 **experience.**

Almost four years. And that's when I made the decision.

Let me ask you, you said something about you'd tell me about the American soldiers going back....You said I'll talk to you later about that. Oh, the American soldiers leaving Vietnam, going back to the States.

I

- 06:31 went to see my interpreter one night, one evening. And her husband was home. He was an officer in the South Vietnamese Army. And he had a friend there, a cousin, or something, who was an officer in the South Vietnamese Air Force. And they decided they would walk home with me,
- 07:00 better to walk home with me, make sure that I got home safely. And we sat down in a marketplace to have a bowl of soup. You didn't have a cup of coffee; you had a bowl of soup in Vietnam. And we started talking, and they said how difficult it was. They said in Vietnam there were the NVA, the North Vietnamese soldiers and Viet Cong.
- 07:30 Viet Cong was South Vietnamese people, predominantly, and as he...I can't think of their names, but as one said, "What we're being asked to do is to go out there and kill. But we don't know if we're killing our cousin, the man down the street, or who. Because we never know." And we never knew. What side....They could work for you in the office during the day, and be Viet Cong at night. They said "We repeatedly hear

- 08:00 of the Americans pulling out, which we know is going to happen not too far off. Where are we then? Are they taking their money with them? Does that mean we won't have any gas for our aeroplanes? Does this mean we won't have this, we won't have that. Are they taking with them the guns? What are we going to be left with, if anything?" And we sat there and I could understand everything that they
- 08:30 were saying. But they were saying things like "We're criticised," which they were repeatedly, "as being lazy and not being good soldiers. But mostly our criticism comes from soldiers who are very well fed. Who have the very best equipment." He said "Our meals, if we're out away from a normal place. We carry two pocketfuls of rice And a tin of fish."
- 09:00 He said "That's our meals." See, some of the Americans in the field use to have their hot meals delivered. It sounds ridiculous, but it's true. And they had this beautiful tinned food. And the Vietnamese lived on pocketfuls of rice. "So they're criticising us from their full bellies. That gives them increased energy." And
- 09:30 we had no means of answering this. And they went onto tell me their side of the story. And I often said to myself, 'If I was a Vietnamese, would I be Viet Cong, or would I not?' I honestly thought that many times I would be a Viet Cong, because they were fighting directly for their families. It was a very, very complicated
- 10:00 war. And the other day I was reading a book written by a South Vietnamese officer, here in Australia, and it occurred to me what had never occurred to me before, that one of the basics of the whole war was religion. Then I realised that the majority of the people in the South had
- 10:30 come down from the North, because they were refused the freedom of religion and of being Catholic. So, it was once again, religion had bared its head, into being a factor of the war.
- Their religion being part of the war, the cause for wars, has been going on for centuries.**
- It has, hasn't it? Since the word dot.
- 11:00 **So you saw these dead soldiers and you didn't have any feelings whatsoever, and you knew it was time to come home, how did you make the arrangements to get out of Vietnam?**
- Well, there were a lot of ends, of course. Number one, I had to tell the ambassador that controlled the area I was working in. He wasn't happy at all. But nobody tried to stop me.
- 11:32 And, of course, in Vietnam if you want to travel, you have to go to one of their officers to get a permit to travel. And of course, you have to fill in long forms. And I was told to come back. Which I did, and there were more long forms. And reasons why I couldn't have one. And then of course, my interpreter said
- 12:00 to me, "There's a very good reason why you can't have one." I said, "What's that, love?" She said, "You haven't paid them any money." So I had to slip some money to the fellow, who gave the permits, and then I got it easy. But then the worst thing happened was I went to the hospital and I got all the needles that you are supposed to have. But, the person who gave me the needles left
- 12:30 me, before they wrote me out the little statement that said I'd had this needle and that needle. And I was not thinking very well, and I didn't insist on it. And on my way, I got into Singapore, the first thing they asked for was this declaration that I had had the needles. Of course, I didn't have it. So I had to have them again. I came home with a swollen arm, from having all these inoculations,
- 13:00 twice. Then I got home. And I went to a little house we had down the coast. And my son arrived, from Canberra, and he was a motorcycle addict at that time. And he had....he had fallen off his bike, and he was all covered in bandages, hobbling along on a stick. He was the one who looked as if he came home from a war, not me.
- 13:32 **I can't imagine how it would have been, coming from Vietnam where your life was turned upside down and then returning to a place that you used to know. How did it feel?**
- It was harder to come home than it was to leave. Because I'd been out of the world for four years. Out of the world.
- 14:00 And of course, the friends that I had before I went away....I was a different person. I am a different person. But they had stayed in the same town, and they were all talking to the same people, and they were all looking at the same TV shows. With a lot of people in those days, if you get together and you're talking to them, they relate to the latest football, or the latest This Is Our Lives, or something like that. Of course, I couldn't join in those conversations, could I?
- 14:31 I went into Hong Kong at one time, to a ladies' meeting, where they were discussing reporting to a cosmetics company that the lip rouge didn't quite match the lipstick. And my friend quickly got me away, before I blew my top. I don't know that I've ever really got back into this world.
- 15:00 But there were so many things like that. And you never really come home. A lot of these Vietnam veterans, you never really come home. You certainly don't come home the same person. Because you've

seen a totally different aspect of life. But yes, it was hard. It was hard.

Did you want to grow a garden?

Did I want to grow a garden?

15:30 I always have to grow something. Never very successfully. I would like to be a famous scientist who discovers why weeds grow more easily than flowers and vegetables. That's my aim in life.

You might be out on your own there.

I think everybody would be very happy.

How was your family

16:00 **towards you when you got home?**

They were fine. But I've never had the courage to ask my two sons what they thought of me going to Vietnam. I've never had the courage to ask them. Now they're both in their fifties, perhaps.....perhaps they'd give me an honest answer.

Have they asked you why you went?

No.

I suppose everything's a two way street,

16:30 **isn't it?**

Well, they've always had a weird mother. The mother was always doing different things.

Did you feel a certain responsibility to the children you left in Vietnam?

My children?

No, the children in the orphanages?

No. Because, one thing that did worry me was the Americans taking home the food

17:00 that I normally had to distribute. But to be honest, if the orphanage directors were honest, they would have probably had enough money in the bank to keep the children very well off, into their teens. Do you know what I mean? Because I don't know, I never tried to investigate was food left there, if that program continued for orphanages.

17:31 Because I don't really want to know. I don't know, I don't want to know. I know while I was there, they had a good beginning. That's a question that I've avoided in my head.

You brought up a good point though, did you feel a certain responsibility to your own children, when you were overseas?

No. Because what I believe is wrong with a lot of

18:00 the men is, they have been tied to their mother's apron strings. My husband was an only child, and he must have been spoilt rotten. And he carried it over. Now, it didn't do the boys any harm. They both got out and did things. I'm very proud of them, actually.

But they weren't children when you left either?

Oh, no, no. They were both into jobs. Gary started cheffing at

18:30 fifteen. And Roy was through with his accountancy. So they both had good jobs. They both had to grow up a bit, and they did it quite well.

Do you think that they gathered a respect for women from seeing what their mother was doing?

Roy has been married twice, and had about three live-in ladies.

19:12 No, that's Gary....Roy has only had one lady, and he has two children, but it took him a long time to marry her. And he's on his boat. And he seems to get a lady friend to

19:30 take over until he wears her out, working on the boat. Then he changes over.

Maybe not, then.

As I say, he's flipping his yacht around Malaya and those places. And I say to him, "For God sakes, come home, it's not safe over there anymore." "Mother, are you concerned about safety, mother?"

So you were home for a while. What made you take

20:00 **off for India?**

Oh well, I had two jobs. I was matron at two geriatric hospitals. That took six years. After I left those, I was co-ordinator of the first women's shelter. I worked there, all these jobs were twenty four hour jobs. I worked there for four and a half years, at the shelter. Then I thought I'd retire and

20:30 get a little old lady's sort of tea and scone shop. And I did that. And I made the scones and I made the piklets. But of course the people that I'd helped during my term at the shelter; they all came to visit, didn't they? And I didn't charge them, did I? And my

21:00 sons called it Mother's Soup Kitchen.

You weren't a business woman then?

Oh, the business was good. Except I gave away the profit. Anyhow, that wasn't working all that well. And one day, a young American came in, he actually came in to see me, because he

21:30 had heard that I had done things and I could possibly tell him things he could do as a volunteer. So we got to talking, and I told him what he could do. And he said, "What would you like to do next?" I said, "I would like to put a welfare program into a leprosy hospital in India." He said, "Have you got a pencil and paper?" I gave him a pencil and paper. He wrote this and that down, and he says, "My uncle runs one."

22:01 His uncle. His uncle was running a leprosy hospital in West Bengal. So I wrote to his uncle, who was a priest by the way, Father Kent. And his uncle wrote back and he said, "I have been praying for seventeen years for somebody to ask me that question." So I closed up my shop,

22:31 and went to India for a year. And it was a very great experience.

Have you kept in touch with the friends you met, like Dorothy Plant etc?

Dorothy died unfortunately. Those paintings on the wall out there, the old man and the other one, Dorothy left me those in her will. But the rest of them, like we have

23:00 reunions, as I said, we have reunions every three years. The next one could possibly be here. And so we've kept in touch to a large degree.

So you're work in India, did that bring back memories of your work in Vietnam?

No, they're entirely different. I had learnt a lot, though

23:30 from Vietnam. For example, the leprosy hospital in India, if anything, hygiene and all the rest of it was much worse than Vietnam. So I gently did things like...for example, to get the patients doing something...The whole place was very dull, there

24:00 wasn't a bit of colour anywhere. So I collected all the tins, then I went and brought some crepe paper. And of an afternoon, with a pair of scissors and the paper and so forth, I would sit down and start to make paper flowers. I would just sit there and not say anything to anybody. And people would drift in one by one, and I'd leave some around the place and they'd pick it up, and they would do it also. They were much better than I was actually.

24:30 But between us all, we made flowers for all the wards. That made them all much brighter. And then I manufactured out of cardboard a little thing to count pills with. Like with the diseased, they take a certain amount of pills everyday. And everybody had to have just so many, so they didn't take too many, and spoil the whole show.

25:00 So I made these little containers. So then we used to get a whole stack of pills and they would fill up the little containers, to save us counting them out one by one. Then we made little packages out of newspaper. So they were handed out to the patients that came as day patients. But in all, I never asked them to do anything. They would come and see what I was doing next.

25:30 What got you interested in leprosy?

I don't know. There was just a need. There was just a need. We did so many things. Like their books were thirteen years behind. So I was able to update their book-keeping. But the best thing, and one of the things I'm somewhat proud of

26:00 in my life is I wrote home a friend, and she mailed me some blackboard paint. And I went out and I brought sheets of ply and I got the boys to put it up on the wall. And I painted it black and got chalk. They're still operating. They've put messages on them, they put pictures on them, they have lectures with them. So for the small cost,

26:30 those blackboards are still operating in every ward. I get a letter from them every now and again. They put Happy Birthdays on them. But the simple most operative thing I've done in my life is put up blackboards.

Oh, you've done a lot more than that, Iris.

Well, that was the most simple. And one of the fun things there, it came on Christmas, and

27:00 the thinking was what could we do for the patients? We had a little bit of money, so the sister and I we went away and we brought cotton saris for all the ladies in there, and I said, "How about pyjamas for the men?" She said, "I've got some at home that were sent to me from overseas. We'll use those." They came from Russia and they were made to fit a Russian man.

27:33 Came Christmas morning, and they put on a parade for me. All these little men. The sleeves were rolled up, the legs were rolled up. They were hanging all over them like tents. That was a fun morning.

That's when you needed a sewing machine.

I had a sewing machine, and

28:00 I made a hundred and thirty covers for the beds for the Christmas. But the sewing machine, the needle kept breaking. It was a very old Singer actually. The needle kept breaking, or the thread would come out or something. So I had a little boy, and these little boys would be minus fingers or toes or something. But one of them stood on the other side and pulled...

28:34 the material through. And the other one stood here, ready to thread the needle. And so we got them made that way. And then I brought a whole stack of wool, and we made knitting needles, and had them all....Can you imagine these men, some might only have one or two fingers, and the other one minus

29:00 half an arm or something, sitting up in their beds in the hospital, knitting. Because they managed to knit. And they were supposed to be knitting caps because they're very fond of having something to put on their head. But they would come up all sorts of shapes, and then I had to cobble them together to make a hat. And all these fellows, sitting up in their wards, with all different coloured hats on.

29:32 But you couldn't laugh. You couldn't laugh. They all thought they looked beautiful, and they didn't take them off. But we lived on curried vegetables, three times a day, you would have curried vegetables. And the water came out of a river, and everybody washed their plates in the same greasy water. How on earth on my constitution survived that is

30:00 incredible. But they cooked everything on the top of a stove. And the top of the stove was cow dung and clay. They were building a wall, and they were mixing cow dung and clay, and building a brick wall. I said, "Would you like me to buy you some cement?" They said, "That fence, cow dung, clay, been there seventeen years.

30:30 What's wrong with that?" I said, "It's good stuff."

Were you concerned that you might catch leprosy?

Yes I was. I used to work in the contagious ward, but leprosy's not very contagious. There's a whole lot of things told about leprosy. It's a nerve disease. And the disease, or the losing of the fingers or whatever, is happened when the

31:00 nerves die. You know, the nerves die (UNCLEAR) and there's no feeling in it. And if you picked up something hot, it would make a sore out of where the nerves were....and you wouldn't feel it. And then it would become a blister, and without the proper medication and so forth, that would go into the bone. And rot the bone. And now,

31:30 of course, they've got a...they've found something, and its not sort of hard to catch anymore. But you catch it like you catch a cold. People sneezing on you, or something like that. But no, I was very fortunate. I worked in the contagious ward and yes, I was scared. And one of the indications that you have it is that your eyebrows fall out. I spent a few years, I think it was about four years or something, possible contagious,

32:00 watching my eyebrows every morning, and thankful they were still there.

Too scared to pluck them?

I was just pleased that they were still there.

And you stayed a year in India before you came home? Why a year and not longer?

Well, everything worked out that way. And I had put my welfare program in and I had worked out a system...They don't have telephones, and they don't

32:30 have buses and they don't have...Possibly for a rellie to get there to say hello or get a message was a long walk. So I worked out some sort of system. I've tried since to remember what it was. So it was getting a thing to the closest village, and asking somebody in that village to get it to the next village. I worked out a way of possibly telling a family that their rellie had died, or

33:00 to come up and pick their rellie up from hospital. But I worked out some sort of a system that worked, of getting messages to the rellies. And as I said, it was a welfare program, so I had my blackboards going. I had them doing crafts. So I figured that was enough, so I just went for twelve months.

And how long after Vietnam were you back in Australia before you found out that you were going to receive a medal?

33:30 Before I left for India?

Yes, did you find out you were going to receive an Australian Citizen medal soon after arriving back in Vietnam?

You mean....

Well, all of them. All your medals.

It was only last year, through a lot of pushing through the RSL, I got the overseas service award. I have never received an Australian Vietnam

34:00 medal. Right? They will not acknowledge I was in Vietnam. Whereas I went through government personnel to get a permit to go in, because I was not working with the Australian Government. Had I been a song and dancer and gone in for half a day...Had I been a hostess on a Qantas flight that went in and stayed overnight, I could have one. Isn't that incredible?

Yes.

34:30 But they won't give me one. So, I don't care. I've got six others.

Do you march in the Anzac parades or take part in...

I generally organise the Anzac Days. No, I don't march. Because I've always been busy organising the march to really, really march.

Are you in contact with any Vietnam vets that have returned?

I was the foundation

35:00 member of the Vietnam Veteran's Association. And I'm a member. I was secretary for a while, I was on the committee for a while, but I haven't been, since they've grown up and they're really functioning, I haven't been working on their committee. They came up the other day and cut down a lot of trees for me. I get a bit of sun on my porch. But we're good friends.

When you think back now, does it seem like another life

35:30 **away? Your involvement in the Vietnam War?**

It was just a section of my life. Actually, when I look back on it....How would you feel of sitting there now, you once had an incident in your life, when you could order your own helicopter?

I'd feel pretty good.

But I often think now, that's incredible. To think

36:00 that I would just ring up and say, "Look, I would like a four seater on the pad this afternoon, at four thirty." "Yes, ma'am." Walk down, there it was. Incredible, isn't it? I'm sure people don't believe that I could just order my own transport.

It was easier than getting a pizza?

Yeah, it was actually.

36:36 I don't think in that book...there's this bit. I was taking the little girl that I had, I was putting back with her father, remember that story?

Yes.

I took her back to her village, one afternoon. And the night was closing in and the helicopter

37:00 pilot said to me, "Don't be long. There's bad weather coming up." And I said, "I will be as quick as I can." But I took her out to the village, which took a bit of time because they were not happy, because there were white birds on the fence and that meant bad luck. So I had to take her in and get her settled with her books and things like that. Then I got in my car and I drove back through the rubber trees. As quick as I could. Got back there, and he was waiting, jumped in the helicopter. And

37:30 we hadn't gone very far, when we went into a lightning storm, and the lightning was throwing us around all over the place. We pulled into the chopper pad, near where I lived, and he was a black pilot and he said, "Were you scared, ma'am?" I thought it was fascinating. "Were you scared?" He said, "Shitless, ma'am. Shitless." He was almost white.

38:03 **Can you tell us how you end your amazing book?**

How I end it? I don't know that it's really....I wrote it and it served the purpose, like it told the story of the people to the wives and the soldiers that read it,

38:30 about the people, they knew little about the people. I don't know. I think it ends telling me I should

write some more. I was fortunate when I went back to get Vinnie to America, I was fortunate to, or they found me, a cab driver who had been in the rehabilitation camp, with the communists. And incidentally, my interpreter, they kept her

39:00 husband in there for three years before they would let him tell her he was still alive. But he was telling me how they put the South Vietnamese officers...There was an old ship out in the harbour. They put all these officers, got them together, and put them down in the hull of the ship, and left them there. And every few days they would bring out rice, and throw it in by the handful. They wouldn't give them rice, they

39:30 used to have it, throw it in by handfuls. And the officers would have to pick it up, to get anything to eat at all. And he said that some of them would die, and they would leave the body down there to get stinky, before they would pull it up and toss it out in the water. He told me all the things they did to the officers they captured. And he told me how they belted them with whips.

40:00 and things like that, in the rehabilitation camp. And I was very lucky, to have just found him, because he trusted me enough to tell me. And my interpreter, to feed her children, she had to get up in the dark of the morning and ride to a lady who was illegally selling rice, to buy rice,

40:30 to feed her children. And if the police caught her on the way back, they would make her get off the bike, and they would take the rice, but instead of keeping it for themselves, they would throw it all over the road, and tell her to pick it up.

I think another book is in the pipeline for you, Iris.

Their children were not allowed to go to...they could go to day

41:00 school, they couldn't go to high school. I don't know if they've changed that, but all the children of ex-soldiers were forbidden to go to school. Her husband, the only job he was allowed to get was selling lottery tickets. Or riding a cyclo, you know. He wasn't allowed to get any job higher than that, so he hired a cyclo, and was

41:30 driving that. Fortunately I had enough money on me for him to buy one himself, and make a bit of money out of that, but they were more or less living on grass or anything they could find. And of course she was very unhappy about the kids not being able to get an education. Is that it?

INTERVIEW ENDS