TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Description	Nellie Williamson neé Marshall, Matron 2/9th Australian General Hospital (AGH), interviewed by Angie Michaelis for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45. Discusses nursing training; uniforms; leisure activities; posting to Middle East; 2/9 Australian General Hospital; posting to New Guinea; conditions in hospitals in New Guinea; drugs; patients.

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BEGIN TAPE 1 – SIDE A

Tape Identification: This is Side 1, Tape 1 of an interview for the War Memorial World War II Sound Archive. The interviewee is Mrs Nell Williamson, née Marshall, First Matron of the 2/9th AGH in New Guinea and previously the Middle East. And later Principal Matron for New Guinea. Interviewed by Angie Michaelis at Mrs. Williamson's home in Turramurra on the 20th February 1989. End of Identification.

When and where were you born?

I was born on the 22nd September, 1906 at Walcha, New South Wales.

And where were you educated?

At various county schools and at Glen Innes High School.

So what level of schooling did you reach?

Intermediate.

And then, you left to go nursing?

I left school and did a course in typing, shorthand and bookkeeping. And then, my father decided that he wanted me to stay at home, so I was obedient and stayed at home. So then, a little later I went nursing.

What decided you to go nursing?

Well, in my day, there was either you went into an office, you went school teaching or you went nursing, they seemed to be or you worked in a shop. There were no jobs then that there are available for young women today. So, I decided next thing, my sister had gone nursing, so I thought well perhaps he will let me go nursing, so that's why I went nursing. And then, I got to like it. I didn't like it at first but eventually I did and then I loved it.

What didn't you like about it at first?

Oh well, it's a rude awakening to a young girl to go into a hospital, with sick people and big operations and whatnot ...

So where did you train?

At Royal North Shore Hospital, St Leonards.

And after you'd finished your training, what was the next step?

After I'd finished my 'general', I did obstetrics at Royal North Shore. And then, I did a short time, private nursing. And then, I went to the country and ran a small private hospital in the Parkes area, in the country. And then ... for about eighteen months. And

then, I went to England with a friend and we nursed ... we went for three months holiday and we liked it so much at the end of three months and there was so much to see, we decided to stay longer – we would work. So we joined a nurses club and we had some wonderful and interesting cases. And then in between cases, we were able to go to Switzerland and to Paris and whatnot, for a week or ten days at a time. We did that for about two years.

How wonderful! So, how old were you when you gave that up and came back to Australia?

Well ... it's so long ago, I would say I was about thirty, when I came home.

Before we go on to your war-time experiences, a couple more background things, what class did you consider yourself?

What do you mean?

Did you think of yourself as coming from a working class background ... middle-class ...?

I wasn't conscious of such a thing. Nursing was a profession, so we didn't consider anything like that.

Fair enough! And what religion were you, when you ... say when you ...

Presbyterian.

And ... was religion important to you?

Very important. We were brought up in a strict home and always went to church on Sunday and we were taught all the ... how to live and what was important and the Ten Commandments and all the rest of it, and our relationship with other people and that was drummed into us very early in the piece.

Did anything you see during the war ... any experiences you had there, change your religious practices or the way you believed?

No it didn't. But I doubted ... used to doubt at times, when I saw wonderful young men killed and badly wounded, why this should be so? ... I did.

But you kept your faith throughout?

Yes.

(5.00) What about politics, was that an important part of your life?

Politics as far as we were concerned, honestly, didn't exist because we worked a twelve hour day and worked solidly, the whole twelve hours and got one day a week off and very low pay and you saw ... after a while you become dedicated in a way to nursing and looking after sick people, but politics never entered our heads.

Was those conditions ... were they the case before you enlisted as well as during the army – the six hours a day – twelve hours a day ... six days a week – twelve hours a day?

Oh yes, yes and right through 'till after the war.

Yes, that's an interesting change, whether the war made a difference.

Oh yes, mm.

Now, obviously you weren't married when you entered the services because, people weren't allowed to be when they enlisted ...

You had to be between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age, the matrons were a bit older, the ones that went straight in, as matrons – they were older.

Some people must've deliberately either postponed marriage or put aside the idea ... because they had decided to enlist. That wouldn't have applied in your case?

Well, when we were in England during the two years – '37 to '39 there was the threat of war in '38 – 'the September crisis', where we thought any minute there would be war and as soon as I got back home in '39 my friend and I put our names down on the reserve – for the army as nurses, should war break out – that's how close it seemed to be.

And did you go in as part of the reserve, did you do some training?

Yes ...

Can you tell me a bit about that?

Oh no ... Oh no no ... no, we were just called up. After I got back I had a months holiday at home, then I went to St Lukes Hospital for a few months and I was called up from there, in May 1940.

I'll ask you in a moment just why you decided to enlist. But were there any military connections in your background? Had any members of the family served in the forces before?

No, no.

Right! Well tell me a little bit about enlistment, perhaps starting with the actual declaration of war – you were back in Australia at the time. I'm sure you can remember Mr Menzies' declaration of war ...

Yes, Mr ... I was a St Lukes Hospital and we heard Mr Chamberlain say, "We are at war with Germany" ... I remember very distinctly.

And what was you reaction?

Just what we were expecting to happen, because it was ... after '38 in England, there was a very grave threat of war there and half the British cabinet had resigned in protest against the appeasement policy. Because Mr. Anthony Eden was the foreign ambassador and he came back to London reporting what the Germans were doing and no one would take much notice. And I think, about five of the head people in the cabinet resigned in protest, along with Anthony Eden. And then I think, I don't remember very much, but I remember Mr Chamberlain flying to Munich to appease Hitler and Hitler kept him waiting six hours and he arrived back at the end of this trip and appeared on the balcony of Buckingham Place one night and there were ninety thousand down there – he waved the piece of paper `Peace in our Time' and the very next day almost, they were tearing the big trees down in Hyde Park making air-raid shelters, because they had nothing ... they had nothing in that line at all, only the underground railways.

So were you glad when the declaration of war finally came?

No. We were all hoping it wouldn't happen, but it was on. It was so plain that it would happen with what Hitler had been doing.

So you voluntarily put your name down as part of the reserves, why did you do that?

Well I thought ... I was always interested in Florence Nightingale, and being a nurse I felt it was my duty.

(10.00) So how long before the outbreak of war had you put your name down?

I'm not quite certain but I would say, about ... I can't remember really, I really can't.

That's alright. And you enlisted or put your name down, with a friend did you say?

Yes.

Did you then stick with the friend ... ?

No, she was Matron of St Lukes and they asked her not to go to the war, that she was in an essential position, running a hospital, so she didn't go and I went off on the hospital ship.

Was there any pressure put on you not to go because you were an essential service?

No ... no.

What about your family, were they in favour of your decision to do that?

I think they got used to me doing what I wanted to do ...

Did you think at that stage about what place the war might play in your nursing career, whether it would be ...

Yes, we thought it would be in the Middle East ... never thinking Singapore would fall.

> Hmm ... did you think in terms of your own career, whether it would be an advancement for you?

No, I didn't think about that.

> When you filled out your papers, did you tell any lies about your age, occupation, religion or fitness?

Oh, for heavens sake! They haven't got much to do at Canberra or wherever this comes from.

> No, I think that that's not really for us. I think that that's very much for people who put their age up or ... something like that.

I think that's ridiculous, I really do.

> What sort of service training were you given? And I mean, training to make the transition between nursing and the army?

None whatever, except we were taught to march.

> That's the sort of thing I was wondering about, really, it was just that? Was there ...

No, we just went ... we had our four years general training plus our experience after our training and no ... we just looked after the sick ones in hospital, the same as you would in a private hospital.

> Do you think that most of the nurses that went in at the same time as you, were of similar levels of experience – similar age, similar background?

Well some were younger, some were twenty-five and just managed to get in, others were as you'd know, between twenty-five and thirty-five, they were various ages.

> Tell me a little bit about what happened to you after you'd been called up, your first experiences before you became matron of the 2/9th ... where you were sent and so on.

I started ... when I was called up, I was sent out as a staff nurse to Ingleburn. I was only there a fortnight, when I was promoted to sister and sent into the show ground in charge of that camp hospital – two hundred beds.

> What did they do with you at Ingleburn? Did they just assess you or ... what was the purpose of that?

Well, they had a camp hospital there and you were just on the staff looking after ... doing your shift like everybody else.

And then, how long were you at the show ground hospital?

Oh, when did I go in? ... March ... May ... June ... July, I think ... I really can't remember but, not all that long because I went on the *Manunda* whenever the *Manunda* made its maiden voyage to Darwin and New Guinea. I went on that trip, then we came back, we sat at the wharf at Darling Harbour because the engineers were on strike for eight weeks. Then, they went back to work and we set sail for the Middle East and brought a load of sick soldiers back from Egypt. And then, I was promoted to Matron of the 2/9th. We got back just before Christmas on that second trip of the *Manunda*.

I don't know anything about that *Manunda* trip. Tell me a little bit about what the purpose of that was and what your role was there?

I was Senior Sister on the ship – next to the Matron. I don't know how many sisters now, I think, about sixteen or eighteen perhaps – two physios but it was a floating hospital, that's all. And we picked sick men up wherever they were due ... classified to be returned to Australia because of medical ill health.

So that brought you back to Australia after that. Tell me, how you came to be appointed matron of the 2/9th?

Well, I don't know. The phone rang one morning and I was asked to go to the barracks at Paddington – Victoria Barracks and I thought I was going to be scolded for something ... Anyhow, Miss Keerie, our Principal Matron said, 'I want you to be Matron of the 2/9th' ... I always said, 'I don't want to be Miss Keerie, I'd rather be a theatre sister'. So then, she promptly said, 'You're not here to tell me what you're going to do, you are here to do as you are told!' So ... she said, 'Now, go to David Jones and get your uniforms made'. So I did as I was told, again ...

(15.00) 'Cause in those days, you got your uniforms made and then what ...

We had to pay for them.

... and then, got reimbursed?

No ... I think we did get a little bit, but not enough to cover, we had to buy a cabin trunk, we had to buy ... we weren't given very much at all. I think we got a small allowance ... I've just forgotten.

Were you very excited ... I mean, you say you were reluctant ...

No ...

... were you excited?

No ... no ... no I wasn't. I'd been on the *Manunda* and I was going off again to the ... we thought we were going to the Middle East which we did.

Had you looked forward to the overseas component of service?

No, I felt that it was a duty. We were at war and we were trained nurses and if we could be of any use that was our role.

> When you finally made it to the Middle East, how much of the 'touristy things' did you do? Did you have a chance to do any of those things?

On a day off, we only got one day off and then when things settled down ... if we were busy and things settled down a bit, we might get a week to go to Jerusalem or somewhere because we were out in the desert out of Alexandria.

> Did you find it interesting, that opportunity to see part of the world you hadn't seen before?

Oh yes, that was very interesting, full of Biblical history, yes, most interesting.

> So what sort of things did you try and do with your days off?

Well, a day off, you couldn't go very far. We'd go into Alexandria and the first thing we would do is have a hot bath, because we were out in the desert, where it blew sand – not dust, but sand all day long. With those winds, they'd whip the sand up and at night you couldn't comb your hair, and we only had little small enamel vessels – bowls to wash in, there were no showers and so we went to town and had our hair done and had a bath and a meal and that was wonderful! And we might ... we probably did a little bit of shopping but we didn't have ... we lived in our uniforms, so we didn't need very much. But we looked around Alexandria, it was a very old city and interesting. We liked to go to the Cecil Hotel and have a good meal ... (chuckle).

> As nurses, did you mix with the army troops, with the AIF troops?

We had officers' ranks so therefore, we weren't allowed to ... On your day off, if you had anyone – private, that was alright, you could, yes. But on duty and that, you were treated as an officer.

> As a nurse, you were automatically an officer ...

That's right!

> ... Were there privileges that you were grateful for having, as an officer, that you would've missed out on otherwise?

Well, we always ... we had the rank of an officer, but we were an auxiliary service. Somehow we never forgot that we were nurses, that was foremost.

> So that's always the way you thought of yourself first?

Yes, as nurses.

> Now, on your first trip to the Middle East, were you the matron of the hospital then?

Yes. I was the original matron of the 2/9th.

Right! And what were the main administrative duties, that you had to carry out?

Well, it was like an ordinary hospital, running mainly the staff, placing them, seeing that everyone was in their right place, appointing your theatre sisters and senior sisters – the ones in charge of a ward, and then there would be two or three others with them, but there was one in charge always. They were like 'captains', the others were more 'lieutenants'.

Did you have to personally sort out the nurses' personal problems?

Yes ... yes.

We might, I think, probably deal with that a bit more in the second section ...

They were all well disciplined and well trained and most of them were experienced women, and there weren't all that many problems ... no, and if there were problems, they were of a private nature ... So I wouldn't discuss anything that ... there was very little ... anything in that line.

When you meet people who were nurses either in your hospital or in other areas, when you meet them now, are you ever aware of the differences between people of different rank in the services?

They were all officers, but some were lieutenants, others were captains.

(20.00) Yes. Right! Yeah..

The senior sisters were captains.

Right! And the sisters were lieutenants?

Yes.

Did you call them 'lefftenants' or lieutenants?

No, we didn't use army rank. We went away, and it wasn't until a couple of years later I think, that we got the pips. The matron wore brown epaulettes, she had her ... The Matron Chief, would have a crown and a pip I think ... she was a Lieutenant ... she was a full colonel. Lieutenant colonels had a crown and a pip ... do you know I've forgotten? ... I have, it's so long ago ... And that came in later but when we went away, matrons had brown cuffs, all the sisters had white cuffs.

So, that's how you picked them?

Yes. And the seniors, I think this is right, the senior – like the captains, they had two stripes around their arms ... or three and the lieutenants had two, I think that was right? And then, they wiped all that and gave us the army – the same as the men, the pips and the little bands across the epaulettes. Some had one, some had two and some had three but that went after two or three years. We went away as an auxiliary to the army, although we had officer status.

So how did you feel when you were officially made part of ... not part of the army but, when you were given the officer ranking, because I believe as you said, that came in a little bit later, did you have any strong feelings about whether that was a good thing or not?

No, I thought, 'Well it was time we did', somehow ... you know? I felt it was a good thing.

A recognition of your place perhaps?

No, I don't think there was any need for that. We weren't any different after we got the pips, to what we were before, when we had the stripes ... it didn't make any difference. Bring us into line more with army, and after all, we were in, more or less, in the army, although we were an auxiliary.

The next questions are about service vocabulary, and I don't know if that has any relevance to the nursing services at all. I mean, some areas of the services like, the RAF are famous for their 'RAF slang' ... I guess later the 'RAAF slang'. Was there any particular slang or particular language that was different in ... either in the nursing service altogether, that you would know if you heard another nurse mention it ... that they were a nurse rather than anything else?

No ... no..

You didn't have any slang terms for the different ranks or anything ...

No ...

... you were the matron, so you wouldn't've ...

No ... no, I wasn't aware of anything like that.

And just also on the question of language, as nurses, you would've heard a lot of the things that the men had to say. Did the men use bad language and if so ... in front of you and if so, did you find it offensive?

No, the men had great respect for the army Sisters, no, I never once struck that, except, a man coming out of an anaesthetic ... a badly wounded man would sometimes coming out, you'd hear him swear, but he wasn't conscious of what he was saying.

So, you didn't find that offensive?

No, no no, we just walked away or ... no.

What were the most popular songs? Do you remember some songs of World War II that you associate particularly with it?

'There'll be blue birds over Dover ... over the white cliffs of Dover' ... I can't remember it ... 'and little Johnny will go to bed in his own little' ... ... that was after the bombing of the Battle of Britain, that song came out and everyone used to sing that ... And 'She'll Be

Coming Around the Mountain' and the old war songs ... 'Roll out the Barrel' and all those old army songs ...

Some of those were left over from the first world war, weren't they?

Well, I don't know about that or not, but I thought 'Roll Out the Barrel' was second world war but it many have been First World War ... but our boys sang it a lot .

Would you join in? Would there be occasions ...

Oh yes, we'd have concerts and everyone would sing and they ... We had to wear long grey gaiters when we went to New Guinea and when ... 'She'll be coming around the mountain, when she comes, she'll be wearing long grey gaiters when she comes ... ' ... that was a 'take off' at us, with these long grey gaiters on account of mosquitos.

(25.00) Can you remember any other 'take-offs' – any other songs that came out of the New Guinea period or the Middle East Period for that matter?

My goodness! It's so long ago, I can't remember my own name now ... ... it's a long long time ago.

Leave and leisure – did you get home leave after you'd been overseas?

We got ... We went to the Middle East in February '41 and Mr Curtin recalled everybody in March '42 – Mr. Curtin was our Prime Minister – because there'd been sixty two raids over Darwin and Darwin was full of sunken ships, but the people didn't know. Singapore had fallen and this armada was coming down to invade Australia. And the turning in the meantime ... Japan had made the mistake, as it turned out, of bombing Pearl Harbour and crippling some of the American fleet in Pearl Harbour and that brought America into the war. Well, indirectly, in my opinion, America saved Australia because we had nothing, very little ... we had very little, we had no bulldozers, we had nothing to clear the jungle and put down airstrips, the Americans ... We all came back in '42 and we all thought we were going to Burma only to find, when the advance party landed there, that the Japs had been there five weeks before and had ... So there was nowhere for them to come but into Adelaide and then from Adelaide, the Americans went up to New Guinea, and they flew their bulldozers, that cleared the jungle, these mighty machines, we had no equipment like that. We had very little ... few planes and it was the American equipment ... They had seven miles of airstrip in no time in New Guinea and then they flew their plans in and their camouflage would come over, so that they couldn't be seen from the air, make it look like jungle and all the planes went in and they were ... along with our men, pushed the Japs back. They were only thirty miles from Port Moresby.

So there was never any, in your experience, there was never any conflict between the Australians and the Americans in the New Guinea situation?

Not that I know of ... of course I wouldn't know, but you will always get a bit of conflict wherever there are groups of people, no matter what it is. You get it in church groups, you get it in sporting bodies ... no two people think alike and the same in anything.

> But in your assessment, the Americans were very ... extremely important there ...

Oh yes ... yes..Oh ... And then there was the Battle of the Coral Sea – you look at the map and the Coral Sea is just off The Cape of York and that was the turning point of the war, and that was where the Japs were beaten.

> And that, would in fact have occurred ...

That was in '42 I think ...

> ... Yes, before you went back to Moresby and established the 2/9th there.

Yes ... yes, we hadn't gone there yet. We all came back, March ... 20th March '42. We set up a hospital, part of the infectious block out of Adelaide. They took that for the army and we took all the sick off the American ships and our own ships, because all the ships coming back were going there. There was nowhere else Burma had gone. And then, our men went to Port Moresby – the 2/9th – the medical officers and the men, I think, in August '42 but they wouldn't let us go because the Japs weren't far from Port Moresby.

> So you were still kept pretty busy in Adelaide?

We were in Adelaide. By this time, we had ... that was August, September ... October, by this time the hospital had closed, I think, there in Adelaide. There may have been a skeleton hospital, I'm not sure and we were sent to Melbourne, to No. 4 American Hospital which is now the Royal Melbourne, and we stayed there for quite a while and then on the 20th or the 28th perhaps, it was, of October, we went up on the hospital ship to rejoin our unit.

> What was it like being in the American hospital, in Melbourne? Did you find things done differently from ... ?

Yes, the meals were different. We had pancakes and maple syrup for breakfast and all those ... the food was different. But they were very ... they had a lot more freedom, they were a lot more lax than our ...

END TAPE 1 – SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1 – SIDE B

Nell Williamson

You were saying that, they had a different way of discipline, did you find ...

They had more freedom.

Did that create any problems with the nurses who were under your charge?

Oh! no no, we were good friends with ... no, you 'live and let live' – you don't interfere.

And your girls didn't say 'Let us out, we should have more of those options'?

They had all the freedom they wanted, they were quite happy, our girls.

Did you ever find any differences between army discipline and nursing discipline or did the two sit ...

No, they fitted very well. You've got a person who's been trained four years – five years altogether, with your obstetric and all, you're still under the strict supervision, you don't lose that in a hurry. You just take it with you and it does you good to be disciplined. Now that's an asset, in my opinion.

I can imagine, yes.

See, today – that's what's wrong ... is that thing on?

Yes. it is on. Did you have an opportunity for sport while you were in the services?

Well ... not that I can recall – a day off if a person ... in Melbourne perhaps when we were staging there the few weeks before we went to New Guinea – perhaps anyone who had friends with a tennis court, they might've gone and had a game, I don't really know about that.

What about reading – did you have a chance to read at all, and if so, what sort of things?

Oh yes. Oh well, just whatever you wanted to, same as you would in a hospital.

Were there ... there were army papers and magazines, did you see those as part of the nursing service?

Well, the Red Cross used to pass on books and magazines, not a lot, we'd read them and pass them on to patients, but there wasn't a lot of ... Once we got to New Guinea, the girls worked terribly hard.

There's a mention here of an army paper around in New Guinea that was called 'Guinea Gold'..

That's Right!

Do you remember that? What was that like?

That was a good little paper, kept us up-to-date with what was happening.

What sort of things might it have in it?

Well, bits of news, of battles and one thing and another, but it was all censored, only told you what they wanted you ... you know, just the same as back here in Australia, I would think. There wasn't a lot ... they only told you what they thought you should know and not have everyone panic ...

Was that a frustrating experience, only being told 'so much'?

Well, that's as it was ... I think. We didn't have any time, the girls worked from six in the morning very often, when we were busy, 'till ten at night and then they had their chores to do and then up again early in the morning and no days off ... Oh, they worked ... they were tremendous, those girls, they really were.

And as head of them, I imagine you must've worked every bit as long hours ... longer?

No, not as long but, we all worked hard.

In the odd moments of leisure, did you see any of the concert parties that may have visited New Guinea?

Yes ... yes, Edmund Stiles and Grace Wilson came up once and Kitty Bluett and I can't remember who else, in the cast, but they put on some wonderful concerts.

What sort of thing would you get in a concert? Comedy? Singing?

Yes comedy, and quite a lot of good singing and acting ... Oh no, and the troops would come from miles around and everyone would sit out and sometimes it'd be pouring rain – tropical downpours and everyone had a ground sheet on a ... they brought their own boxes and sat on a box, with the ground sheet over their heads and the stage was covered in – and the actors weren't wet ... or the actresses.

How often would something like that come around?

Not very often, two or three times whilst we were in New Guinea. And then there was their local entertainment. I've forgotten what their unit was called ... Entertainment Unit ... or? I just can't remember, but they'd come around and entertain sometimes ... They were an army ... connected with the army.

(5.00) So would members of your ... would your nurses ever put on a concert or anything like that, informally?

I think they joined in ... a 2/9th concert once and they made costumes out of the hospital nets and the hospital material that they used in the theatre and whatnot. They dyed it with the dyes they used to treat the skin conditions with – lovely purples and greens and yellows and they got all sorts of wonderful shades and they made ... They had a male ballet once and the girls helped the sergeants and the privates make their ballet skirts and they had them in colours and all sorts ... and they were doing the ballet in their army boots ... ... and hairy legs ... Oh they were so funny, they were really good. We had some very good comedians in our unit.

Is there any other ... of that sort of entertainment, that you can remember?

I can't at the moment, but the sergeants used to put on concerts and they were really good. They had some good artists.

Wonderful! Just a question about pay – would pay in the services have been similar to what you were receiving in civilian life as a nurse or as a matron?

No, I don't think it was as good ... we didn't get much in civilian life because at the end of four years – hard work, doing my 'general' I got, three pounds nineteen and six or was it ... three pound? ... It was under four dollars it was pounds then, under the two dollars a week as a trained nurse.

That was what was left over after ... they presumably gave you board?

Oh no, no, no, that was our pay. I don't know what they ... no, that was our salary when we moved in, ten and sixpence halfpenny a week, well that would be a dollar..

That would've just been over a dollar ...

Ten and sixpence halfpenny, that would be what? A dollar – a dollar a week, I don't think that's quite right. Oh yes, it would be, that'd be right, fifteen shillings our second year ... Yes, fifteen shillings and a pound our third year, that would be ... a pound our third year and twenty five shillings the fourth year and then, I went back on the staff as a sister, a junior sister and I got £3.17.6d yes, £3.17.6d, yes.

So when you joined the army the pay would've been better than you'd been receiving?

I ... we only got a sergeant ... I only got a sergeant's pay and I was the matron – I was a major, equivalent.

Before the days of equal pay ...

Oh! They exploited – they always exploited nurses.

So would ... well, there would've been no reason then, for any nurses from civilian life, to join the army in order to get better pay?

Oh dear! No. Now where's Joan Crouch's book?

Wounds and illnesses – did you ever have the chance to get ill yourself?

No, I've never been sick in my life, touch wood!

That's pretty straight forward.

Yes ... We had a good record in New Guinea. It was a malarial area and not one sister got malaria. Of course, we were very careful. We all had to be in long trousers and gaiters by six o'clock at night 'till six in the morning and all had to sleep under nets, no matter how hot it was.

How much responsibility would you have taken for the health of your nurses?

I had to remind ... they were very good, they were told and I don't think any of them wanted to get malaria so they abided by the instructions – they all must be covered and ... it was the most uncomfortable dress because of the humidity and the heat, getting into these long tight ... long hard trousers and boiler suits, they were, at six o'clock at night and a hat on your head going on evening duty, it wasn't ... and long sleeves and it was thick drill – material. It wasn't an easy – and boots and gaiters ...

(10.00) Were there other illnesses which the nurses came down with at all?

I think an odd one might've got dysentery, you know, just for a short time, through something they ate or the water perhaps, but there was no ... not a lot of illnesses.

Back to the Americans, did you have ... well, you nursed with them at the American hospital – in New Guinea, did you have much everyday contact with the Americans?

There was an American hospital with a wire fence between their hospital and our hospital and we were very good friends with the senior medical sisters and matron. They used to come and have afternoon tea and I went there, and along with a couple of sisters for afternoon tea a couple of times and no doubt, individual sisters in my unit went there. I don't know about that, but they all got on as well as they could, I think.

Did you compare experiences with them, while ... over afternoon tea?

Oh yes, they had a wonderful canteen and they wore nylon stockings and we had to wear Lisle which we didn't like and they had Elizabeth Arden products and lovely face creams and we had to provide our own, whatever we brought from home in the bottom of our cabin trunk, and what we could buy if we went to Alexandria.

Why do you think they were so much better looked after than ...

I don't know but the Americans look after their women folk very well.

Did you make any friendships with any Americans, that you, say, kept up later?

No, no we went to their messes and and we had you know, had lots of nice evenings at the various places near where ... if they were near us, they would always invite so many of us, along with the doctors, to visit them either for an outing or for lunch. Some of the girls might've made friends, I don't know about that. But I think in Alexandria, some of them used to go on the harbour with some Americans, you know, around ... seeing the various parts of Alexandria, so I heard but ... how? ... I don't know really, but I have heard they did.

Right! The end of the war, it's alright, we are going to get back to New Guinea later, but how ... when did you first realize that the war was likely to be over soon?

Well, they were talking in 1944 towards the end of the New Guinea Campaign, that the end of the war was in sight because they'd pushed the Japs back over the Owen Stanleys and they had pushed them back in various places and the writing was on the wall.

So where were you when you heard that the war was over?

I left New Guinea ... in '43 I had to leave the 2/9th. I was appointed Principal Matron of the whole of New Guinea. Well, there were many big general hospitals there, by this time and when you get to a certain number of general hospitals in an area – in a state, you must have a Principal Matron, so I was appointed Principal Matron of New Guinea and I had to go and live at the 2/5th a few miles down at Bootless Bay and then it was my job to fly over the Owen Stanleys, once a month, around the various hospitals and see how things were and report back to the Matron-in-Chief in Melbourne, how everybody was going and what was doing and ... A job I hated ...

Why did you hate it?

Well, I didn't ... I liked my own unit and I didn't want to leave perhaps, and I didn't want to be inspecting other people's hospitals ...

How much difference was there in the hospitals?

Not a great deal.

(15.00) Did you see particular difficulties in ... What, there was one in Lae, one over ...

Dobadura the 2/11th ... there was CCSs [Casualty Clearing Stations] strewn around. There was one at Finschhafen, the 2/1st was at..down near the 5th at Bootless Bay, 2/5th ... 2/1st ... 2/11th over the Owens at Dobodura and the 2/7th at Lae and then, as battles don't last all that long, they'll either win or lose – one side or the other, and then, they drive them back – the enemy back or vice versa and then, they re-group – they have a while to re-group and so ... it looked as if in June '44 the brigadier at New Guinea Force Headquarters – he said that the war was pretty well won and one of the girls wanted to get married and he said, 'Let her go, they must not be stopped, the war end is in sight. She must be allowed to marry if she wants to' so that was that! And then, we all came back to New South Wales when the New Guinea Campaign was over and I think I was about the

last one. Another hospital came in just to sort of ... you know, there was still troops in the area – so there'd be some hospital there should they need attention. But we had been there over three or four years, we'd been there ... I went there in '42 so we'd been there ... I'd left in June '44 and that was the end of the New Guinea Campaign and we came ... The 9th came back, some went to Tamworth, others had leave and they re-grouped and then they went to New Britain to Morotai but I left to be married at the end of June '44. So, that was the end of my army career.

Can I ask? Was this someone you met in the army?

No, somebody I knew before.

So had you put off getting married because of the war?

No, no, no ...

But you decided that it was then an appropriate time to get married?

Yes, that's right.

Right! So you were back in Australia when finally we ...

War was declared ... [sic]

And what was your reaction?

Oh very thankful, that it was all over,I knew ... we could all see it was. The Japs were being pushed back and the Americans had won the Coral Sea Battle which was the turning point, otherwise they'd have been in Australia. We'd all be down in the rice fields and up the rivers growing rice, it only for the Americans, I don't care what anyone says ...

Did you feel any change in your attitude towards the Japanese after the war was over?

After it was over, it took a while to get over how badly they treated our soldiers and how cruel ... (gong)

So do you feel any different today, about the Japanese?

I do not like them buying up our country. They've recently bought a cane farm according to *The Herald*, up north of Cairns and they paid twenty times its price – normal price, and they're going to put a hundred and twenty five houses on this, and it will be right out of the price of any young Australian couple, 'cause the Japanese economy is booming and they're buying our lovely homes all around the harbour. I do not think this is right. Why not let them lease it if they ... or pay a good rent for it or ... but why? After fighting, all those years to defend the country, why do we let them in now, to buy it? ... to buy our country.

Would you feel the same way about the Germans? ... the Italians?

No, because I knew a few men – reliable men who have told me they were well treated as prisoners of war in Germany, but the Japs were brutal, 'cause I had a young brother, and he said, 'They were very very cruel, very cruel indeed' and they starved them, sent them on marches and he said ... he won't talk much about it, but he said, 'They were indescribably cruel to the prisoners of war'. Belted them with iron bars, backs of shovels and all sorts of things in the mind and I don't see why, they should come in now and they want to buy all our golf courses up, and the Australians will be caddies and ground staff and it'll be the Japanese playing ... I can't understand, why we allowed this. 'Cause they used to tell the prisoners of war, 'Even if it takes a hundred years, we will conquer you' and they used to tell the prisoners of war nurses, this.

(20.00) For the record, you didn't come across any Japanese in your hospitals, you didn't nurse any?

We had a compound with some captured Japanese but our orderlies looked after them. We had nothing to do with them.

Just getting back to the end of the war, do you remember being demobbed? ... Did we call it ... did you call it 'being demobbed'?

Yes ... I just wrote to the Matron-in-Chief and told her that I was going to be married and in those days, you automatically went out of the army.

Were you pleased to leave?

I was sorry in one way, but I felt I was doing the right thing.

No regrets?

No regrets.

When you actually got out, what clothes and possessions and so on did you take with you?

I only had a few army dresses for a while because we were given so many coupons – not many and it didn't go very far. My sister gave me some to get a dress and somebody else gave me some to get a few things and it took a while.

What did you find to get married in?

Well I bought a nice suit in Melbourne ... lovely blue ... I was very proud of myself in that, but my husband didn't want me to wear it because he wanted me married in my uniform. He always thought the nurses were marvellous.

And did you marry in your uniform?

Yes, I did.

So, did you go back to nursing then, after your marriage?

No, no, I lived out on a sheep station.

That's a whole other story, isn't it? How long had you been out of Australian civilian life then?

From when I ... from March 1940 'till June ... I suppose it'd be July – I was married on the 17th of July.

'44?

Yes. And I was still in the army then, but I knew my discharge was coming through.

Right! So ...

Over four years.

Did you notice changes that had occurred in Australia when you came back to live here full-time?

Yes ... I sometimes felt that some people didn't even know there was a war on.

What do you mean by that?

Well, they weren't a bit concerned, somehow. We felt that on leave once we were ... some of our medical officers said the same thing. They couldn't get back quickly enough because they got the impression that a lot of people didn't even know there was a war on.

They weren't prepared to make sacrifices that you thought were necessary?

I really don't know but we got the impression that some people – not everybody, 'cause a lot of people had sons up there and brothers and ... but there were a lot of people that we felt didn't even know there was a war on.

So was it at all hard to fit back into life in 1944 back in Australia?

Well, not really. No ... no, I ... no, I soon got back into my new life and I knew that the others would all be home – my brother would be home soon, because the Japs were being pushed back everywhere. And then of course, there was the signing of, you know, of peace by the Japanese. I'm not sure where that took place – to General MacArthur on a ship wasn't it? ... I think, I think so.

Yes, I think it was on a ship. How much contact had you been able to have then, with your brother while he'd been away serving and you'd been nursing?

None at all ... none at all.

Did you get news anywhere?

No, ... no.

That must've been pretty distressing?

It was. We didn't know whether Ron was dead or alive. And all the boat loads of poor wounded men were coming back and some with teeth out and some with, you know, eyes all bandaged up and some on ... legs off and it was terrible to see them. And there was no word at all of my brother. And then, the *Formidable* came in one of the last battleships bringing troops back and we were due to fly home this day. We were at the old Hotel Carlton and my husband said, 'What are your brother's initials?' And I said, 'RM Marshall' and he said, 'He's coming home on the *Formidable*' and he rang up and cancelled our plane seats home and we went out to Ingleburn to meet Ron. I got an awful shock when I saw him.

(25.00) Because he was so emaciated?

Yes ... he sort of had an ethereal look about his eyes ... I don't know, I just can't describe ... he'd been a prisoner for so long and shut up in a compound ...

How long had he been a prisoner?

Three and half years, I think.

Was he pleased to see you?

Oh, he was pleased to see us all ... Oh yes!

Extraordinary! So now, how much contact do you feel you have with those days in the army? Do you, for example, go to reunions or do you march on ANZAC Day?

Yes, we go ... Oh yes, we all meet on ANZAC Day and then we go to our usual meetings ...

Which meetings are they?

Well, one is the RAANC – that incorporates the present army nurses in the system now, that are full-time – peace time nurses, and then there's the Sub-Branch RSL – that's the ex-army ... I don't go very often to that but, we have you know, our unit was drawn from every state in Australia and Tasmania and we had a big reunion and they came from all the states, some years ago and that was a wonderful reunion and that was the cause of Joan's book being written. They all said, we should get together and write up out history and Joan said, she would do it and that's how that came about and then it started the 2/5th off – they wrote one not long ago and the 2/1st are getting one out now and then, some of the POW – and Dr Goodman, he put a comprehensive one out. But he was an orderly with the 2/4th/88 and then, I don't know what, he went to the university and I don't know what degree he got and then he ... he's classified as ... I think, as a historian, so he wrote about our war nurses. The New Guinea Campaign we haven't done – that's the tough one.

No, we're going to come to that, I assure you – yes it is going to be 'the tough one' and in some ways, this may be a tougher one. Did you join the RSL? ... Yes, because you're a member of the Sisters' Sub-Branch, is that right?

Yes.

Do you think that the RSL has been effective as an organization looking after the welfare of people involved in the war?

They've done their best ... they've done their best, I think.

What about they way they've got involved in wider policies about defence and Aborigines and immigration – do you feel they should be talking out on those things?

Well, I don't think I'm in a position to say 'yes or no' to that because the war has been over a long time. Their job is mainly to look after veterans.

And you think they've done a good job with that?

I think they have ... because this government is not easy, I don't think – they're not easy on old people or veterans.

Your closest friends – have they been through similar experiences – were they involved in the war as well?

Only the army sisters.

So, you would still number army sisters as amongst your close friends?

Yes. And some of my close friends, they've done good work back here, whilst the soldiers ... they've done wonderful work, you know, in the Red Cross and ...

Did you ever go back to anything associated with nursing?

No ... no.

Right! I'm sure you didn't suffer any long term illness or disability as a result of the war?

No, none at all.

You've mentioned to me a couple of times that it all seems so long away. Are the war years important in your memories, would you say?

Yes, very ... very.

So do you often think about them?

Oh yes, I do, a lot. I always read everything on the war.

And what sort of things do you find yourself recalling?

Just the ordinary run of the mill things that happened in the hospital. And all the various people, a lot of our medical officers, they were wonderful men. They're nearly all gone, you know, most of them have died.

Are they happy memories, mostly?

Oh very ... very happy memories.

Have other people over the years been interested in your war-time experiences?

Very few ... very few.

Is that a disappointment?

I don't want them to be, if they don't want to be. But, no ...

END TAPE 1 – SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2 – SIDE A

Tape Identification: Side 1, Tape 2 of an interview for the War Memorial, World War II, Sound Archive. The interviewee is Mrs Nell Williamson, nee Marshall, first Matron of the 2/9th AGH in New Guinea and previously the Middle East and later, Principal Matron for New Guinea, interviewed by Angie Michaelis at Mrs Williamson's home at Turramurra on the 20th February 1989. End of Identification.

So just before we go on to your specific experience as a nurse in New Guinea. Over all, what do you think the most important effects of the war were, on you?

The realization of the tragedy of war – with such losses of our fine young men.

You must've seen a lot of men dying in your hospital?

Certainly did!

And a nurses detachment hasn't taken away your feelings about that?

Oh no ...

Now you mentioned earlier that when you joined the AANS, you came in as a staff nurse – it seems that your previous experience wasn't relevant at that point, to what rank you were given. Do you think that that mattered in the long run?

No, I think ... I think that's what we were all expected to do – to enter the army as staff nurses and then they sorted the sisters out and so on from there on – according to what you had done previously to entering the army – according to your experience.

And in your case obviously, your civilian training counted for a reasonable amount?

Yes ... yes it did. Especially having two years in London, at the various London hospitals – that helped.

With the granting of commissioned rank in the army in 1943, seniority in the AANS dated from the time of commission, whereas in the other women's services, it dated from the time of enlistment. Did you feel that that mattered at all? ... Were you discriminated against ...?

No ... no.

Well, perhaps a more interesting question is on, uniforms? You bought your own uniforms – was it unfair to ask the sisters to buy a whole outfit and maybe find that not all the items were used?

I think there was a small allowance to cover everything, that's the buying of a cabin trunk, a bed – camp stretcher, our uniforms and our outdoor uniforms – we had a summer and a winter one, but I'm sure the allowance did not cover the cost of everything.

One nurse has written that some of the uniform items could've been left out, and she thought it was a bit unfair that they had to buy them, because they hardly used them. Do you think that that was unfair?

To tell you the truth, it was so long ago, I can hardly remember what we ... had ... that is true.

Do you think there might've been some uniform items, which were just badly designed for the conditions, either for Middle East or New Guinea?

Yes, we were sent away, with large organza veils and starched Peter-Pan collars and stiff cuffs on our long sleeved dresses and of course, in the heat with the humidity was so heavy in the air, that they became limp so it wasn't long 'till I told the girls to cut their veils into two triangles and wear them as little caps, like theatre caps and we dispensed with the cuffs and collars. Until the laundry improved because it was run by natives – it was an army laundry but the helpers were all natives and they couldn't ... a lot of them were still in G-strings. Honestly, they were untrained and sometimes the uniforms would come back dirtier than when they went. Other times they'd stand up with so much starch in them you couldn't wear them, you had to wash them. Other times there'd be no starch. So eventually, 'the powers that be' in Melbourne designed us a safari suit in soft grey material which was a great advancement and convenience.

(5.00) So the veils and cuffs didn't some back later?

No they didn't ... no.

So, were the final results – they were more practical then a civilian uniform was?

Oh yes, yes, the safari suits were.

Did nurses find it hard not to be able to have the neat white linen they were used to, from civilian life?

Yes. For special occasions, like a Sunday afternoon – we would sometimes put afternoon tea on, and ask our medical officers and a few people from other units to afternoon tea and we all made the effort of having one veil and dressing up as we were used to with the red capes and white collars and cuffs and grey dresses ... silver buttons and we were proud of our uniform, very proud of our uniform. We were sorry that it wasn't practical up there. It was on account of the rain and the humidity – just couldn't wear them. They hung just limp – they were terrible.

> There was a move apparently, in 1942 to introduce khaki dress and some people said that it was resisted and successfully. Some people say by sentiment, and some because it was felt that the grey uniform was a relief to patients who were weary of the sight of khaki – do you agree with that?

Yes, we were very pleased to retain our grey. It was the colour right down, I think since Florence Nightingale I really don't know what she wore, but the world war one sisters wore grey and it was our colour and we wanted to stay as army sisters in grey.

> So it wasn't any more flattering or less monotonous than khaki?

No, it wasn't really, but we liked it better.

> Do you think that people deliberately wanted to maintain that difference from the other armed services?

I think some did.

> Now the changes in the summer uniform that came in, included trousers, and again, one nurse who had written about the period, says ... she complained that the khaki trousers she had, were men's style with fly fronts. She unpicked the flies and converted the trousers to a more feminine side opening style. Were you similarly embarrassed by having to wear men's trousers?

Well that was only because there was a shortage of boiler suits. We were waiting for the grey safari suits to be manufactured in Melbourne and in the meantime, being a malarial area we had to be covered, fully covered from 6.00 pm 'till 6.00 am.

> Was it effective, the new uniform – the boiler suit or the trousers and pants?

Oh yes, we wore gaiters with those the same and they tied around the ankle and they had long sleeves and in the day-time ... it became the uniform altogether, in the day-time they wore the sleeves rolled up with a grey hat.

> Was it very hot?

Oh yes ... the heat was tremendous. And after the rain, probably three inches every afternoon of torrential tropical rain, and next morning the heat coming out of the wet ground, was unbelievable. I used to do rounds around the hospital and I think it was well over a mile long, the length, because it was all undulating country – up hill and down dale

and gullies and little bridges and whatnot and the heat was ... you know, was very very bad.

Did you find it very oppressive having to wear those uniforms? And the girls, did they get very fed up with it?

We wore dresses in the day-time, our ordinary grey cotton dresses, with short sleeves because the mosquito doesn't worry people in the day-time – it didn't worry us in the day-time, and it was from 6.00 pm 'till 6.00 am we had to wear safaris. And then later, after I left, I believe, the safari jacket and the slacks were worn in the day-time with the sleeves rolled up,

(10.00) Right! Training of nurses for military service – did the nurses get any special training in treating either the sort of wounds that they were more likely to meet or the conditions?

No ... no you just went from hospital, if you were called up straight ... I went from St Lukes to Ingleburn. And we just looked after people with high temperatures and fevers and whatnot. They were just ordinary complaints – flu and similar ailments.

And the only parade ground, the only specifically service training you can remember is being taught how to march?

How to march and how to get on and off a bus ...

How do you get on and off a bus?

And then we all ... the matrons ... the Principal Matrons and some of the other heads of other services in Melbourne – we all had to go to an army school – I think that I was in 1943. I know, I flew down from New Guinea for it and we stayed at Grong Grong in Melbourne and then we each had to take a parade, on the parade ground – shout out the orders ... 'Halt!' ... 'Quick March!'..etc ...

Did you feel quite comfortable with that?

I wasn't so efficient, some seemed to like it better than me.

A lovely story I read this morning – it must've been in Joan Crouch's book about some matron or some fairly senior nurse taking their troop off telling them to 'left' when they meant 'right' and then dropping her handbag ...

And all the money fell out, that was Matron Abbot, the Principal Matron in Queensland ...

A lovely story.

And then she frowned at them for not going the opposite way ...

So, that never happened to you?

No ... no.

This is about the staffing, by the nursing service of military medical units, and I believe that the 2/9th with which you were the matron, had an enormous influx of casualties from the Kokoda Trail and ended up with two thousand patients for the staff establishment of a six hundred bed hospital ...

That's right.. we were then ... I think, by then we were a twelve hundred, I think that's right. We had gone from six hundred bed, like when we went up there first, to an eight hundred when we got more patients and then, when the Kokoda Campaign was on, we got up to over two thousand patients and we became a twelve hundred bed hospital.

Now what sort of problems did that cause for you?

Well, shortage of staff of course, but then, by that time, the 2/5th had come to Bootless Bay and they were waiting for their hospital to be built and got in readiness for them, so they were on loan to us which was a great help.

So what was the worst time for the under staffing problem?

Well, for every patient, on a bed there was one on an ambulance stretcher beneath the bed and they all had to be put under mosquito nets at 6 o'clock at night and very often after the heavy tropical rain in the afternoon – it ran off hills and flowed through the wards which were dirt floors and of course, it became – the floors became a quagmire and the girls had to wear gumboots day and night to look after the patients. And very often the sick ones would fall out of bed into the mud, and oxygen cylinders would go at an angle of forty-five degrees because they were so heavy in the earth floor – they went sideways. They were tied to beds and all sorts of things but even the beds went down on the side ... that was in the wet season. And the tents by this time began to be eaten through with mildew and they leaked and, of course, then there was always the twisting of beds here and there to miss the drops and dishes put around to catch ... so that the patients wouldn't get wet. It was pretty grim.

And was this right through or ... well you mentioned the wet season, it was dry season when you arrived ...

Yes, each year, there's a dry and a wet season and this happens each year.

And were problems also related to what was going on in the war at the time?

Well, they were extending the hospital all the time and there were such heavy casualties coming from the Kokoda Campaign – fleets of ambulances would arrive whilst the bulldozer was levelling the ground to put another ward up – sixty bed ward up and the men would be standing at one end with beds ready to go in and others putting the covers over the tents, others lacing them together to form a sixty bed ward and then that eventually became a hundred and twenty beds.

(15.00) So what had to be done to actually develop the ward from ... was it raw jungle when you moved in?

Oh yes, it was all raw jungle. And the bulldozers levelled the ground off and the engineers put the drains around. Sometimes the drains weren't deep enough to take the heavy flow of water because it was such a hilly terrain – up hill and down dale, the water would rush off the side of a hill through the wards and you just couldn't ... no one could stop it. And they worked for weeks on end in gumboots – the girls, in all that heat, those big heavy black gumboots.

So how long would it take to construct a ward from 'go to whoa'?

Well I don't know, I really don't know but ... In the meantime, the ambulances were waiting, 'till the wards were there and the beds were in and the beds made up before they could put their bodies on the bed.

Hmm, extraordinary!

And the theatres, they worked around the clock – three teams – two surgeons, two sisters and two orderlies and that often went well into the night and that happened for weeks on end. And the Blood Bank – at first, there was no blood flown in and the blood was taken form the staff and the walking wounded, but later the blood was flown up from the Blood Bank in Sydney.

Do you remember particular outbreaks of disease that happened at particular times or was it constant?

Well, they'd come in with dysentery from various places and scrub typhus – scrub typhus was a dreadful disease and there was no serum for it, there was no treatment but plain nursing – fluids, copious fluids and sponging and that sort of thing.

Were there difficulties in providing those copious fluids?

Oh, yes at first, but later on the Red Cross, they were very good and they brought us all sorts of things. And at first, there were no refrigerators. I think the Blood Bank had a refrigerator and probably the theatre to keep the serums and whatnot. But later on we got kerosine refrigerators, which was a great help.

Did you have enough to go around?

Not ... we started off with black boxes – hot boxes, with blocks of ice.

How did they make the ice?

Well, it was untreated, just untreated water ... I really ... I don't know, there must've been ... I hadn't thought of that, they must've had some means of generating ice, I don't know.

One more technical question neither of us can answer. There's a mention here, of nurses in one of the CCSs working twelve hour shifts – 8.30 to 8.30 – was that average, or was that exceptional, in the New Guinea Campaigns?

Much the same, I think more 7.30 'til 7.30.

But still, twelve hours?

Yes, and some a lot longer. Some would go back after their twelve hours are done and stay because the wards were busy and some of them – the nurses knew that the sick scrub typhus patients – she couldn't look after everybody, so a lot of them worked overtime.

So maybe twelve hours would've been about average or ...?

Yes, and others did at their own ... in their own time. They went back and sat with very sick scrub typhus patients.

Now, I understand that because of a particular battle or because of transport arrangements, you'd get the sick and the wounded coming in in groups. Who decided the order in which they should be treated?

Well, they were ... first of all, I think they stopped at the orderly room and particulars taken, I think that's what happened, and then they were sent to various wards, according to their injuries and their illnesses.

Was it a decision for a doctor or would you as matron ...

Oh no..no we didn't have anything to do with that, no.

So the doctor would make the decision about ...

I think so ...

... who went where and then you would just get in and do the work.

I think so, yes.

And when you had a number of patients arriving at a particular ward, would there be any question about which of those would get treated first?

Oh yes, the more serious, the more dangerously ill ones would be treated first. The doctor would do what he thought – treat the ones who needed urgent treating.

(20.00) Could that be a difficult decision in deciding ...

No ... no.

... when you had a number of people, which one should be treated first?

No ... no ... well now, I think that would be up to the doctor – the doctor to answer, he would make do to the best of his ability.

Now, these questions are about nursing techniques under war-time conditions, it begins saying, 'with the advent of penicillin it presumably

became easier to deal with infection' – but penicillin didn't come in until well through that period, didn't it?

No, they had to requisition to get penicillin in the surgical wards, that was where it mainly went, but it was quite a business, I believe.

So it wasn't extensively used?

It wasn't in existence when we first went there.

When it did come in, did it make a major change in the way people treated infections?

Well, I would think so, yes.

But that was after you'd moved on ...

That was in the latter part.

What other sorts of drugs did you use?

The sulphur drugs – there were five sulphur drugs and they were just coming in to being when we went to the Middle East, early in the piece.

And what sort of effect did they have?

Well, some were given for dysentery, others were given for various complaints, they were good – the sulphur drugs were very good. I've forgotten the names, there were five, but I can't remember them.

What about malaria, what sort of treatment would you've used for that?

Well that had ... they had ... well all had anti-malarial treatment, we took atebrin which made us yellow like Chinamen – our skins yellow, we all took that, sort of suppressive treatment in case we were bitten. They had quinine and you know, all sorts of things.

Intravenous drips for the effect of shock of blood loss, would they've been in use?

Yes ... yes ... yes, I think so.

What would you've done, if you had had a patient come in with serious wounds, who had lost a lot of blood as a result?

The doctor would see to that. He'd either give them serum or blood transfusion and that by this time, was flown in from Sydney.

To start with, you had your own blood transfusion service?

Well yes, it was just taken from the staff or the walking wounded.

Just to go over a couple of the sorts of illnesses that were most common – what would you do with a dysentery patient? How would they be treated?

Well now you're asking ... I think sulphaguanidine was the one for dysentery, it was a sulphur drug ... look I really can't remember.

Malaria, scrub typhus ...

There was nothing for scrub typhus, there was only nursing – fluids and sponging and keeping that high temperature down. T hey'd go for days and days and weeks, with a high temperature, which ended up, if it went too long – brain damage could result.

Dermatological cases? Do you remember ...

Yes, there was a lot of those owing to the humidity and lack of water to wash in and that sort of thing. Mainly the wet all the time and the rain, the wet season – you'd see men working on the roads and the rain pouring down and their shirts, everything, shorts – everything wet.

Is there anything you could do for those?

Well, they had all sorts of dyes, we had some very good skin specialists, depending on what the complaint was.

Dengue fever?

Yes, there was a lot of that. I don't know whether there was so much of that in New Guinea or no. I've just forgotten, there was that in the Middle East, I know ... plenty of that.

How did you treat that?

More like influenza ... I don't know what they gave for that, 'cause the sulphur drugs were just coming in.

Now, what about psychiatric cases? I don't imagine you would've had a lot of experience of that, before nursing in New Guinea?

Yes we had a big ward of ... When we were in Adelaide, there were quite a lot of psychiatric patients, when we came back in '42. We had them out at Northfield, we were there about ... Oh, four months perhaps, and we took all the sick off the American ships and our own ships and there were quite a few psychiatric cases there ... Colonel Sinclair was in charge of that.

(25.00) What sort of nursing would you be required to do in those cases?

The girls that were thee had had previous experience in ... I put those in that ward and they were used to this type of patient and they did a very good job.

It's often said that men who are suffering from the trauma of war are more likely to be able to talk to doctors than ... to talk to nurses than doctors. Do you think that that was the case?

Well they used to confide in the nurses quite a lot and they were so thrilled when they came in ... and surprised to see nurses and they were just ... sort of startled to see women there.

> Would there have been ... did the nurses who were say, in charge of the psychiatric cases, did they ever suggest to you that any of the people were malingering?

No ... no, I think that the doctor would've soon – the specialist would've soon sorted those out.

> Self inflicted wounds, are they a thing that you came across at all?

No, not to my knowledge.

> Now I know you said to me that you would rather have been working as a theatre nurse but perhaps you know what went on in the theatres anyway – it must've been very difficult to maintain asepsis with these tent operating theatres. Did you ...

That was a hut ... the theatre was a hut, gauzed in with a concrete floor. There were two theatres, a blood bank what else was there? No, they had plenty of theatre staff and the asepsis I would say, was of the highest order. Because a lot of the wounds were very dirty when they came in – fly blown and gangrenous.

> This is because people often had taken perhaps up to a couple of weeks to actually reach the hospital.

That's right, and a lot of them crawled back on their hands and knees over the Owen Stanleys, in the Kokoda Trail Campaign. There were few 'Fuzzy-wuzzies' – natives, to carry the ones who couldn't walk but the ones who could get along, got along the best way they could, sometimes on hands and knees and it was all up hill and down dale – crossing the river streams and ... it was indescribably terrible terrain.

> When there were very heavy casualties for example, did the nurses have to work, far beyond what they would've done if they had been civilian nurses?

Oh yes ... yes ... Oh yes.

> But there were no protests or complaints about that?

No, never a compliant, no.

> Was there an absence of basic reference books and did this matter?

What does that mean?

> I guess it means ... I don't know if it happens in normal nursing practice or perhaps it's one that would affect the doctors more, but if you want to go away and check something, that you don't have access to the same

references that you might have if you were nursing or being a doctor in civilian life – that didn't come up?

No ... no ... no.

Where there any ways then, which you could remember, that you'd said, 'We had to drop our standards, because of the conditions'?

No, I think high standards were maintained all through, in spite of the hardships and the mud and the leaking tents and all.

Good to hear! Many of the doctors were young, and they were encountering a new range of wounds and diseases. I suppose that was true of the nursing staff as well ...

Oh yes, yes.

... was it apparent that the doctors may not have had the experience that would've been useful?

They had senior specialists in all the units – surgeons and physicians who had had vast experience and they had skin specialists and psychiatric specialists and then, the surgical teams, they were, you know – surgeons before they enlisted.

So did you ever encounter a situation, where you thought a doctor's decision was wrong?

No, never.

It must've been unusual to have so many male orderlies working in the hospital and presumably, most of the nurses had come from a situation where there had mostly been female staff – how did they cope with a higher than usual ratio of male nurses?

Well, we always had wardsmen in the hospitals where we trained. They did certain work and ... no, there was no problem at all.

No resentment on either part ...?

No ... no.

Because the male nursing orderlies ...

There was a little resentment 'cause the medical men and orderlies went up in August to New Guinea – the sisters weren't allowed to go until October, and by the time we got there in October, they had ...

END TAPE 2 – SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2 – SIDE B

... of the orderlies toward the female nurses?

Only in New Guinea, because the orderlies had gone with the medical officers in August, to New Guinea and the sisters were not allowed to go until October and when the sisters arrived to take over the wards, there was just a nod resentment from one or two of the orderlies about reporting to the sister instead of the doctor, see, they'd been ... for three months.

How would you deal with that sort of ...

They were very – the sisters were very discreet and just went along and did the best they could and that faded out.

Just sort of ... perhaps backed off from ... and let the orderlies go and talk directly to the doctors?

Oh no, no once the sisters were in charge, they were in charge. The orderlies realized then that the sisters were trained and that was it. There weren't many, there was only one or two in this instance – but that would happen anywhere ... I don't think anyone would be interested in those questions, you know?

I suppose that the point of putting those questions in, is that, if they don't get recorded in official histories, in the sort of written things and perhaps this is the only opportunity to record them, if they did happen.

There's been so many books written now that ...

Oh well, I hope we find some things that aren't in the books as well. Did you have any air-raids? Did you experience any bombing raids in New Guinea?

Oh yes, in the Middle East we did, or do you mean New Guinea?

Well, tell me about the Middle East.

Yes, we were only sixteen miles from Alexandria when the Italians and Germans were bombing the daylights out of Alexandria. The harbour was full of sunken ships and we used to get the shrapnel out where we were.

How frightened were you?

When the siren went we were all supposed to get down in the slit-trenches but they were full of scorpions and centipedes and all sorts of 'crawlies' – some went, I didn't go I just put my bed flat on the concrete floor and hoped for the best.

The scorpions were more frightening?

Oh yes, I would rather the shrapnel.

But nothing of that sort in New Guinea at all, no bombing raids?

We had an air-raid, once or twice in New Guinea – they dropped a bomb or two around but no harm was done.

For some of the nurses, would that have been their first experience of anything similar?

For one or two who hadn't been in the Middle East, it may have been, yes.

Did you need to reassure them, were the ...

Well it happened so quickly, I remember one or two flying under a card table, hoping for shelter and protection. But it was ... we were in line between ... near the aerodrome, probably that bomb was meant for the planes on the aerodrome, but it was just on the out ... you know, near us.

There's one report of a sister who was in an air-raid and a piece of shrapnel landed virtually on her lap and she said, 'Great! I'll take it home as a souvenir' ...

I don't remember that.

What was the sort of attitude in the situation of an air-raid, were people generally ... was there bravado?

It happened so quickly that no one really fussed much about it ... No I don't think so ... that's all I remember about it and then it was over.

We now come to some questions about nursing conditions – which do you recall as being the most difficult to cope with – the heat, the wet and mould, inadequate equipment, under staffing or insect and animal life?

Or what?

Insect and animal life? I'll just wait till this plane has gone overhead ...

The insect and animal life? There was no animal life, I don't think. The insects were the mosquitoes, we coped with those by covering up – 6.00 pm to 6.00 am and mosquito nets, no matter how hot the night, you daren't come out from under your net. And the gaiters and that coped with the mosquito and the anti-mosquitoes cream all around the face and neck ...

Was that irritating?

Yes, it wasn't the best. I don't know whether it was any good ...

(5.00) Well none of your nurses got malaria?

No, but I think that was more being covered up.

So what was worse for you about the conditions?

I think the humidity and the steaminess and the rain – the wet season, was very trying ... leaking tents, everything went mildewy and the mud – the mud was terrible, take one step forward and slip two back, if you were going up. A lot of the tents were on top of little

rises and by the time you got up, you know, you could've been up and down three times if it'd been dry – 'cause you'd take one step and slip back a couple. Later on we got little stairs put in – bits of wood, which was a help but at first ... it was very slippery mud.

So those physical conditions were more of a problem to you than any inadequacies in equipment or not having enough staff?

Yes, I think probably. We had staff, we were all right for the first little while, when we got there there were twelve hundred patients and by this time we were a twelve hundred hospital bed, but we only had a six hundred bed equipment, I believe, and ... but later on we got more and then we had other sisters from the 5th AGH who were waiting for their hospital to be finished. They were on loan to us and we had some of the 1st AGH, the same thing was happening to them and then after that, we eased off and we were given some leave, in batches of thirty ...

You came back to Australia for that leave?

Yes, for ... I don't know whether it was a fortnight or three weeks now, I've forgotten and ...

How long did you have to work before you got that leave? What period of time would we have been looking at?

Well, I think I got mine at the end of '33, I suppose, over twelve months. We went there in October '42 ... October '43 yes it would be ... and then we left in '44 – the campaign ended in '44.

There is a question of ... did you have any interaction with the native people of Papua and New Guinea, either as servants or in any other way?

We had some that worked digging drains around the hospital, in charge of one of our sergeants and we did have some natives in the convalescent home at Rouna Falls. I don't know whether they were ... I was never there so ... I don't know whether they acted as cleaners or attended to the grounds or what they did. I'm really not sure about that.

So were you ever conscious of being 'a white race' in a country which was primarily peopled by ... by natives?

I think there may have been some natives who worked in the officers' club in Port Moresby in the latter part –waiting table, I think there might have been some.

And how were relations then between the race?

I think the natives and our men got on very well, but I don't think the nurses had anything much to do with the natives at all.

And you didn't treat any of them in the hospitals?

No, not to my knowledge.

Now, a question of social life. I imagine that the officers may well have been very pleased to see the nurses when they came to New Guinea ...

Oh yes, I think they were. Yes, they gave us a great reception when we arrived.

What sort of thing would you do when you actually had some off-duty hours?

Well..some went sailing, in the various bays – Bootless Bay and around about ...

What would they have access to, to sail in?

Well they had this little lalokies ... were they called? What were they called?

Lakatois? Was it?

I think it might be, I've forgotten ...

The little outrigger canoes?

Yes, something like that – and picnics ...

So, did you ever go sailing in one of those?

No I didn't, but some of the girls did. They'd have a picnic out and go with some of the officers and some of their friends, you know mainly in groups.

(10.00) What do you remember doing in your time off?

Mainly, we went to ... up into 'the rubber' for a picnic – a group of us, who had the day off together and we'd get some provisions from the stores and make sandwiches or take a loaf of bread or ... and have a picnic out amongst 'the rubber'. It was beautiful in parts up in Koitake – it was forty miles from the hospital and the most beautiful butterflies – blue ... almost emerald green butterflies about three and four inches long, I've never seen such beautiful butterflies ... Oh no, we used to have some lovely picnics and in the end, we got a bit tired of picnics and said, 'If anyone asks me to go for a picnic when I go home, I'll scream' ... ... it was mainly picnics and to dance at the officers' club at night.

How would you get there, for the picnics?

For the picnics – well somehow, the officers we went with, seemed to manage to get a jeep or ... and a driver ... yes ...

And the officers' club, that was in Port Moresby ... what was that like?

Very nice, but we didn't use that until after all the work settled down and the girls were able to have a day off when we got the extra help from the 5th and the 1st.

That was after several months that that came in?

Oh yes, yes no days off for months on end when we were busy.

Now some ... there's a report that a number of nurses found marriage partners as a result of their service in New Guinea ...

Oh, yes.

Did you go to any weddings for example, of anyone?

We has one in our mess – lovely wedding and a sergeant – I think he was a sergeant, and one of the sisters. They'd known each other for a long long time.

So what did they do to celebrate the wedding?

Well, they asked me to arrange their honeymoon ... I said, 'I've done a few things in my day, but I've never arranged anyone's honeymoon before'. So I had to ring Mr Sefton – I think his name was. He owned a plantation, with a nice home and he offered, if any of the girls wanted a few days off, there was room ... he set aside a few rooms for them to go up there and have a couple of days to rest and wander around, so I think these two went up there.

Delightful! And what did they do for the actual wedding? Did they ...

We had it in the mess and the cook made a lovely wedding cake and we had the usual ... I can't remember where they were married..I really can't – where they took their vows, whether it was in a church in town in Moresby or where I don't know.

It would've been an army chaplain that would've done the ceremony?

It might've been in the tent at the hospital. I've really forgotten about that, but I do remember the reception.

Now I believe that you were decorated. You received the Royal Red Cross – how did that come about?

Well, I think just for the work we did in New Guinea, when we were the only hospital there. We had two thousand battle casualties and ... working short staffed and ... I think that was all the citation said 'For outstanding devotion to duty'. I always think the Royal Red Cross belongs to the whole of the unit – those girls were magnificent, they really were and never a grumble.

Really? Never a grumble?

No, never a grumble ... no, I never heard them grumble. They might've grumbled amongst themselves about the conditions but ... they were ... they really were tremendous.

That is outstanding, isn't it?

And they all got on so well. Some were six in a tent ... four in a tent.

When did you hear that you were going to get the citation?

I think the brigadier rang me up from New Guinea Force Headquarters and said ... and by this time I was living at the 5th. I'd become Principal Matron and I couldn't live at the New Guinea Force Headquarters because I would've been the only female there, so it was easier for everyone for me to live in the nurses lines ... sisters' lines at the 5th, so that's where ... they built me a nice little grass hut, made me some nice furniture and I was very comfortable there ... But I did miss my own unit, seventeen miles up the road.

Tell me a little bit then about what you were doing when you were the Matron for the whole of New Guinea ... Principal Matron was the title?

I got my instructions from our Matron and Chief in Melbourne and she wanted me to go around the various hospitals and CCSs and some were over the Owen Stanleys and I used to be up and down sitting at the aerodrome. I think it was the Seven Mile aerodrome waiting for a plane to take me over the Owen Stanleys and sometimes the clouds would come down and you couldn't clear the mountains so, you'd wait a couple of hours and then you'd get word to say, there'd be no plane coming in, back you'd go home, wait a few days and repeat the performance and then perhaps you might get over to Dobodura.

(15.00) Was it hazardous flying over the Owen Stanleys?

Oh yes, and I used to get so air sick ... it was terrible.

What were the planes like?

Oh just ... everything was ripped out, you sat on an iron seat. The seats were each side and sometimes you'd take ... we took some Americans up once. I was the only nurse on the plane and this officer next to me started smoking and – Oh Dear! it made me ill, and I said, 'Oh sir, please don't smoke, I'm so ill, it makes me ill' and he was so nice and apologized. I've often thought of this ... and was I glad to get landed. I think I got to Townsville and then I had to get a flying boat to Rose Bay and the flying boat was even worse. So, I beat a hasty retreat when I got where I was staying to the chemist to get some air-sickness tablets so ... that was a help getting something.

As you travelled around to visit the other AGHs and CCSs, did you find differences in conditions in the various places?

Much the same, it was the wet season everywhere up there and they were all much the same, but some had better sites. Ours was so undulating and hilly, streams flowing though. They were real breading grounds for mosquitos, but why the site was chosen was because there was only one water pipe and the Americans had it and then they somehow helped us get the water from that across to our hospital ... they were very good and very co-operative and helped a lot ... that's why the site was chosen. It was next door to the Americans because of the water pipe – it was the only source of water.

But other sites for different stations were better later?

Yes, they were better – I think they were all better.

What was important then, in choosing a site?

The water was No. 1 priority. It was near the Laloki River, a fast flowing river and you can't run a hospital without water.

And in other places, they looked for a flatter area obviously, with water. Other things that were important?

Well, away from an aerodrome of course, because the aerodromes are the things the enemy look for, to bomb ... near a road, easy access. There was only one road from Port Moresby to Koitaki up in 'the rubber' – just one dirt road and in the wet weather it was very dangerous because you'd slip off and go over the side if you weren't careful.

What do you recall ... what's your happiest memory of nursing in New Guinea?

I think just doing a job ... a job well done and being able to help those poor men, and they were the cream of our manhood – beautiful young men died like flies from scrub typhus and various things ... and wounds. Oh no, it was very sad, that Kokoda Trail Campaign.

Did you ever get disheartened?

No ... no ... no, it was great when we heard rumours that the Japs had been pushed back and you know, Americans and Australians were gaining ground, pushing them back over the range – it was very heartening.

END OF INTERVIEW