



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Identification: This is an interview with Monda Lenz, who is now Monda Russell. It's taking place in Melbourne on the 21st of July 1989 and, Monda, say again, you were, what was your unit?

The 10th Detachment, 1st Australian Entertainment Unit

Good. At least if you say it, it's correct.

Ha ha.

Going back, right back, tell me about where you were born, and what sort of family you came from.

I was born in Melbourne in 1923. My family was perfectly normal. I had another sister who played piano - she was older than I. My father's - the only way I think I had a voice was my aunt was a singer in a choir, but that's the only singer that I can recall in the family. And then when I was about - I went to school in Melbourne at Christ Church, South Yarra, and then to Merton Hall. I then, round about when I was about thirteen, fourteen, a friend said to my mother, 'I think she can sing'. Nothing was done about that of course. You didn't do that sort of thing when I was young, you know. And I went to - I got a job - my first job was a telephonist at 3AW - the night telephonist - and I thought 'Well, I'll have a go at this singing business'. They had a programme in Melbourne at 3UZ called 'Are you an Artist?', which was on Sunday nights. It was a sort of talent quest thing, you know, and if you won it then you came back as - kept coming back till you were knocked out, you know. So, I must admit I got the sack from 3AW because I couldn't have Sunday nights off, and I thought 'Well I'll give this singing a go'. By this time I was seventeen - seventeen and a half and I went - I was in it for five weeks you see - and so I just had to leave 3AW. Then I did freelance radio 1942 ...

Just going back to your actual family ...

Mmm.

A comfortable upbringing?

Yes. It was of course depression times. We didn't have a lot, but we didn't go without. We had a very happy family - a very dear father and a loving mother - and thank heaven not a pushy stage mother. But we just did what - I'd go swimming with my father or play tennis. That was the extent of it. There wasn't the money for a lot of things so you had two sets of tennis at threepence a set, you know. But I don't think we missed anything, you know. I don't feel I missed anything through sort of coming up in the bare hard times. We didn't go without. We were limited, as most families were, but certainly not as badly as a lot of families were, you know.

Did you anticipate the war? Did you at that age sort of think ...

No. Not at all. The war was - well, we didn't have the media outlets in those days, you know. I don't think I read a paper. You listened to the radio. I think probably about, not, certainly not until Poland was invaded did sort of it come to us that - or to me, anyway - that there was going to be a war, and I really don't think that it even hit me what a war was going to be. I mean, I'd been brought up on the great war of '14-'18, but I don't think that war really meant

anything to me except that I lost an uncle in the first world war. But it didn't mean, really didn't mean anything, not personally, you know. It didn't touch me personally. So that when Poland was - I don't think it even hit me then that it was going to sort of involve me or my friends.

(5.00) When did you suddenly think, 'Hey, this might involve me?'

I think when the boy I was engaged to - he was in the Victorian Scottish - they transferred as a unit to the AIF. Then it hit me that this was going to involve me personally and us as a country, and my brother-in-law joined up of course. He went away in January '40, to the Middle East. So that, I think, is when it really hit me that war meant - and at that stage even then I think war just meant the boys went away. I don't think it really, I don't think we really comprehended that they could not be coming back, you know what I mean?

So you were, getting back to that talent quest, where did that end up?

That ended up by me getting engagements going onto radio 3AK - not 3AK - 3XY, 3UZ, all the, and the Sunday night shows that were at the Princess Theatre. They were troop shows, and ...

What sort of things did you do?

Anything from musical comedy to ballads to some grand opera, just the well known things.

And you were singing solo?

Solo, yes, yep.

Can you remember some of the songs you sang?

Ah, yes, I do because I can remember that every audition I did I always sang - if I sang 'Love will find a way' from the *Maid of the Mountains*, I got the job. If I didn't sing that, I didn't get the job. And that was always my lucky charm, for want of another thing, little dreaming that I'd end up in the *Maid of the Mountains*, but that was because, I learnt all those things on a, when I was young, on a player piano. I knew all the words and all the music of all the old musical comedies and that's how I learnt it, because I occupied my time pedalling furiously and learning singing, you know.

But no musical instruction?

No.

None at all?

None at all. Not then.

When did you become part of the Entertainment Unit?

I didn't become part of that until late in the war because I was under contract to the Tivoli, and so I couldn't get out of it until my contract finished and I could then go.

Was there much entertainment of service personnel involved in the Tivoli show?

Not a great amount. We had to do a, always had to do a camp show on the Sunday night. We used to work two shows a day, six days a week, and then Sunday night was always a camp show or whatever.

That's a lot, isn't it, two a day?

It was a lot but it was - oh, if it was pantomime, we did three shows a day because we did pantomime in the morning, and then we'd do the normal shows afternoon and night.

Did you think that was very hard work? Or ...

No. No, we loved it and I mean, certainly, we weren't on stage all the time. I think the ballet and the show girls had a harder time than we did because we'd just go out and perhaps do four, six numbers in the whole show. But it was pleasure, it wasn't hard work as far as I was concerned anyway. I loved it.

So, you had always, you had wanted to go into the army Entertainment Unit?

Yes, but I just couldn't get out of my contract, you see. I just wanted to get into the army.

Was that a protected thing, entertainment?

Well, we were army. Pure army.

I'm sorry, but when you were with the Tivoli. Was that protected?

Yeah, well you, I was stuck by my contract.

And even a war couldn't break that contract?

No. No. It was just, you were under contract and that was it. That's why we had to do a show on the Sunday nights and that saved the Tivoli or the company from being broken up by each one having to, wanting to leave and go out, because the whole show was set. It was a ten week run in each city, so the whole show was bound together so that if one dropped out the whole show, the [shangers?], and all the things had to be cut and you just couldn't do that.

So you travelled with this Tivoli company?

Yes. We did ten weeks Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney, and then you had a rest, and then you came - in which time you did radio or whatever was about, you know - and then you came back and started again rehearsals in Melbourne.

So, when your contract was up ...

Then I joined up.

Specifically to the Entertainment Unit?

Yes. A friend was DAD Amenities here, and he said, 'We need some good voices; if you're going to join up, join up and we'll slot you straight to entertainment'. I did my rookies course, you know, but I went straight to Entertainment Unit.

(10.00) And tell me about your first experiences with that.

Well, I arrived in - after rookies at Darley here, I went to Sydney and was greeted by I think everybody I knew in theatre. There was Peter Finch with his drama class wandering around saying 'How now, brown cow'; Eddie Corderoy playing piano - he was with the ABC then; jugglers doing things; us singing our heads off; Horrie Dargie playing his harmonica. It was a madhouse. But fun.

Where was this?

That was in Pagewood, in Sydney. That was where they showed - it was the Pagewood studios. That was our headquarters. That's where they shot *Forty Thousand Horsemen*, the film.

And so, were you slotted into a unit then?

I went straight into the *Maid of the Mountains* company.

Tell me about that.

Well, we had, Lorenzo Nolan was the tenor. George Nicholls played Baldassarre, the lead, male lead. I did say Bob - Bob Simmons - who has since died. Albert Chappelle, Colin Croft - we had a fully professional company, you know. It was all the pros that - they'd been in other entertainment detachments, but then they came together for the *Maid*.

And what, you worked up the show at Pagewood?

Yes. Yes, we rehearsed at Pagewood and we did our first two shows there and then we went off on the road.

How did you travel?

Oh, in the most beautifully battered buses you'd ever see. Those two buses took us - we'd have all the band instruments and the costumes and what have you on the back bus and we - there were six girls and thirty boys - and we all managed to get into the front bus and oh, but they didn't let us down. They went over some rough country, through Australia. It was fun.

What sort of places?

Oh, we went through Shepparton, then through into New South Wales to Cowra, all in the back army camps, you know. And then in Brisbane we went to Canungra, and wherever there was a camp, we went. We couldn't always do the show. If we couldn't do the full, you know, *Maid of the Mountains* show, we'd do a concert, you know. We'd all do our bit, whatever we did.

Was the main show a sort of set piece?

Oh yes. Yes, it was the complete *Maid of the Mountains* company show that was put on here in Melbourne with Gladys Moncrieff. That was exactly as we did it.

And, so that you didn't sort of improvise, didn't have to improvise at all?

No, not at all. It was set to script.

What about the sort of semi-shows that you did when you couldn't fit the full company in?

Well, it was mainly the singers and the pianist that we'd do, or the dancers. It depended on where we could do it. If there was a hall, sometimes we could get the show up and get the scenery up. It was a matter of being able to get the scenery up, you know. But if we couldn't, we'd do it on whatever we could in, just in the camp itself, or wherever we could do anything.

Now, what about the costumes?

Oh yes, that was - we'd have to press them and put - they lasted the whole thing, we didn't think they would but they got back to Sydney in one piece. They took a lot of looking after. They had to be ironed before each one because of the moisture in, particularly in Rabaul. They'd get very limp, you know, and we'd have to iron them and then we'd have to pack them and those poor baskets used to get filled and unfilled, but the costumes - they were beautifully made and they really lasted right through.

Getting back to the travelling, did you, were you accommodated in army camps?

In army camps, yes. Always in a camp. Wherever we were playing we'd pull in or if it was a bigger camp, and we were going to play, say, two or three shows out of there, it was our headquarters there, at the nearest army camp.

So you spent how long in Australia doing that, that travelling?

Uh, we did um, oh, must have been nine or ten months just going from place to place. But it, we had a wonderful company and a wonderful group that - we were a family. We really were. We were very lucky as far as our, the members were concerned, because we all loved what we were doing and we just - Joe and George would look after the girls. We would be, he always would find out what we needed and really fathered us all the way through, bless him.

Who was Joe and George?

Joe Latona and George Nicholls, or Conway Nicholls, as he usually sang under. He was in the record department of the ABC in Melbourne and then he was in charge of that and then he retired.

You were still quite young then, weren't you?

Oh yes. What was I when I joined up? I had my, I know I had my twenty-second birthday in Rabaul in the tunnels where the Japs used to be. We had a birthday party there - it was wonderful. We had the tiniest piece of steak that the boys flew in from, the RAAF boys flew in from Lae, and about five potatoes and we sat round like Indians, each getting a little square of steak. It was wonderful!

(15.00) That's your twenty-second. So, that must have been very exhausting, that travelling for ten months, was it?

We didn't notice it. We really didn't notice it because the show'd go down, we'd pull it down and put the costumes away, we'd get back to camp, but I think when you are young you don't ...

Were you doing a show every night?

Most nights. Most nights. Not always - particularly in Rabaul we'd have ...

I mean when you were travelling.

Oh travelling. Depending how far we went. It was probably every second night we'd do a show, and travel, you might travel all day and get into camp and then do one the next night.

So that there were enough camps for you to do that?

Oh yes, yep.

And you didn't go to the same place twice, no doubt.

Oh no, no we didn't. We didn't. We were at Bandiana, going through Melbourne - we were at Bandy, we were there for a little while and, funny little theatre which is still there, bless it, on the Hume Highway, which we did two nights. Sometimes we'd do two or three nights depending on the size of the camp and depending on the circumstances, but usually only two if it was a big area, you know.

What were the troops like as audience?

Wonderful. They were - I think we were all a little wary being musical comedy, you know, because they were so used to the Waratahs and the other groups of entertainment that we were a little bit wary of whether, how they'd take a full show with a story and singing and what have you, you know, and the full orchestra of course. But they loved it. They all seemed to just think it was great. So did we, 'cause when they clapped it was great.

So you didn't have to sort of try and make up gags that appealed to them, or anything like that?

Oh no, no. We didn't do anything like that.

How did the New Guinea - How did you come to go to New Guinea?

Well we were sent from Brisbane. Ah, Peter's - Peter Finch's company went to Lae and we went to Rabaul. We were all, we were there and then we were coming home - after we'd been there, oh, about four months I suppose, the - oh, three to four months anyway - we were all packed ready to go to Japan for the occupation forces. Five o'clock in the morning we were all ready and then General Blamey decided we weren't going, so we unpacked again.

So the whole company went to Rabaul?

Oh yes, complete as was. We, that's when Colin Croft came in then - we'd had another boy doing his role who was due for discharge, so Col came in and he took over the role, but apart from that we had our normal company right through, all doing the same thing.

Tell me how, do you remember going into Rabaul and how it was for you then?

Yes. We ...

How did you get there, for instance?

We went up on the *Duntroon*, the dear little thing. We, I might add we didn't have any cigarettes, we didn't have any money when we hit the ship because it was before army pay day and we used to have to go to mess - we girls were given the officers' quarters up top, which I think put their noses out of joint being navy and we were army - and you'd have to go past the canteen to go to the, into mess, and all the - I only used to smoke maybe one cigarette then, I started in Brisbane - and we'd go past the canteen and there'd be all these lovely things and none of us had any money to get them, and we got, I remember in Brisbane we bought two ounces of tobacco, a box of papers already rolled with cork tips and a machine that made cigarettes, and we'd sit on the deck like Indians and roll and we'd all have a puff, you know. It was hysterical. The captain would ask the girls over for a sherry before lunch and give us a cigarette, so we'd take one, smoke one, and then he'd give us another one and we'd take it back to the boys, put it in the pool.

So, as you say, very much a family thing?

Oh we were, we really were.

So, did the army pay you in cash?

No, we just got our normal paybook. We were army as was and it went into our paybook, and you were paid - it went in fortnightly.

So it was a bit difficult to get hold of the cash to buy the cigarettes?

True, true. And at four-and-four a day, it wasn't very much; four-and-fourpence we got, or at least I got. We were privates then, and we got four-and-four a day.

And the cigarettes were ...?

Ah, I think they were tenpence a packet, or something like that, so that we didn't have very much out of our ...

How did you actually get hold of cash that you could buy things with?

Well you could go into the pay office if you had some money in your paybook.

(20.00) So you could get cash by going to the pay office?

Oh yes, yes you could, but of course with that amount of money - and I allotted three-and-four home to be banked, so I lived on a shilling a week, which didn't go very far, but then we didn't need very much, you know, and as I say, in those days cigarettes were - uh, I probably smoked one a day then, so it really didn't make any difference to me.

How much drinking was there?

Very little. We were allowed two bottles a week - two bottles of beer a week. Well, I suppose because we had to do a show at night we were - I didn't drink very much then; in fact, I think I had my first drink in, um, Chermside in Brisbane, which was just bush then. I just wasn't interested and nobody, everybody had to think of the show that night, so that was it. I mean we'd have a couple, the boys'd have a couple of beers, which was fair enough, those that drank, but there was never excessive drinking at all.

Did you notice any drinking amongst the audience or the other troops?

I don't think we noticed it. We were so busy doing what we had to do and you couldn't really see out into the audience, but I must admit I don't think I ever saw drunks in a camp anywhere because, had they been, they probably would have been up trying to chat the girls up or something, but we didn't have that. We were very, very fortunate.

So you, going back to the ship, you scored the officers' quarters ...

Yes. I don't think they were very happy and then, because there were 1,025 troops on board and we six girls, plus the crew, so we had the section that were the officers' quarters and George and Joe put the lounge right across the little passageway and they slept there to protect their girls.
(Laughter).

So, I guess it must have been quite a funny feeling being on a troop ship with so many men and just you lot, was it?

Yes, it was, but we were not - it was off limits to us to go down onto the next deck where the boys were. Our boys were there and sweltering; we sweltered too, but at least we had a bed; they didn't. I think mainly they had hammocks or just slept on the deck, you know, to get some, some - it was so hot going up. But that, as far as we were concerned, we had a bed and we were right.

What about during the day? You were allowed to mix with people, were you?

We didn't go down into the ship at all. We stayed, our boys would come up and we might run through a few numbers or something on the top deck, you know, but apart from that we didn't go down.

Did you do any shows on the ship?

No, no we didn't.

So tell me about Rabaul when you first saw it. What did you make of that?

That was very eerie. It was a very eerie feeling. Um, you, we came into the harbour and there were what they call the 'beehives'. There are two islands like small volcanoes sitting in the harbour and we came into Kokopo and we, our camp, the girls were camped in the hospital the other side of the island, and these dirty roads and dusty roads and we thought 'goodness', and then we were in two - two girls to a hut, to a compartment, you know, and we, I don't, it took us a while to sort of get ourselves settled in and I think it was two days before we went down to the theatre and got the costumes down and that sort of thing. Well then, it did take us a while to get the costumes in gear because they had been packed on the ship coming up, and in Brisbane while we were waiting to, for transport, and then we had - it was a very funny feeling somehow, it just didn't, there was no, the thing that struck me - the first thing that struck me - was there were no birds. There were all these trees, some of them very flattened of course, but there were no birds, and that amazed me.

So no birds ...

No, no birds. We didn't see a bird.

Did you find out why?

Well I, no, we didn't. I think probably because of the bombing, they had just gone to refuge somewhere else, but there were just - and that is the thing that always struck me.

How long before you went up there was there bombing?

Oh, there was, Rabaul - when was peace declared? '45, August '45 - well that's when the Japanese capitulated so there was, I would say there wasn't very much in Rabaul for about a month or two months before peace was declared. I think they just um ...

No, but you went up there and there had been recent bombing?

Not, no, not, certainly not within two months of us going up there there'd been, because oh, no, it'd be more than that because peace was well and truly over when we got up there.

(25.00) So you went up there after the war finished?

War finished when we went into Rabaul, yes. Because you would never have got into Rabaul in peacetime with all their tunnels and submarine pins into the cliff and the tunnels underneath where they lived. It was impregnable.

So, what's, tell me more about Rabaul and those sorts of things.

Well, where do you start with Rabaul? The thing, another thing that really struck me were the *Canna* lilies in this sort of desolation and what have you, and these massive *Canna* lilies in

the most glorious colours. They really did brighten up the day. But I think the most touching thing on Rabaul - that touched me anyway, and I know it did touch the rest of them - was we, we drove, we were going to do a show for - a concert show - for the nuns and priests that had been incarcerated in the tunnel - they'd escaped and got their own tunnels - on the other side of, from the harbour, and we drove along the beach road and we passed a mission, which was right on the beach, or had been a mission.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Side two, sorry to interrupt ...

That's alright. And we passed the mission. Of course it was right on the water - there was no cliff or anything, it just went straight into the water - and there was this huge Japanese, like an American liberty ship actually, with this great concrete decks, on its side. The mission was completely flattened; all the statues were down and there was just one of the Virgin Mary standing - just one statue, and everything else was completely flattened by bombardment, obviously from the sea. And that really sort of put the hackles on the back of your head a little bit, so we sailed on and we got to where the, we were doing the concert, and we looked down into this huge pit virtually, and there were all these steps cut into the sides and we had a little portable piano that went everywhere with us, and two of the natives carried it down into the pit - or whatever, for want of a better word - and the nuns and the priests and the lay sisters and some of the children that had been living in the tunnels - the tunnels that they built - and we did a concert for them, and that was the first music they'd heard since before the war. And that was the greatest, really greatest thing that I think all of us really felt we were doing something then, you know, it was just wonderful.

It was obviously very um, this whole thing was a part of your life that had left very strong feelings with you?

Actually it left - the army times has left more with me than all my years in the theatre, because in theatre, rightly or wrongly, I thought, 'Well, alright it's very nice for the ego that someone claps', but with the army you knew that if they didn't clap, they didn't like you. They didn't do it for politeness, and when you got a really good hand, and the boys clapped and they whistled, that was great. And we weren't getting anything like the money we were getting when we were professionals before we joined up. But there was much more - oh, I don't know, what's the word - oh, self satisfaction I suppose, out of that.

Was there patriotism behind what you were doing ...

Oh, yes ...

... like the regular servicemen?

Oh, certainly. I mean, if I couldn't have got into Entertainment Unit, I would have gone into any part of the army, if I'd not been going into entertainment.

So there was a strong sort of commitment to war effort ...

Well, yes ...

... behind what you were doing ...

Well because Harry was away - he later died - and I just wanted to get into it, you know, and do something, even if it was only pushing a pen it was going to do something, you know.

This theatre, or pit, you described. Was that an underground thing? Or ...

It was a hollow cut - it's very hard to describe - it was quite large and they had a lot of gravestones where the nuns and those that had died whilst they were there, and they had them all, the graves were there, on the flat part of the, the floor - it was like a crater - just like a crater, and it was, the steps went round and down like this and the boys - the two natives - carried the piano down and then carried it back again. But it was just for all the world a level based crater.

Could these people speak English?

Oh yes. There were some Dutch nuns and all of them spoke English and all the mission sisters, the native sisters - er, novices - they all spoke English.

When you were sent to Rabaul, did you know how long you were going to be there?

No, we had no idea, no idea at all. It was just a matter of when the army decided they'd, we'd had enough - or they'd had enough - and wanted us back. And then, when we did all come back in, when was it - it was Easter, so it was in March/April '46, and then I was discharged in October '46.

(5.00) So how long were you actually there?

In Rabaul?

Mm.

We were there about five months I suppose.

Tell me about the theatre that you had as your home, that you showed me the picture of.

Oh, yes, that was great. It was very small, for our type of show, you know, but it was all thatched top roof and all built of timber and all the seats were just benches, rows and rows of benches, but we were under cover, of course. But some nights it'd be pouring with rain and the boys'd be sitting out with their ground sheets and we'd get a bit of the rain. But it was very tiny. We only had one dressing room on the side and that was only sort of shielded off for us and one the other side for the boys, and we had a couple of Japanese prisoners-of-war who used to do the cleaning up and they'd peep round and I thought they thought, 'These odd people, what are they doing?'. They'd be peeping round the baskets at us, you know. It was a dear little theatre. It was just open - open front and timber sides - and just the roof on the top.

I mean, what sort of gear did you have, in terms of lighting and things like that?

Oh, we had our own lighting; we had our own sets of flies - they were in the bus with everything else, and our footlights. We had our own footlights and we had our own flies, as I say, the top lighting, and then there was the boys - well, of course, we had all the instruments for the orchestra, you know.

Any amplification gear?

We had one microphone, and that was all.

And that was for the singers, presumably?

Yep, yes. Well actually, it was for the whole show. It just took enough to go out, you know.

Were you able to be heard right at the back, do you think?

Yes, we were heard. We did ask some of the boys could they hear. The only time they couldn't was if it was pouring and then we'd give it away and do it the next night, you know.

When you say a full orchestra, how many instruments?

Oh, I suppose we had ten, looking back. It's funny. You get so used to being with people you don't ...

Can't seem to ...

No. Golly. (Laughs)

... counting. And what was your song? What was your *a la piece*?

I did the one short number that was written into the show which was - oh Lord, isn't that stupid, know the tune, can't think of the number.

Can you sing it?

No, not now. Oh, those days are gone forever, I'm afraid. I can't even think - isn't that, it was [Grilietto?] was the role that was just written in for it. Oh, I can't think of it. *My Dear Marqu...* oh, from the, wait a minute, *My Dear Marquis* from ...

We'll come back to it.

It'll, it'll come later.

It'll come back. Um, and so you did the same show quite regularly?

We did it every night, yes.

Well, there must have been huge numbers of troops around there?

Oh, there were, there really were. Well, in Rabaul there was the 2/10th, they were there, the transport; the hospital of course. There were a lot of troops on Rabaul. Our - and of course there were a lot because there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Japanese prisoners-of-war there then.

Did you ever perform for them?

Nope. No.

So they got nothing?

They didn't get anything.

And did, the troops, how were the troops sort of taking your show compared to the troops back in Australia?

Ah, on a par I would say. I think they just were glad of a, some entertainment, you know. They, they loved the show. Then we'd have a picture night. We went, I can remember seeing a film; we had a night off - we used to have a closed camp one night a week and we weren't allowed out of the camp - the hospital camp, that is - and we got to a film night and it went on and on and we saw Mildred Pearce[?], so I wrote back - amongst other films - and it teemed. We had ground sheets on and you could hardly see the screen - but we weren't going to miss it - and I wrote back to the family and said, 'Now don't miss Mildred Pearce'. I eventually took my mother to see Mildred Pearce when it opened at the Regent in Sydney. That's how far ahead we got quite a lot of the films. We were lucky.

(10.00) So there was *Maid of the Mountains* and films. What other entertainment was there for troops up there?

Nothing. Oh, except the messes in the various detachments. The 2/10th Transport had a wonderful mess. They had an old searchlight, glass - which was the roof - and palms. They had it done out beautifully. It was a lovely mess. We were invited there a couple of times, but they really had made things as nice as they could, you know, under the circumstances.

And did you have much spare time?

We had a lot of spare time during the day. We always, we didn't do anything during the days. We'd go out on paddle boards on Rabaul or just have a swim and ...

Reading? Can you ...

Oh yes, well what few books were there. I think we exhausted those after about three weeks, because days were boring. But the one funny thing is I have always been a fanatic on pumice-stone for my feet, you see, and it travelled everywhere with me. So my sister, thinking she was doing great strokes, sent me up a parcel, and on the bottom were two new pumice-stones. But she didn't know that to get from, to the beach, from the, across the beach to the water, you walked the whole way over pumice-stone because it was volcanic. (Laughs) So I bought her some home.

Was, did you ever go out from that theatre to perform in outstations, or to troops in the ...

No, no. They came, it was a central point in Rabaul.

So they were brought in from wherever?

Yes. It wasn't such a large island, you know. It wasn't um, they all came in to us.

And was there any attempt to sort of vary the show at all, because you were doing it for so long?

No. Oh, occasionally we'd do just a straight concert, but not very often. It was, most of the time it was just the *Maid of the Mountains*.

There were no acts that you had to ...

No.

Did you socialise much with the troops? Was that permitted?

No, it wasn't permitted. We had to sort of, the girls had to stay, unless George - who was our Sar-Major - or one of the boys came to get us from the camp, we had to stay in the camp, you know. We didn't, we'd have a rehearsal or something like that, but we didn't, we weren't allowed amongst the troops unless we were invited to the mess, but then the boys had to be with us, you know, and you couldn't go out in the jeep without the boys - two boys - with us because of the natives in the jungle.

That would have thrown you a lot on each other.

Yes, and we didn't have - it was very strange that so many people could be together and the atmosphere was the same when we left Melbourne, say, and when we got back to Sydney.

So there were no tensions generated by this?

No, none at all. It really was a great unit. And I think the same thing applied to Peter Finch's unit. They were - John Storr was in that, and Peter of course - and they had the same sort of camaraderie.

Did you ever perform for the New Guinean people?

No. No. We were purely Rabaul.

And they didn't have any New Guinea troops that came in from ...

No. No. We had the Papua and New Guinea troops which were on Rabaul, which I would presume had originally come over and they were just so proud. They used to like seeing the show, but they were so proud of their uniforms and they were all spotless. Our boys used to look like ragamuffins and they looked as if they had stepped out of a band box, you know.

Was their reaction to the show any different from the Australian troops?

No, a little bit of wonderment I think, because we all had makeup on and we didn't have our uniforms on. We had pretty frocks, you know, and I think that was a little bit, but apart from that, no, they - if everyone, once somebody clapped, they were all into it.

When did you - you were actually back in Australia when you heard the war had ended?

No. No. Oh, yes. We were in Australia when war ended.

Did it surprise you to be sent to New Guinea after the war had finished?

No, because the troops were there you see. The occupation troops had to stay there - the troops were there for a long time, and the mopping up went on, you know, so that they had to have some entertainment.

Well the troops took, helped with the cleaning up of Rabaul, did they?

Yes, yes.

It must have been in fairly bad shape when ...

It was not good, was not good at all.

Do you want to go out? [Interruption.]

So how, did you, were you able to get out into the countryside, see anything else of ...

No. We went one trip out into - oh, I've forgotten where it was now - but that was all, because of the jungle and the natives. We, we had, the girls had to be protected, because you had the odd one that was a little peculiar with a way of seeing white girls, you know, but we were - of course the hospital was guarded - but we didn't, we did, oh, we went swimming around by Matupi the volcano.

(15.00) Very clever gentlemen, the Japanese. We couldn't work out what this smell was - apart from the sulphur - and they had dug a little ledges into the side of the volcano, and had forty-four gallon drums in which they cooked their rice. So they were using the heat of the volcano for cooking, these little ledges - it fascinated me.

Very clever. What about your health up there?

Oh, wonderful. Except I got some tropic and sand fly bites which became infected and the penicillin wouldn't touch it up there with the humidity and the moisture, so I was flown home before the girls, the rest of the girls. Some of us came, three of us came down together, and the rest of the girls came down by ship, because I was back virtually in camp by the time the girls got back - the rest of the girls got back.

And your diet, what was that like?

Army. Gro... oh, no, we did have one really good night on, we had Sybil - Colonel Sybil Irving - who was colonel in charge of AWAS - the Australian Women's Army Service - she was our big chief. She came up to check on her girls, and we had the most splendiferous party you've ever seen. We actually had fresh fruit salad, which was wonderful, and I think we had lamb, but oh, it was marvellous. Oh, we thought it was Christmas. That was about the greatest thing we'd had. I gave up breakfast on Rabaul. I used to, I was so sick of baked beans, spaghetti, scrambled eggs made with powdered milk, powdered eggs and rancid butter that I went off breakfast - and it's only latterly I've gone back.

And what for lunch?

Lu... oh, lunch, you'd have suppose it's salad with the lettuce'd be crook, because they'd fly it in from Lae. Very limp. Or you'd get curried meat and vegetables out of the tins, you know. And you always had fruit juice. Well, we had blackcurrant - I think we must have had all the blackcurrant that was ever issued to the army - and it'd get thinner and thinner. It'd be lovely the first day, and then they'd top it up with water, you know, and it'd get paler and paler until you didn't know what it was, but it was wet.

And for dinner?

Again, you might have stea... meat and vegie pie - anyway that you could do meat and vegetables, we had. But we didn't miss it.

But the vegetables were mainly what ...

They were in the cans. They were the canned stuff, you know. But it didn't, I don't think we really worried that much about diet. We had enough. The one thing you did do was the minute you walked in you grasped your piece of bread and butter because otherwise it'd disappear before you sat down, you see.

What, bread and butter was something special, was it?

Oh, we, we always had a slice of toast for breakfast with whatever, and the bread was always on the plate, but you always made sure that you got your piece of bread as you went through to sit down.

And were the canteens wet canteens?

Yes, they were wet canteens, but not on Rabaul. It was issued out. There was no, you couldn't go across and have a drink. The, in the canteen they'd have all the cigarettes, all the deodorants and that sort of thing, but you couldn't, there wasn't a thing as such as a mess where you could go and have a drink. It was only the various companies that had a mess. You just went and got your two bottles of beer, which we invariably gave to the boys anyway.

Yes. So you flew back to Australia a little bit early?

Yes. I flew back and I went into - oh, where did I go first - oh, Concord, that's right - Concord Hospital - and they had injections for all the tropical ulcers, and then I went down

with malaria after about - it was six weeks - about six weeks and I suddenly didn't feel very well and went clunk. They picked me up and I had about eight attacks of malaria until I eventually had the cure in 1948 - '48 in Hobart, and then I was fine. But it was a, I, I had great trouble because with malaria you sweat. I don't. And so I - the fever wouldn't break, you know, it was a - trust me to have something that was very odd.

Did you go back to Pagewood then?

Yes, we went back to Pagewood and I was there at Pagewood until we were discharged. I was on the phones, until we were discharged.

(20.00)How long did that take?

It'd be about three months. The boys were all getting out bit by bit, you know, one by one, and I came out in October.

You had to actually be, wait to be asked to get out, did you?

Yes, wait till your turn. But the boys were naturally anxious, 'cause most of them were musicians - well, all of them - musicians and pros, and they, the public is very fickle. They'd been forgotten, no matter how well known they were in - 'cause some of them had been away since '3... or '40 anyway, in fighting units first and then into entertainment, and most of them - the majority of the boys had been in the Middle East and some had come back and gone into New Guinea in the fighting, and then come back and gone into entertainment, so that they'd, you know, they had a pretty rough time, the boys, that I think they were anxious to get out and take up their profession, because it was a difficult time for them to try and break back in - those, say, the musicians who'd played in a band, obviously somebody else'd gone in there and it's very difficult for them to get back. It was difficult for everyone, I think, because we'd been forgotten in that time.

So what happened when you left the army?

Ah, when I left the army I got a part, a scholarship with the Conservatorium on rehab., but I couldn't afford to take it, so I went back to singing because I didn't have anything there to live on, you know. So I went back and did radio and the Prince Edward stage shows and various things like that.

What sort of effect do you think that army experience had on your career subsequently?

Oh, I think, I think it lessened your chances of getting back. Um, I think, oh, well then I started singing - I went to Perth and did some shows for the ABC and some plays and shows for the ABC Hobart - and then I thought, 'it's time I put some roots down'. I'd travelled, I just felt I needed to settle, you know, and as I say, not live out of a suitcase, so that I only sort of did shows if I was in Perth. We lived - my sister and I lived there for about two, three years - and I did quite a few shows for the ABC over there. But I only did shows there where I was living. I just wanted to just be stable because all the years in the theatre - you're ten weeks here and ten weeks there - and so I think the homebody started to come out a bit then.

And I guess war makes, people were in that kind of mood anyway then, after the war, weren't they?

I think so, I really do. I think they'd all had enough and just, 'Let's settle', you know.

You don't by any chance remember the name of the song that you sang?

No, isn't it - oh, I keep going to say the waltz song from *Romeo and Juliet* and it isn't. It's from *Die Fledermaus* and it's the most well known of all soprano songs, and it's just not coming - isn't it stupid - it must be old age.

And you sang that song night after night?

Yes, night after night after night.

What is it - I mean, did you get bored doing that?

No, because it was all part of the, the jigsaw. It all fitted in and it, and then, if Ino was off, I'd play the maid - we'd do it like that, you know.

So there was some variety?

Oh yes, yes, a little.

Um, I guess in your unit you didn't have any of the sort of female impersonator people, did you?

No, no we didn't have any at all.

Did you ever come across them any of the time?

Oh, yes, I knew - quite a lot of them were in the other detachments, you know, that, er because we didn't need them because we had girls, but the other units - the Waratahs and all the others - they needed 'fems' in it.

Did you have much to do with them?

Only the ones I knew in, sort of in the theatre and then afterwards the Kangaroos - there were quite a few in there - and I caught, we caught up with them from place to place, but we were all going in different directions. We saw more of them back at Pagewood, and then the Kangaroos went on the road - they did, they stayed together and formed a company like the Kiwis, which were New Zealand army show - this is post-army - and they toured through Australia doing a complete show with fems, you know.

That was what they were called is it? Fems?

Yes, fems. At least in our day.

(25.00) And were they part of the group, or were they sort of ...

No, they were part of the group, and everybody was the same. And rightly so - they were the most tremendous female impersonators.

Were most of them just ordinary men?

Yes.

Were some of them homosexual, or ...

Oh, some were, some were, but that didn't worry us. It didn't worry the boys - there was no, no antagonism at all, and that's the way it should be.

It's never been a worry in the theatre anyway.

No, well, golly no - or in any artistic side - because they are so artistic, and apart from that they make females feel like the Queen of the May. And it's very nice to be treated like a female.

Was that not so in the army generally?

Oh, no. In the army we were treated wonderfully. I was talking on life in general, you know. In this day and age, you're sort of expected to do everything yourself because of women's lib, you know, and I still like to have doors opened for me and helped out of things. I am female enough for that.

Right. Well, thank you very much. I think that is nearing the end of this side, but you mentioned that the group you were with was very much like a family. When you were broken up because the war finished, what was that like?

There was a feeling of loss. There was a feeling of moving - almost as if you moved to England and left your whole family behind - because you knew jolly well that you weren't going to see probably three-quarters of those people again - people that had been part of your life for all that time - and it was sad, really. I had a great, personally had a sense of loss. But fortunately, I've sort of kept in touch with Colin Croft and the late Joe Latona - who died in April; Michael Pate, who's my best boy - even his wife knows that - and George Nicholls who, before he went to Brisbane. We sort of kept in touch. The girls married. One's gone to Western Australia and they've moved, but out of our six girls, I'm the only one in Victoria. The rest - 'cause we were a composite company - some from, as I say, from Western Australia, from Queensland, all over the place. But there was still the sense of loss that this had finished - it was the end of an era.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B.