



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Edward Stokes. I'm recording with Una Keast, tape 1, side 1 on nursing.

Una, I just wondered if I could begin by asking you - well, first of all, when you were born and where you were born?

I was born in Tottenham, central New South Wales in 1915.

Right. And did you do your schooling there?

I did my primary schooling, yes, and then high school - I went to PLC Orange.

Right. And from PLC Orange I guess you went from there direct to begin your nursing, did you?

No, I had twelve, or about eighteen months at home and then I went and did my nursing - which I did at the Orange Base Hospital - which was a four year training then.

Right. So I think we worked out before that took us from about 1934 to 1938.

Yes, that was the training period - four years.

Right. Just asking one other thing - this is to do with the war I suppose. Looking back on your childhood period, the general tradition of ANZACs - what Australia - what Australians had done in the first war, was that very much part of your childhood memories, or not - growing up in Tottenham?

Yes, it was and there were quite a number of first world war diggers on the land around there and they were all men that were highly respected.

Right, that's interesting. Well, going on a little bit. You finished your training, I think, in 1938 and by that stage I think you were a sister, is that correct?

Well, staff nurse, as they called us then. You had to be a staff nurse for twelve months before becoming a sister.

Right, but you were a sister by the time war was declared.

Yes.

Well, war's declared. Do you have any memory of the - I mean even perhaps the day - of when war was declared? Do you remember that or not?

I certainly do. I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing.

Can you tell us?

Well, I was visiting in the country and sitting in front of the fire when the news came over and it happened to be the home of a first world war digger and we all just looked at one another and went 'Oh, no'. So next day I went and I got on a train and went to Sydney and out to the Victoria Barracks and enlisted.

Why did you enlist so quickly?

Well, why not? I was brought up to honour my God, serve my King and salute the flag.

Right, that's interesting. Were there ... were there other motives involved, perhaps of - which would have been quite understandable - travel, adventure, that kind of thing? Or was it distinctly patriotic?

No, patriotic, purely.

How did your family react - were they pleased or not?

Well, I had three brothers who also went into the army - so it was - I think my mother was quite proud, really.

Right, there were no brakes put on what you were trying to do by ...

Oh, no, no, no, no. We did our own thing.

Right, just, Una, going on from there. I think you were saying before that you had to be twenty-five before you could actually be, um, um - taken into the army. How did you spend that time after you'd enlisted, until you were twenty-five?

I continued nursing because we were called up from our work to go into the army.

Right. And how did you feel when the news finally came through that you were - you had been called up?

Very happy.

And I think you were saying that you did your service training beginning in June 1940 at the Sydney showgrounds. Just going back to that time, I mean, you, you were a country girl - I don't know if you'd been in Sydney before - but arriving at the Sydney showgrounds at the beginning of this great thing, what do you remember about that?

(5.00) I'd been to Sydney many times.

Well, the showground was a large place. There was an old building - Seppelts Burma building it was called - it isn't there any more. That was used as the hospital and the men were camped in horse stalls, cattle stalls, you name it. They were camped in there and there was a lot of camp sickness. We were camped - or we weren't camped - we were boarded in a hotel opposite the showground. So we had a lot of camp sickness, not - nothing else really.

What you mean by camp sickness?

Sore throats, 'flu, tinea.

Ah, right - just from not ideal living conditions. The, um .... You were suddenly thrown together obviously with a whole lot of other young women, doctors and so on. What do you remember of that process of induction into the army and of, well, the basic service training, if you like?

Well, we didn't really get any basic training. We were all trained nurses to begin with and it was just a matter of learning how to do the army paper work. There was so much of this to be done.

Mm, mm. Did you get any specific medical training, for example in the kinds of situations, say, dealing with casualties and bad wounds and so on?

No, No. That just came naturally, later on.

Do you think you should have? Did people ever feel there should have been training of that sort?

No, I don't think it was necessary.

Right. Well, just going back to that period. Do you have any, um, any other memories of, you know, those first few months ...?

[Laughter.]

At the showground, there.

[Laughter]

What was your social life like for instance?

Oh, the only social .... Well, we had .... Yes, I guess we had a good social life and we were given tickets to go to Randwick every Saturday. But not being a betting woman - once - had a look at it and that was enough. I don't think any of us ever bothered going a second time. Yes, we were invited out from time to time.

Was parade ground drill ever a part of your training, or not?

No. No, not then. No, we found that later on which we resented really. We didn't think it was necessary. (laughs)

I could imagine that. Let's go on a little bit because I know you've got very strong memories of later on. I think it was October, 1940 that you left Sydney in the *Queen Mary* - part of a large convoy en route to Bombay. I'd imagine that was quite a stirring departure.

Well, it was absolutely magnificent. We were supposed to be going quietly and there were hundreds and hundreds of little boats dotted all around the harbour, waving us off. People on all the headlands. It was almost like the Bicentenary 'birthday bash'. There were just people everywhere and, of course, the *Queen Mary* was such a huge vessel. We had various bands on board - army bands - there were seven thousand troops on board and one was a pipe band. I remember going - probably across the Australian Bight - on a Sunday afternoon and the pipe band playing. And I thought, oh dear, my Scottish ancestry, and the tears were rolling down my cheeks. [laughter] No ....

> Sounds very evocative - and bands were - were bands a regular feature of the journey to the Middle East?

Well, yes. And they did their practice and their bugle practice as well as their other routines that they learnt.

> What else do you remember of shipboard life?

Well, the *Queen Mary*, as I said earlier, was a very large ship and we'd come down on to a certain deck and there'd be troops around - just sitting around - gambling, whatever and suddenly 'shush' so there'd be 'shush' from them. I don't know whether it was the language they were using or what it was but we never had foul language used in front of us anywhere at any time.

> That's interesting. Did .... There was a contingent of nurses - quite a lot on the ship I would imagine - and also, far more men. Were there ever any difficulties between men and women on ship or later for that matter where men tried to take advantage of your situation?

No, never. I think they respected the sisters and our matron was very strict. We were not allowed out on deck after dark. I don't know why she had to worry, but she did. Um, no - no problems.

(10.00) Did you eat with the men, or did the nurses eat separately?

We ate with the officers. In the officers' mess.

> That's interesting. And on the journey over were there any alarms or anything like that from the possibility of enemy action, or not?

No, no. But we did fire drill or boat drill, I should say, regularly every morning - complete with life jackets and line up - that was the only drill we did.

> Right. Well, I know you went to Bombay and at Bombay, I think, you trans-shipped and then you made the journey to Suez. Arriving in the Middle East, I think at Palestine, must have been a very, very stark contrast to Australia. What was your first impression of the place - just generally of the Middle East?

Actually, hitting Bombay was the big shock because it is so filthy - or it was so filthy - and I don't think it's any better now, um - since the British have left. It's dirtier than ever I'm told

and I know that what I have seen of India in the last two years it's filthier - the place is falling down. Palestine - well, I think we were over the initial shock.

> Were there any sicknesses after you left Bombay with men - stomach disorders, that kind of thing that had to be treated?

Yes. Yes and there was a certain amount of meningitis on board the ship so we - we did chores - duty.

> Right. Well, going on to arriving in Palestine. What was your first general impression of the area of - and where you were actually sent?

Um, well, I .... On seeing the Arabs and the donkeys and the camels and the filth, I immediately thought of the Bible and started studying the Bible - not studying the Bible but reading it and learning about places we were surrounded by and going to visit so forth and so on. So it was a very interesting period.

> Yes, there must have been a deep sense of the history in the past of the place.

Yes, yes it was so.

> Did you get time to make local excursions and to explore or were you generally so busy that things like that didn't happen?

No, we had time to explore and go off on leave - a week in Jerusalem - a week up in the Lebanon, somewhere like that.

> Mm, mm.

And I had ten days, at one stage, in Cairo. So it sort of broke the monotony - if there was such a thing.

> Mm, mm, that's interesting. The .... Just turning to your first work there, Una. I think you said that when you arrived you were first working at the 2/1st AGH. What's your memory of the physical set up? How well established, or otherwise was it?

Well, it was well established and it was all under canvas - the wards, that I worked in - were under canvas, which were very sound until we had heavy rains. Rains came and then they might collapse. [laughter]

> Was that common there, rain?

Rain - at one time of the year. I think it was around about Christmas time it rained and the pegs would give way in the ground and down would come the tents.

> Around you and your patients?

Yes.

And, um, the work you were doing - was that mostly there .... Were you more dealing with men who'd become ill or men who'd - who were wounded?

Well, it was more camp sickness through Palestine. Eventually troops did come back that were wounded - came back from the desert but it was more camp sickness again.

And what were the main - the main illnesses that you had to cope with?

Well, it'd be the usual eye troubles and gastric troubles, and the odd pieces of surgery that were needed to be done. I can't think of any in particular other than those - depended on which area one worked in really.

Right.

Because there was always gastric troubles no matter where one went.

Mm, mm. Were you .... If you had to, say, if you were on top of the situation or not in terms of coping with the number of men ill or not being able to cope - were you able to keep on top of the situation or not?

Always. Yes, no problems.

Right. Well, going on a little bit. I think you went elsewhere in Palestine for a while but then you were sent to Greece. This is now with the 2/5th AGH. That seems a very interesting story because I understand you were really only there a short time and that there was the anecdote of the man on board the ship. Do you remember how that began - when you first heard you were going to Greece?

(15.00) We didn't know where we were going. We never knew where we were going. We got .... We knew we were moving but we didn't know to where until we were on board ship and this huge convoy, in Alexandria, in Egypt - Gracie Fields warbling away 'Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye' and this gentleman on board ship. I think he was in a naval officer's uniform and he told us that he was surprised to see us going over to Greece when he was going over to organise the evacuation of Greece.

Mm.

So we were in Greece for only about three weeks, I think. As far as I remember.

Mm. What do you remember of your time in Greece? Where were you for a start and what were you doing?

We were at a place called Ekali which was a summer resort for the wealthy from Athens. It was very beautiful, up there. We took over a hotel and some of us lived in - oh, an old barn, I suppose it would - no, that's not right - some old building which had .... For the first time in my life I saw bed bugs - but still we weren't there for long, and we were busy getting wards ready to be occupied which so many of them were before we left and, um .... You know, the Germans would fly over - they'd fly so low you could even nearly see the colour of their eyes.

They were just flying - there was no resistance to them. They just flew right over the top of the trees. They never attempted to strafe us as they went over.

Was the hospital always very well marked with red crosses?

Yes. A red cross on top of the hospital. But I remember on a couple of occasions walking to the hospital and these planes going over. They had every opportunity to strafe me if they wished, but they didn't wait - waste time. There was an aerodrome not far by and we could stand out of the front of the hotel and watch them bomb and blast that away. And they'd come in from behind the hills and swoop down on it, you know, giving it hell as it went.

Were you ever frightened at that time?

No. No. And at night some times - the last night - we could hear the bombs or guns being fired and you could see the flare in the skies at night but we knew .... We were waiting to go out, waiting just to be told to move. We were sleeping - three in a single bed, if you can imagine it - and fully clad, excepting for shoes and hats in case we had to go at a minute's notice. And when we went we were told to take just what we could carry which is what did.

We might pick up on the - that story in a moment, Una, because I know you were ...

I got carried away.

No, no. Yes, well I'll pick up on the story of that evacuation in a moment, Una. Just going back to the hospital in Greece. Were you there treating men who were sick or wounded, or were you simply establishing empty wards, so to speak?

Well, we established the hospital but before we left the wounded were coming in. Because they were well and truly retreating, despite what we heard on the radio that we were gaining ground - it was not true.

And what's your memory of that - of dealing with large numbers of wounded men for the first time?

Well, we didn't have large numbers, but they were coming in. But we didn't have the large numbers. The men who stayed behind got the large numbers in.

Perhaps, if I could just ask you this now, because it was, in a sense, during this period, anyway, that you had your first contact with the casualties of war - if we could put it that way - men who had been wounded and so on. Was it difficult - were there emotional conflicts that sometimes made it hard for you to carry out your medical nursing in terms of feeling great sympathy for individuals? Just being horrified by the condition they sometimes arrived in, or not?

No, I don't remember that. I do remember being emotionally upset on several occasions when these kids of seventeen years of age - under age in the army - who would be delirious, or

dying and want their mothers, you know. And you would have to pretend you were their mum. That was hard.

Mm, sure.

Yeah. That was one of the hardest things. I think that and seeing the prisoners of war later on when they came back were the two most emotional points.

(20.00) Mm, that's interesting. Well, we'll certainly, of course, talk about the prisoners of war later on, Una. Well, just going back to the story then. You are evacuated and I think you are told you can only take what you could carry. Tell us the story of that. That was quite revealing, I thought - the - of how I think, things gradually had to be abandoned en route to a port.

Mm. Well, when we left the hotel to go, we went to an olive grove - travelled some time - where we disembarked and waited to board a train. While we were waiting, we were told the train line had been bombed so we couldn't go that way. So, later on we got back into these big iron transports - iron sides - and we travelled all night in those. Next morning, we disembarked into a Greek cemetery and during the night, we had had to slow down because there were dead mules on the side of the road - the Maltese people had been using - they were the muleteers and they had been bombed going down the, oh, what do you call it - the isthmus in Greece. So we spent the day in the cemetery. We hadn't had a wash for several days because we weren't allowed to take off our clothes but we managed to find a well in the cemetery and we used our tin hats to lower them in and bring up some water so that we could wash our face and hands. We were strafed by the Germans while we were there and then ...

Could you tell us about that? I mean, how close a call was that?

Well, it wasn't close. I really don't think they were after us. I still maintain they weren't, because we were lying flat down in the cemetery. I think they were just shooting up anything they thought might be there.

Mm, mm.

Um. So at night we went on, so far in these big transports again - and we were told - we came to a point of disembarking again and we were told we had a three mile walk. Now, I might say, that that three miles was not three miles - it was one, if that. Anyhow, bags became very heavy and people were throwing things out left, right and centre. When we arrived at the fishing caique - Greek boat - the order came back for men to throw out kit bags - not to take kit bags on board - there wasn't room. So this was dutifully done. But there was one colonel - Colonel MacDonald - who had carried his own kit bag all the way, so he threw his out. Well the officer that gave the order for all bags to be abandoned said to his batman, when he came on and who had been carrying his kit bag for him: 'Where is my kit bag?' 'Oh,' said the batman, 'You gave the order to discard them'. 'Go and get my kit bag' says the colonel. So this poor guy, off he went and he came back with a kit bag and in the daylight whose name is on it but MacDonald. [Laughter]

That's rather a nice story ...

Oh, yes. He was such a fine man.

Some loyalty to the right sort of officer.

Yes, wonderful.

Going on, Una, I think it was on HMAS *Voyager* that took you from there to Crete and I think you were in Crete for only a week.

Mm.

But conditions, I think, were rather poor - was that correct?

Oh, yes, they were poor.

What were they like?

Well, we didn't have anywhere to wash to begin with, so the only thing you could do was go down to the sea and strip off and .... What we didn't know were the troops up on the headland with binoculars and here were we trying to have a wash in the sea.

[inaudible]

[Laughter] We were in a shed, a large barn and given a blanket - that was our bed on the concrete floors. I was one who happened to be on night duty - there were no beds for the patients - they just had mattresses on the floor. And, those of us on night duty slept in slit trenches - we found that was softer than the concrete floor and people who were not working were also talking - so it was rather difficult to sleep there. It was either there or on the beach.

Mm.

The troops - so many of them - were too tired, too weary, too exhausted to even take their clothes off so we would get their boots off for them and they'd just lie there, you know - because the order had been given in Greece for walking wounded to get themselves out ....

Mm..

And those ....

How badly wounded were some of these men?

Excuse ....

(25.00)Just continuing after a pause.

Do you have any other memories of that one week in Crete, Una?

Um. No. It was hard work but it was satisfying work - as nursing nearly always is satisfying - at least I always found it so.

It must have been very difficult, I'd imagine - there was obviously quite a lot of movement in your time in the Middle East - I mean, Greece, Crete for a week, and so on. Was it difficult for the organisation to get itself together and really do much effectively in a week? How well organised were you?

Well, I think the army did an amazing job, the way they organised things like this. We, of course, never knew what was going on. We felt we should have been told but I can understand why they didn't tell us.

Mm.

But the colonel and the matron, they always knew what was going on.

And, for instance, when you were there for a week. Did you have the supplies and things also arriving that you needed to work effectively, or not?

Well, there was a British hospital there, so we really worked for them. It was not an Australian hospital and they had been there - I don't know how long they'd been there before we arrived - but that's where the mattresses came for - from - for the men, and tents.

I see, so you were really working within an established - established framework. If we can go on a little bit. I know it was from Crete that you went to Alexandria. That was quite an interesting story, I thought, of the people who saw themselves in a special category. Can you tell us what you remember of that voyage?

Well, the nursing sisters were all on board one ship with walking wounded and on the other side of the wharf was a ship with British subjects on board. And many of these British subjects didn't speak English but there they were - getting out. They'd come across Europe, many of them, and they'd got from Greece - to Greece, and then from Greece to Crete and going from there to Egypt. They arrived on board with chicken, champagne and their dogs - and they wouldn't allow us into the dining room. Oh well, I'm wrong, I should have gone back ....

It's all right. Don't worry about the order, just go back.

These people demanded they have so many - nursing sisters on board ship with them. So some of us were sent from this one side of the wharf to the other one - onto this other ship - ten of us - and we didn't have any cabin. The OC troops and the adjutant - they vacated their cabins and that gave - two girls to a bunk - and it finished up two of us were left sleeping on the floor, or the deck as they say in the navy. During the night there was a U-boat scare - and people were screaming, and racing up and down. I can vague... faintly hear it. And then the OC troops came in and he couldn't waken us so he put the lifebelts on us - lying on the deck and we were still in them in the morning. You know, we were tired and we just didn't ....

You'd just had it.

Yeah.

I'd imagine there must have been some resentment between yourself and these - I mean the nurses and these people who were - were rather lauding it over you.

Well, they'd ring their bells from their cabins and say bring me this, bring me that, you know, and people .... One woman with her dog said to the adjutant: 'My dog has not had a bath for three days. What will you do?' And he said, 'Madam, there is plenty of water over the side of the ship'.

And do you have any other memories of that voyage to Alexandria, Una?

Well, we had .... I remember one of the girls on board - and she would take the children's nappies and wash them. And dry them in the engine room. And yet we were treated as stewardesses by these people, you know.

Mm.

We also had on board, war correspondents - including Chester Wilmot. And we arrived in Alexandria - we couldn't get out of our cabin - the - um, General Burston was on the wharf and he called out: were there any nursing sisters on board, and somebody said, 'Yes, ten of us'. And we told him we couldn't get off, that the gangways were packed with these people who wouldn't allow us out of our cabin. He sent troops on and they got us off. So we were first off and then they lined up the war correspondents and we watched them come off - racing around grabbing taxis and gowries [?] and looking for telephones to get their messages through. They had tried to drill us on what our experiences, but we knew by this not to say anything to the press.

Mm. Was ...

It was always so exaggerated or distorted, so we didn't say anything to them.

Were those official orders that you not talk to press people or not?

No, we were never given the orders but we knew what they were like - are still, I think.

Yes, well there is always a pressure to produce a story, isn't there?

Mm.

Just a moment, Una.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: This is Side 2, Tape, 1,
Una Keast.

Well, going on a little bit, Una. We might perhaps just skate over the last period in the Middle East. I know some of your nurses went to Eritrea. You stayed in Palestine with the 2/ ....

1st.

1st, for some months I think it was. Were there any particular recollections of that period?

No, not really. No, it was just all part of the routine.

Right. Then I know you did come back to Australia via Colombo - convoy that went to Adelaide. What was it like arriving back in Australia - you'd been away for quite some time and seen things that probably some women would never see. How did you feel?

Well, I think the Pope was not the first one to kiss the ground of Australia because a lot of us were very happy to put foot ashore.

Mm. Had there been much tension on the voyage? I mean was there fear of attack and so on, or not?

Well, we always had good convoy cover from destroyers and cruisers - always. We never had any problems. We had started at one stage to go to Java and all of a sudden bunting was flying on all the ships and a u-turn was done and we went racing - scurrying back for shelter. Having come from Bombay we went to Colombo but that was because, as I said, we were going to Java, but that was because of the Coral Sea Battle - I think it was that was going on. I may have the wrong name but there was a battle going on with the Japanese and they were in retreat. So that is why we hurried away.

Well, having got back to Australia I know that it was at Armidale the 2/5th AGH reformed. Was there any - what are your memories of that time, was there much reorganisation, training for example or was it just a matter of getting people together again and so on?

Well, it was really just a matter, as you say, of getting people together and reforming. We had a colonel who was very keen on having us march which was the first time [laughter] - still the magpies got him when he was out on the ground one day so he didn't worry us too much after that.

[inaudible]

No. And people of Armidale were very kind - they really were.

I gather drill - marching - wasn't seen as, well, particularly appreciated.

Well, I don't think it was necessary for us to do it. We were never on parade, but we were camped first of all in the tote house on the racetrack, so the drill was done on the racetrack. We later moved to the dog, um, trails - dog, oh, what do they call them - where they race the

dogs - and the hospital was on the showground - all under canvas. So we spent a winter there before going up to New Guinea.

While the hospital was set up there were you dealing with men who had been evacuated from war areas or just ...?

No.

Dealing with your own sick and so on.

Yes. The boys coming across from Singleton and various places depending where, you know, the nearest camp or - camps at Tamworth, Singleton and they - a lot of them would come to us.

Just - and this is routine medical work. Of course, you were going to New Guinea. I don't know if you knew that yourself at the time but obviously the authorities did.

Mm.

Did you have any, um, specific training then in terms of tropical diseases and sicknesses?

No.

How much experience did you all have about things, such as malaria, and all the other tropical illnesses?

Well, we hadn't come in contact with them. But we soon learnt to deal with them. The doctors were the ones who ordered the treatment and then we just carried on from there.

(5.00) Right. Did you think it would have helped if you'd had some kind of training in terms of tropical illnesses, or not?

I don't think so. I think with nursing - one of the main things is common sense and tender loving care. I think those are the main ingredients to make a nurse a nurse.

That's interesting. Well, going on a little bit. I think it was in January, 1943 that you went to New Guinea. You were saying it was a nightmare, why?

Well, conditions were so hard. I was there for about a week, I think, and not even, you know, acclimatised and still becoming very dehydrated in that climate. I went to work for about six weeks at the 2/9th AGH - working twelve hours a night and coming off duty and the food was appalling - to have a breakfast - I mean, you had either half a pear which we had every morning for breakfast for three weeks, or baked beans on toast which we had every morning for seven weeks. And then to climb to our tent which was probably a one in three grade up the mountain side - slipping - going up two steps, coming back one, eventually getting up to the top. And then having to come down again to shower and then to climb back up the hill again. And um, noise, noise the whole time because the air force were busy - they were

buzzing around and - the heat and the humidity, and we were in tents, working in tents, living in tents, sleeping in tents. It was all under canvas.

Yes, well, I can imagine it would have been a real strain.

Yes.

The first six weeks, I think, you were with the 2/9th at what was called 'Seventeen Mile'. Let's try and capture a little bit of that in some detail. Could you tell us a little bit more about your tents - how they were set up? Were they big tents, comfortable tents, or was it all rather squalid?

They were called EPIP tents. E for Egyptian, what else the rest was I've forgotten now. And they accommodated four people - four beds. We had canvas stretchers. There was no furniture. There were two poles in them and the wire went across the poles and onto that hung our uniforms. Um. What else about the tents? Well, that was about it. We had mosquito nets, of course - we had to sleep under those. They came down at sunset - by sunset, they had to be down, same as our sleeves. We had to be in long drill pants and jackets, boots and gaiters before sunset.

And that was really rigidly enforced, was it?

Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, for our own benefits - with the malaria.

You were saying, Una, that food was rather bleak and that, of course, was a comment I have heard before. Where did you eat? What were mess facilities like?

Well, often one would come off duty and walk through the mess and say: 'What's on tonight?' 'M and V'. Meat and vegetables. 'Okay, thank you very much. I'll have an atebrin'. Swallow an atebrin which was the anti-malarial drug and continue on. So that we were hungry and I think after being hungry for so long one's tummy shrinks and - I found it very difficult when I came home to eat a decent meal. As a matter of fact, I was on my way back again before I started to eat properly, but I know I was - had lost over a stone in the first twelve months up there and I'm not a big person.

No. And was there ever any black market of decent food, while you were there, or not?

No. Never saw anything. The Americans were being well fed and ships that came into port - there was a Greek ship used to come now and again - and they were very kind to us - knowing we had been in Greece - and they would supply us with a sheep or some fresh fruit, something like that. So that was always very pleasant.

What about the eating for the men who were either ill or wounded - obviously not men who were too ill to eat - but when they were recovering - nutrition is obviously critical. Did men get the food they needed, or not?

Well, I think there was special food flown up for them. And we had a dietary sister who looked after things for them and she did her best.

(10.00) Mm. So men who were recovering ...

Yes.

Recuperating ...

Yes.

They were better fed ...

Yes.

Than yourself.

Yes. But I think one of our biggest problems was lack of refrigeration. We had old kerosine refrigerators and they were called 'Silent Nights' - they belonged - Hallstrom's - the first refrigerators in Australia. And we couldn't leave them closed long enough for the water to get cold. You have to remember there were no soft drinks - it was just water with lemon or orange cordial.

Did the water have to be boiled?

No, it was chlorinated, I think. I'm sure it was chlorinated because we couldn't always drink it. And I know we had to walk through chlorine from the shower to get out because of tinea and we had, at one stage, a colonel who'd been a dermatologist and he was very keen to keep this tinea out. So the chlorine was there to ....

Right. The conditions in the hospital itself, both at Seventeen Mile and perhaps later when you were at Bootless Bay with the 2/5th. One sees photographs of wards with beds, literally, standing in the mud. We had a look at a photograph a while ago in your book of the two sisters wading through water. Was that common, or was that uncommon?

Well, we wore .... It was uncommon, really, depending on where one was. We didn't always wear gumboots. We wore boots. Men's boots - at one stage - light heavy boots. And then, I think it was the Parker company made some lighter boots for women. But we had ditches running through the wards, of course, they were dirt floors - ditches running through them would take the water out. We worked by lantern light - paraffin light - at night. I worked in a ward that had sixty beds, but I had a hundred patients. Forty were strung in stretchers underneath the bed and the two - the double decker would share the one mosquito net.

Mm.

It was grim.

Mm.

Really grim.

Yeah, that figure is very, very high, for the number of people you were caring for compared with the official statistics I've seen that I think were, you know, ratios far less extreme than that. Was that typical to be so hard pressed?

This would have been .... I can't remember which campaign. It was during the campaigns - while they were on that we would get the large numbers.

Mm.

But that was really the only time that I had, um, double deckers to care for - double decker accommodation.

Right. I'm might just come back to talk - I want to talk specifically about some of the campaigns and wounds and sicknesses and so on in a minute, Una. But in amongst all this, you know, the difficulties and so on, was there any time for you to relax - did you have any - get away from it?

Yes.

Did you have any social life?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We had, we had - well I remember having a week in Jerusalem and I had a week - ten days in Cairo. After I'd finished working at the 2/9th AGH the matron decided I needed some rest and sent me off ....

This was after the six weeks at ....

Yes.

Seventeen Mile.

Yes, yes.

And what did you do?

Well, she sent me up to one of the CCSs to relax for a week before coming back to work.

During the general round of - for instance, when you returned to Bootless Bay, near Port Moresby - during a typical working week, did you get much time off just to yourself, to relax, to do things, or was it constant work?

Oh no. We had our time off. We - I don't remember - I think we worked about ten hours a day. But during the campaigns it would be twelve and I know that on one occasion we worked around the clock. Some of the wards were so busy, staff worked .... I can never remember whether it was the 32nd or the 33rd battalion that had a bomber crash on them, when they were ready to take off to go to Wau and they were - the men were laden with hand grenades and goodness knows what not and this bomber crashed on them. And we got them in - what - the remains - and the doctors worked in shifts around the clock in the theatre and the girls in the wards worked around the clock. Padres - everybody was into it.

(15.00) Some of them were so badly burnt they - there was no way they could even hold a cigarette - and you'd stand and hold a cigarette and let them have a puff. So I mean, it depended on the conditions as to how long one worked. And then, of course, there were other times, such as when we came back from Crete - we didn't have any clothes - so we had to wait for uniforms to be made and that was - took about five or six weeks, I think.

And you couldn't work until you had uniforms?

We had no - we didn't have any uniforms.

Why couldn't you work without uniforms?

We had nothing to wear.

No, obviously you had your own sun clothes - civilian clothes, what ever.

No. No civilian clothes - oh, no. We came out of Greece in what we stood up in.

Mm, mm, right.

Plus a bathing suit if you could hang onto it. So we used to go to the beach and that was it - until we could get some clothing.

Right, that's interesting. Going back to New Guinea, Una. You were recalling that particular incident and also the general - generally being understaffed. Was the understaffing at periods when you were absolutely flat out - was that more generally related to sudden outbreaks of a particular disease or was it more generally related to a campaign or some disaster?

It was related to campaigns.

Mm. Well, I might just ask you again here to although ....

As I said the disaster on the plane - I mean that plane - landing on those men, that was a disaster.

But it related to people - wounded men - rather than ill men.

Mm.

I did ask you this before, but I might just ask you in the context of that particular story about the aeroplane and the men with severe burns and so on. I mean .... Obviously some of these men were horrifically injured, burnt, whatever. How did you cope with that? How did you cope with seeing people who'd been reduced to a kind of mockery of what human beings should be?

I think one learns that very early in nursing - to hide one's feelings, and I think we were often - people would say we were hard - but we weren't hard, we just learnt to hide emotions. And after one would retire from work of an evening, you know, then maybe the tears would flow,

the emotions would take over - but never on duty - one never showed it. Self control, I think one might call it.

> Would - did you - did nurses talk to one another much just as women to women about that kind of thing - to unload your emotions, or not?

Oh, yes. Yes - go to your tent and talk to your tent mates and they'd give you their doings of the day - what had gone on.

> What about other people such as padres, did they play a role in supporting the supporters - helping people like yourself or did they tend to give their time to - more to people that were actually wounded and so on?

Well, I don't think the padres were needed amongst the nursing staff for giving support. I don't think we needed it. We had ourselves to talk to and they spent their time with the wounded and I think they did magnificent jobs. They, and the Red Shield people - absolutely marvellous.

> Were there ever cases of nurses who simply broke either under the physical strain or the emotional strain of facing the kinds of things you had to face? And if they did break what was done?

I've never known of anyone who broke - never heard of a soul.

> In your unit or throughout the whole ...

Throughout. I never heard of anyone who cracked up. Girls would develop malaria and they would be sent home, or if they were married they got sent home. And people would disappear every now and again for some reason, I never did find out why, but we - our - we weren't to ask why anyhow. This is one of the things - many years ago one didn't ask questions. Things were just accepted and we did as we were told and that was that.

> Mm, sure.

Now, of course, people are much more inquisitive, aren't they?

> Yes. Here am I. (laughs) Going on .... Let's go on to something else, Una. The .... It must sometimes, I imagine, have been very difficult when you had a large influx of men who'd been in a campaign and arrived wounded at a hospital - to order them. I mean obviously there must have been some cases who simply wouldn't survive and time was no doubt more valuable with other people. How, how were those decisions made and who made those decisions as to the kind of ordering of treating people in crisis situations?

I really don't understand your question. I'm sorry, um ....

(20.00) Sorry, it was a bit round about. When you had a sudden influx of wounded men from a campaign ....

Yes.

How did doctors, and were nurses involved, decide who should be treated first?

That would have been decided further up the line before they came to hospital - up in the RAPs and the CCSs before they got to us. They often came in with tags - a coloured tag on them to denote emergency or urgency. But otherwise, I mean, it was just a matter of - just going ahead.

Right. If you thought back to the different situations of dealing with men who were - who'd been wounded - or dealing with men who were sick with tropical diseases - which was harder? Or did it just vary from person to person and situation to situation?

Um. Well, the tropical diseases were bad, especially scrub typhus. Malaria - you knew that they would get over it, probably, and the dysentery cases - I didn't work with dysentery ward - but they were very sick for a long time, a lot of those men - really ill. And the surgical people - once you could get them fit enough to be sent home, they were sent home, either flown or by hospital ship, so we had no way of, sort of, following up on them.

Whereas the tropical disease men stayed until they were ...

Well ...

Cured, did they?

It depended. If they had scrub typhus they came home too. Malaria - they stayed, and the dysentery people - they stayed. Yes.

I understand scrub typhus was particularly severe - how did that affect men and what could you do as a nurse?

Well, all we could do was keep the fluids going into them. You have to remember, we didn't have, um .... Penicillin came in while we were in New Guinea. The first time we ever saw any of the antibiotics, but prior to that we had the sulphur drugs which were useful with the dysentery people. Getting back to your question - how did we deal with scrub typhus - well, it was just straight nursing, keeping the fluids going to them, keeping them in bed - there wasn't - and getting them home, back to Australia as soon as we could.

Right. And with malaria, and dysentery - were two other key illnesses, of course. What were the routines, there to deal with dysentery and malaria?

Well, I didn't work with the dysenteries - they were always in a ward - separate. They were isolated from everybody else, so I can't tell you about their routine, other than I do know they used to feed them on - at one stage - epsom salts - would you believe it? Malaria - it was a matter of piling blankets on them and keeping them warm while they were having their rigours and then getting fluids into them. There was nothing else we could do for them.

Mm, mm. I'd imagine sometimes there were cases where men were really suffering severely in terms of their minds through trauma of injury or severe

cases of illness and so on. How could you help there? What did nurses do where men were really at their wits end or perhaps beyond?

Well, the main thing was to try and talk - counsel them. If they were what we would say a psychiatric case, they were dealt with by a psychiatrist - sent home. But men were very strong - mentally - on the whole, they were very strong. It just used to amaze me how much they could take and not crack.

Mm.

The human body - oh ....

Mm, sure.

And they wouldn't - they seemed to have a fear of letting their mates see them if they even thought of cringing, you know. I think that was it.

Mm.

There was always, 'Oh, Joe is worse than I am', you know. 'Joe Blow - he's much worse than I am - don't worry about me', and this was the attitude of so many of them.

Mm. A very positive attitude.

Oh, yes.

(25.00) Let me just ask you about the doctors. I'd imagine some of the doctors were quite young - just in terms of people, you know - the necessity of the situation. Were there ever situations where either you as an individual or nurses you knew - disagreed with a doctor about the handling of particular cases?

No. Not to my knowledge. I think, in our training in those days - my day - we didn't question doctors.

Mm.

Simple as that.

Yeah.

Later on, of course, as I got older it was different but in the war years when I was so young - it was .... Didn't question.

Right. Another issue was, did you ever have to deal with men - Japanese - who'd been captured.

Yes. I did. In Morotai we had a Japanese compound right by the hospital so they would come over and be treated as outpatients and then go back again. So I saw a few that way.

Mm. How did you feel about it?

I didn't have any love for them. Don't ask me to elaborate on that.

Oh, no. That's, that's, of course, completely understandable given what had happened.

Well, I saw so many, you know, men come in who'd been maltreated - not just Australians, but Indians as well - who'd had green grass tied around their legs in squatting positions and then the grass would shrink and they were cut right in, you know - oh - cruel. The things - and we used to hear the stories of what they had done and it was just unbelievable. My advice to anyone who has any love for Japanese is to read 'The Last Journey' - Sandakan.

Mm.

It is a book everybody should read.

Mm, sure. The ....

Have you read it?

No, but I do know a little bit about the story.

Well, we did the - we got a few of the boys from there - there weren't many left, I think it was only six left, I'm not sure how many we got in - may have been four - and found it hard to believe what they told us. We also had troops in from Ambon with acutely distended stomachs and feet and - from beri-beri and others of them were gaunt like Belsen horrors.

Just to clarify for the transcription - this was when you were at Morotai.

Mm.

And how did you ...? Do you remember other things about that?

About which?

The people who came from Ambon and Sandakan.

Oh, I remember the shocking state they were in. The .... We later on got boys from Changi, too, and they were not as badly - well, they may have been as badly treated because some of them had been on Burma railway. But when they arrived to us they were not in as bad a condition as they were - the others were.

Mm.

So we kept some of these others for some days to try and get them stabilised on some food which was carefully - everything was monitored - what they had to eat and drink and they weren't allowed to eat this, they weren't allowed to eat that, in case they had reactions to this food.

Mm.

Um.

Perhaps I might ask you a little bit more about the prisoner of war returnees later when we're talking about Morotai, Una. The .... I've asked you about the Japanese and so on, were they - was this during your Port Moresby period or when you were at Morotai?

Morotai, Morotai - we came up against the Japanese.

How did other people feel about that. For example, Australian troops?

Oh, I think their love was on a par with mine, at that stage. I think the average Australian really det... hated them, you know.

Did they still feel they should be given medical treatment, or not?

I don't know. But of course with the Geneva Convention they had to be. We stuck by that, whereas they did not.

Mm. Sure.

Oh, they were given all the rights, not only there but in Cowra when they were there and I nursed Japanese troops, at one stage, when I was at Goulburn before going up to Morotai.

Mm.

And they had the same treatment as the Australians had.

Mm. That's interesting. I guess as it should be even if the other side hadn't done that.

But, we did learn that the Japanese in the compound at Morotai had better food than we were having.

Why was that?

Because they were protected under the Geneva Convention.

Mm. It sounds odd. Just a minute.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Una Keast; Nursing, tape 2, side 1 or side 3 of the whole lot.

Right. This is just going on. During the period in New Guinea around Port Moresby, Una, I understand there was a certain amount of air activity.

Well, we were not bombed, but, mm, excuse me, there were plenty of dog fights would go on - at night. We'd see the RAAF and the Japanese fighting overhead. So lights had to be put out which - at this stage we were using lanterns for working in - so they were turned very dimly.

Right. Yes. If you had to look back and think about the most difficult things for coping with in New Guinea - the heat, the wetness, inadequate equipment, understaffing, that kind of thing - what would stand out in your mind as the things that made your life really the most hard to bear?

Well, it .... One thing you didn't mention there was the stench - the stench of the jungle.

And what was that like?

Oh, it was vile and it got into all our clothes and any books that we might have had - they smelled for years.

What exactly was the stench of the jungle like?

Well, just like that - a stench all to itself. New Guinea - I just think of the hard work, slog and the heat and the lack of sleep and the lack of adequate food - everything - adds up to just New Guinea to me.

Mm. So when you left to come back to Australia, on your first leave, that was with some joy I guess.

Only because I knew I was going back again. I checked that before I came on leave that I would be going back to my unit. I don't know - somebody told me that there were only eight of us who started as original girls who finished up with the unit and I was one of the eight. But I don't know whether that's correct - I've never checked the names.

That's interesting. Did you feel a - there was no feeling that you'd done your bit and that you could return to Australia.

On no, I was part - I was part of that unit. We were a family. We still are.

Tell us about that. You mean between nurses and themselves or nurses, doctors, the whole lot?

The whole lot. We're still a family and we have a reunion once a year on the - near to 19th October every year and it is amazing how many people turn up to that luncheon.

And the old days are just there again, are they?

Oh, some of it. Yes, some of its the present and some the future.

Oh, I can understand that because it must have been a very sort of tightly bonding period. But ....

But you don't remember the hard times so much as the funny times - that's when you get together and start chortling about funny bits and pieces.

Mm. What are the funny memories?

Oh, dear. Well, one very funny memory I have. When we went out on the fishing caique to go on to the HMAS *Voyager* and I was carrying a kit bag, haversack, respirator, water bottle, wearing a tin hat ...

This is just to clarify - leaving Greece to go to Crete.

Yes. Yes. And the boats were bobbing up and down on the water and a fellow said to me, on the *Voyager*, who didn't know they were getting nurses. He said, 'Give me your hand, mate', and I said, 'Oh, I'm all right, thank you. I'll be right'. And he said, 'Struth, bloody women'. So that was okay. Then somebody trying to get on went down between the two ships - or the caique which was not a ship - it's a boat - and went down into the sea - I've never seen anything so quick as these seamen. They got their legs and kept the boats apart with their legs while another fellow dropped down and pulled this woman up, who happened to be an English army nursing sister.

(5.00) So that night we - when we went on board we were taken down into the boardroom on the *Voyager*, and that was no good to me, just sitting there at a table or slinging in a hammock, so four of us went up on deck and we slept up on a torpedo tube - where we could get some air and the - the boys were there all night - they hadn't seen Australian women for eighteen months and they just wanted to talk, so we let them talk and I'm not a tea drinker but my goodness me that night I was full of 'char' I think they called it - great mugs of char kept coming and they wrapped us in blankets and eventually I think around about four o'clock we managed to get some sleep. But that was a funny thing - that was a funny night.

Sure. And what about New Guinea, you know, it was obviously trying to say the least but were there light-hearted moments there - any particular incident that you might remember?

I remember some happy times in New Guinea. I was keen on horse riding and one of my friends also, and these fellows would bring us down these horses which were supposed to be pack horses and we'd go riding. Darkness comes very quickly there - sometimes we'd find our way home by lightning along the ridges - get down. They were enjoyable times. There was also a club in Port Moresby where we could go dancing.

Ah. We went to a plantation one day and this owner of the plantation was telling me about - his wife hadn't had any visitors - oh, this was pre-war this happened - hadn't had any visitors for some time but anyhow a ship put in and they came up to - these passengers came up to the plantation. So she got the boy to bring in the tea and when he went to pour it, it wouldn't pour, so he tried again, still it wouldn't come out. So he put his mouth to the spout and blew out the cockroach. So. Another one of his stories was about him not bringing the toast to breakfast ...

Mm.

And finally the wife, his wife went out to see why such a delay in getting toast and here's the boy sitting out in front of the fire with the toast between his toes - as a toast rack still making another with the other foot. You know, making toast.

He must have had fairly tough feet.

Yes.

Mm. Okay, on a little bit, Una, I know after the first long stint in New Guinea you went back on leave to Australia but then you were returned, I think for six months to ...

Seven.

Right, to Bootless Bay, first I think.

Oh, um, oh, I beg your pardon. Yes, six months. Yes, yes.

Were there any particular memories of that second period near Port Moresby?

No - just carried on from where we'd left off.

And then after that you did go to - again I think on leave and that was the period when you were at Goulburn.

Yes.

Are there any particular memories of that?

Well, it was very cold. I can tell you.

It seemed bit of a ...

Very cold.

A bit of a bleak place.

Winter - after being in New Guinea for eighteen months - and we had big coal fires in quarters and we'd take it in turns - one would sleep for three hours and then get up and stoke the fire and then the other one - they were huge rooms, huge, high ceilings and big old coal fires. Rounds were done on a bicycle, at night - huge area around.

What rounds - to see ...?

Well, to check on the wards. There weren't that many sisters on night duty but there were a lot of orderlies on night duty and one would drive - ride around and just check and make sure everything was okay and move onto the next one.

And were the cases - were they men who had been evacuated or just servicemen who were ill in Australia?

Oh, some of both - psychiatric and skin - and some of the Japanese who had misbehaved themselves at Cowra.

Mm. And what were the psychiatric cases like once they got back to Australia?

Mm. Well, I don't remember whether the ones that I had to deal with - whether they'd been - what they'd been through, I really don't remember about them, that much about them.

Okay. Excuse me. Well perhaps we might move on from there because I know it was a reasonably short period. I think from there you went - from Goulburn you went - in about April '45, by this stage you were a captain - to Morotai. How do you remember the place? What was it like arriving there?

(10.00) White coral, island - we were on the peninsula. Very pretty.

Mm.

Um. Under canvas, of course. Um ....

Was it - in terms of the general environment - was it better or worse than New Guinea?

Oh, it was an improvement on New Guinea. Because it was - we were right on the water's edge and we could just come off duty and go for a swim. We couldn't swim without shoes because of the coral - it was very, very bad - the coral. Well, we were on a coral atoll, actually. But the swimming was delightful - the fish up there, you know - we think our Great Barrier Reef is something, but it was just so wonderful up in Morotai. We didn't have snorkels and glasses but we used our respirator face pieces to view the fish and they were so quiet and so tame - nobody had blasted them or worried them.

Mm.

And at low tide one could walk out - oh - more than fifty yards but when the tide was in, it would sometimes come right up and into our mess, so it was a matter of tuck the feet up, you know, when the king tides came. Well, then of course, it would - the drains that had been blasted around the wards to let the rain out, then would fill up with the king tides and that water would back up, so that's where we would have the floods in the wards.

Mm. This is a photograph I remember in the book of the girl ...

Yes.

Girls and the ...

Gumboots.

And the gumboots.

Yes, that's it. But it was pretty up there. It was very. very different from New Guinea but it was hot. You know it was what - only two degrees north of the Equator but a different heat. It wasn't .... And there wasn't the stench of the jungle - it wasn't the same.

I suppose also you had sandy ground rather than muddy ground which would be ....

Well, it was white coral ground, really.

Ground, ground-up coral.

Yes.

But rather like sand ...

Yes.

Not mud to ...

No.

So it would soak up the water.

That's right.

Um. And I guess you had steady sea breezes, did you - to cool it?

Yes. Yes - we did.

What about when you had - in bad weather. As I understand it, it's a very low lying island - what happened?

Well, apart from the rain and the sea backing up. Sometimes the tents would give way and collapse, but usually they were anchored to forty-four gallon drums on the corners. And I remember one night going to hear some records and it was - oh, dear - um, Grieg's piano concerto was being played on a tape - on a record at least - we didn't have tapes then. Somebody came into me and said, 'Your tent is down'. So I ignored it. I didn't know what they meant. The third time I heard it I said, 'Oh, no', and I raced off to find my tent flat and that day I had spent two and half hours with a flat iron and a primus - you know what a primus is?

Mm.

Ironing my slacks and jackets and here they were all flat in the mud and the end of the bed poking out in the rain. So ....

So how did you spend that night?

With my knees up under my chin. Somebody - oh, the men came and pulled the tent out, but the bed was wet and there was nothing we could do about that. But the tent was erected again so next break I had it was a matter of wash all these clothes again and start ironing.

Mm. Yes I can imagine - imagine the situation ...

But mine wasn't the only tent that went down I can assure you - there were a few others went too.

Mm, mm. The hospital at Morotai ....

Yes.

Compared for example to the one's you'd been working at and near Moresby - was it better set up or not as well set up?

It was the same principle. Wherever you went the hospitals were the same. If they were under canvas - they were exactly the same - and actually if they were what they called built wards where you had gauze down so far and then masonite - they were still the same - still the same set up - with the centre being the office area and the sterilising area as we called it across there.

Mm.

Thirty beds that end - thirty beds this end.

Right. Of course, by this stage the war's moved on a little bit - or - while - during your period at Morotai it's ...

Oh, yes. It's coming to a close.

You know - the Japanese were being pushed back. Were you really dealing with the men who were ill or with battle casualties?

(15.00) We were dealing with both. Because we .... While we were there Borneo was invaded so we got quite a few across from Borneo - so battle casualties, as well as ill people.

Right.

And then after that when the war did finish we then started to get the prisoners of war through.

We might come to those in a moment. The .... Morotai itself, I'd imagine, was a much healthier place than New Guinea. Was it? I mean, is that correct?

That is, yes - correct - different atmosphere altogether.

So what were the main sicknesses that you had to deal with?

Well, there was always malaria. I don't remember any scrub typhus in Morotai but there was dysentery and malaria. One never got away from that - in the tropics. And skin problems - there are always skin problems.

> Yes, yes. Something I might just ask you then. Tinea - I've often heard talked about - I mean my father had it in the war, and, you know, it went on and on and on. Did that - skin problems - did they affect women equally, or were men more affected because of their living conditions or something?

Men were more affected because of their living conditions, I think. I mentioned earlier that we had a colonel who'd been a dermatologist and he insisted on us using the chlorine baths. Um - if we could jump over it we would. But also we had the opportunities to use baby powder on our feet and I think that was a very big factor in not having so much tinea.

> To keep your feet dry.

Yes.

> I can ...

And, of course, we weren't in the mud like the men nor did we have to live in our socks for days on end or weeks on end as they did.

> Mm.

Conditions were altogether different.

> Yes, you obviously had the ability to change ...

Oh, yes, oh, yes.

> Wash and so on.

The fighting men had - you know ....

> Just going back to Morotai, Una, before perhaps talking about the end of the war - prisoners and so on. Do you have any other particularly memora... particular memories of the place?

Of Morotai. Um, yes, we had the most wonderful man as a colonel, called Colonel Angus Murray. Everybody loved him. He was a father figure - from the first world war - and he was one of the finest men anyone could ever meet. And somebody told me, up there they had a pipe band and they would like to come down and play near the hospital. So I said, 'Well, I'll ask permission'. So I went to Colonel Murray and asked him and he said to me, 'What do you think?' So the pipe band duly came down and played - and it was a moonlight night with a full moon and a lone piper eventually just paraded up and down on our beach, this white beach, playing his pipes - absolutely out of this world, it really was.

> Very evocative. I can imagine it, and the - everybody on the island was there?

Well, I don't know about everybody on the island but it would have carried a long way.

Mm. Sounds lovely.

Mm, it was - it was beautiful.

Mm. Scotland in a tropical paradise.

Mm.

Well, going on a little bit. Of course, it was at Morotai that - where you were when peace was declared.

Mm.

Um. How did people react? What was your reaction?

Well, I don't know whether I should tell you my reaction. I happened to be sitting on the beach that night and some of our men were going home - on the points system they had working somehow or other. And they were going home and we were saying 'cheerio', 'goodbye' and all the rest of it, 'We'll probably never see you again, blah, blah, blah', and suddenly Very lights start being thrown up in the sky and we thought, "Oh, the Japanese have escaped from over in their compound". And then somebody came out who'd had a radio, I might add there were not radios then, like there are now and they said about the Emperor - Japan would surrender, providing they could keep the Emperor. So! My reaction was to go to the ward and tell the troops. So I went over to my ward and I told them this news and there were cheers and tears and all the rest of it and I said, 'I have a bottle of brandy'. There was a bottle of brandy for medicinal purposes so I opened it - gave who needed a drink a drink and had found some other liquor and tipped it all in a bucket and those who liked that could have a drink to peace - that was .... It was hard to believe, really, that it was - had come.

(20.00) Mm, I can imagine it was a long time and a lot of people had ...

And so later on that evening - our matron, who was out and - what was the other one's rank - our matron she was a - called a principal matron, I think. These two matrons were dining out somewhere and they phoned the mess and said, 'Is there anything happening in the mess tonight?' And we said, 'Yes, we're having a party'. So further up the men who'd heard peace was being declared decided they'd come down and bring their little few instruments they had and we'd have a band in our mess. They did this - so as anybody who appeared on the scene with any rank had it removed - my job was to take off watches and they were just thrown into the sea. I mean it was childish, isn't it? But what else could we do? Thrown into the sea which was right - our mess was right on the sea, on the beach and they were just - as I said earlier when the tide was in it was right up, under our tables - dining tables. So they were just thrown into the sea and dunked. So when the time the matron - the two matrons arrived - with their escorts - they likewise were thrown into the sea. I had a pocket - two pockets full of watches so no watches went into the sea.

Mm, mm but lots of ....

But everybody was dunked.

Sounds lovely.

Mm.

And then you got on and had a party.

Yes.

Any more memories of that night?

Well, what's - what really started the swimming business was, a young fellow pulled me up and he said would I please go down to the AAMWS and tell so and so he would like to see her. Because they had to go to bed earlier than we did - or go to their lines - earlier than we did. So I went down and I heard voices saying, 'Ah, here comes Sister Mills'. And next thing I knew I'd been grabbed and I was in the mud. [Interruption]. That's here. So I went and had a shower - I didn't take off anything - I just showered in what I had on. And when I got back to the mess that's when everybody had decided they should have a swim.

Mm.

Excuse me.

Just pausing here.

This is just going on after a neighbour had been at the door.

That was a lovely description of that night, and so on. Was romance common between the nurses and the men wherever you were, or not, Una?

Well there was a certain amount of it - I suppose - it's only natural.

I was thinking of - you know - the scenes in the *South Pacific* and that, you know. Obviously highly idealised kind of situation.

I think the young man that asked me if I would find this AAMWS for him. I think he was hoping to propose to her that night. There were a few other proposals made that night.

Mm. Feelings must have been running very high.

Mm.

So how did the night end up?

Oh, dear. People were scrambling around on the tops of tents and swinging from trees. [laughter]

Really a lovely mad night.

Yes.

Well, going on a little bit. Of course, then there was a sadness, I suppose, after peace had been declared, with the return of the prisoners of war and so on from Ambon and Sandakan that you had mentioned before. Is there anything else that you recall of that process?

Um, I remember the church we had - it was no special denomination - it was just for any denomination, really. And it was amazing to see how many people just went in, any hour of the day or night - it was - they just walked into church and sat and prayed. That struck me.

Do you mean after peace was declared?

Yes. Yes. I hadn't noticed it before. But I noticed it more so after peace was declared and when the prisoners started coming through - the ex-prisoners of war.

Mm. There but for the grace of God go I, perhaps.

Mm.

Were people - men perhaps, rather than nurses - I mean, where men had been in combat situations and so on - was there a consciousness, do you think of, much thought given to the people who had not survived, who wouldn't go back to Australia?

I don't know. I think there is a lot more thought perhaps given now as the years have gone by.

(25.00) Mm. Right. Well, going on to something else. We might just talk about - to finish Morotai. You were showing me, before, the statement read by General Blamey to the Japanese at Morotai. I think you were there at the time. What kind of an occasion was it? What happened?

Well, we - we were allowed, so many of us, especially the original girls, were allowed to go down to the parade ground which was - I'm not sure whether it was part of an aerodrome - I can't remember that now, but I think it was part of an aerodrome. And out in the middle was a table. And next thing along came these two Japanese being escorted by four Australian soldiers. They were the tallest men - they must have been specially selected to bring them in because they positively towered over these Japanese. They marched these Japanese on and stood there at attention and then in came Sir Thomas Blamey, accompanied by General, oh, I can't think, Moore - Moorehouse [?] I think was his name, and General Blamey - they had to put their swords on the table and then he read out these terms to them. Now Sir Thomas Blamey was not a large man - he was short but he was rotund. And he had a florid complexion and when he read these terms out I thought he would have apoplexy. He was absolutely scarlet in the face and he meant every word that he said. And it was wonderful to hear it - just, you know, to be there and hear and see this.

Yes. Well, I've read just this afternoon the last - well, that whole statement and certainly the last part of it didn't leave anything - there was no sympathy at all.

Mm.

Was there a large contingent of Australian servicemen and nurses drawn up during this?

Oh, yes.

And Japanese.

I didn't see any other Japanese - no - only those two high ranking officers.

And how did they appear?

Little Japanese. No, they appeared calm.

And do you have any other memory of that occasion?

Not really. No, that was - just being there and hearing it, seeing it, witnessing it.

Mm. Well, it was obviously .... They were stirring times and most historic. How long did you stay in Morotai after the surrender, before you returned to Australia, Una?

I think it was about five or six weeks before we came back.

And I think you did have - there was some option you had of in fact going on to Japan that you didn't take up. Why was that?

Well, by this stage, I was considered one of the senior sisters and Miss Sage, who was the matron-in-chief, asked me if I would go. But I had had nearly - well, by that stage, five and a half years of tinned food, discomfort and I was happy to get out of the army and get back to civilian life and get on with living again.

Mm.

I have regretted it since - that I didn't go up there. I suppose it was a missed opportunity, but - such is life. One can't look back, one goes on.

Sure, no doubt there are other opportunities.

Let me just turn this tape.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B.

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Una Keast, nursing, tape 2, side 2 - side 4 of the whole lot.
Just to end with Una. Could you just tell us how you ended your service career? How long were you - did you nurse with the army before you were demobilised?

Um. I was two, two months off six years when I was demobilised. Then I had my long service leave which took it up, you know, to the six years.

And did you continue nursing?

Afterwards? Yes. I went and did my obstetrics as soon as I could - which I hadn't had time to do before and I went down to Melbourne and there were navy, army and air force girls there. The sisters down there were terrified they were getting these ex-service girls down there.

Why were they terrified?

Because we were so much older than the others. Anyhow when we left ...

And no doubt more experienced.

When we left we learned then that they had been frightened of us and they said how much they had enjoyed having us because we had character - shared the weight. Simple as that. And we had a lovely time - we old girls and we were trying to train a lot of these young ones, you know, that had just finished their general training.

Mm. Sure like as ...

We taught them a lot.

Mm. That's interesting. And you - how long did you continue nursing?

Oh, many years. Yes. I went overseas after that and I spent a long time overseas.

Right. Well, just turning back then perhaps to end with - the war. Looking back on it all, could you say how it affected you - not then but later on? How it had affected you as a person? How it had changed you, perhaps, or not?

It's a very hard one to answer because I don't know what I would have been like if I hadn't had it. Perhaps I'm a little intolerant of trivialities. Um - and I know I'm a private person, but I don't know that the war is to blame for all this. One thing I remember about being in the services was the camaraderie which was absolutely magnificent. My tent mates - the girls I went into the army with on 11th June, 1940 - tent mates over those years, two of them, they are still my best friends. And when we have reunions it's, you know, just so great to see all the girls again.

I know that as, um, the hospital, I mean just a minute - ah, ah, the number - the 2/5th has an organisation. Is that active? How much do you see of each other?

Well, we get together on ANZAC Day and march as a unit and we've always had a luncheon after it. And then we have a luncheon on the - near to 19th October, as well. I don't know what we're doing next year for fifty years, it will be - when we went in - it will make me seventy-five.

Sounds like a special celebration's due then.

Yes. I don't know what they are organising but somebody's at it.

Good, just finally, Una. Its something I say to anybody - just to round this off. Is there anything you feel you'd like to say, or should be said for the record - for the story of your life in the army?

No?

No.

Okay. Well, on behalf of the War Memorial, thank you, that's all interesting and all valuable.

Well, that's my pleasure and I thank you.

(5.00) Good.

END INTERVIEW.