



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

Identification: ... 2/6th Hospital. Tape one, side one.

Alice, could I just ask you when and where you were born please?

Yes. I was born in Rockhampton in 1918 and then when I was quite a small child we moved to New South Wales.

Right. And where did you go to school? Where did you grow up?

Well, on the north coast, Murwillumbah. I started school and then we moved later on to Bathurst and I went to school in Bathurst.

Right. And I understand from what you were saying before that nursing was a great girlhood dream of yours but the depression came along. Could you tell us about that?

Well, it was a total obsession with me to be a nurse and because my father had three sisters who were nurses - trained sisters - and I grew up with the idea that that's what I wanted to be and I've never changed my mind to this very day. If I had my chance again I'd be a nurse, a trained sister.

And what exactly was it that ... how did the depression affect those plans?

Well, I was the eldest of the family and my father lost his job and so then, of course, it was very for him to be abl to get anything else and of course in those days money was important and he couldn't afford to help me.

Right. And I guess also you were contributing to the family were you?

Well, I couldn't because there was no work about. If I could get any kind of a job I did it and I'd give them that but, really, there was no ... very little work about for anyone.

Right. So it was more the cost that the family would have had to have borne to have put you through nursing?

Yes.

Just one other thing that I often ask people, Alice. The first world war and the Australian involvement in the ANZAC tradition and so on, were you very conscious of that as a young woman or not?

Yes, but not to the extent that I became conscious of it later on. I often wondered why on earth my mother cried every ANZAC Day when she looked at medals that belonged to her brothers. She had two brothers killed in the first world war and I thought that was rather ridiculous but I was to change my mind very drastically at a later date.

Yes. That's interesting. Well, going on a bit, I think it was when Chamberlain went to Munich you were saying that the VADs were formed and you became involved right from the straight I think ...

Yes, that's correct. The ... We did have VADs in Australia in the first world war. I'm not really up to date with the work they did but when Mr Chamberlain went to Munich the detachments had been springing up all over the nation and we then began in earnest to train as VADs for any eventuality that might happen.

Right. And your motive for becoming involved, or your primary motive, was it that here was a chance to do the nursing that you'd been prevented from doing because of the depression and so on? Or was it primarily a desire, a patriotic desire to serve the country?

I think perhaps it was a little of both. I was very, very interested that I would get some training in nursing and that was what I wanted to do and eventually, if I worked very hard and completed the VAD part of it, that I could go into public hospital. So that was my main desire. And then, of course, in those days we were all very conscious of our nation; we were very conscious of our obligations as it were to England and so that came into it as well.

Right. Well, let's actually turn to the training. I think it's quite interesting. You were saying that - let's just turn to the medical aspect of it first, St John's Ambulance and Red Cross were both involved - you were trained yourself by the Red Cross. What did that early training involve?

(5.00) Well, when we first went into the detachment we were trained in ... in those early days we had first aid training. We had six months first aid training and then when we completed that there was an exam and then six months home nursing training. And after that year was completed in those days we were allowed to buy a uniform which we bought ourselves. And then the following year we had another six months advanced first aid and another period of six months advanced home nursing. And then for that effort we were allowed to buy for one and sixpence a little red cross to put on our uniforms - a Red Cross pocket. We also, during the whole of that time, we were drilled by members of the local army and we had lectures on how to behave in various circumstances that we might find ourselves in.

Military etiquette, that kind of thing?

Well, military ... military hospitals if we were called upon to go into the hospitals because when the war broke out the military hospitals were established and we all aimed to work in military hospitals but, of course, we had to finish these ... complete the two years' training by the St John's Ambulance or the Australian Red Cross, and I was a Red Cross trained person, and then we had to do a period of training in the public hospitals. We weren't allowed to go into the hospitals until we'd completed this two years and we had to have so many hours of training in the public hospitals before we were allowed to go into military hospitals. So we were all ... that was our aim, to get into those military hospitals and do our work.

Right. So it was obviously quite a structured program and it was after you'd done a period I think in the camp hospitals that you then became eligible to go overseas. Is that correct?

Yes, that's correct. Actually we didn't know that part but when, in 1941, the army had decided to send women into the army, they'd always had trained sisters of course to go into the army, but they decided to send VADs to the Middle East. We were required to have had so many hours of voluntary service in military hospitals before we were allowed ... onsidered to be eligible to enlist.

Right. I think you were saying also that part of the work of VADs was kind of homecare work - sewing clothes, making badges, that kind of thing. Could you tell us about that?

Well, not so much homecare. It was in the early days of the war and because the Red Cross were doing such a marvellous job training us they also had sewing days and all the women made all kinds of garments for the people, refugee children. We made little coats and little dresses and we made pyjamas and surgical jackets for the hospitals, the military hospitals.

Right. That's interesting. Of course, when you went overseas you were paid, I think you said, four shillings a day?

Yes.

But ...

When we were called into the army, regardless of whether some girls were called into the army before they left Australia and worked in military hospitals as paid VADs, but when we were called up to go on active service we were given four shillings a day.

And before that, of course, it was a totally voluntary thing and, in fact, you were covering all your costs.

Absolutely.

Was there ever any question amongst VADs then that people felt it would have been right that you be paid or was it just the spirit of the times and your own personal feelings that made that voluntary thing a positive thing to do?

There was never any thought as far as I'm concerned or know, no-one ever thought that we should be paid. I mean, it was purely and simply a voluntary job and, as you know, the Red Cross, I can't speak too highly of the job they did during the war. The Red Cross were always giving and so it was part of our thing to do - to give.

Just before we actually go overseas, there are two things that I thought we might talk about. Yes, I was just going to ask you about the different uniforms and there is this lovely painting here in your album, Alice. What were the different uniforms you wore for separate occasions?

(10.00) Well, to be ... when we first joined the VADs we were in white uniforms and white stockings but of course they weren't practical. So for active service they decided that we'd have a blue uniform and the working uniform had a white collar and white buttons. And a navy blue cardigan if it was cold and a cape for ... often at night duty we needed that extra warmth. For mess we had ... I don't ... for going out when we were anywhere we had what was called a mess dress and that was navy blue slub-silk linen they called it in those days with a navy blue collar and it also had navy blue buttons. And for the summer uniform for official occasions we had a blue skirt and a blue jacket with a white collar ... a white shirt and a navy blue tie. And for the winter uniform it was a navy blue uniform with a red ... and each uniform, of course, had a Red Cross pocket.

> Mmm. They're very attractive uniforms and I've always been rather impressed by the hats. They had a lovely, slightly rakish feeling to them.

Well, it's rather strange, when you say 'rakish feeling'. Our superiors were always on to us about the hats and the hair. The hair had to be back and the hats had to be on at the correct angle but you know what women are, they found a way to use them.

> Yes, I'm sure. Well, they're very attractive. There's also this article in the *Women's Weekly* - just for reference this is August 9, 1941, 'VADs welcome chance of service with army abroad' - down at the bottom here it mentions some of the equipment you had, to take overseas. Do you remember the different things you were issued with, or not?

We were never issued with anything. We were given thirty-seven pounds by the Government when we were called into the army and that had to cover everything that we required in the way of uniforms. That included all those clothes I've told you about. So, it gives you an idea of how times have changed. We were able to buy all those clothes for thirty-seven pounds. And we also had to buy a trunk which I still have in my treasures, and then we were given things. The Red Cross gave us a little attache case and various people gave us gifts of cosmetics and things like that which we were ... were very gratefully received because beyond that we had to get help from wherever we could get help to augment the added costs of our uniforms.

> Yes, I'm sure. That's interesting. Just stepping back a little bit, one other thing I wanted to ask you about was the involvement of your family in all this. How much support was there from your own family for what you wanted to do?

Great support for the time I spent in the VAD because my sister was there too but they were very reluctant that I should go into the army and have anything at all to do with it or go anywhere. But I did go. One of the awful things was that I went home on what they call final leave and found my family had the mumps so I then had the tremendous choice - the doctor said I could choose, I could just go and see them each day but I was not to go near them and that was very difficult for me.

> So that was what happened?

Yes.

That must have been very difficult. Well, going on a little bit then to the actual ... there was this decision by the Government of course that they were going to send the first draft of VADs overseas and this was late 1940. How long did you yourself have to ... knowing that you could actually go overseas?

We had - I think it was about the August that the announcement was made, that VADs would go overseas - and we left Sydney on ... in November. November we sailed.

So I assume also that you had specifically applied to go overseas?

Oh, we all did. Everyone was wanting to apply for active service. We didn't know where we were going and I think there was a lot of bravado in it because we weren't at all sure where we'd end up. We all thought we'd have to have our heads shaven and things like that. So, there was a lot of confusion but we ... actually in 1939 I said - I think there were four in our detachment who said that if we were required to go on active service anywhere, we would go. So as the years passed, two years passed, and I still had that idea that I would go on active service anywhere I was sent. I had no idea where I'd be going. No-one knew ever where they were going.

Sure. Actually one thing I had meant to ask you before was the declaration of war. When war was declared between Germany and Britain and the Empire I suppose, do you remember that day and do you remember how you felt about it?

I remember it very well because my brother had fallen ... had an accident off a motorbike and he was unconscious and we'd been to the hospital and we came home not expecting him to live and then we had this. I can remember that day very vividly and I can remember where I was standing when the Mr Chamberlain made the declaration of war.

(15.00) Do you think, well yourself at any rate, did you have any comprehension of how appalling a struggle it might be? How long drawn out it might be?

I had no idea of the length of time. I was just appalled that it was happening. Of course we'd known that France had fallen, capitulated, and I just felt for all the people that were involved in it. I really ... I just didn't know what the future held at all. I don't think anyone did.

As a young woman at that time, had you been very aware of political developments in Europe in the late 1930s?

Well, I'd taken quite an interest in it because I'd always been politically minded, I still continue that; it's one of my pet things. But, no, I didn't know the full implications. When you're nineteen you don't really know all these things but we became very aware as time progressed when we were making these small clothes for these small children that were becoming refugees throughout that area.

Right. Well, that's interesting. Moving on a little bit, you've applied to go overseas and so on. The final preparations I'd imagine were quite exciting but perhaps also a bit daunting?

I don't know if exciting is the word. I think that there was a tremendous mixture. One had a great mixture of leaving home and families and, you know, the whole future was so uncertain. I think that's the thing that was in our minds. We didn't know where we were going or whether we'd see anyone we loved again. But, I guess there was a certain amount of excitement and there was a certain amount of challenge in it because so many of the girls throughout Australia were as well trained as any of us and they all wanted to go and so we just ended up thinking we were the lucky few because they sent ... they had planned to send 800 to the Middle East but the first lot were to be 200 and we were the first 200. And when we came back, while we were in the Middle East, the Army Medical Women's Services was formed and we automatically were absorbed into that when we came back.

Yes, right. Well, the departure I think was on the *Queen Mary*, do you remember that? Do you remember the occasion and how you felt?

I can't really remember how I felt beyond all the confusion of it all. We were told regardless of whether we knew or didn't know the ship we were to sail on, we were not to tell anyone. Not to tell our families, not to let anyone know. And when we went out into Sydney Harbour and there was the *Mary* we were overawed by the size of it and what we'd done, I think; what we'd let ourselves in for. We got on board on a Friday evening and someone from the army came and told us that if the *Queen Mary* was considered to be unsinkable, that if we got a 'tinned fish' in the aft it would still sail. If it was in the forward part it would still sail and if one went through the middle it would still sail. But by this we were so confused we didn't know where we might be if we got a 'tinned fish'. Fortunately we didn't. She was a wonderful ship and she still had a lot of the beauty of ... her original beauty there and although they'd taken a lot out and we were in a cabin on the main deck, which was of course in her - when she was commissioned - one of the beautiful cabins. But everything had been stripped and there were eight bunks, eight wooden bunks. And I can remember the horror of the army's conception of sun-down is, you know, when it's just beginning ... the sun's just beginning to sink. So they locked the whole ship up then and a lot of us would spend half the night - it was very hot, it was never built for this Australia run - and we'd spend half the night running our hands around the portholes because there was no way we could get them open and we weren't allowed up because of the black-out.

Why were you running your hands around the portholes?

I think we thought fresh air was outside and we all badly needed fresh air.

I see, right. Yes, that must have been very, very hard being cooped up inside a ship like that. What are the other recollections of that journey? Was there much recreation? Did you have any training?

Yes. Yes, we had training. We had a lass from South Australia was a trained physical instructress and she gave us physical culture every day on the little deck - I've forgotten what it was called - and we also had air-raid training. We had to run around and have our

respirators on and we had to be ... learn to wear our tin hats and know when they were to be worn and so we had constant training. We also were told with so many troops on board and so few women that the women were to, in the event of anything happening to the ship, the women were to be taken off first. And on the *Mary* she had two supposed-to-be unsinkable boats on either side of the ship and if it tilted one way we were to go to the top side, if it tilted the other way we were to go to the other side. And we were to move very, very quickly which we were trained to do every day. Boat drill was a very serious part of our existence because we knew that the men's lives depended on our getting off very quickly, which they couldn't move until we left.

I see. That's interesting. And boat drills were very regular?

(20.00) Every day; twice a day as a matter of fact, we had boat drill. It was one of the most rigid rules that we encountered.

Really, as often as that? Do you think - I'm just imagining the situation - obviously that would have kept people very keyed up, but after you'd done it for the twentieth time, did you get better?

I think we did but I think we also ... we were aware all the time of the seriousness of it. We were told that the *Mary* was, you know, as you know, one of the fastest ships on the sea and that she could outrun things but the possibility was there and as far as the war was concerned it was Mr Hitler's main target - the two *Queens* were his main target because we didn't have this modern way of lifting troops and those ships were responsible for carrying thousands of troops and, you know, we knew and we heard several times while we were on mid-ocean that the *Mary* had gone. And it was all propaganda and we didn't take any notice of it, but it made us very aware that it was a constant need for the women to act very swiftly and do as we were told because the thousands of men's lives depended on it. And, as I repeat, that we were told we had to get off first; be taken off the ship before the men were able to move. In the event of leaving the ship under those conditions we had to discard our respirators and just take tin hats.

Right. That's interesting. Just one other point perhaps to pick up on on the voyage, there was obviously this bevy of young women and a whole ship load of men, did you have much social contact?

There was no chance for any personal kind of contact but we did have ... the sergeants' mess would have parties and invite us down. But by the time we'd been there for half an hour we were all wringing wet because with no windows ... no portholes open and no fresh air it was just ghastly, absolutely ghastly. We enlisted as privates but because of transport problems we were given the honorary status of officers in those early days and we were able to go into the officers' mess and it was the dining room of the *Queen Mary*. It wasn't very big and it wasn't all that pleasant because there was no air-conditioning but it was cooler than being down in the sergeants' mess. And the food was quite good on the *Queen Mary* but often we'd bring fruit. If there was any fruit on the table we'd bring it out and we'd have all the men waiting around outside and we'd give them the fresh fruit.

Was there any other actual hospital unit, incidentally, travelling on the ship? Were there any nurses or sisters?

Yes, there were some nurses and we weren't a unit at that stage. But *Mary* on that particular trip ...

Do you want me to turn off?

No, it's right. The *Mary* on that particular trip - incidentally, the *Queen Elizabeth* was with us, there were two, both the *Queens* were in our convoy - and the *Mary* really carried reinforcements to all the units over there. I think we had the engineers, one lot of engineers which was a complete unit but other than that they were reinforcements to all the various ... and we didn't know at that stage which hospital we'd be attached to in the Middle East.

Right. I might just ask you here something I was going to bring up a little bit later and that's this question of whether or not there was some tension or not between the VADs and the regular nurses perhaps through a misunderstanding of how you were to fit in to the existing structures. Was there ever any of that on the *Queen* ... on the voyage to the Middle East?

Never. I think that in the beginning they thought that what does this bunch of women think they're about? But I think they very soon realised because even on the *Queen Mary* we had a very heavy outbreak of what was then called URTI - upper respiratory complaint - and we worked very, very hard on the *Queen Mary* going over and we had so many of them that we even had the boys lying on the deck, we didn't have any beds for them. And they were lying on the deck and we had to be attending to them all the time there. So that our worked started when we got on the *Queen Mary* and I think that the sisters that we were taking with us all began to realise then how ... that we were there ready to work and that's the only thing we had in our minds - that was to work.

Right. So you were a serious group of trained people rather than a kind of dilettante group of do-gooders just bumbling around.

Exactly. And also there was a great deal of, what shall I say, not strife but ... turn it off for a sec, I can't think of the word I want. There was a great deal of what I'd call rivalry between the states because you must remember that there was a quota from each state in this original 200 and we all wanted to show the other states that we were the best trained, you see. And so every state had that in mind and we all thought we were the best. But, of course, they were very early days and that was another thing that we developed a bond that has remained to this day and no-one cares what state or ... It didn't take very long before we didn't care two hoots which state they came from. We were all there and we were all there to work.

Right. That's most interesting. Well, going on a little bit during the voyage, Alice, of course, when you left Sydney you didn't realise where you were going. When did you finally realise that you were destined for the Middle East?

Well, I think that somehow it got through within a few days that the Middle East was our destination. It was furphy; we were all surrounded by furphies they were called in those days. I don't know what you'd call them now - just rumours. And so the furphy was that it was the Middle East was our destination which would have pleased my father because he was terrified I was going up to the near-East.

And once that general rumour got around, was it welcomed or not?

Yes. We ... as I say, we were very thrilled to think we were going to serve somewhere and really, I think I can speak for everyone, that the destination of service was not important to us. It was just to go into service and do what we were trained to do. And I think a lot of us had brothers and uncles and people who had served and were serving in different theatres of war and we were just happy to do for the boys that we were going to look after, what we would hope others would do for our loved ones.

Yes. Well, going on. When you arrived in the Middle East, I think you went fairly immediately to the 2/1st AGH, is that correct?

Yes.

Could you just tell us the story of getting from the ship - I'm not quite sure where you disembarked - getting from the ship to the hospital and perhaps also your first impressions of very, very different landscape and environment to what you had been used to before?

Actually it's very vivid because there were 200 of us and when ... we disembarked at Port Tewfik and there were pieces of ship sticking up all over because it was a very heavily bombed port and so the harbour was full of things that had been bombed and 100 of us got off and then apparently there was an air-raid scare and so we were left stranded and the ship took off out to sea again with the other lot on it. And we found that we had to wait. We went over to what was called the NAAFI, it was a comforts thing from the British people, and it was a long marquee and - or a tattered tent really - and tattered old tables, and we were given something to eat. And a very tall, black man was walking along with a basket of bread rolls and he put one in front of each of us and although we had started off in a fastidious way, we soon learnt to eat anything we were given and we just thought he was a wonderful person to give us something to eat, because that was late in the afternoon and we'd got off early in the morning and we were very hungry.

And then late that evening the rest of the ship ... the ship came back and the others got off and joined us and then we were taken to a railway station and I wouldn't have a clue where it was. And we got on the ... I think we were taken to El Kantara and we got on the train and that was a terrible journey across to Gaza. And we arrived at Gaza at about four o'clock in the morning in rain and the soldiers were there telling us to jump. We didn't know where we were jumping too, we just had to jump off the train.

You said it was a terrible journey. Why was it terrible?

Well, we were so crowded and it wasn't the cleanest train I'd ever been in and we were terribly crowded and we discovered that one of our lasses had died at Port Tewfik that day with meningitis and so when we arrived at our camp, we were taken in, we were staging for a week and I think they were waiting to see if anything else developed. We were in quarantine.

> Right. I see. And from there you went on to where the 2/1st hospital was established at Gaza.

Yes. We were at Kilo 89 and in the early days ...

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE A

START OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

> Well, let's go on then to talk about the period when you first went to the 2/1st.

The 2/1st AGH. Well, of course, it was a military hospital and the sisters met us very happily and treated us exceedingly well; they were the most wonderful sisters in the 2/1st AGH. And they had ... it was of course a lot of patients there and a lot of wounds and ... but we were ready and we just went into the ward work.

> It sounds from what you are saying that slipping into the routines of the ward work was fairly easy.

It was very easy. We knew what we had to do and the sisters, as they grew ... developed confidence in what we were able to do, they gave us more and more things that were of greater interest than just cleaning lockers and changing beds and things like that. We very soon got into the swing of real work.

> Of real nursing.

Real nursing, yes.

> Right. That's good. We might perhaps come to talk in more detail about the nursing aspect of it when you were with the 2/6th, except, could I perhaps ask you just now: Was there any work that you did with the 2/1st that was very different to what you later did with the ... when you changed hospitals?

Yes. Well, it was different because they were more preparing the patients to go home to Australia when we got to the 2/1st AGH. But one thing I would like to mention here was the Christmas Day, our first Christmas Day at the 1st AGH, and it teamed with rain and it was so dark that even at lunchtime we had to have hurricane lamps to serve our patients their food. But that's where I think we got the first taste of what Australians under difficulties can do because with all the difficulties and the lack of any facilities that we might have expected, they all put the best foot forward and the sisters came and looked after us for our Christmas dinner and we went and looked after the sisters for their Christmas dinner and ... but we all ... all personnel looked after the patients for their Christmas dinner. So that's where this

wonderful feeling of belonging and really doing a job started, I think, on that Christmas Day which was such a terrible day otherwise.

> That's very interesting. I think you were saying before, too, I think it was about Christmas Day, that you were very upset about serving the men's meals on tin plates that were - I'm not sure if it was because they were very hot or very cold - I gather you felt they were, you felt, less than adequate.

Well, I think that it's very hard to throw one's mind back and I'm sure you couldn't possibly do it, to fifty years ago when the kitchen staff did their very best to get any food they had - and it wasn't wonderful food - to the patients as hot as they could have and we had what we called long food trays and underneath contained hot water - they put the hot water in. But you can imagine sending that over to - I guess it was about two foot six long and about eighteen inches wide - and that was full of the food for the men and the only thing we had to serve it on was ti plates and I found that exceedingly upsetting and I think everyone did that we had to serve them their meals on tin plates. But ...

> Was that upsetting because the food became cold or because it was socially perhaps a bit less than gracious?

Possibly a little bit of both but mostly it was because a lot of them were very ill and to serve them a tin plate, you wouldn't like it, and to serve the food on a tin plate. And they weren't shiny new plates, you know, they'd been used a great deal. So, yes, it was ... it was upsetting. I found it upsetting and I know a lot of people did.

> Right. Just while you were talking about Christmas but perhaps not thinking only of that first Christmas but I think you were there for the next Christmas too, weren't you, was there a special feeling having ... celebrating Christmas in an area that was very, very close to the heart of the Christian story?

(5.00) Yes. Some people were ... if we had a day off we'd go down to Jerusalem and I think that did have a special meaning to us then which we hadn't comprehended fully before and it was wonderful to walk around. I don't know if it added to our feeling. I think that I just do have to say that it was the wonderful spirit that it was Christmas and none of us had contact with our loved ones from Australia and none of us knew if we'd see them again and we felt that some of the boys we were looking after wouldn't get home and I think that was the feeling, that while we were there and this was the moment, and we'd put our very best into it, everyone did it, not just one person, but that was the feeling.

> Yes. That's interesting. Something I was going to pick up on later but we might just have a word about it now, given what you just said. You were saying about some of the men you felt would never get home, I assume by that you mean that they were too ill, too badly wounded to survive. How did you cope with that? How did you cope with the emotions? And how much distancing was there from the men to be able to do that?

Well, I think as far as the men in the hospitals were concerned, we had very, very few casualties and I think we felt they would all go home, they'd be right. The hospital ships

would call and take them home. But we thought beyond that to the problems that they would have when they got home. There were some that had lost limbs and some who had ... there were others who'd lost their minds. We had mental wards and it was a very sad thing for us to see men because what you've got to remember was that in those days anyone over thirty was round the bend, they were very old in our opinion, and Australia had chosen their fittest sons and they had to be strong and very fit to get into the army and - we all had to be strong and fit to get into the army - and so when you saw youth and strong, young youth and you felt that somehow, that a lot of them would be battle casualties one way and another which proved to be the case in many cases. And that others would go home and require help for the rest of their lives.

> That must have been very difficult to cope with. You were mentioning the wards or cases where men had ... where their nerves had been shot apart - I assumed that's what you meant - how difficult was it coping with those mental cases as against men who were physically injured?

Once again, it was the spirit of the men because regardless of ... they often were totally unaware of the affect that the war had had on them. They just lived in a happy land gathering little pieces of glass and things like that and they were a happy lot. It was Ward 17 I was in and I felt that that was also a challenge. It was something I had never even thought of; it had never crossed my mind that the different aspects of war injuries. It never entered my head when ... in the salad days when I was really wanting to go. And I just thought that you had the wounded and the people that then would get better. And so the consequences didn't ... I didn't ever really comprehend until I got into those wards. But, as I say, once again, the spirit of the men prevailed in all cases and it didn't let us dwell on those things.

> During your training had you ever had any discussions or lectures on ... to help you cope with these kinds of problems?

No, not really because when ... I don't think any of us ever - we VADs - I don't think we ever really felt that we would ever go overseas or go on active service into any theatre of war. You know, although we were preparing in our minds and we said we were ready, but I don't think that we'd known, and we had no special training for that at all. Because when the Government decided, from the time the Government decided to send us until we left, it was a very short time.

> Right, sure. Well, two other things that I thought perhaps we might just talk about because I'm sure they wouldn't have probably varied a lot between the 2/1st and the 2/6th is your general living conditions and food. You were living in tents and I think you said a while ago you lived in a tent for four years of your life - that would daunt a lot of people of today. What was tent life like? Did it have it's good points?

(10.00) It had its very good points because in my tent, it was an E.P.I. tent, and there were three other girls in it who were in a similar situation of going up daily to the little thing we had hanging on the wall where our mail went, and no mail, and at one stage we were totally cut off from Australia. And so we had rancid butter in tins from England - I think it was from England - and we had terrible bread and so often we just felt more like ignoring the food and

eating a chocolate if we could get our hands on it. So the boys were very good, they'd go to the NAAFI and buy chocolate for us if they had any money. Not very many people had very much money in those days. But, no, the food for a period of time was terrible but we did have our own ... some of our girls were cooks and they cooked for us and they were just so brilliant. I can't ... I think today they'd be paid a king's ransom if they could make out of the food, what they made out of army rations.

> And living in a tent, I mean, the actual tent itself, how much space did you have? How much were you on top of one another? And did you enjoy that or did you sometimes wish you had more space to yourself?

Mmm. I can't ... An E.P.I. tent I think from memory it would be about twelve by twelve feet. Yes, that was very difficult to live with four women and we only had little stretchers - those little fold-up stretchers - and we had to be very careful how we got into them or they collapsed. And for ... when we moved up nearer the hospital we were ... the tents were grouped in groups of three because of the possibility of bombing, then they wouldn't get everyone. And our ablution block, we always said we were going to Mecca because regardless of how cold it was or how hot, depending on the seasons, we had to walk, oh, about 300 yards to the ablution block. And we did have ... eventually we got hot water - frequently it was cold and the toilets, or lavatories as they were called then, were just a long line of - they dug pits in the ground and a row of seats on that and hessian around them and that was ... that's where we had to go to the toilets. So, yes, it was very difficult but once again the spirit was wonderful and occasionally we had a snark about something or other but in the main, looking back over four years, one girl stayed with us until we got back to Australia, so that was four of us. And then when ... in Australia we only had room for three people, the tents were very much smaller and just a dirt floor, and the three of us stayed together for the whole of the four years and in that time we didn't have one serious encounter. That's not too bad.

> Yes, that's most impressive. So far from becoming strong enemies you obvious became great friends.

Oh we're very ... we're bonded; we're very close friends to this very day, all of us. And all ... you know the tents because they all became a little more bonded than the general, you know, run of us.

> Sure. How well equipped were they incidentally? You were saying it rained very much that Christmas.

Well, the tents we had in the Middle East were set on cement blocks because, as you know, there are wretched little crawly things round in the sand so they were just very rough blocks of cement. But the floors were reasonably waterproof, if the tents didn't blow down. But frequently a flap flew off or a tent collapsed or the stick hadn't gone in the right way to hold it up and so we were out there in our night gear and macintoshes and things trying to prop them all up again. So, often, yes, we did get a ducking from time to time but it was all in the ... all in the cause.

Well, it was obviously well taken. Let's move on a little bit, Alice, when the 2/6th hospital in, I think, March '42. What's your recollection of that transition period and perhaps what are your first ... or what were your first recollections of the staff and the personnel of the 2/6th hospital?

(15.00)Well, I think, this would be a good recollection because we'd become very friendly with the sisters and staff up at the 2/1st and we were recovering from great agony of saying goodbye to them and being left alone in the sand, we thought, and we didn't know what was going to happen to us. So, when the 2/6th arrived we were just so happy to have them that we wanted to help them then. It was our turn to help them, kind of, do our best to help them settle in. But we found them to be such a well organised, wonderful group of people, it was a most wonderful unit, and they'd been through such a lot in Greece and Crete and they were well able to set the hospital in motion in a very short time. And I think they also got a bit of a shock to find that these strange women were waiting for them. But they were wonderful and they absorbed us into their unit and when the day came they said, 'You're no longer just detached troops, you're part of the unit' was the happiest day in our lives and we really felt we'd made it. It was great.

That must have been a very proud moment. We'll go on to talk about some of the specific personalities of the hospital perhaps later. But let's set the scene now, the hospital itself, at Kilo 89, I think you said.

Yes.

Could you describe the hospital building for us? Roughly how big it was, perhaps how it was built and in how good or poor condition it was?

Our hospital was a base hospital of course, the 2/6th was a base hospital, and they set themselves up there at Kilo 89 as a base hospital. The ... yes, it was all under canvas. There was a block of cement where the so-called day room was established and from that ran down an area where the showers for the men and the toilets on one side. And then on either side of that block was a very large marquee and it was under the marquee with cement floors, they had these cement blocks, and we'd have a ward on either side that could accommodate thirty to forty patients.

So how many wards in all were there?

Look, I'm sorry, I can't recall how many wards we had but we had a 1200 bed hospital and so we had a lot of wards.

Right. That's the calculation I was trying to make. Say if there were - I think you said there were about thirty men per ward ...

Yes. Sometimes, for the special wards they were a bit smaller. We had one special ward, it was called the CO's ward, and regardless of the rank, because we had other ... for the men we had wards and for the officers there was another ward, and then we had one ward set aside which was regarded as the CO's ward and all the most serious, dangerously ill men were taken in there - spinal injuries and brain injuries - because our CO was a brilliant neurologist.

Right. So obviously I was just doing a quick calculation. There must have been something in the order of forty wards, something like that to give you your 1500 beds.

1200 bed.

Oh, 1200.

Well, that's right. But then of course we had the Q Stores and we would have a small marquee set aside for each of the chapels for the ... I think the different religions used our little marquee but the Roman Catholic people had a marquee all of their own.

Right. Could you ... sorry ... Alice, was just saying that of course there are a lot of other extraneous things - post offices, pay offices, et cetera. I thought I might ask you just to begin the more detailed talking about the hospital with a description if you could of a typical day on the wards for you, how did that begin?

We had to be on duty at seven o'clock. On day duty we were on duty at seven o'clock in the morning and we would work till one and then a lass would come on and she would work till nine. And we ... that was a normal kind of time if we were not terribly busy. But when we were busy, which seemed to be a lot of the time, we'd go on at seven in the morning and the night staff would stay on for an hour. And we would then go on through the day and we'd often ... we'd work till one o'clock, off till six, and then we'd go on again at nine and that was the day. But when we were terribly busy, of course it was fourteen hours one day, thirteen and half hours the next day, seven days a week - you wouldn't believe it.

Just going straight through. And in the ward work that you were doing yourself, Alice, what were some of the major tasks that you were involved in?

Well, as the sisters developed confidence in our work and as they had more and more horrible duties to perform, they gave us duties that consisted of some of the very bad wounds we had to ... would take a very long time, sometimes an hour and a half, some of the dressings took to get off, and then the sisters would come along and we'd be allowed to assist in preparing the wound for its new lot of bandaging and ...

Treatments and so on.

... treatments, all the treatments. And we had men that had lost limbs and they would, you know, require a lot of TLC, if you like to put it that way. You know, they like to think that you would do something a little bit of extra special for them. And a spoilt lot some of them. We found them to be a spoilt lot sometimes. But we thought they were very worthy of it.

(20.00) Did you have much to do with burn cases?

Yes. We had ... I wasn't in the burns ward actually but we had a very wonderful sister who took a very active part in the burns treatment and we had one boy who ... a petrol drum had

burst in Syria and he was flown down and he didn't live in the end, but she spent a lot of time and gave a lot of valuable, burns nursing information to the hospital through her work.

> That's most interesting. I did ask you this in another context before but perhaps there is a slightly different dimension to it now and that is: How did you cope, just as a person with men who really were very severely injured, disfigured and so on? I mean, I'd imagine emotionally it must be very, very difficult.

We didn't have a lot that were disfigured facially, at least I didn't see a lot of those. We did have men that were more damaged inside, they didn't seem ... they seemed to be pretending to be the big, strong soldiers but they did have tremendous fears and I think that was one of the things that was a little harder to take, in those days because, I repeat, they were all quite young. There were some older ones but in the main they were young men. And they feared about returning to life and not being as they were and I think that did as much damage to them and then a lot of them had lost comrades and under rather horrific circumstances and I think that played on their mind a lot. And I think ... But I think that we were so terribly busy and there was so much to do and there were so many of them that felt that way at that particular time. And then they had most vivid imaginations and we always got the wags that came in and they weren't so badly off, you know, and they'd play the big strong man and they had their dogs tied up - imaginary dogs of course - at the bed and wouldn't let us walk on them and we had to walk round them and in a way they - of course there was no radio, no ... we had a little bit of radio in the evenings to listen to Mr Haw Haw but there were no radios, no music, there was no television or anything like that - and these men were just such a wonderful asset to the wards and they could make anyone laugh; they really could. Some of the antics they got up to and there was ... I can remember that, you know, they had special names for anything. If a dog, mascot, jumped out of anything they called him - it seems very irreligious - but they called him 'Jumping Jesus'. They had the name for one of the dogs that was a mascot for one of the ...

But we had an air force base reasonably - a squadron - near our hospital and so that we had quite a few of the airmen coming in too. And that's how we learned a few of their tricks.

> That's most interesting. At nights on the wards, I mean I've certainly heard men from other units talking often of how they suffered nightmares for years and years after the war, were nightmares and screamings and awful things going on in the night a part of the picture or not?

No. I think in the main they suffered in silence but we knew they were suffering a lot of them and some of them did have horrible nightmares. They had shaking fits and they also had times when they were just totally unable to sleep and ... but somehow ... and they knew that we were frightfully busy too. So it was a time in life which I'm very proud to recall actually, when I stop and think about it, that everyone was out to help everyone else and so, you know, they didn't try and put their troubles onto people if they were able to contain them themselves.

> That's most interesting. You were telling me before about convoys arriving at night. I just wondered if you could tell us generally how men arrived? Did

they generally arrive at night? And how did they arrive in the hospital? How were they transported?

Well, we'd prepare the wards to begin with during the day. We'd have to clear the wards and the people that were able to go back to their units or able to go to convalescent camp were all cleared out - we'd have a big clear up - and then we'd all have to fall to and make the beds and then in the evening the convoys would arrive, ambulances would bring the men down. Of course there were no lights allowed then so they'd come in with their tiny little slits across their ... headlamps were all covered. And they would disgorge all these men. The walking patients would limp in one way or another. The stretcher cases would be carried in and placed on a bed. But one thing they all had in common, that on each man had received from the Australian Red Cross a little bag of toothpaste and toothbrush and things like that. Because often they were brought out and they would have been to a staging camp or an advanced camp hospital before they came to us but the Red Cross was ever ready with these little bags of goodies and, of course, the Salvation Army would have helped them. But that's how they came in and then we'd have to set to work to scrub some of the desert dirt off them and get them, you know, as clean as we could, to get them into bed.

So obviously they generally arrived without any of their personal kit ... personal kit and equipment and so on.

Exactly, except for what the Red Cross had prepared and given to them as they came out of battle.

Right. So once they were cleaned and scrubbed up and got into bed, then they were ready to be treated, operated on, whatever, is that right?

Yes. Then the doctors would assess their wounds and, as you say, whatever they had to be operated on or if they had to be just bed patients. I can remember once a young man came in and he said, 'Nurse, will you read this?'. He had a gash in his leg from his knee up beyond his thigh and it was shocking - I could have put my arm into his wound - and he said, 'Will you read this?' and he said, 'It's from my father' and I read the letter. And he said - his name was John, I'm not putting one on ... it's not a dear John - but he said, 'Dear John, Your mother of course is terribly worried about you at this particular time but don't let that make any difference to the job you've got on hand'. And I thought that was the spirit that was there then. You know, whatever they suffered they still ... there was a job to be done and it had to be done.

Yes, sure. The wards that you were working in, the facilities you had from beds to pans to whatever you need in wards - which I don't know a lot about - how well equipped were they?

Well, we had the basics and that's all one could say. We had the basics. We didn't have a great ... the supplies ... our Q Store was quite well stocked for the number of beds we had to provide but we only had the basics. We did have bed pans, we had urinals and we had a good supply of sheets which of course were laundered by the Arab laundries over there but we were exceedingly short of bandages and things like that. So that all bandages had to be saved regardless of how revolting they were and if ... I often ... I was on night duty a number of

times and it was my job to take this kerosene tin full of - because we had very up-to-date utensils you can see - my kerosene tin full of bandages, sometimes there were two kerosene tins full of bandages depending on which ward I was in and they had to be washed. Not just alone by me, whichever VA was on duty, that was her job to wash all the bandages and when they were thoroughly washed and cleaned we then had to put them into another kerosene tin, put them on a little fire and boil them up. Then we had to dry these yards and yards and yards of bandages and then they were given to the boys with a stick and they spent their time, regardless of how they were tied up - arms, legs or anything else - as long as they had some fingers free they would roll up our bandages and then they had to be autographed to get them ready for the next use.

> That's most interesting. Were there other tasks around the ward that men could help with and did help with?

The men were fabulous. I've always been a bit fastidious about the washing up. I liked all my plates scraped and of course we only had big, old tin tubs outside the wards for our washing up dish so I insisted everything had to be scraped. I couldn't ever bear to see those bits floating around, so they used to call me a tiger. In fact my name was 'Tiger' for a long time. But, yes, they helped with the washing up and they helped carry the meals around and they helped gather up the plates afterwards and, in fact, as far as the men were concerned, if they had a mate or a person that came in - one of the boys that came in - they seemed to form their mateship very quickly and they'd look after them so well. You wouldn't believe it. That's where, you know, they talk about mateship sometimes and I think it's got a hollow sound because in those days it was real mateship. They did anything for each other.

> That's interesting. I was just recalling a comment, I don't remember who made it, but anyway the person was talking about death and saying that how men in these kinds of situations in war camps, where an individual was dying, although they were very far from their families they often died very good deaths because they had a lot of very close emotional contact at the end. And ...

END OF TAPE ONE - SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

> Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Alice Penman, 2/6th AGH. Tape two, side one.

I didn't see a lot of death because I think I've already said our hospitals had a tremendous record of saving their lives and they ... and I only knew of ... very few in actual fact. And there was a tremendous bond because I think we were all in the same boat. There were no privileges or no extras for anyone really, we were just all as one. And if it was him yesterday it could be me tomorrow or us tomorrow, you see. So that was the kind of philosophy that we had and ... but if anything, regardless of what happened, because if some news did filter through one way or another and it was very sad there was so many people around to share it and to help. And so, you know, there was really very little need for psychologists or

psychiatrists because the help was there and it was homemade; it came straight from their hearts and they helped each other tremendously.

The biggest shock of death that I saw was on the *Queen Mary* going over. One of the boys died and so we had a burial at sea and that was something that I thought my brain wasn't going to cope with very well. But, once again, when all the people stood around and with great love and reverence he was placed into the sea, I thought, well, you know, we could have great confidence that we'd always be loved while we were there and there'd be someone to be very close and feel very deeply about us. So ...

> Right. Well, I can understand that. One thing I might just touch on, malingering. Was that at all common, or not? Men hanging on longer than they needed to in hospital?

Yes, there were some cases of that and we felt ... we had a deep feeling for them because we thought that they were some of the men that were ... If a man is wounded by war - a physical wound - you can see it and you can sympathise and you know you can help in any way you can but - and there's so much that can be done - but for many reasons I felt that a lot of the malingerers, and there were quite a number of them, but I felt that they were affected in different ways. Maybe they hadn't had the kind of home care or love or the ... you know, they came from all kinds of situations. So I always felt that there was some reason for it, or they were just plain afraid. And I think that even the bravest person that went over there, I don't think there was a ... they couldn't ever say they were not afraid.

> Yes, you'd have to be fairly superficial to say that, I'm sure.

Exactly, yes. And, you know, worry affects different people in different ways. Some of them would get themselves into a state where ... we all thought 'I wonder if we will get home to Australia again' but, you know, it crossed our minds from time to time but I repeat we were all so busy and when we weren't flat out in the hospital we were flat out trying to see anything we could see around the place so we were terribly well occupied. Mark you, we had to walk and because we didn't have a lot of money. We would join up together and take a taxi somewhere or another and the Red Cross also had buses for the men and it took them to different places. We used to go to the kibbutz and the Jewish people were fabulous to our boys. They would give them afternoon tea and they didn't have very much themselves because that was the beginning of those kibbutz. But if we were selected to go with them in the ambulance or convoy of whatever they had to the bus to take them, to be there to look after them, we enjoyed it and we learned a lot about all these different things. So there was always a lot to occupy our minds. And then we'd get home and frequently too tired to try and write a letter home or even eat. You know, many times we were really very tired.

(5.00) Mmm. That's interesting. But just turning back for a moment to the malingering issue. The picture I get was that you and, I don't know, perhaps the women generally took a fairly understanding view of that and tended to see the underlying causes rather than be judgmental about the symptom?

Exactly. Yes, that's how we felt. We felt there was a reason for them to be malingering and they either just wanted to be given a little bit of love or care or something, you know. But we

didn't admire them for what they were doing but we had an understanding. And we used to get angry with them if they tried to pretend that they had something that we knew perfectly well that they didn't have. But nevertheless there was a sympathy there for them.

> You mentioned a moment ago writing letters. I'd imagine mail days or when mail, I guess fairly infrequently came, that must have been hopeful and perhaps also sometimes very disappointing when hopeful letters didn't come. What's your memory of that?

Oh, well, mostly the letters didn't come because, you know, the mails were infrequent and for one reason or another. But when they filtered through everyone shared their letters so you had the feeling, well, all right, you knew something about Australia and you got a little bit of home news. And, as I said, it was a sharing time. And so although you didn't get that personal letter, you did. But we could go down to the Mil. PO - military post office that's short for - and we could select to send a telegram. We could say, I want to send a telegram to mother or brother or whoever it was, and so you'd give the address and then they'd give you a sheet of paper and you'd say, well, I'll have 'twenty-nine' which says 'Are you all fit' and I'll have 'thirty-two' which says 'I'm thinking of you' and 'forty-one', 'I love you'. And so you'd chose those three numbers and they would be sent off and that's how you sent your telegram. Nothing personal about it all. And ...

> How often could you do that?

You could do that any time you had the spare money but money wasn't - well, in my case anyway, I think some of them were very well off, but in my case didn't have a lot of money to send telegrams. I think they were only about one and sixpence but one and sixpence is one and sixpence. If it meant that I could go, you know, somewhere to have a look at something and I thought that was important I could write and tell them all about it later on.

> Let's turn to that. I was going to ask you about your occasional leaves. Obviously as you were saying often you were far too busy even to think about that but sometimes you did get away. You mentioned Jerusalem and I think Syria. What stands out from those visits?

Not a great deal I'm afraid. I did go up to the cedars of Lebanon which were very beautiful trees then and, of course, these days I'm very sad to think that possibly they're no longer there and such destruction. We were able to stay in a hotel which had been stripped of all its nice things but we thought well that wasn't bad to be in a real building and have running water, that we didn't have to go walking miles to get and we could go to the loo and we didn't have to walk miles with the fear of ... in the blackout we had to dodge the slit trenches. We had slit trenches outside all the tents so it wasn't infrequent that someone would, you know, be lost in a slit trench. You'd be walking along talking to thin air.

> I was just going to say about these excursions. I guess you'd generally go off in a group together?

Together, yes. Well, we never went off alone of course but I think, yes, I went off in a group of about three. I think three of us went to Syria. And later on I was fortunate because I

missed out on going to Jerusalem. I'd been down there for a day's leave but there was a week leave and for those who were lucky enough to be drawn out of the hat, or whichever way they did it, I can never work that one out, but I'd missed out totally. But then a friend of mine wasn't able to go so she came rushing around to me and said, 'Would you like to go instead?', so that's how I went.

> Right. That's interesting. Another issue that I think's interesting and you did say something about before was the business of a fairly small group of women being amongst a very, very large number of men and yet a feeling that - on your part at least - that there was never any danger, never any feeling of having to keep people off because of their ... just of how they saw life and their values. Could you tell us about that?

(10.00) Yes. Well, of course, there were always so many people about. I mean, you try and live in a unit of 600 personnel and be on a troop ship of 10,000 of them and staging camp of thousands, I mean you don't have any moments where you have any private moments or anything. But the feeling that we had about the men was that they were all absolutely fabulous and that we never had any fear. We could go anywhere. We had no fear at all and we could ... there were soldiers everywhere and even if we didn't know any of them, I mean, if we went to Jerusalem or anywhere, if we didn't know them we only had to raise our voice and we'd have a whole hoard of them there to protect us. And we always felt totally protected. Never at any stage did we feel ... at least I didn't fear anything and I don't think that any of the other girls did in that way. They were just wonderful.

And in the wards we knew from time to time that we had some baddies, you know, boys who'd really 'done time' and done things before they left Australia and they'd served their time so they were free then, but they were among the most wonderful when it came to any work to be done. They were up first and they would do it. And if we had a patient that was very ill and we had trouble in turning him we'd attend to all things that had to be turned to and then say, we just wouldn't have to raise a voice, just say in a natural voice, 'Would some of you guys come and help me turn Joe Blow over' and they'd be up on their feet like mad and we didn't have to select anyone to do anything. They just ... you would just ask and it was done.

> Right. So there was a real spirit there.

Oh, a wonderful spirit, yes, a wonderful spirit.

> Well, that leads on naturally to what you've said quite a few times about the 2/6th hospital, Alice, and that's the spirit of the organisation and therefore obviously the quality of the people. What would you think about that first of all?

Well, I think personally, to begin with, the CO of the 2/6th AGH was Colonel Money and I think he was one of the most outstanding men and in every way. I think that he'd been to the first war as a gunner and I always think that that perhaps gave him this human quality. He was an outstanding doctor in Sydney and recognised in many parts of the world for his work. But he was a leader and I think we all had such enormous respect for him that that was the

bond, the common bond, that brought us all together, to do our best for him because he only ever gave his best.

> He certainly must have had a great advantage over other doctors in terms of having suffered the horrors of front-line combat himself and therefore being able to really have a deep rapport with these men who had been wounded.

I think that's possible because he got the MC in the first world war so that gives you idea that he wasn't sitting doing his knitting. But, the other things was that we had a padre, a Roman Catholic padre - is that right - and his name was Father Burke and he was one of the most incredible men I've ever met. I'm an Anglican and we'd often meet at the Q Store when we were each collecting our clean sheets to put on ... prepare our respective alters for the Christmas service, or the Sunday service, and he became ... I became a great admirer of his but I wasn't alone. The entire unit admired this man. And when the convoys came in, regardless of the hour, Father Burke was there. In fact our affectionate name for him in the unit was 'Pitter-Pat' because he pitter-patted everywhere and he - when the convoys came in - he knew who belonged to him and who didn't. But he never missed a man. He went to every bed and bid them welcome and asked if there was anything he could do, letters to be written, or anything at all, could he in someway contact a loved one or do anything. He was just the most outstanding person.

> And this was, I think you said, for all men, not only for the Catholics?

Exactly, that's what I said. He knew who his own flock so-called were but he went to everyone. And he treated us all the same way. He didn't ... he knew who didn't belong to him but there was no difference. He was just a man for all people; he was a man of the people. And later in life he carried on in the same way.

> Mmm. That's a very touching memory. I know you did keep close touch with him I think later on. I think you were saying that not all the padres had quite his level of commitment, Alice?

That's right. We had some very good padres and they did a very good job but none to the extent that Father Burke - he was totally dedicated to man. I think that would cover what he was. He was a very ... but he was that kind of person and remained so till his death.

> Were there any other ... I mean, obviously there were a lot of other important and wonderful people but were there any other individuals who would really stand out as being key reasons for the *esprit* of the hospital?

Well, of course we had some wonderful sisters. My mind of course is not able to remember all the names. If I'd known I would have made a list of them - that wouldn't have been so good I suppose - but, no, we had the most wonderful sisters and they also have been wonderful to this day. Their dedication to the work they were doing and their ability to help the boys in their distress was quite outstanding. And our doctors. But then it got down to all personnel of 2/6th AGH, they were a very united, dedicated mob.

(15.00) Did you have many occasions when the hospital came together as a unit, for example, parades, that kind of thing? Or were you generally so busy and everybody was off in their own separate wards or wherever?

Yes. For the unit birthday, I can't remember when that was, but it was for their birthday and we were included in the parade. I've got something written about that somewhere and that was really wonderful. You know, we were part of them. We were part of the 2/6th AGH and we threw away our VAD colour patch and up went the 2/6th AGH colour patch which value to this day. It was wonderful.

Right. And what about other social get togethers? Was it common, well, for example, Saturday nights or other special nights, were there gatherings of doctors and nurses and VADs together or did you tend to keep in private worlds?

I think everyone had their private world because the units surrounding, if they were able to they - regardless of where they were in the Middle East or anywhere else - they would have a party and invite the girls to go and, of course, under the strictest supervision we were allowed ... We were taken off in the back of trucks and fortunately none of us fell off. But we were taken along to the parties and I can remember very vividly once it was teaming with rain - it often was teaming with rain - and it was so wet. It was almost as wet inside as outside so we didn't take off our gumboots and some bright spark decided that the floor - we couldn't dance because of our gumboots and we were dancing on raw cement almost - so this bright spark went along and got a packet of Percil and sprinkled it over the floor to make it a little slippery and of course we almost all died, we couldn't breath. That ended the dance very quickly.

We all had to be in by 23.59, that was a minute to midnight, and we always had an officer sitting up on the book to check us in. And so we hurried home. We were allowed, in those days, in the Middle East, we were allowed - in fact during our army period - we were allowed two nights out till ten o'clock and one night out till one minute to midnight. So that was the extent. It didn't give us a lot of time for social ... socialising but we had a lot of fun. We'd have picnics and we'd include people and sometimes I'd take the ration store people so they'd give me some rations to take; some of the boys that I wanted to take out from the wards; and, you know, we just made our own fun.

And things like eating, just day to day eating, was that ... were you in a mess with the nurses or did VADs have their own separate set-up?

No, we had our own mess; the sergeants had theirs; the sisters had theirs; and the officers, the doctors, had their own and there was no ... you know, they didn't ... I think that it was a very nice thing to be able to walk into your own ward because ... into your own mess because on our days off we were allowed to come up in whatever we had on, you know, a civvy dress. It was a great delight to get into something that wasn't a uniform, being in a uniform for years of your life, you know, it's a lot. So if we could get into a little light dress or something we thought we were made. A pair of shorts and ... So we were allowed to go into the mess in that garb but, of course, no other eyes should look upon us if we were in the mess in the ...

Right. So there was that time just to be yourselves and relax.

Yes.

> Yes, you were talking before about the food and the food being, you know, adequate - I mean, inevitably - but I have heard one other person say that there was a very great discrepancy between the food that appeared in the officers mess and the food that other people received and that there was a level of tension because of that. Do you recall that or not?

Well, yes. Yes, that is so. The officers had better food than any of us had. But then they paid money. They had to, over and above their army rations, they paid an amount of money into the mess and then the secretary or whoever was in charge of the mess went off and bought the extra goodies they had. They didn't get anything like that really out of the army. And as far as we were concerned in the Middle East the fruit of course is very beautiful over there, beautiful fruit - fresh - and we weren't allowed - we had to be very careful - we weren't allowed to take anything from Arabs because of their ... they were very unclean kind of people, but they bought ... a lot of the food came from the kibbutz at that stage. And anything they did get from the open market or any place like that, it was washed. And if my memory serves me correctly, it was washed in a very light solution of Condy's crystals and so it was all washed. But we had to be very careful. Sometimes on route marches, because we had a lot of route marches, if we weren't working we had to go on a route march because we always had to be aware and be fit. I think that was a way they kept us fit. There was no place they could give us physical culture over there or anything like that. So to keep us fit they made us walk. And we'd have ... sometimes we'd be made, run across a field and then put a respirator on us to see how we could cope with, you know, stress and things like that. But we were able to buy - the little Arab boys would come along and say five for five, they'd give us five oranges for five mils and I think five mils is worth about ... two cents or something like that, or less - and we would buy them and we had ... we were taught how to split them from the top down and then, you know, get the orange out almost without touching the skin. We did that but we were advised not to. You know, to be very, very careful of eating because there was a great deal of tummy wog over there.

(20.00) Was illness very common amongst the women, or not?

No. No. I only had one sick day ... I only had one day in the whole of my army life and that was I was prone to get an infection in the corner of my finger nail and I picked that up somewhere, I don't know where, and one day I ... I didn't ever have a sick day off, I didn't have a day in sick bay in the Middle East. This was later when I was in Queensland with the 2/6th unit and I didn't go off duty but I jammed it in a door and that made me see stars so I was sent off to sick bay for about three days I think. That's all the sick ... and ...

> So you never had any stomach problem in the Middle East?

No, nothing at all, as I say. And, well, from the time I left till the time I got home, that's all the sick days I had. So, I consequently have no claims. I can't produce a sick form or whatever - A46 I think it was called - but I think I was fortunate and I'm fairly small and we were taught to lift ... you know, I did say a little earlier that we had an air force squadron nearby so we sometimes had a bit of drill. It wasn't constant but we were shown how to, if

the men were too ill to get out of their beds, how we could, you know, put the legs under and lower them to the ground so there'd be less of a shock. But that wasn't such a great problem. What was a great problem was trying to persuade the men who could, get under the beds for protection. They didn't like that at all. So that was one of the hardest jobs we had to convince them of that.

> That's interesting. Just finally before ... talking about the period with the 2/6th, of course it was during the time you were there that the fighting at El Alamein was at its height and of course I think your husband was there, although you didn't know at the time. How do you remember that period and how did it affect your life at the hospital?

It affected a lot of people but at that time we were just so busy that, once again, you know, you can absorb an awful lot if you've got a lot of things to do and it was the period of our greatest activity in the hospital and everyone was doing so much. And, once again, I can only say that when you see other people suffering and some of the girls lost fiances in that El Alamein; many of them lost cousins and some of them lost very, very dear and close friends; and all kinds of people and personalities that we'd known of in Australia, we lost. And so it was a constant feeling of ... you cut yourself off from it somehow. You just went on churning out what you had to do and making yourself so tired that you actually could sleep.

I didn't know my husband then. He was at Alamein and he was a gunner and so, of course, I was spared that. But when I met him years later and married him I realised how much I didn't comprehend in that respect, that the girls were suffering when they knew that fiances and loved people were up there. I didn't have anyone at Alamein.

> Did any of your tent mates lose close friends or fiances?

No. No, not my tent ... there were four of us, no, we didn't lose anyone personally. But they did lose friends. Some of them lost friends and one of my very close friends lost - she and her sister were with us - and they ... two of their childhood friends were both killed, young captains, and they are side by side in Alamein now.

> Yes, I remember you saying how that's very hard. Well, it was early in 1943 I think that the hospital shifted back to Australia. What's your recollection of first hearing that you were to go back to Australia? Was it good news or not?

(25.00) Oh, of course, it was very good news. We were absolutely thrilled and we were more thrilled because we weren't leaving any of our people in the Middle East. There may have been some administrative staff remain, I don't know, but the Australian Government were moving the whole of the 9th Division back to Australia and it was one of great joy and we felt one of ... we did feel satisfaction. We felt we'd worked well and hard and we were part of the unit and we'd made up our minds that wherever this unit went we were going to go with it. And we were staging for a bit. We had to pack up the hospital of course so there was tremendous activity. We got the last lot of patients off on the hospital ships and then we set to work to pack up. There was a little bit of trauma because one of our girls had a fiance in ... what's that island ... Malta and he was in the Australian Air Force and he'd been in Malta for a long time and some how or another - he was an officer - and he got a message through to the

CO to say that he was coming to ... coming down to Gaza. And the CO, of course, being the man he was, was filled with great feeling for these two young people, but of course he had to say that we wouldn't be there. I don't know how he said it because we were all going to have our tongues removed if any of us said we weren't going to be there, because the 'wogs' seemed to have ears all over the place. I shouldn't call them 'wogs' because your not allowed these days, but the Arabs had ears all over the place and they seemed to get the stories before our intelligence received the news. And, however, in the end they took this lass, Robbie, with us to Port Tewfik where we were going to get on the boat and then he eventually arrived. And he came tearing around and they caught up with each other. They were married in Jerusalem but she had to come home with us anyway. She didn't come home on the *Queen Mary*; I came home on the *Queen Mary*. Half of us came home on the *Queen Mary* but the other half ... I don't know what ship they were on as a matter of fact but I know that some of them were on the *Ile de France* because my husband was there. I think she came home on the *Ile de France*.

Right. Well, just turning to the actual voyage back after what obviously must have been a very frenetic period of getting everything packed up and embarking on the ships, do you have any particular recollection of the journey back or was it fairly straight forward?

Well, it was a very traumatic trip back because the *Queen Mary*, the captain was very angry. He wanted to bring the ship back alone because of its speed but the Australian Government wanted to play it safe and they were very worried about having a whole division on the sea and they insisted the *Queen Mary* remain with the convoy. So we were taken on board and then we ran up and down the Red Sea for a week waiting for the rest of the convoy to catch up and when they did we had five ships in the convoy and then we had escorts as well. So I think altogether there were about twelve ships in the convoy to bring the 9th Division back to Australia.

We were on the *Queen Mary* five weeks and if you can imagine it, but you can't, but I think there were 10,000 men on the *Queen Mary* so there was never a square inch that you could sit and have a quiet chat with anyone. So one ...

So there were people camped all over the place were there?

Yes. A lot of the men were allowed to sleep up on deck. It wasn't supposed to be so but they had ... there were none of the facilities of the *Queen* ... all her swimming pool and all those things had all been covered over and they had - what do you call those things that are slung and people lie on them?

Hammocks?

Hammocks. Hundreds of hammocks and the men all had those. We went back into our wooden bunks that were very hard and eight of us in a small cabin - a very small cabin. And we had only sea water for washing and bathing and baths and things. We were also compelled to carry a life jacket with us. The *Queen Mary* had a good number of rafts they'd put on board but everyone knew that if anything did happen to the *Queen* that all the people weren't going to get off. So it was a court martial offence if we were caught without a life

jacket - we had to carry a life jacket everywhere we went for five weeks. So that was a bit tattered by the time we got home.

I can imagine. Quite tedious too. I might just turn this tape over.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE A

START OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

Identification: Edward Stokes with Alice Penman. Tape two, side two.

Alice, when the hospital arrived back in Australia I think you all had some leave. That must have been fairly special.

Yes. We had what was called 'Liddington' leave and then we were all sent off to a rookies camp to make sure we knew how to drill and clean grease traps which seemed a bit - well, in my opinion - a waste of time. But then we got the wonderful news that the hospital was forming in Northern Queensland. So we were all bundled onto a train in time and we went to Northern Queensland and they only cleared ... made a clearing through some trees and they said, 'That's where your camp's going to be'. So on the dirt they put up little tents and we went into that, into the tents. There were no facilities at all. We had a piece of cement further down in the trees and just some corrugated iron around that and that was our ablution block - cold water. But just as time went on we got the boys to say it with sticks and not flowers - they said it with sticks. They brought little bundles of ... and we got an old Sawyer and put it outside and we boiled the water and so then with two dishes it required two people to have a warm wash because two people would fill these two dishes and then we'd take it in turns of washing each other. You know, providing the water for it.

Yes, sure. The general life of the hospital there, how different was that from the Middle East?

Very different. Very different because the atmosphere was different. We didn't have to worry about the Arab people, you know, because that was a constant fear in the Middle East and we didn't have to worry quite so much. We just enjoyed Australian furphies that we knew came from Australians, there was nowhere else for them to come from. And then we had a busy period with boys coming down from the Islands and life went on much the same. We didn't have any more facilities even though we were in Australia, we didn't have any more facilities than we'd had before really.

But I guess a lot of the people who were coming down from New Guinea were not only battle casualties but tropical illness cases?

We had a lot of tropical illness. We had scrub typhus, were the main worry and they were ... required a lot of nursing and it was a great worry at that time because we didn't seem to be able to get to the root of that wretched thing.

Right. Well, I know also that while you were ... or when you came back you had the option to in fact go directly into nursing and take two years off, with

> your course shortened by two years but you decided to stay with the hospital. Why was that?

Well, I ... I anguished over that because I still had my great desire and love of nursing. I wanted to be a trained nurse but I just had this wonderful feeling of wanting to be with this unit. It was the most wonderful feeling to be with this unit and to do whatever it had to do and it had done so much that I wanted to be part of it. So back I went. Some of the girls did take advantage of that and they were given a concession. The Nursing Association rewarded us by taking two years off for anyone who would do it. But I remained with the unit until I was ready to go to the Islands. I was on draft and I met my husband and we were married and so that came to an end and I couldn't go. But I'll always be proud of the time I spent with the 2/6th.

> Right. Well, that's most interesting. I do know now that you have a ... well, you're certainly obviously very close to a lot of these people so I gather a lot of the spirit of the organisation has lived on?

(5.00) It has. I march with the unit every ANZAC Day and this year in particular, this ANZAC Day, is our fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the unit and we're planning a big party in Sydney.

> Mmm. I'm sure it will be very special.

And we do have, some of the girls are coming ... some of the personnel are coming from other states, it's not just the New South Wales group now. They're all wanting to come back and share this with us.

> Well, that's lovely. Just more generally, looking back on the whole period of the war and when you're in the Middle East in particular I suppose, what would stand out most of all in your mind and perhaps did it change you and if it did, how did it change you?

I can't ... I can't recall what it did to me. I think it made me more aware of the suffering that the world goes through and as the world gets older it seems to suffer more. I thought it had gone through all it could suffer. That's - in my opinion - that's the most outstanding thing, that people are born to suffer as they do. It's something I'm not really able to come to grips with now. I felt better when I was there, able to be doing something, you know. But I think the suffering that's gone on, we have through our organisations, we have kept in touch with even those young men who are now old men who have suffered all these years and, you know, we try in our small way to continue to help wherever they are. But that's the most outstanding thing.

I think a change made me a far more independent person. All the things and the values that I thought were mine. I mean, I didn't have very many new dresses or anything like that. We didn't. But they, after the war, they seemed to be quite unimportant. I didn't really ... I think I was very blessed that I had a family and that I loved them and I've been very lucky.

Right. That's very, very interesting what you said then. Just finally, is there anything that you feel you would like to say that has not been said that's significant?

Could you turn it off.

This is just turning on again.

I'd just like to say in bringing this to a close that I was exceedingly proud to be part of the 2/6th AGH but I think you would have gathered that by now and that I was exceedingly ... also exceedingly proud to have served the men. And when it was said, I think, General Alexander said, 'I'll always be proud, under my command fought the 9th Australian Division' and I've always said and I was very proud that I was able to serve it in a very small way.

Well, that's been a very interesting session, Alice. I mean that. On behalf of the War Memorial thank you very much for making these tapes.

My pleasure. Thank you.

END OF TAPE TWO - SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW